

THE SERVANT OF TWO MASTERS

By CARLO GOLDONI

Adapted by CONSTANCE CONGDON

From a translation by CHRISTINA SIBUL

Directed by CHRISTOPHER BAYES



WILLPOWER! 2009-10 STUDY GUIDE

yale
repertory theatre

CHARACTER MAP

INNAMORATI THE LOVERS



CLARICE

Daughter of Pantalone and beloved of Silvio. Previously, she was engaged to Federigo Rasponi, but recent reports of his death have freed her to marry her true love, Silvio. She is brave and passionately loyal.



SILVIO

Son of Doctor Lombardi, this hot head is in love with Clarice. He is better at using a sword than using his head. His father calls him “a young man with a good heart.”

FEDERIGO RASPONI

The former fiancé of Clarice and brother to Beatrice. He is known for his “pure spirit and brilliance.” He and Florindo fought a duel, and Federigo was rumored to have been killed. But can the rumors be trusted?



BEATRICE RASPONI

The sister of Federigo and lover of Florindo. Though she mourns her brother’s death, she still wishes to marry Florindo. As Brighella says of her, she is “beautiful! A young woman of spirit and such courage. She used to dress like a man and ride horseback.” Could that “habit” come in handy?



FLORINDO ARETUSI

Beatrice’s fiancé, who has killed her brother Federigo in a duel. On the run from the law, he is desperate to hear news of his beloved Beatrice and hopes to find word of her in Venice.

VECCHI THE PARENTS



PANTALONE

The father of Clarice. Pantalone is a wealthy old Venetian who hopes to marry off his daughter without any trouble. All he wants is for “everything to work out for the best.”

DOCTOR LOMBARDI

Silvio’s father and a learned doctor of Venice. A scholar, he likes to use the fanciest words he can find. Others may not always understand him, but they agree that he “speaks beautifully.”



ZANNI THE SERVANTS



TRUFFALDINO

A quirky and perpetually hungry servant who is employed by both Beatrice and Florindo. His masters get the best he has, but it’s often not good enough. After meeting him, Pantalone wonders, “is he really crazy or just stupid?”

BRIGHELLA

Crafty but kind, Brighella runs a top-notch inn with “good beds, shiny floors, and wonderful food.” The host with the most, he knows almost everyone—including Federigo. Will he blow Beatrice’s cover?



SMERALDINA

Clarice’s witty maid, who likes to comment upon the folly of her masters. Eventually, she falls in love with Truffaldino and hopes to marry him. She describes herself as “a poor girl in search of [her] place in the world.”



—EMMY MILLER, PRODUCTION DRAMATURG

A FARCE TO BE RECKONED WITH

Oh, happiness! It is a bright morning in Venice, and the young couple, Silvio and Clarice, have just been given permission to marry. Clarice had previously been engaged to another man, Federigo Rasponi, but his sudden death has freed her to marry her true love. Clarice's father Pantalone, Silvio's father Doctor Lombardi, and the innkeeper Brighella stand by as witnesses. A knock at the door interrupts the happy scene. Smeraldina, Clarice's maid, brings in Truffaldino, a quirky servant with disastrous news—his master, Federigo Rasponi, isn't dead after all! And he's here in Venice! A man enters, declaring himself to be Federigo Rasponi and demanding to marry Clarice. Pantalone feels obliged to uphold the original engagement, much to the distress of his daughter, Silvio, and Doctor Lombardi.

Meanwhile, the innkeeper Brighella draws Federigo aside—and reveals that he recognizes Federigo's true identity. The person dressed as Federigo is actually *Beatrice*, Federigo's sister. Federigo was indeed killed in a duel by Beatrice's fiancé, Florindo, who then fled to Venice. Beatrice has followed him, hoping to collect her brother's money from Pantalone. Outside the inn, the always-hungry Truffaldino waits in the street fantasizing about food. His master Federigo—who he has no idea is really Beatrice—doesn't feed him nearly enough. Therefore, he decides that the best course would be to find another master to serve as well. Two masters, double the food! At just this moment a man enters, struggling with his luggage: it is Florindo. Truffaldino offers to serve him, and Florindo agrees. The servant Truffaldino now has two masters.

