

COMMEDIA DELL'ARTE AND COMEDIE HUMAINE

by Giovanni Fusetti

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On my first day of school at the Ecole Jacques Lecoq in 1992, after the introductory meeting between the staff and the students, Mr. Lecoq approached me, to my greatest surprise, and spoke me these words: "I was born twice. The first time was in Paris, at my birth. The second time was in Padua, when I was born to theatre". He knew I was from Padua and I was extremely honored by those words.

One of the fundamental events in the Italian period of Jacques Lecoq was his encounter with the living traces of *Commedia dell'arte*, the historical Italian Comedy. This encounter took place in Padua, the city where the first recorded *Commedia dell'arte* troupe, *la Fraternal Compagnia*, was established in 1545¹, and the city of Ruzzante, actor and playwright who in the early 1500s anticipated *Commedia dell'arte* by writing plays with stock characters, using the local dialect, *il pavano*.

While searching for the ancient masks in the faces of the farmers of Paduan countryside, Jacques Lecoq and Amleto Sartori found the echo of Ruzzante's types, with their feet in the dirt and the sheer poetry of survival in their guts.

Those years of research led to a reinvention of the technique of leather mask making, as well as of the unique theatrical territory known as *Commedia dell'arte*, that played a crucial role in Lecoq's pedagogy and theatre vision. This fact is best expressed by the logo that Lecoq choose for his school: a reproduction of an ancient image of Arlecchino.

The operating principles of traditional Commedia dell'arte

It is not an overstatement to say that Commedia is a milestone in the history of western theatre. Between the 16th and 18th centuries a multitude of companies traveled throughout Europe performing shows (*canovacci*) based on improvisation,

¹ Ferrone (1985) pp 13-14. This document is available online in PDF format, in Italian.

stock characters with and without masks and a unique talent of physical performing, integrating text, pantomime, acrobatics, music, singing through the virtuosity of improvisation. Characters such as *Pantalone*, *Arlecchino*, *Zanni*, *Il Capitano*, the Lovers (*Innamorati*), and *Colombina*, just to mention the most famous ones, became internationally renowned and their theatre had profound influences on the coming generations of actors and playwrights. From Molière to Shakespeare, from Melodrama to puppet theatre, from French *pantomime blanche* to silent movies and the Italian cinema of the '50s (*La commedia all'italiana*), *Commedia dell'arte* is a current of theatrical vitality flowing through time, and it is in the roots of contemporary actor-based theatre devising².

After the second half of 18th century, *Commedia* disappeared from theatres, replaced by a new wave of dramatic authors and text-based acting, from romantic theatre to melodrama, from bourgeois drama to naturalism. *Commedia* kept living in popular theatre and puppets, until the late 1800s and early 1900s when a new interest developed, led by a generation of theatre artists attracted by the necessity of putting the actor and the theatrical body at the forefront of theatre. Among them Jacques Copeau established a lineage that includes Etienne Decroux, Marcel Marceau, Jean Louis Barrault, Jean Dasté and Jacques Lecoq. One of Lecoq's earliest assistants, Carlo Mazzone-Clementi, introduced *Commedia dell'arte* in the United States in the late 50s. Thanks to the work of these masters and their students, *Commedia* is now universally recognized as a milestone in the training of the physical actor.

But what makes *Commedia dell'arte* a unique theatrical event, and what are the ingredients of this remarkable recipe ?

First, *Commedia* is an actor based theatre language: *un Teatro d'Attore*. Theatre of actors. The actor, as protagonist of the theatrical process, also fulfills the functions of the director and author.

By being the body of the character, the actor is the body of *Commedia*. Then, *Commedia* is the realm of mask play. With this I don't mean just the physical object

²² For a comprehensive history of *Commedia* in relationship with Movement Based Theatre, an invaluable resource is the text *Le theatre du geste*, edited by Jacques Lecoq.

mask. Mask is a *state of playing*: both the masked characters (old men, *Dottore*, *Capitano* and male servants) and the unmasked ones (lovers and female characters) are transposed by the mask state into *types*.

This is a truly crucial aspect of Commedia. A type is not a specific character with a unique personal history and an individual psychological journey. It's a "playing field" that includes all the individuals who share the same set of drives and urgencies.

