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Preparing for Commedia dell'Arte

Abstract

Commedia dell'Arte comes alive when played passionately by characters with an unquenchable need. Commedia is a theatre of contrasts. It moves from Order to Disorder, Chaos, Disaster and back to Order and a Happy Ending. Masks and improvisational play distinguish Commedia from other theatre forms, and the spectacular nature of each character's play. Commedia dell'Arte is alive today because audiences see themselves on stage dealing with the fools they meet daily. It will never die as long as there are great masters like Carlo Mazzone-Clementi, Giovanni Fusetti and Antonio Fava to share the form, and fools to poke fun at in the world.

Keywords

Actor, Commedia dell'Arte,
Scenario, Mask, Performing
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Get ready to leave naturalism behind, movies and straight plays, method acting and emotional preparation. Get ready to use your instincts, grab an idea and go with it, to throw your whole body and voice into a character in a simple scenario ---- and see where it takes you and your partners in play.

Commedia is play. There are some basic rules --- some bumpers that will head you back when you feel lost, but at its root, Commedia is play.

Do you want to play? To let your child "Come out and grab the balloon --- no matter how high it floats?"

Play takes great physical energy and relaxation, and real generosity towards your partners. It takes both an open and inspired mind.

Commedia is a theatre of great passions --- human needs. It is a very human comedy.

You need food. You need money. You need sex. You need love. And you need it now!

You are in action as long as you are on the stage. You aren't asking yourself, "What do I want now?" You are "wanting it" physically, verbally, actively. And you will do anything to get it. "Make a fool of yourself?" You don't care! As long as you get what you want. You must have it!

To your character, anything is possible.

If you are an impotent old rich guy, you believe that young women can love you and crave your attentions.

If you are a cowardly braggart of a soldier, you believe in your own myth of bravery until the very moment you are in danger, and exposed as a pretender.

If you are a Doctor, Lawyer or PHD, you believe in your powers, your theories, the importance of your ideas to the whole world, even if every word you say is bullshit.

You take center stage and hold it because if you leave the stage, you will die.

If you are a lover, every breath, every word, every action expresses your love; and your happiness or unhappiness depends on every breath, every word, every action of the one you love.

If you are a servant, your very life depends upon pleasing your master... even if that is impossible to do. You are physically torn between your own personal needs and your need to please. You are always hungry and afraid that the food will not arrive in time to save your life. Even though your plans go awry, and only work out by mistake, you still plan and hope and dream. You are an innocent in another world --- childlike in a land of crazy and powerful adults.

If you are a Signora, you are a powerful Amazon of a sex goddess, unafraid of men and willing to fight for what you desire. Always in charge, you are a predator in the bedroom, with a thousand tricks in your bag. You can be ruthless, tricky, passionate, direct, and sometimes physically violent with your servant. You want a strong attractive man to melt your passion and conquer you. You are afraid that will never happen, but you never give up on the game.

In every pair of servants, one is the boss. Which is not to say a genius or a good and effective leader. The top banana is just a bit smarter and more in charge. The second banana tries his best, but always disappoints, and in the most creative ways. Good intentions! Disastrous outcomes.

In a Commedia, everything begins in balance. The most famous scenario is this:

Flavio and Isabella are in love and decide to get married, but their parents create insurmountable problems, which the lovers ask the servants to solve. After a series of disasters, the servants, more by luck and cunning than skill and intelligence, bring the families back together so that Flavio and Isabella can be wed. All returns to balance. The pattern is Order, Disorder, Chaos and Disaster, and then a surprise change in fate that brings everything back into balance and Order is restored. "Romeo and Juliet" with a happy ending.

Commedia is a theatre of contrasts. Each archetypal character is different from each other. Their masks, their movement and gestures, their desires and behaviors --- all paint the stage with different colors, tempos, shapes. It is a dance of the Zanni, a soccer match of dichotomies, a riot of action, a spectacular event from the entrance of the first Zanni to the exit of the whole company.

There is no set, no curtain, no special lighting. The characters create all that through their dynamic play. Every entrance and exit is motivated by a need. Each character sees the audience immediately upon entering the space. When they take the stage, the audience is their partner, their confidant in crime, in love, in plotting, in disappointment, and in celebration. They share everything with this huge friend.

Every prop is also a character in the play and deserves equal respect. Once they enter the stage, they are always visible to the audience until their exit. Be it a coin, a contract, a slapstick, a bastone --- all enter and exit the stage alive. How the characters play with them give them life, moment to moment.

The characters are also called Masks. Once your mask is on, it is your face. To bring it to life, you match its power with your body and voice, walk and gesture --- with your dynamic play.

It is leather --- so you never touch it with your human hand or it loses its power. In fact, like a prop, your face must never be hidden or your character disappears with it. You justify why your mask is always visible with your action -- your clear intentions.

Your human nose inside of your mask leads your character and the audience's attention. Your nose looks down only for a definite reason --- you dropped something or are

diverting your gaze. Otherwise, your nose follows what you want, who you are engaging in play, a prop put into action, or the audience, who you are addressing, as in an aside. Only, it is not an aside in Commedia, because the audience is always your playmate.

All this said, the heart of Commedia is passionate and spectacular play. Do that, and all the pieces will fall naturally into place.

And as Antonio Fava always says before the play begins,

Buon Lavoro!

Gale McNeeley

(I write this with complete gratitude to my three great teachers: Carlo Mazzone-Clementi, Giovanni Fusetti and Antonio Fava).

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