Truffaldino's first job for his masters is to go to the post office for their mail. Unfortunately, Truffaldino can't read, and the letters get mixed up. Florindo reads Beatrice's letter and learns that she's in Venice dressed as a man. Delighted, he runs off to find her. Pantalone arrives with a bag of money, which he hands to Truffaldino for his "master." Truffaldino doesn't know which "master" Pantalone means and mistakenly gives it to Florindo, though it was intended for Federigo. Meanwhile, Clarice begs her father to release her from the engagement to Federigo. The disguised Beatrice arrives and asks to speak with Clarice in private. Once they are alone, Beatrice reveals her true identity. Clarice is greatly relieved and tells her father that she will now consent to marry "Federigo." Unfortunately, Silvio doesn't know the happy news. Enraged at the loss of his love, he attacks Pantalone and accuses Clarice of being faithless. Deeply hurt, Clarice prepares to kill herself. Luckily, her maid Smeraldina arrives just in time to stop her.

At last it's time for lunch. Both Florindo and "Federigo" order their meals at the same time, and Truffaldino finds himself in a jam. Can he keep both masters satisfied while also finding time to stuff his own face? Smeraldina arrives, and Truffaldino, who had previously noticed the pretty maid, declares his love for her. He discovers that she feels the same. More mix-ups lead Beatrice and Florindo to believe that the other one is dead. In despair, they run out of the inn at the same time, ready to take their own lives. But just as they are about to plunge in the knives, they see...each other! They embrace, delirious with joy. Silvio and Clarice are reunited, and even Truffaldino is forgiven for daring to try to serve two masters at once. Oh, happiness, once more!

—EMMY MILLER, PRODUCTION DRAMATURG



DETAIL OF THE SET MODEL, COURTESY OF KATHERINE AKIKO DAY, THE SCENIC DESIGNER FOR *THE SERVANT OF TWO MASTERS*.

SLAPSTICK, STEREOTYPES, AND MASKS

The History, Characters, and Plots of *Commedia dell'Arte*

ORIGINS

Commedia dell'arte (pronounced com-MAY-dee-ya dell'AR-tay) originated in Italy in the 1500s. *Commedia* is based on Greco-Roman traditions of masked comedic pantomimes and the plays of Plautus (254–184 BCE) and Terence (195–159 BCE), ancient Roman writers who specialized in adapting extant Greek texts into comic commentaries on life in the Roman Republic. In its earliest form during the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, *commedia* initially consisted of short farcical sketches (think *Saturday Night Live*), often obscene (again, think *SNL*). These sketches were performed mainly in the courts or palaces by actors who had non-theatrical “day jobs.”

As the form became increasingly popular, however, professional theatre companies—the first in Europe—emerged: touring troupes of actors who made their living solely from appearing onstage. In fact, adding “*dell'arte*” to the form’s name distinguishes *commedia* as not simply a form of casual entertainment but as an “art” involving skilled practitioners with training and technique. Because *commedia* groups traveled from town to town, presenting shows in the open air on temporary stages or as part of carnivals, *commedia* was accessible to everyone, not just those who cavorted with lords or princes.

At first, only men performed in *commedia*. In fact, the notion of an actress didn’t exist in those days; it would have been shocking to see a woman onstage! In 1560, however, *commedia* became Europe’s first theatrical art form to have women tread the boards. (Women didn’t appear onstage in England or France until the 1600s.) Religious authorities railed against this innovation, but actresses were there to stay. Their presence led to the creation of new character types and more complex plots. For example, the character of the male lover hadn’t previously existed in *commedia*, but the inclusion of women demanded male romantic counterparts, and stories of star-crossed lovers became a staple of the genre.

The actresses brought greater sophistication to the humor of *commedia* pieces. Traditionally, a lot of the laughs came from the fact that the characters onstage appeared ridiculously grotesque: stupid, bumbling, clumsy, often suffering from some physical deformity. The actresses (perhaps out of vanity) rebelled against the demand that all characters be unintelligent and ugly, so they injected cleverness and intrigue into plots that had otherwise relied only on slapstick. Raunchiness, stupidity, bumbling, and clumsiness continued, of course—those things can be really funny—but the humor was heightened by the contrast of such characters with their savvy counterparts.

