



Commedia dell'Arte Curriculum Guide

Updated January 2011

Dear Teachers,

Faction of Fools Theatre Company is devoted to preserving and promoting the classical style of Commedia dell'Arte.

Curriculum Guides are designed as a resource both for teachers and students. We encourage you to photocopy articles you find helpful and distribute them to your students as supplemental reading.

This curriculum guide contains material about the history of Commedia dell'Arte, the masks, and the acting style. Also included are approaches to explore the style in the classroom to help students form a deeper understanding of and appreciation for the art form.

We hope that this curriculum guide will prove useful as you explore this classical art form and prepare to bring your students to the theatre!

Sincerely,
Faction of Fools

Table of Contents

<i>A History of Commedia dell'Arte</i>	3
<i>Matthew R. Wilson, Unmasked</i>	6
<i>The Characters</i>	8
<i>Further Resources</i>	9
<i>Classroom Activities</i>	10

Contributors

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In School Programs

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Mission Statement

Faction of Fools Theatre Company celebrates Commedia dell'Arte in Washington, DC and around the world. We preserve and promote this Renaissance theatre style by both respecting its heritage and exploring its future. We embody the spirit of Commedia, which is traditional yet innovative, international yet familiar, and classical yet accessible. In our performances, actor training, international initiatives, and educational outreach, Commedia dell'Arte is theatre at its best: physical discipline, spontaneous imagination, collaborative energy, and joyous wonder.

Faction of Fools is a 501(c)(3) not-for-profit organization.

A History of Commedia dell'Arte



Commedia dell'Arte (which translates as “theatre of the professional”) began in Italy in the early 16th Century and quickly spread throughout Europe, creating a lasting influence on Shakespeare, Molière, opera, vaudeville, contemporary musical theatre, sit-coms, and improv comedy. The legacy of Commedia includes the first incorporated (i.e. professional) theatre company, the first European actresses, and many of the themes and storylines still enjoyed by audiences today.

The style of Commedia is characterized by its use of masks, improvisation, physical comedy, and recognizable character types. According to the Maestro Antonio Fava, the famous character types can be divided into four main categories:

- (1) The **Servants** or **Zanni** such as Arlecchino (Harlequin), Pulcinella (Punch), Colombina (Columbine), Scapino (Scapín), Brighella, Pedrolino, Pierrot, and the like;
- (2) The **Old Men** or **Vecchi** such as the greedy Magnifico (Pantalone), the know-it-all professor (il Dottore), or the stuttering Tartaglia;
- (3) The young **Lovers** or **Innamorati** with names such as Isabella, Flaminia, or Ortensia (for women) and Flavio, Orazio, Ortensio, or Leandro (for men).
- (4) The boasting **Captains** or **Capitani** and their female equivalent, the vivacious and oftentimes violent La Signora.

Hundreds of character names exist, each the invention of a particular actor, but all of them can be viewed as a derivative or hybrid of these four major character types.

Commedia’s origins have not been conclusively determined, and scholars have demonstrated a variety of possible factors in its development: the masked, improvised comedy of the Roman Atellan farce tradition; the mime theatre of the Byzantine world; the jugglers and traveling players of Medieval Europe; the market culture of early modern piazzas that featured performers, charlatans, and festivals; and Renaissance rediscoveries of Plautus and Terrence by theatre Academies and the *commedia erudita* tradition. Whatever its origins, by the 1520s, performers like Angelo Beolco (il Ruzzante) and early practitioners of the **Zanni** character type were entertaining audiences with a style that appears to be early Commedia. Some early references to this style include names like *commedia all'improvvisa* (the improvised theatre) and *commedia zannesca* (the zanni-esque theatre).

Master-servant scenarios became somewhat more sophisticated as the **Old Man** character type emerged to boss the Zanni around. Early female servants (*zagna*, singular; *zagne* plural) were played in masks by male performers.

A major landmark in theatre history occurred in Padua, Italy, on February 25, 1545, when Ser Maphio’s troupe of performers signed a letter of incorporation establishing themselves as a “*fraternal compagnia*.” (The anniversary of this date is celebrated every Commedia dell’Arte Day.) This document is the oldest extant record of modern actors thinking of their work as a legitimate business. Other troupes of this era had similar endeavors, and the business of “show business” was born when artist-entrepreneurs began to create professional models for making a living in the theatre. This capitalistic innovation represents a departure from classical models of civically funded theatre or medieval models of amateur, pan-handling, or church-funded performances.