When the actor plays a mask, he has to go beyond character: he leaps into the realm of types. Everything is in the body: the psychology of the type is revealed instantly by the physicality. No text, story or directorial note is required: in the very instant the mask enters on stage, the audience connects on a fundamental, sentimental level, with the essence of that type. They *know* him. The emotional urgencies and states of the character, embodied in his physicality, are perceived instantly by the audience, who "feel" them, beyond any necessity of intellectual understanding.

Only one thing is needed in order for the actor to bring the mask to full life: an action. The job of a commedia player is to fully embody a very precise physicality, reach the state of playing of that form, and play action-based themes.

Commedia contains all the technical ingredients of mask play (*le jeu masqué*): amplification, dramatic projection, articulation, vocal transposition, strong and clear urgencies. The mask demands a constant high level of physical energy so that emotions become gestures revealing a fully engaged body: alive, radically expressive and always playful.

The next fundamental ingredient is improvisation. In fact Italian Comedy was first known as *Commedia all'Improviso* or *dell'Improviso*.

There is a whole field of meaning in this word. In Italian *all'improvviso* means "all of a sudden" as well as "unexpected", and the verb *improvvisare* means to invent something unplanned using everything that is given. It involves creativity, ingenuity, boldness, imagination, risk-taking³, playfulness.

For a performer, this means going on stage without knowing what is going to happen but knowing the rules of the game, *le jeu*: playing the mask and its technique, saying yes to all that happens by reacting to all actions, developing themes, unfolding the

³ In the words of Perrucci : A beautiful, though dangerous, endeavour.

intreccio (the intrigue/plot), creating crescendo and ...having fun. Italian players of the 16th century were masters in this art, and there are countless reports of admiration and awe from spectators witnessing their ability to create theatrical delight with anything and everything. *Commedia dell'arte* is a play of urgency and survival: all passions and drives of the characters are pushed to an extreme in a physical celebration of rhythm, attitudes and improvisational folly.

For these reasons Commedia keeps shining as a moment of clever madness in the history of theater. It never died and never will: it is a poetic space in which contemporary and future actors and theater makers can go whenever they want to breathe in some wild and rigorous stage vitality.

The modern notion of Improvisation and its priority in the theatrical devising process are gifts from the Italian performers of those times, *les italiens*. In the play *all'improvviso*, the actor-creator constantly nourishes the plot through the development of comic themes (*lazzi*). The result of this way of performing is another fundamental principle of Commedia: plays are not based on a script but on a *canovaccio*⁴. We could translate it with the word *scenario*, or *plot*. If we explore some traditional canovacci from the 17th century, it is surprising and somehow disappointing to discover that a canovaccio is contained in just a few pages. It reports the titles of the acts and their various *lazzi*, and the outline of the plot. Sometimes there are key texts or words, but ...that's it. All the rest was the play *all'improvviso*: a blending of invention and experience, in which each actor would tap into an individual repertoire of texts, *lazzi*, songs and tricks created in years and even generations of practice.

There are three other aspects of traditional commedia that are worth mentioning for their historical novelty and their reverberations into contemporary devised movement based theatre.

The first relates to its professional nature. The word *Arte* means Profession: it is what you do well with your hands, your skills from which you earn your living. The

⁴ The term refers to the *canvas* that was hanging backstage, with the sketch of the play written on it. The Italian word *canovaccio* also includes the notion of raw fabric, rag-like, non refined.

word actually comes from a sanskrit root, AR⁵, meaning *to be in motion*. The words *arm, army, articulation, art* are all related. So *Commedia dell'arte* literally means professional comedy. It is the first time in modern history, that comedians gather together, sign contracts which engage them to work together professionally from the beginning to the end of a season. This means planning, marketing, rules on leadership and mutual support, competition for audiences, financial success as well as struggle. The contemporary status of professional free lance actor creator was born then.

Another great and fundamental novelty was that, for the first time in the history of western theater women performed on stage. The Church couldn't stand this event: there is a famous line by an outraged clergymen writing to his superiors about a performance he attended: "La Donna è DONNA!" The woman onstage is a real woman ! Women on stage were a huge novelty and a big hit for the time. I believe this is the main reason why we don't find masked female characters: this extraordinary event needed to be seen.