The term “slapstick” originates from *commedia*, referring to a common gag in which one actor would slap another with a lightweight wooden club called a *battacchio*.

The *battacchio* was perfect for this kind of physical comedy because it made a loud smacking noise when it came into contact with someone’s body but was too flimsy to actually hurt the person who’d been hit.



By the mid-1700s when Goldoni wrote *The Servant of Two Masters*, *commedia dell'arte* dominated European stages with various cultures adding their own innovations to the style.

SLAPSTICK, STEREOTYPES, AND MASKS

CHARACTER AND MASK

All *commedia* performances incorporate a specific set of stock characters. A stock character is essentially a stereotype; we're meant to view a stock character not as an individual but as representative of a certain kind of person in a certain kind of story. (For example, in a fairy tale, we immediately recognize "stock characters" like a damsel in distress or an evil witch.)

Masks are also an essential feature of *commedia*; almost all of the actors wear masks when they perform. They're more than just a costume piece; the mask represents the *personaggio* (pear-so-NAH-jee-oh, in English, "personality") of each character. The masks are also important guides for the audience, allowing us immediately to identify what stock type each character represents.

ZANNI (ZAH-nee) The comic servants

The *zanni* are the comic centerpiece of the genre whose bread-and-butter is incompetence. Usually servants, they're a group of characters constantly at the mercy of other characters, often beaten, and always hungry.

In the scenarios, it's normally up to them to resolve not only their own issues but also the problems posed by the *vecchi*. Most of them aren't that smart but must suddenly summon unexpected brilliance to save the day. They never manage to summon the necessary smarts on the first try, and their series of failed attempts to get things right drives the action—inevitably, their efforts making everything worse, until at the end of the play they finally stumble upon a viable solution. They're unable to perform easy tasks without messing everything up (think of Truffaldino's inability to deliver his masters' mail successfully), but in a pinch they pull off the seemingly impossible.

The *zanni* can be further divided into three important subtypes:

FIRST ZANNI



In *The Servant of Two Masters*: BRIGHELLA

The first *zanni* is often named Brighella which comes from the Italian word *brigare*, meaning "to con." Indeed, the Brighella character is a schemer, brimming with wit, always trying to trick others. He can be an exception

to the rule that *zanni* are stupid—although, more often than not, his schemes go awry. When he's not a servant, he may appear as a middle-class businessman, such as the tavern-owner in *The Servant of Two Masters*.

Brighella often wears an olive-green half-mask, arranged in a greedy or lustful expression.

SECOND ZANNI



In *The Servant of Two Masters*: TRUFFALDINO

The second *zanni* always bears a name ending in "ino," commonly *Arlecchino*, or, for the French, *Harlequin*. He is a fool, saying the wrong things at the wrong time and misunderstanding simple instructions. The other characters often misinterpret his words and actions. He's usually set up as a foil (an opposite or rival) of Brighella, or the first *zanni*, and their conflict creates additional moments of comedy.

The second *zanni* mask is a brown half-mask with almond-shaped eyes and a broad snub nose.

SERVETTA

In *The Servant of Two Masters*: SMERALDINA

A female servant, often the brightest of the bunch of *zanni*. She might be a little foolish, but she can also be pretty, graceful, and capable of devising the best-laid plans.

The *servetta* tends to appear without a mask.

VECCHI (VEK-ee)
The old men

PANTALONE



In *The Servant of Two Masters*:
PANTALONE

He's usually a merchant and a money-obsessed miser. He's either the father of one of the young lovers or lusting after the young female lover—sometimes both.

The *vecchio* (singular of *vecchi*) is a persecuting figure in the story. He provides the essential conflict by throwing obstacles in the paths of the other characters (for instance, denying the lovers permission to marry), so that they must resort to tricks and cunning to get what they want. He claims he's driven by duty, but it's really just ego. Maybe he wants to keep the young woman for himself, or if she's his daughter, he wants her marriage to benefit him, financially or socially. At the end of the play, he meets his just desserts; stripped of his authority, he's been humbled.

His mask has a long, hawk-like nose, bushy eyebrows, and white hair.