Another major landmark in theatre history was first confirmed in 1566 when a Commedia performer named Vincenza Armani became the first documented professional actress. (She took

the stage in Mantua almost a full century before a professional actress appeared in London's theatres.) Evidence exists as early as the 1540s that Commedia troupes began to create professional space for female performers, but the late 1560s and 1570s were the Age of the Actress. Isabella Andreini became one of the most famous and sought-after performers in all of Italy and France, and her contribution to Commedia dell'Arte is still seen in the most prevalent name for the leading female Lover: Isabella.

The advent of the actress occasioned a new character type: the male and female **Lovers** or **Innamorati** (*innamorato*, masculine; *innamorata*, feminine) who became the children of the Old Men. These additional characters allowed Commedia troupes to employ far more sophisticated dramaturgy and storylines, and the resultant tradition was dubbed "the Perfect Comedy" because of its balance of highbrow and lowbrow themes and its complicated plot twists centering on the thwarted dreams of young Lovers. The story of troubled young love became a hallmark of "the Italian Comedy" and is seen most famously in Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*. (But remember: If Shakespeare had actually been from Verona, Juliet would not have been played by a boy.)

The advent of the actress also establishes a new tradition of unmasked characters in the Commedia *dramatis personae*. Whereas female characters had previously been played by men wearing grotesque female masks, actresses performed without masks exposing their own authentic (and reportedly beautiful) female faces. The male Lovers, as their counterpoints, also performed unmasked, and additional unmasked characters came to include the *servetta* (French, *soubrette*), an unmasked female servant like the famous Colombina. The "*infinato*" tradition (such as the character Pedrolino) was a male servant who played in white face (hence the term "*infinato*," meaning "floured.") This white-faced comic servant is an ancestor to the white-faced clown of the circus tradition and the modern, white-faced pantomime.

The fourth character type is the **Capitano**, a boasting but fraudulent war hero, much like the *miles gloriosus* ("glorious soldier") character of Roman comedy. The Capitani are famous for their sonorous and bombastic names such as Capitán Sangre y Feugo, Capitán Escombombardón, and Capitano Spavento della Valle Inferno. (The last was created and performed by Isabella Andreini's real-life husband, Francesco.)



Unlike their counterparts in England, who founded an industry on the reputation of key playwrights (Marlowe and Shakespeare, for example) and the success of their own purpose-built theatres (the Theatre, Curtain, Rose, and Globe, to name a few), Commedia dell'Arte players capitalized on the virtuosity of the performer as showcased in improvised performances that could be staged wherever necessity demanded. The depiction of Commedia dell'Arte as "street theatre" is a simplified myth, for the reality was that Commedia players performed wherever possible—but ideally indoors where it was easier to monitor ticket revenue and to control the various aspects of the performance. Undoubtedly, most companies frequently played on touring stages in piazzas, but the most famous companies enjoyed indoor bookings at public meeting halls (the *stanze*; *stanza*, singular) or by commission at court. In fact, the famous Teatro all'Antica in Sabbioneta was intended to house a resident Commedia troupe, a plan ultimately cut short by the death of the benefactor Duke Vespasiano Gonzaga Colonna in 1591.

The traveling Commedia troupes consisted of 12 or so professional performers, each a specialist in his or her character. There were no playwrights or directors. The company manager (*capocomico*) would announce the title and theme of an evening's performance, making a scenario or *canovaccio* available to the performers. Some 800 historical *canovacci* survive—most notably

in the Scala scenarios published in Venice 1611 and in the recently published Casamarciano scenarios housed at the National Library of Naples. Most scenarios are approximately three pages long and describe the basic plot points of the story with character entrances and exits indicated. The dialogue was not scripted for comedies (though troupes might perform scripted tragedies or pastorals as part of their repertoire). Using the framework of the scenario, actors would collaborate together to improvise a unique performance at every show. The complicated story of intrigue, deception, despair, and ultimately (usually) happy ending was seasoned with a rich collection of *lazzi* (singular *lazzo*): polished jokes, bits, gags, feats of acrobatics, displays of skill, or comedic shtick that could be inserted into performances wherever the actors thought appropriate. Thus each performance was a showcase of, on the one hand, honed technique and carefully rehearsed physical comedy routines and, on the other hand, live, in the moment spontaneity.

