

COMMEDIA TONIGHT!

By Jeffrey Smart

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STORY OF THE PLAY

All of the elements of commedia dell'arte are here, waiting to enliven your stage tonight! A commedia dell'arte troupe invades a town square on market day and performs a play. In the play, two young men, Flavio and Ottavio, and their servant, Arlecchino, have come to the town to find love.

And they do with Isabella and Aurelia. The young ladies are the daughter and the ward of Pantalone, a thin, impoverished man intent on marrying Isabella to his rich, fat friend, the Dottore, who happens to be Flavio's father. Isabella would rather marry Ottavio, of course.

A rich, widowed Contessa arrives and begins to pursue Pantalone. As the faithful servant, it falls to Arlecchino to arrange for his masters to get the love they desire. (And someone for himself if he ever has the time!) His schemes force him to pretend to be English, French and German, all with outrageous accents. But other characters are plotting as well, resulting in mistaken identities, people running after or away from each other, and Pantalone even donning a dress. In short, there's sure to be commedia tonight!

A sophisticated play for community, college, and high school theatres.

HISTORICAL NOTES

Commedia dell'arte was a physical and improvisational style, so feel free to incorporate any physical business that occurs in rehearsal and add lots of ad lib yelling and cheering during any chasing or physical sequences, both from the participants and from the onstage audience.

CAST OF CHARACTERS

(5 m, 4 w, extras)

ARLECCHINO: Ottavio's servant.

OTTAVIO: An impoverished young lover, Flavio's best friend and lookalike.

FLAVIO: Rich, a sighing lover.

ISABELLA: Pantalone's daughter.

AURELIA: Pantalone's ward, a sighing lover.

PANTALONE: Isabella's father, thin and not so rich.

DOTTORE: Flavio's father, rich and fat.

CONTESSA: A widow always in black, rich.

LISETTA: The Contessa's servant.

ONSTAGE AUDIENCE: Townspeople and vendors, including an actress who serves as the Young Woman in the last scene.

TIME: The late 1500s.

PLACE: Square in an Italian town.

SETTING

A town square in Italy. Buildings frame the streets which empty into the square. Filling the square are vendors with their carts and trays. This is a market day and thus somewhat festive.

In this play, 20 soldi equal 1 ducat. Seventy ducats per year was equal to a craftsman's annual income.

COSTUMING

Characters wear the traditional commedia dell'arte costumes. The lovers, Flavio, Aurelia, Ottavio and Isabella, are decked out in the height of style in the richest fabrics available and affordable. If you think Romeo and Juliet, you won't go very wrong. Flavio probably wears more subdued colors than his excitable and slightly threadbare friend.

Arlecchino wears a tight-fitting peasant's shirt and vest or jacket, and knee pants patched with colorful rags that eventually turn into a diamond pattern from head to toe (nimbleness should be considered). In the last scene, Arlecchino and Lisetta are accessorized as a married couple: he with top hat, black tail coat and ascot; she with a white train, veil and bouquet.

Pantalone wears tight red leggings, that are usually sagging to show his thinness as he ages, and curved slippers. Whiskers and a coat somewhat like our modern smoking jackets or a small cape completed his outfit.

Dottore is clothed in black and sometimes wears what we now consider a graduation gown and cap to show his learnedness (think an Oxford don). The Contessa is a woman of property, dressed in black for mourning, probably with hat and veil or a mantilla on her head and, for our purposes, a gown cut to reveal an ample bosom. Lisetta wears worn garb appropriate for female servants, with an ankle or mid-calf length skirt for practicality and a little flirting. The townspeople dress in the more practical garb of Arlecchino and Lisetta.

PROPS

PANTALONE: Handkerchief, coins.

CONTESSA: Purse with jewelry, handkerchief, coins, fan.

LISETTA: Bird cage, satchels, suitcases, harp or bass case, steamer trunk, armoire.

ARLECCHINO: Black dress with veil, roll of parchment.

FLAVIO: Coin purse.

AURELIA: Suitcases, coin purse.

OTTAVIO: Book, carpetbag.

ISABELLA: Suitcases.

SET PROPS: Drums, horns, various market goods, tray of masks, coins, miscellaneous objects for Isabella to throw.

ACT I

(AT RISE: Interrupting the shouts that sell their wares - sausages, pots, jars, ribbons, silks, pasta, bread, books, etc., come the cries of a commedia dell'arte troupe, led by an energetic actor we will know only by his stage name, ARLECCHINO. The troupe might augment their entrance by banging on drums or tootling on brass instruments. During Arlecchino's opening speech, some of the other ACTORS are clearing the space and others are arranging to use the houses that flank the square.)

ARLECCHINO: Hurry, hurry, step right up! Take a seat, ladies and gentlemen! Prepare to be delighted! Standing before you are those players of comedy and love known as I Famosi! We're here to present you one of our hundreds of comedies performed throughout Italy, Spain, and a little bit of France. Prepare to lift your spirits, broaden your smiles and lighten your cares - prepare yourselves for commedia dell'arte!

TOWNSPERSON: What's commedia dell'arte?

ARLECCHINO: What's commedia dell'arte? What's commedia dell'arte? *(HE faints to the floor, then rolls over and springs up.)* I'm glad you asked. It's professional entertainment. We are actors, entertainers, performers and acrobats who roam from town to town living solely on our ability to please you. How do I know it's professional? Say, do you have a soldo on you? *(The TOWNSPERSON digs up a copper coin. ARLECCHINO snatches it out of his hand.)* One soldo, ladies and gentlemen. I am now a paid professional. And that's commedia dell'arte!

ANOTHER TOWNSPERSON: Yes, but that's a trick, that's not entertainment.

ARLECCHINO: A trick? And what is entertainment? The ability to remove yourself from something and admire the antics of someone else. Didn't you laugh at him/her? Didn't you stand back, look at him/her and say to yourself, "A fool and his/her money are soon parted?"

Commedia Tonight!

- 6 -

ANOTHER TOWNSPERSON: Yes.

ARLECCHINO: Commedia dell'arte!

A THIRD TOWNSPERSON: But I thought entertainment was getting caught up in someone else's dilemma.

ARLECCHINO: For a simple Italian village, you've certainly got sophisticated ideas of entertainment. So I present you a lover, (*AURELIA emerges to admiring oohs and ahhs.*) tender-hearted, given to another, yet fallen in love with a young man, (*FLAVIO enters to admiring oohs and ahhs and performs pantomime love with AURELIA.*) as tender-hearted as herself. They love, they yearn, they sigh, they dream, but, aha! (*DOTTORE, somewhat corpulent, enters scowling.*) The young man's father, as cruel as his costume is black, as long-winded as his addiction to books has made him, determined to keep the two apart! (*CROWD: Boo. Hiss. To the THIRD TOWNSPERSON.*) Are you caught up now?

THIRD TOWNSPERSON: Yes.

ARLECCHINO: That makes it - (*To the CROWD.*) What have we got?

ALL: Commedia dell'arte!

DOTTORE: My friends, I should mention that commedia dell'arte is so called to distinguish it from commedia erudita, the learned comedy of the court and academies translated from the masters of Greece and Rome. Befitting its ancient origin, it tends to be somewhat - stale. However, the spirit of those plays, their very essence - the essence, some have argued, that is at the center of all comedy throughout the ages - has been rekindled by contemporary persons who are vibrant, dynamic -

ARLECCHINO: Desperate to make a living.

DOTTORE: It's the comedy of professional players, the true definition of -

ARLECCHINO: What's that phrase again?

ALL: Commedia dell'arte!

ARLECCHINO: Yes, commedia dell'arte, filled with your favorite characters.

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