IL DOTTORE
(EEL doh-TOR-ay)



In *The Servant of Two Masters*:
DOCTOR LOMBARDI

He's talkative and eager to demonstrate his intellectual superiority, and he loves food and festivity—as evidenced by his big belly! He may also be a father to one of the lovers and Patalone's rival. He typically works in an academic profession such as law or philosophy and often misquotes Latin phrases in his attempts to sound smart.

He appears in a quarter-mask boasting a bulbous nose and prominent mustache. His is the only mask that allows much of the actor's face to show—a perfect opportunity for the actor to rouge his cheeks bright pink, hinting at his overindulgent passion for wine.

INNAMORATI
(ee-NAHM-more-ah-tee, think of the word "enamored")
The young lovers

In *The Servant of Two Masters*:
SILVIO & CLARICE and FLORINDO & BEATRICE

Of all the *commedia* characters, they most nearly resemble real people (and therefore are the only characters to consistently not wear masks).

However, they're still comical because their passion for one another catapults them uncontrollably between extreme ecstasy and, when things don't go well, extreme despair.

They're ordinary people whom by some mischance—be it interference by the *vecchio*, the betrothal of their beloved to someone else, or the death of that cherished lover—has forced into extraordinary circumstances. Overcoming these imposed circumstances becomes a rite of passage into adulthood. They accomplish their goals when they've successfully stood up to the *vecchi* and assumed control of their destinies.

***Commedia* archetypes can also be identified by specific *maschermi* (MAH-skay-mee; physical actions/gestures that convey character). For example, Pantalone walks bent in on himself, both because of age and because he's trying to protect his purse. *Il Dottore* strides with back straight and proud, but belly thrust forward, since over consumption of food and drink is one of his defining traits. The *zanni* scurry quickly, nervously, their speeches accompanied by sweeping gestures—for them, everything is urgent!**

SLAPSTICK, STEREOTYPES, AND MASKS

PLOTS AND LAZZI

PLOTS

Initially, the plots of *commedia* pieces were generated by the ensemble of actors through improvisation based on common themes, such as love, lust, jealousy, and general misunderstanding. Actors didn't use fully-written scripts but rather relied on summaries known as scenarios. (In Italian, the term *scenario* means "that which is pinned to the scenery," because brief outlines of the basic details of each scene were attached to the backs of set pieces for actors to review before going onstage.) Using scenarios instead of written scripts helped *commedia* troupes to be as obscene as they wanted without breaking censorship laws—after all, if nothing profane or politically irreverent was put in print, it was harder for censors to impose restrictions on the content of a performance.

Goldoni injected a more formal notion of authorship into the genre, carefully crafting his storylines ahead of time into a three-act structure and writing specified dialogue for each character. In a Goldoni play, the action typically unfolds in a prescribed pattern.

At the beginning of Act I, everything seems to be going well for everyone, but difficulties develop as the act continues. In Act II even more complications arise, and in Act III the situation escalates into crisis. Luckily for our hapless heroes, *commedia* always ends happily. In the final moments of Act III, problems are solved, lovers united, and the servants paid with either prizes or punishment—sometimes both, depending on what they deserve.



ILLUSTRATIONS FROM *HARLEQUIN ON THE MOON: COMMEDIA DELL'ARTE AND THE VISUAL ARTS* BY LYNNE LAWNER, 1998.

LAZZI

The main moments of comedy in *commedia dell'arte* come not only from these stock characters in outrageous masks, stuck in absurd situations—but also from *lazzi* (LAHT-zee). A *lazzo* (singular of *lazzi*) is a moment of comic physical business that interrupts the action. Often *lazzi* occur in between plotted scenes, but *commedia* actors might perform a *lazzo* at any moment, spontaneously inserting it into a scene if they think the dialogue is dragging or the audience's attention waning . . . or if they themselves get bored! While *lazzi* might happen at unpredictable times, each of these stock gags has been rigorously developed and rehearsed; actors in *commedia* companies had

hundreds of planned *lazzi* at their disposal and taught them to younger actors. Certain *lazzi* became traditional in companies over several generations, as fiercely protected as modern trademarks.