Venice, Verona, Padua, Mantua, Ferrara, Bologna, Florence, Turin, Genova, Rome, and Naples were hot spots of Commedia dell'Arte during the mid-16th to early 17th Centuries. The more enterprising Commedia troupes also found audiences outside of Italy and experienced unparalleled success in trans-national touring. A Commedia troupe was granted permission to perform in London as early as 1566. Isabella and Francesco Andreini's company *i Gelosi* ("The Zealous Ones") first played the French court in 1571. By the early 1700s, Commedia troupes had entertained audiences across the continent and had been commissioned to play for Europe's most distinguished monarchs, including Queen Elizabeth, Louis XIV, and Russia's Empress Anna. By way of the British "panto" tradition, which flourished in the 18th and 19th Centuries, Commedia characters even found their way to New World stages. In the 1800s, fools named Harlequin, Columbine, Scaramouche, and Pantaloon frequently appeared in American clown routines, comic entr'actes, and even minstrel shows. A French innovation named Pierrot (a descendent of Pedrolino) became an icon of the early 20th Century since his evocative white face and silent gesture were so befitting to the early silent screen. (Watch the brilliant film *Children of Paradise* for a later depiction.)

It was not until 1750 that Commedia dell'Arte received its name. What was frequently known as "Improvised Theatre" or, outside of Italy, as "Italian Comedy" was finally dubbed "Professional Theatre" by Carlo Goldoni in his treatise *Il teatro comico* (*The Comic Theatre*). The name stuck and is a source of pride among Commedia practitioners today who see their tradition as founders of professional acting. Ironically, however, Goldoni, meant it as a term of disparagement—comparing the vulgar, hackneyed, pandering, and commercialized style of the "professional actors" with the more literary and noble style of *commedia erudita*. Goldoni brought about needed theatrical reform, and he established Italian national drama with his success as a playwright of hundreds of comedies, including *The Servant of Two Masters*. His reform, however, came at a price. He hired Venice's best Commedia performers but required them to play without masks and to speak his written script rather than dialogue of their own invention. It has been argued that Carlo Goldoni "killed" Commedia.



With all due respect to Signor Goldoni, we believe Commedia dell'Arte is alive and well.

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Matthew R. Wilson, Unmasked

An interview with the Artistic Director

Q. As an actor, what interested you in Commedia dell'Arte?

A. When I was in 9th grade, I saw my first professional Shakespeare production: a student matinee of *Twelfth Night* by the Tennessee Repertory Theatre. I was mesmerized, fell in love with the play, and decided that someday I would play Feste, but I realized that the actor who had played Feste had a lot of comic tricks up his sleeve that I couldn't do. So, at an early age, I started training in physical comedy, clown, and mask play. When I began serious Commedia dell'Arte training, I was still using Commedia as a means to an end: training to play Shakespeare's fools or other comic characters but not to do Commedia dell'Arte per se. The more I kept working, however, the more I fell in love with Commedia for its own sake. To this day, I still haven't played Feste, but I now do a *lot* of Commedia dell'Arte. It's not necessarily my "favorite" style of theatre, but it is the style in which all of the things I love about theatre come out most clearly: the direct relationship with the audience, the truth of the improvised moment, the trust and collaboration among performers, the high degree of professionalism, the spectacular style, and the ways in which "normal" human interactions are given polish and pizzazz.



Q. Where did you study this art form? How long was your training? Can you describe the experience?

A. I began studying Commedia dell'Arte at a high school theatre camp and then moved to New York to work as an actor. In early 2001, a friend from that high school theatre camp called to say, "We have to go to Italy to study Commedia dell'Arte with Antonio Fava because he is in all the books I'm reading." I decided not to argue, and he and I spent the better part of 2001 and 2002 in Italy, training at Antonio's school and then working to create and perform a play with him. In 2004, Maestro Fava invited me back to his school to teach for him, and I have been able to spend summers for many years teaching in Italy at one of the world's premiere Commedia dell'Arte conservatories. The students range from age 18 to late 60s and are drama students, professional actors, or theatre scholars from all over the world. We work primarily in Italian, English, and Spanish, but, when performing, the students all speak their native languages. The variety of perspectives is beautiful, and I am always inspired by how people learn to collaborate and communicate despite the differences in language and culture. In addition to the mental strain of constantly creating and exploring and trying to communicate in other languages, the physical work is grueling. We train for ten hours every day, and the students must create public performances daily. I remember the day my friend and I arrived as students. The woman who organizes the school told us that we would be performing the first night of classes. When we hesitated, she quickly asked, "You are actors or you are tourists?" Message received! The school celebrated its 25th anniversary this past year, and I have been fortunate to be a part of 8 of those 25 years as a student and instructor.

