

Shakespeare and Commedia

A Short Report on Exploring Shakespeare through Commedia dell'Arte

This spring I found myself teaching in an American Study Abroad Program accredited by Memphis University at the Accademia dell'Arte in Arezzo in eastern Tuscany. This experience led us to discover an integration of Shakespeare and Commedia, in which the assets of one complemented the potential weakness of the other.

By way of background, the Accademia dell'Arte receives both undergraduate and postgraduate students in Theatre Studies who wish to immerse themselves in either a semester, a summer or a year-long program of conservatoire-style training combined with an intensive Italian language module. The main thrust of the program is Commedia dell'Arte, both in its most feisty traditional form but also in more contemporary applications through the creation of original masks and scenarios. My role is that of Coordinator and Course Leader, facilitating a course designed to extend their vocal abilities, particularly with a view to their defining vocal design for the characters in the Commedia. I also collaborate actively with Marcello Bartoli, a recognized point of reference for the Commedia tradition in Italy, and Nino Racco, a traditional story-teller from Calabria who uses original masks and song in his work. Towards the end of the program I direct a performance that brings together the various strands of study in an ensemble way.

The small group of students who arrived in Arezzo this spring was a mixture of American undergraduate majors in Theatre Studies, Irish postgraduates from Trinity College, Dublin and one Brazilian. My own personal experience of the Commedia, and mask work in general, was limited before coming to work in the Accademia, so I was feeling my way towards how my work could dovetail with that of my fellow Italian colleagues.

In the existing course, during the Commedia sessions, the students became acquainted with the main character types—some of the principal ones being Pantalone, the old moneyed merchant driven by avarice; Arlecchino, the eternal servant ever hungry, always ready to turn an acrobatic trick; and Colombina, the maidservant, lucid and confidante to the Innamorati (Lovers). Students learnt the vital characteristics of these “masks,” their status in the hermetic world of 16th century Commedia and the desires, drives and weaknesses that motivate them. Each character comes with its own very specific mask and a set of clearly defined physical characteristics including dress, style of walking and gesture as well as rhythm. Vocally each character was traditionally related to a certain accent or dialect, resonant with the different regions of Italy before its relatively late unification in the 19th Century. Once students had embodied these stock characters they improvised and subsequently elaborated short scenes based on traditional scenarios (canovaccio).

During this inaugural semester at the Accademia, classes took the form of concentrated workshops, so the Voicework classes that I facilitated were programmed in alternation with the Commedia and other classes. The initial course, “Voice in Performance,” was designed to develop the students’ voices both in terms of range, power and flexibility, as well as to introduce them to a fundamentally interdisciplinary approach, where pure sound, text and



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physical and facial movement form part of an ensemble of performance skills. This was specifically with a view to preparing the actor for the polyvalence of the Commedia style, where movement and vocal quality are highly stylised and not naturalistic in essence. I decided therefore to emphasise our exploration of the vocally grotesque, and introduced the notion of the “vocal mask” with a view to this. The “vocal mask” is a corollary of highly stylized facial postures, which lead the student to develop grotesque facial characteristics. Similarly with the voice we can construct vocal settings or characteristics, which tend to be equally extreme and sometimes ridiculous. Such ‘vocal masks’ allow the student to open out her/his range of characterization through the voice. But I still did not know how useful these studies would be until Marcello Bartoli came to my class and confirmed that this was precisely the material that he wished the actors to unravel and apply ultimately in the Commedia scenes.

Subsequently I investigated a series of Duologues from Shakespeare which concentrated on the Lovers (or would-be lovers...), be it Kate and Petruchio from the *Taming of the Shrew*, Helena and Demetrius from *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Anne and Richard from *Richard III* or Olivia and Viola from *Twelfth Night*. These scenes seemed to me to be particularly suitable given the theme of frustrated love and sensuality which so often forms the visceral basis of the Commedia canovaccio. Each scene exhales its own flavour. *The Taming of the Shrew* is fast and very lively, a veritable ping-pong match of words and gesture. The scene from *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is urgent and rasping but also a version of the amorous chase. Anne and Richard swing in ever decreasing and tense arcs of a circle till the prey is pinioned in Richard's net of words. Olivia and Viola spar tenderly in a subtle interplay of word and look.