Many *lazzi* incorporate acrobatics; center on food, sex, and bodily functions; or involve practical jokes. For example, the always-hungry Truffaldino might engage in a *lazzo* such as the “*Lazzo of Eating Oneself*,” upon finding no actual food to eat, he begins to gnaw on his own flesh in a frenzy, starting with his feet and slobberingly working his way up. Or he might fall victim to the “*Lazzo of the Royal Taster*,” he's served all kinds of delicious

dishes, but every time he's about to take a bite, a doctor says it will make him sick and snatches the food away. Finally, he plunges the doctor face-first into his plate. We still see the manifestations of *lazzi* in the comedy today. Movies like the *National Lampoon* series or the *American Pie* franchise are fueled on food fights and sexual hijinx—and sometimes both in the same scene. Shows like *Punk'd* or the antics of Sasha Baron Cohen are exercises in the *lazzi* of playing practical jokes on unknowing targets. *The Simpsons* and *South Park* owe a great debt to a form developed five centuries ago. *Commedia* really has earned its distinction as an “art”—even in 2010, it's still making us laugh!

—HANNAH RAE MONTGOMERY,
PRODUCTION DRAMATURG



CARLO GOLDONI

Comic Innovator

“My life is not interesting; but it may happen that some time hereafter a collection of my works may be found in the corner of some old library. This will perhaps excite a curiosity to know something of the singular man who undertook the reformation of the theatre of his country, who gave to the stage and the press one hundred and fifty comedies of character and intrigue, in prose and in verse; and who saw eighteen editions of his theatre published during his own lifetime.”

—CARLO GOLDONI (1707–1793)

THE EARLY YEARS

From his earliest days Carlo Goldoni was obsessed with books and theatre. By the age of four he could read and write fluently, and at age eight he penned his first play. His middle-class Venetian family despaired of him; they had high hopes that he might turn to something respectable, like law or accounting. But their son remained stubbornly enchanted with the world of the stage. Although he dutifully studied law at his father’s insistence, his heart wasn’t in it: he ran away with a band of traveling actors for several days before reluctantly returning to school. After a few more false starts, which included Goldoni’s toying briefly with becoming a monk, the young man finally settled on his true love: playwriting. Success was quick to favor him; he was appointed writer-in-residence at the Teatro San’Angelo in Venice and had his first hit with a comedy called *The Crafty Widow*. More triumphs followed, including a spectacular season in which Goldoni promised his audience sixteen plays in less than a year—and delivered.

INFLUENCES AND STYLE

Although Goldoni loved his country’s theatre, he also felt it needed improvement. Italian plays at that time came in two varieties: the scenario-based, improvisational *commedia dell’arte* and the court dramas with an affected, poetic style and aristocratic content. Goldoni felt that both of these were due for a serious update. In his opinion, the scenarios of *commedia* were tired and dull and its characters boringly one-dimensional, but the language and content of the court plays were inaccessible to ordinary Venetians. Goldoni wanted a new type of drama, one that better reflected the real life and speech of the people he saw around him. He found a model in the great French playwright Molière whose comedies of manners had taken France by storm. These “new comedies” satirized the hypocrisy and absurdity of daily life and were full of interesting characters and lively, realistic dialogue. With Molière as his inspiration, Goldoni set about writing plays that blended the vigorous physical comedy of *commedia* with a naturalistic and witty depiction of everyday domestic life. In these plays he largely rejected the scenario-style of *commedia*, which left much to actor improvisation, and instead focused on developing carefully crafted dialogue that added realism, wit, and complexity. This innovation quickly earned him admirers such as the French philosopher and writer Voltaire, who applauded the “ease and naturalness” of Goldoni’s style.

BATTLE WITH GOZZI

Not everyone appreciated Goldoni's innovations. Carlo Gozzi, a fellow poet and playwright, wanted to preserve the traditional forms of Italian theatre, including *commedia dell'arte*. He saw Goldoni's new, text-based plays as an assault upon Italian dramatic tradition and campaigned to discredit them. To this end, he founded the Accademia dei Granelleschi, a group dedicated to defending Italian literary language against the type of popular and realist techniques that Goldoni used. He even wrote a number of insulting plays and poems lampooning Goldoni both personally and professionally, including *The Love of Three Oranges*, in which Goldoni is symbolically portrayed as a fountain spouting rancid oil and tainted wine.