Q. Who is Antonio Fava?

A. Antonio Fava is one of the world's leading Maestros of Commedia dell'Arte and makers of traditional Commedia dell'Arte masks. He inherited the mask of Pulcinella (a traditional Commedia character from



the South of Italy where Fava was raised) from his father and began to work as a performer. He is also passing on the tradition to his son who frequently performs with him. Antonio studied and performed with most of the famous European legends of the 20th Century before starting his own school back in Italy in the early 1980s. Today, he is known throughout the world as an expert on Commedia dell'Arte. He teaches, directs, and performs in Italy for half of the year and then tours internationally for the other half of the year. His masks are on display in museums and in high demand for theatre productions. Each one is a hand-crafted work of art. The masks we use in our shows would retail for thousands of dollars, so I am very glad to have them made for us by my friend and mentor!

Q. What was the impetus for creating *The Great One-Man Commedia Epic*?

A. At the end of the 1500s Gabrieli, one of the famous Commedia performers of the day, would perform entire shows in which he played *all* the characters. As with all things in the Commedia tradition, we have records that this occurred and reports that it was wildly successful and entertaining, but we don't have descriptions of what actually happened. We don't know how he did it, what tricks he used, or how the shows went. The style is known in Italian as a *pantomima gabrieliiana* (a "Gabrielian act"), and it is one of the things that we study at Fava's school. I decided to make my own *gabrieliana* in 2004 because I was inspired by the challenge and because I wanted a show that could travel easily and could demonstrate the different characters and themes of a traditional Commedia dell'Arte play.

Q. How long did it take to create the show?

A. I had been studying and performing the characters in the show for four years before I began to work on it, but the bulk of this show was created in about four weeks during the summer of 2004. In reality, the show has continued to develop ever since. Each performance is different, and many new gags have been developed while other parts have been edited down or simplified.

Q. How long did it take you to perfect the characters? Which one is your favorite?

A. Commedia dell'Arte is and always has been a lifetime of work. However, it took about six months of performing my one-man show before I felt I had reached a first stage of mastery for the characters and the physical endurance necessary to play for a full-length show. The Zanni/Servant character was my first love, and I also took quickly to Dottore and the Lover. For several years, the Capitano was the hardest character for me to perform because his mentality and bravado are so far from my normal disposition. When I wrote the scenario for *The Great One-Man Commedia Epic*, I came up with the idea of playing three different Captains and had to work hard to fall in love with the character! Today, however, he is probably my favorite.

The Characters

The Commedia dell'Arte characters recorded in history fit into four main types. Examples of each type are as follows:

Zanni

Zanni are the servant characters. These characters try their best to serve their masters, despite their lack of wit.

Truffaldino—a standard, long-nosed “second zanni,” “second” in the sense that his dim wits are often complemented by a slightly craftier friend who plays the “first” role in the comic couple.

Scapino—whose name is derived from the Italian verb “to escape,” is the classic, crafty “first zanni,” available for all projects of intrigue and also to make decisions for his servant friends...though not necessarily good ones.

Pedrolino—the fussy domestic serving man to La Signora, the young wife of one of the Old Men. Pedrolino’s status is heightened by his clean clothes and indoor accommodations, but suffering the constant abuse of La Signora is no easy task. The character is traditionally played in white make-up rather than a mask and thus is known as “*infarinato*” (“floured”).

Coviello—from the southern tradition, a typical first zanni.



The Old Men

Pantalone—a wealthy old man who has finally achieved status near the end of his life, he is greedy and self-interested after years of struggle. He is often the husband of the young and violent La Signora, who cuckolds him every chance she gets.

Dottore—from Bologna, the center of fine cuisine and the university system, he is an expert in everything...especially food. Sometimes a know-it-all, sometimes a charlatan, he loves to ramble on.



The Lovers

The Lovers are typically the son and daughter to the Old Men. They are highly emotional and passionate. They will do anything to marry the person they love.

Flavio—lead male lover.

Isabella—lead female lover.

The Captain

This braggart soldier is usually from a foreign country other than Italy. He boasts and brags of his strengths, abilities, and triumphant battles but in reality cowers in the face of conflict. This exotic attention-seeker often arrives in the scenario just when things start to go badly, and he only makes them worse. The Captain is a lover of war and a lover of women—but mostly a lover of himself!