As contemporary theatre goes, we tend to forget this historical fact: before *Commedia*, women were not allowed on stage. Even in classic Greek theater, tragedies were written, performed and, in the early time, even watched only by men. In the democratic Athens, theatre was an event for all citizens and women did not have the status of citizens. Neither were slaves, children or foreigners. Yet interestingly a significant number of Greek tragedies are named after characters who are women or foreigners.

One last ingredient: *Commedia* was a multi-linguistic form of entertainment. The different masks came from different areas of Italy and beyond: *Pantalone* from Venice, *Brighella* from Bergamo, *Dottore* from Bologna, *Pulcinella* from Napoli, the *Capitano* from Spain and so on so forth. They did not just speak with accents, but in fully embodied and widely different languages. When Italians troupes arrived in France in the second half of the 1500s, they didn't speak French, and the audience had no access to the variety of italic dialects. The actors overcame this problem with

⁵ From <http://www.etimo.it>, an excellent source for Italian etymology. A valuable online resource for English is <http://www.etymonline.com>.

their physical playing and the use of mime, as well as developing the *grammelot*⁶, a language made of the phonetics of a specific language but without any meaning except for some occasional comprehensible words.

Commedia in Lecoq's pedagogy

After his Italian period, between 1948 and 1956, Lecoq brought Commedia back to Paris, together with the masks from Amleto Sartori. Here it became a keystone of his pedagogy, not only as a specific style of half mask comedy, explored during the training, but as a guiding principle within the very structure of the school.

After my training and my teaching at the Lecoq School, I have worked for several years within the pedagogic framework of Lecoq, in the training programs that I have devised. I progressively realized that the specific operating principles of Commedia are deeply engrained in Lecoq's pedagogic process.

Even the articulation of the teaching into the four classes of Movement, Physical Preparation, Improvisation and Creation is in direct connection with the classes taught at the *Ecole du Vieux Colombier* by Jacques Copeau, who was very much inspired by *Commedia dell'arte* in his quest for "renewing theatre"⁷.

The principle of playing from the body through actions, is something we constantly practice: whether it is with half masks, full masks, characters, clowns or bouffons, the body comes first, and improvisation is how the player creates and eventually writes her work. In an improvisation class, the students bring a form/mask/character they are working on in that particular session of the program, and they receive from the teacher a theme: for instance a classic theme in Commedia is "Pantalone counting his money". And there they go, playing and devising on stage.

The whole notion of "ensemble creation" practiced during the *autocours*, is deeply connected with Commedia: there are no directors nor authors, and the collective

⁶ Dario Fo's exploration with *grammelot* is referential.

⁷ Jane Baldwin, *The accidental rebirth of collective creation*. See also Mark Evans, *Jacques Copeau*.

devising happens through actors improvising with a type/character/mask, resulting in a relatively loose script that always allows the actors to improvise within a fixed structure. This is the definition of *canovaccio*.

On the point of Arte as profession we find another value of Commedia embedded in Lecoq's pedagogy. Every single student landing in his studio was not looking to be trained on how to succeed in an audition, but on how *to create* his own shows. Their question is not whether there is work for them out there in the theatre, but how they can make theatre themselves. Lecoq's teaching is not about interpreting theatre but about devising theatre. The vision of creating a "troupe" and earn your living through good playing, is in the heart of almost every one who undertakes this pedagogy.

Even the multi linguistic aspect of Commedia was crucial at Lecoq School, as well as in my later experiences teaching classes of international students. One of the most remarkable experiences I had during my first year at Lecoq's, as many others did, was that we were encouraged to improvise in our different languages...and it worked ! It was a revelation, an almost magical event: a theatre that works before and beyond words !

From Commedia dell'arte to Human Comedy: Stock Characters, Clichés and Types

Lecoq's pedagogy of movement was in constant movement itself, and at one point he realized the danger for students of playing *cliché*⁸ characters, as seen in poor reproductions of *Commedia dell'arte* throughout the world. They would fall into the trap of a fake style, stuck in the historical contexts and types of Italian Comedy, but fundamentally boring and poetically uninteresting. A dead and flat imitation. So he moved the principle of half mask comedy out of the traditional frame of Italian Comedy and he started developing a territory which he named Human Comedy

⁸ The French word *cliché* refers to a printing plate.

(*Comedie Humaine*⁹). Students were asked to make their own masks, and to play them in themes from contemporary world.