Ironically, Gozzi eventually adopted many of Goldoni's innovations. In theory, Gozzi supported scenario-based *commedia* without a written text, but in actuality he wrote a number of scripts himself. His most famous ones were called *fiabe*, fantastical stories based on fairy tales from around the world. Of these plays, the most highly regarded are *Turandot* and *The King Stag*, both of which combine *commedia* characters with magical, fairy-tale elements. (A new adaptation of *The King Stag* was produced by Yale Rep in 2004.)

LATER YEARS

Eventually Goldoni grew weary of Gozzi's unceasing attacks, and in 1762 he decided to withdraw to Paris. There he wrote plays for the Parisian stage and also began working on his copious *Memoires*, a two-volume autobiography. He remained in France until his death in 1793. He is now hailed as the inventor of new Italian comedy and one of the greatest Italian playwrights—not bad for a man who claimed that his life wasn't interesting!

—EMMY MILLER, PRODUCTION DRAMATURG

A STATUE OF CARLO GOLDONI AT
ST. BARTHOLOMEW SQUARE IN VENICE.





THE GAME OF THE MOMENT:

Just because Christopher Bayes has a reputation for being a clown doesn't mean that he isn't serious about his craft. He spent years as a company member with Theatre de la Jeune Lune, where he acted, directed, composed, and designed for the stage, and with the Guthrie Theater, where he appeared in over twenty productions including playing Caliban in *The Tempest* and Harlequin in *Triumph of Love*. His acting and directing work has been seen on stages across the country and has earned him numerous awards, grants, and fellowships. In true *commedia dell'arte* tradition of passing down *lazzi* to future generations, he is devoted to training actors in the art of clowning. He is currently the Head of Physical Acting at Yale School of Drama, and he's served on the faculties of Julliard Drama School, the Actors Center, New York University, and the Brown University/Trinity Repertory Consortium.

Before rehearsals began for Yale Rep's production of *The Servant of Two Masters*, production dramaturg Hannah Rae Montgomery sat down with director Christopher Bayes to talk about the serious business of clowning around.

HANNAH RAE MONTGOMERY: *You played the role of Brighella in The Servant of Two Masters at Hartford Stage in 1996. What was that experience like?*

CHRISTOPHER BAYES: We had a wonderful time. My favorite scene to perform was what we called "the menu and setting of the table" scene that Brighella has with Truffaldino. It became a huge game, or *lazzo*, in which we acted out all the different qualities of the dishes and animals that ended up in them. It was so alive and different each time we did it, depending on the audience and discoveries that we made in the moment.

HRM: *In the production, you wore a mask, like traditional commedia performers. How do you approach acting with a mask?*

CB: I have always been interested in the world of masks. There is such a grand theatricality to it, and it demands a kind of physical psychology to bring it to life. You must support the mask with your body. You must allow your body to think and make choices for you. You are so obviously playing a character who is larger-than-life that the rules are all different.

HRM: *Which of these crazy "larger-than-life" stock characters is your favorite?*

CB: I love the *zanni* (from which we get the word "zany"). They are the closest to clowns because they believe that they are clever but are really quite stupid. We root for them because they get beaten by the other characters, but they dream of a better life full of love, food, and sleep. I identify with them most.

HRM: *It sounds like you had a great time performing in Servant. What attracted you to Servant again, this time as director?*

CB: I had been looking for something to work on with Steve Epp (who will portray Truffaldino in Yale Rep's production), one of the most inventive and hilarious actors in America. I thought that he should really take a crack at playing this kind of part. I have also been doing a great deal of *commedia*-inspired projects over the last ten years, from Molière to devised projects at Yale School of Drama and thought that it was time to go toe-to-toe with [something like Goldoni], the cornerstone of the style.

An Interview with Christopher Bayes

HRM: *How do you approach directing this style of comedy?*

CB: I find that you must ask: What is the game of the moment? When you have a company in search of the game together there is a curiosity and appetite for fun that will be exciting to watch. You must all play, attack, devour, or provoke until you find what is most silly, beautiful, and hilarious. You also find out many things in front of the audience and begin to adjust and tweak from performance to performance. The pleasure of the comic world is that it's an ongoing conversation, an enjoyment of the comic problem. We aren't in search of a solution, but a playful adventure full of mystery and disaster. If we're lucky, at the end of the performance...triumph! And sometimes the audience doesn't think that something is as funny as we do, and that can be really funny as well!