Examples of names for the Captain include:

El Capitán del Corazón Solitario (from Spain)

Capt. Maj. Brig. Gen. Montgomery John Wells Smith (from England)

Captaine Jean Grammelot (from France)



The female counterpart to the Captain is the young, vivacious La Signora. *La Signora*—usually a young, opportunistic wife of one of the Old Men. She has married for wealth, not love. Typically she has grown tired of waiting for her husband’s inheritance and more tired still of his advances. Despite being married, she continues her pursuits for love, usually with a Captain.



Further Resources

Books:

- Coticelli, Francesco, Anne Goodrich Heck, & Thomas F. Heck. *The Commedia dell’Arte in Naples: A Bilingual Edition of the 176 Casamarciano Scenarios*. Scarecrow, 2001.
- Duchartre, Pierre Louis. *The Italian Comedy*. Dover, 1966.
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- Gordon, Mel. *Lazzi: The Comic Routines of the Commedia dell’Arte*. PAJ, 2001.
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- Heck, Thomas F. *Commedia dell’Arte: A Guide to the Primary and Secondary Literature*. Authors Guild Blackprint.com, 1988.
- Henke, Robert. *Performance and the Literature in the Commedia dell’Arte*. Cambridge UP, 2002.
- Rudlin, John. *Commedia dell’Arte: An Actor’s Handbook*. Routledge, 1994.
- Rudlin, John & Olly Crick. *Commedia dell’Arte: A Handbook for Troupes*. Routledge, 2001.
- Salerno, Henry F, trans. *Scenarios of the Commedia dell’Arte: Flaminio Scala’s Il teatro delle favole rappresentative*. New York UP, 1967.

Online:

- www.factionoffools.org
- www.commediabyfava.it
- sites.google.com/site/italiancommedia/plays-and-scenari
- www1.american.edu/IRVINE/jenn/home.html
- www.delpiano.com/carnival/html/commedia.html

Bring a Faction of Fools show
to your school *today!*

The Great One-Man Commedia Epic

1 Actor. 10 Characters. 1000 Catastrophes.

Artistic Director Matthew R. Wilson transforms a bare stage into a raucous world of young lovers, squabbling old men, boasting soldiers, and dim-witted servants.



For more information, email
education@factionoffools.org.



Classroom Activities

Character Walks

Have students walk around the room as a character of their (or your) choice. Encourage them to fill the empty spaces in the room and to avoid bumping into one another. When you call out “TAKE,” students should freeze. Now as they are walking, ask them to imagine that an invisible string is attached to the top of their head. The string is going to pull them through space, causing their head to lead them. Have students explore walking this way. What happens to the rest of their body? Do they speed up or slow down? Encourage students to think about who these characters might be: what’s their name and/or profession? where are they going? etc. Then call “TAKE.” The imaginary string is reintroduced within a few seconds, only now it’s pulling a different part of their body. Explore leading with the nose, chin, chest, stomach, hips, and knees. Encourage students to discover the voice of the different characters. You may pause and have students tell us about their characters and demonstrate their different walks.



Emotion Levels

Have students line up at one end of the room. Call out an emotion, like “sad.” Ask students to take one step forward and show us with their bodies, faces, and voices someone sad at level 1. Then have someone else step forward and show us sad at a level 2. Have them increase their portrayal of sadness by exaggerating it and stepping forward at a level 3, then 4, and so on up to 10. By 10, encourage students to be over the top and dramatic, perhaps screaming and crying on their knees. Go through this progression several times with different emotions, like happy, jealous, or heart-broken. Discuss how the emotions change as they increase. If you were sad at a 1, what emotion were you portraying at a 10? Despair? Distraught? Once students get the hang of exaggerating the emotions step-by-step, this can become a game by calling out the numbers and emotions out of order. The facilitator can call out “Joyful at an 8,” “Anger at a 6,” and “In love at a 10!”

Simple Scenarios

Partner students into pairs of two. Give each pair a simple scenario from the list below. Have them improvise the scene once without masks. Encourage them to find three different ways of doing the task of their characters. The first time students typically rely on their voices and facial expressions to communicate the scenario. Once they have created their scenario, have students do it again, this time wearing a mask of some kind. This will require students to find ways of showing us who the characters and how they feel with their whole body.

Scenario #1: An Old Man and his Servant

Zanni, the servant, is very hungry. Every time he is about to eat his dinner, his master gives him a new task to complete.

Scenario #2: The Lovers

A young boy and a young girl fall in love at first sight. They discover their fathers are enemies and will never let them marry. They decide to run away together.

Scenario #3: The Captain

A soldier comes to a foreign city with his servant. He brags about how he has fought bravely in a war. The soldier then sees a mouse, and they are both scared away.