I think this was a remarkable move, both poetically and pedagogically. It opened the field of exploration to the depth of the tragicomedy of human nature through types. This field has been the main focus in my practice of Commedia after my time with Lecoq.

A stock character represents a whole group of individuals, who share the same fundamental drives and urgencies. It is a type in the sense that it is a pattern that manifests itself in multiple individuals.

Moving from *Commedia dell'arte* towards Human Comedy we encounter a transitional territory in which we can explore the question whether Commedia types can survive out of their specific historic frame. Working in different countries and with international groups of students, it became very clear to me that yes, they survive. And they thrive. Not as clichés but in the deep truth of their drives

Pantalone is a Wall Street banker, an Italian shop keeper in Rome, an estate agent in London. She is the cashier of a boulangerie in Paris, a Tarot reader on a late night TV show, a rich donor at a charity event in Boston.

The Zanni are latino immigrants working in the field of Southern California, waiters in a Parisian Café, cooks in an Italian restaurant, young privates in the army. The lovers are the overemotional and over the top artists after a premiere, the stars of TV soap operas, the adolescents in distress with their first love experiences. Wherever there is a war, there is the potential for a Capitano, the ancient *Miles Gloriosus* of Roman times. But he doesn't have to be a military man: Italian bars are full of Capitano-like types bragging about their love conquests. And this type goes beyond gender: I have met business ladies embodying the Capitano's drives, and actresses, cleaning ladies, politicians, and ... many Italian Mamas !

If we let go the traditional types and we go even further diving into contemporary life with contemporary masks made by contemporary students, Human Comedy becomes a field of manifestation for a wide multitude of human types. Some tend to

⁹ The reference to the work of Balzac immediately comes to mind.

appear everywhere, and others are quite specific to a location, a culture, a time, a milieu. Every country and every culture have its own variations on universal types, like the Capitano or Pantalone. But there are some types that are typical of a specific community or milieu or even a city, like the valley girl of California, or the venetian *Gondoliere*.

I have done this exploration with different audiences and students in different parts of the world, and it has always instantly sparked people's enthusiasm. In classes and lectures, I ask who could be a type that everybody would recognize without any explanation or text, and people starts throwing suggestions. The ones who get instant laughter and loud approvals, usually indicate a clear type. The audience feedback means that they actually know everything of that type, and they are already writing for him, in the sense of imagining him in different situations and scenarios. Sometimes everybody laughs but me, because that type is too culturally specific and my culture doesn't know him.

As an example, here are some types that emerged in my commedia work in the US: the lonesome cow boy, the valley girl, the Texan millionaire, the corporate woman, the northern California pot grower hippie, the southern California surfer, the blue collar, the nerd, the redneck with specific regional variations, the biker, the emo, the truck driver, the racial variations on the cop, the NY Jewish mother... Just to name a few.

It is immediately evident that this exploration can touch some hot spots: race and gender are often entangled with power and abuse. The simplification and generalization of the types can be perceived as reductive, outrageous or even offensive. But at the same time the naïveté, directness and emotional generosity of this style of playing can bypass the codes of the "politically correct" and lead to powerful spaces, highly poetical and highly political at the same time.

What is particularly powerful is that each mask has a counter-mask. Pantalone is not only grumpy and stingy, he becomes romantic and generous when he falls in love. The Captain is fierce and loud and...a coward. To essentialize characters into types means to expose the counter-mask of the world in a very direct and revelatory way.

Traditional Italian Comedy was not directly political, in the sense that it was not addressing and attacking power with a revolutionary intent. In this regard it was actually extremely cautious: nowhere do we find represented the types who had actual power at the time: the Church and the Aristocracy. And there is no political revolution in sight: at the end the master remains master and the servant remains servant.

But Commedia was certainly provocative: a clever entertainment mirroring and mocking a specific and very defined social context. And it was revolutionary for the mores of the time: not only women were on stage, but in many scenes they were engaged with sensual and even overtly erotic themes. Sensuality and obscenity were part of the poetry of earthly pleasures and many Canovacci would end with Pantalone “celebrating” the wedding of various couples, to the greatest outrage of the clergy of the time.

