

What You Need to Know About Commedia Dell'Arte

From ThoughtCo by Cher Hale

Commedia dell'arte, also known as "Italian comedy," was a humorous theatrical presentation performed by professional actors who traveled in troupes throughout Italy in the 16th century.

Performances took place on temporary stages, mostly on city streets, but occasionally even in court venues. The better troupes — notably Gelosi, Confidenti, and Fedeli — performed in palaces and became internationally famous once they traveled abroad.

Music, dance, witty dialogue, and all kinds of trickery contributed to the comic effects. Subsequently, the art form spread throughout Europe, with many of its elements persisting even into the modern theater.

Given the vast number of Italian dialects, how would a touring company make itself understood?

Apparently, there was no attempt made to change the performance's dialect from region to region.

Even when a local company performed, much of the dialogue would not have been understood. Regardless of region, the oft-used character *il Capitano* would have spoken in Spanish, *il Dottore* in Bolognese, and *l'Arlecchino* in utter gibberish. The focus was placed on physical business, rather than spoken text.

Influence

The impact of *commedia dell'arte* on European drama can be seen in French pantomime and the English harlequinade. The ensemble companies generally performed in Italy, although a company called the *comédie-italienne* was established in Paris in 1661. The *commedia dell'arte* survived the early 18th century only by means of its vast influence on written dramatic forms.

Props

There were no elaborate sets in *commedia*. Staging, for example, was minimalistic, with rarely anything more than one market or street scene, and the stages were frequently temporary outdoor structures. Instead, great use was made of props including animals, food, furniture, watering devices, and weapons. The character *Arlecchino* bore two sticks tied together, which made a loud noise on impact. This gave birth to the word "slapstick."

Improvisation

In spite of its outwardly anarchic spirit, *commedia dell'arte* was a highly disciplined art requiring both virtuosity and a strong sense of ensemble playing. The unique talent of *commedia* actors was to improvise comedy around a pre-established scenario. Throughout the act, they responded to each other, or to the audience's reaction, and made use of *lazzi* (special rehearsed routines that could be inserted into the plays at convenient points to heighten the comedy), musical numbers, and impromptu dialogue to vary the happenings on stage.

Physical Theater

Masks forced actors to project their characters' emotions through the body. Leaps, tumbles, stock gags (*burle* and *lazzi*), obscene gestures, and slapstick antics were incorporated into their acts.

Stock Characters

The actors of the commedia represented fixed social types. These types included *tipi fissi*, for example, foolish old men, devious servants, or military officers full of false bravado. Characters such as Pantalone (the miserly Venetian merchant), Dottore Gratiano (the pedant from Bologna), or Arlecchino (the mischievous servant from Bergamo), began as satires on Italian "types" and became the archetypes of many of the favorite characters of 17th- and 18th-century European theatre.

- Arlecchino was the most famous. He was an acrobat, a wit, childlike, and amorous. He wore a cat-like mask and motley-colored clothes and carried a bat or wooden sword.
- Brighella was Arlecchino's crony. He was more roguish and sophisticated, a cowardly villain who would do anything for money.
- Il Capitano (the captain) was a caricature of the professional soldier — bold, swaggering, and cowardly.
- Il Dottore (the doctor) was a caricature of learning who was pompous and fraudulent.
- Pantalone was a caricature of the Venetian merchant, rich and retired, mean and miserly, with a young wife or an adventurous daughter.
- Pedrolino was a white-faced, moonstruck dreamer and the forerunner of the modern clown.
- Pulcinella, as seen in the English Punch and Judy shows, was a dwarfish humpback with a crooked nose. He was a cruel bachelor who chased pretty girls.
- Scarramuccia, dressed in black and carrying a pointed sword, was the Robin Hood of his day.
- The handsome Inamorato (the lover) went by many names. He wore no mask and had to be eloquent in order to perform speeches of love.
- The Inamorata was his female counterpart; Isabella Andreini was the most famous. Her servant, usually called Columbina, was the beloved of Harlequin. Witty, bright, and given to intrigue, she developed into such characters as Harlequine and Pierrette.
- La Ruffiana was an old woman, either the mother or a village gossip who thwarted the lovers.
- Cantarina and Ballerina often took part in the comedy, but for the most part, their job was to sing, dance, or play music.

There were many other minor characters, some of which were associated with a particular region of Italy, such as Peppe Nappa (Sicily), Gianduia (Turin), Stenterello (Tuscany), Rugantino (Rome), and Meneghino (Milan).

Costumes

The audience was able to pick up on the type of person actors were representing through each character's dress. For elaboration, loose-fitting garments alternated with very tight, and jarring color contrasts opposed monochrome outfits. Except for the inamorato, males would identify themselves with character-specific costumes and half-masks. The *zanni* (precursor to clown), such as Arlecchino, for example, would be immediately recognizable because of his black mask and patchwork costume.

While the inamorato and the female characters wore neither masks nor costumes unique to that personage, certain information could still be derived from their clothing. Audiences knew what members of the various social classes typically wore, and also expected certain colors to represent certain emotional states.

Masks

All the fixed character types, the figures of fun or satire, wore colored leather masks. Their opposites, typically pairs of young lovers around whom the stories revolved, had no need for such devices. In modern Italian handcrafted theater, masks are still created in the ancient tradition of *carneval*.

Music

The inclusion of music and dance into *commedia* performance required that all actors have these skills. Frequently at the end of a piece, even the audience joined in on the merrymaking.