To conclude their semester there was to be an Ensemble presentation before an invited audience of roughly a hundred people in the very spacious main entrance hall of the Villa Godiola, the home of the Accademia. It occurred to me to ask the students if they could revive some of the canovaccio they had mapped out in their Commedia work, in particular scenes involving the stock characters of the Commedia: Il Capitano, Arlechinno, Colombina, Brighella. And we had the four Shakespearian duologues...So we had the basic raw material for the presentation—half a dozen Commedia scenes of varying length and the four duologues.

How was this rather heteroclitic mixture going to come together? Could these two very contrasted genres complement each other? Did it make sense to mix styles? I was curious about the

potential pitfalls of such a performance, but felt optimistic about possible cross-fertilization.

Our Commedia scenes depicted a jealous Capitano tricked by a Colombina who is really in love with Arlecchino: two Zanni who arrive to make a huge barbecue, and steal each other's food: the unfortunate Brighella and Il Capitano each make an appointment to meet a sly Colombina who sets them up only to find she has stolen their gifts and is making off with Arlecchino... The themes of the scenes are foiled love, greed, and burgeoning sexuality. The pace is fast: the physical actions extreme and the mask movements punctuated and stylised. In the traditional Commedia each character would have her/his own accent identifying them as being from different regions, heightening the comic interchange. An actor playing in the mask was not expected to use her/his own voice. Another had to be established. Each character also tended towards a certain tone and rhythm of speech. In our versions of these scenes the student actors created their own vocal designs for the mask, from the booming almost military inflections of Capitano to the syrupy sing-song of Colombina, from the guttural Brighella to a high-pitched whiney Zanni.

To create a short presentation that was balanced I alternated the Commedia and the Shakespeare Duologues. So a triumphant Colombina and Arlechinno might go off chased by a revengeful Capitano and Helena and Demetrius would enter swiftly from the same door wrapped in their desperate chase. Petruchio's exit with a struggling screaming Kate would coincide with the appearance of a particularly greedy Zanni. The pace was upbeat.

As we started rehearsals for the presentation the Shakespeare scenes seemed to suffer from the exposure to the world of the Commedia: the masked characters were so striking, so immediate and their adventures tipped us into an hilarious zany world. Sometimes the Shakespeare came across as stilted, lacking in colour and fire compared with these lusty characters—the weight of the text seeming to slow the action down and our attention would drop until the next commedia entrance.

However, as the student actors rehearsed the changes and the transitions from Shakespeare to the Commedia, I saw that the two genres were rubbing off on each other. The clarity and pace of the Commedia sometimes showed us where the Shakespeare was being played too muddily and lacking in bite. On the other hand the Shakespeare made us more aware of the vocal and verbal rhythms in the Commedia. The actors began to enjoy the change and found that, although they had to vary the form of their playing, three elements were

common to both styles: the sense that the audience is a part of the action; the need to be clear and defined even in the smallest gesture; and a clarity in the rhythm and dynamics of a scene: bringing up the stakes.

The Shakespeare scenes began to benefit from the tighter Commedia style. They no longer lagged. Instead they appeared as a welcome contrast and we were drawn more fervently into the centre of each little scene: quicker than might have been the case if we had not already been accustomed to very rapidly assessing the situation on stage and the desires of each character. By the time we came to the final presentation there was no “drop” with the Shakespeare; the same energy that had sustained the rough Commedia now sustained the muscular language; the same vivid reactions of the masked characters informed the body language of the Shakespearean protagonists; the same attention to audience reaction and timing lent a new dimension to the hermetic quality of the dialogues. We had actually succeeded not in blending the two styles but in letting the strengths of one feed into and inform the weakness of the other.

This experience was not planned in advance when this program was first conceived, but I see it as a rich vein of enquiry and practice in the semesters to come. It has led me now to collaborate this summer with Marcello Bartoli in his Professional Actor Workshop at the Teatro Metastasio in Prato, near Florence, where he investigated the notion of The Contemporary Mask by elaborating a series of characters with the actors, who subsequently conceived and fabricated their own original masks. Once again I had the opportunity to propose some stepping-stones as to how to invest the vocal and verbal aspect of the masked character. In the fall semester of 2004 we have now agreed to collaborate actively and work in tandem in the final phase of the training. I will also be teaching regularly from spring 2005 at the international Academy in Paris where the accent is again on the Commedia.

In particular I have decided to renew the experience of working Shakespeare alongside Commedia and to this end will choose extracts from one play (probably *The Merry Wives of Windsor*!) This should enable us to create one unified Shakespearean world paralleled by the Commedia Universe... a challenging prospect!