As a representation of the social construct of a society, the political potential of human comedy is extensive. Every society deals with the same fundamental social and political issues. With infinite variations we all need to deal with gender, family, community, power and decision making, work, class, education, religion, war and so on. Every community, in a given time, will find a specific structure involving multiple roles playing within very specific rules. Observing a community through the lens of types, allows us to see what is essential: once we have selected a set of fundamental types and found their truth and depth, the process of writing physical tragicomedy is fast forward.

A community of types is an archetypal milieu. I had great fun exploring the work of Shakespeare in the style of Commedia, turning famous plays into Canovacci, a great writing exercise for students. For this purpose, *Romeo and Juliet* is a great plot, because it is so solid that it can take almost anything from traditional commedia types to fully contemporary settings. I have seen Montague versus Capulet becoming Evangelical versus Lesbians, Italian Mafia versus Irish Cops in NY, Army versus Hippies, Superfit versus Obeses, or children of two families fighting against the love between their two old widow parents in a retirement home in Florida.

The play of types is accessible to anybody and this gives commedia a unique potential in education. I have taught commedia with students as young as 12 years old, and the results have always been astonishing. The connection with a type is much easier than with a psychologically defined character: there is an instant tapping into the playful power of the body, and the mask allows the physical experience to bypass all sorts of self judgment, insecurity or intellectual doubts, becoming a very empowering experience for the young actor and human being.

The play of human archetypes

Exploring further the notion of types, I engaged with the work of Carl Gustav Jung, in which archetypes play a central role. In Jungian analysis, archetypes are functions of the psyche: they are collective archaic psychic structures, inhabiting all humans, like roles available in the big play of human life.

Examples of these archetypal figures are the great mother, the father, the child, the *puer*, the old man, the trickster, the fool, the hero, the hermit, the warrior, the wild man, the witch. Some are gender specific, others exist in both genders. We can find many archetypal figures in the oldest European set of Tarot Cards, *les Tarots de Marseille*.

Our relationship with Archetypes can be conscious or unconscious. In any case they are active in individual and collective life. For Jung our individual and collective evolution, or *individuation*, is connected with the conscious integration of our archetypal world. Interestingly, in his writing, Jung uses the term *mask*, in reference to psychological types.

The Jungian scholar James Hillman went even further in this approach, creating what is known as Archetypal Psychology. He affirms that our psyche is polytheistic.

I am fascinated by how much theatre, and in particular human comedy can bring to this field. Theatre has a phenomenal potential in this process of integration of archetypes: the actor is by nature a “shape-shifter” and play is a very powerful and fun way to get in touch with different parts of human soul¹⁰.

¹⁰ See the work of Arnold Mindell in Process Oriented Psychology

As humans, from ancient Greek theatre to contemporary cinema, we have valued highly the ability of representing the darkest sides of human nature through playing them. I think this is because we have the intuition that if we are able to play the most difficult part of our nature, we can become more aware of them, and more “in charge” of them, and we will not allow them to take over in an unconscious and destructive way. This is where theatre is still connected with its ritual origins. Play is a form of intimate knowledge and integration. This intuition has inspired a variety of intersections between theatre and political, social or psychological work, like Theatre of the Oppressed, Psychodrama, Gestalt Therapy, Process Work, just to mention a few. Theater as representation of life is a collective intimate process involving both actors and the audience: through the story embodied by the characters, the audience can experience the inner journey that each good story unfolds, thus touching further levels of awareness.

As a theatre pedagogue trained in Gestalt therapy, I have applied the principles of human comedy and archetypes in many ways and in many settings, using play and comedy in processes of personal healing and emotional awareness. The profoundly healing power of humor emerges from and through the depth of the archetypes and the play of types.

Conclusion

Commedia embodies the playful wisdom of the theatrical body and brings us back to the essence of theatre. In Lecoq's words it is “The childhood of theatre.”¹¹ I see the pedagogic heritage of Jacques Lecoq as a map of territories to explore. His pedagogic principles are not only great tools in the training of actor-creators: they embody an epistemological approach, a way to know the world. The vision of the poetic body learning through imitation and play has tremendous potential not only in theatre, but in education, healing, social work and political action and in any field of our society where through theatre we can support the longing of individuals and communities to know themselves and live in peace and fun on this planet.

Lunga vita alla Commedia dell'arte !

¹¹ Jacques Lecoq, *Le theatre du geste*, page 113.

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