

WHAT IS COMMEDIA... (short curated bio by Susan Bertoia)

COMMEDIA DELL'ARTE is the lively form of professional Italian mask theatre that flourished in 15th C Europe and has influenced our Modern-day clowns. Commedia was born out of the tradition of the strolling minstrels and performers who travelled from town to town throughout Europe. It gained popularity through its exciting theatricality; masked actors, music and acrobatics. They performed outside in town squares and was a theatre performed for the 'people' by the 'people'. Often the comedy was based on satire and current affairs. The term Commedia Dell'Arte can be understood as "the craft of the professional actor/storyteller".

Commedia dell'arte was an actors' theatre and was the first form of theatre where women were "free" to perform as women on stage. It was exciting, challenging, physical, inspiring and is now included in part of the western actor's heritage and training practice. Traditionally Commedia troupes relied on stereotypical characters, masks, broad gestures and clowning to play to large, diverse crowds. The stock character types of the commedia portrayed social class and hierarchy that could be easily recognized through their "mask". Of these masks were the servants (Arlecchino, Pulcinella, Columbina), the masters (Pantalone, Dottore), the captain (Il Capitano) and the Young Lovers.

Commedia lasted as a theatrical form for over three hundred years evolving from travelling troupes into court supported theatre companies. Commedia followed the tradition of the travelling juggouleur in Europe or the Troubadour, or the French medieval lyric poets who sang on the themes of courtly love and chivalry. They travelled in Southern France, Northern Italy, Eastern Spain around 11-13C. And so too did the Commedia troupes travel throughout Europe, gaining popularity in France, Spain, Germany and England. Commedia influenced Western culture in many ways from opera plots and characters, to literature and visual art, to mask making and of course theatre. In around the late 1700s commedia died out as an art form – itself became a parody and was used as a way to describe a vulgar and less refined form of theatre. Eventually it became set aside for children's theatre and petty amusements. There were several resurrections of the commedia as we see in the late 1800's with the drawings of Maurice Sand and the works of Picasso. In Italy in the 1950s there was yet another interest in the commedia. This partly due to the struggles Italy was having with its own identity of a society. The wars had created its stresses as well. Giorgio Strehler (theatre director) and Amleto Sartori (sculptor) along with Moretti (actor) embraced the re-invention of the commedia. Strehler took to training actors in the style and developed with Sartori the traditional leather masks that would have been worn back in the day. The agile and spontaneous Moretti seemed to have channeled the spirit of not only the great comedic servant Arlecchino, but also the spirit of commedia back onto the Italian stages. **

*** Il Piccolo Teatro di Milano was where Strehler began this return to commedia. There is a school there as well as several theatres that dedicate a portion of their season to commedia and Goldoni. It was here that I trained back in the 1990s*

re made famous by the Italian players in the seventeenth century. See Appendix F.—TRANSLATOR
the master of Molière, and Nature was his teacher.”
sque little circus in Montmartre of the sort painted so charmingly by Seurat in his *Le Cirque*. T
til 1925, and then went to the Cirque d’Hiver.—TRANSLATOR.