HRM: *Of course, the lazzi are another defining feature of what makes commedia performances funny. How will you devise the lazzi in this production?*

CB: We will rehearse these bits but also try to leave room for spontaneous discovery. I call these *lazzi* “moments of Jazz.” We know the melody and the structure, but each performer has the freedom to take a little solo. There must be the possibility of disaster. Without that danger, there is no real adventure.

HRM: *Why stage Goldoni today? Do you think that we relate a lot differently to commedia today than people might have in the 1700s?*

CB: *Commedia* is a living form. It is not a recreation or historical re-enactment. It comes alive with the new breath of each audience. We see stock characters that we recognize and relate to in every performance. We see reflections of *commedia* in sitcoms, *SNL*, and *The Simpsons*. We laugh at idiotic logic and desperate attempts to cover our mistakes no matter what century they come from. The main trigger for laughter is surprise. Sometimes we are surprised by a trick. Sometimes we are surprised by the sheer audacity of a performance. Sometimes we are surprised that a bad idea leads to something remarkable. Or that something stupid can turn into something brilliant, simple, and human. I have a feeling that what surprises us also surprised people in the eighteenth century. We haven't changed that much. Although I do think that we bathe more often. And we have the iPhone...what a surprise.

CHRISTOPHER BAYES DIRECTED JOHN PATRICK DOHERTY, LIZ WISAN, AND WILL CONNOLLY IN *THE COMMEDIA PROJECT* AT YALE SCHOOL OF DRAMA IN 2010. PHOTO BY YI ZHAO.

FROM THE GREEKS TO GOLDONI

2500 YEARS OF WITTICISMS, WISECRACKS, AND WIPEOUTS



In the West, comedy has often been regarded as tragedy's down-at-heel cousin, yet it boasts an equally long and illustrious history. As early as the sixth century BCE, mimes could be found in many of the emerging Greek city-states, combining short, often bawdy sketches with juggling and acrobatics. In 487 BCE, the first full-length comic play was performed in Athens, which was then embarking on nearly a century of democratic rule and theatrical innovation. The following decades saw the heyday of Old Comedy, a relentlessly political genre. The playwright Aristophanes was the master of this form. He and his contemporaries tackled contemporary events with barbed satire. Their characters hatch utopian schemes to improve society, while the chorus lambasts politicians and other public figures in the most scurrilous terms.

With the collapse of Athenian democracy at the close of the fifth century BCE, comedy was forced to retreat into the private sphere, focusing on love, money, and family rather than civic debate. This genre is known as New Comedy. Its most important exponent, Menander, wrote plays chronicling the tribulations of young lovers who must defeat greedy parents, lecherous old men, and other unsavory figures in order to marry. The couple's final union holds out the promise of new life and social renewal. After Rome replaced Greece as the dominant Mediterranean power, the Romans adopted New Comedy for their own stages. Playwrights such as Plautus and Terence borrowed conventions and even entire plots from their Greek forbears.

ROMAN STATUE OF A MASKED COMIC ACTOR, MODELED AFTER A HELLENISTIC PROTOTYPE, CA. FIRST CENTURY, AD. GALLERIE DEI CANDELABRI, VATICAN MUSEUMS, VATICAN CITY.

The Roman Empire disintegrated in 476 AD. During the centuries that followed, Europe splintered into a patchwork of small fiefdoms ruled by squabbling noblemen. Urban centers emptied; literacy rates plummeted. The early Catholic Church attacked theatre for its alleged ties to pagan religious rituals and for portraying behaviors that the Church regarded as frivolous or downright immoral. These combined forces eradicated most theatre from the European continent. However, groups of traveling performers kept the comic heritage alive throughout the medieval period. Like the Greek mimes before them, these troupes offered a mixture of short sketches, acrobatics, and other types of entertainment. The *commedia dell'arte* of Italy most likely emerged from this lineage of transient, popular performers. *Commedia* actors worked in tightly knit troupes that often included several members of the same family. Performing in streets and market squares, these troupes incorporated stock characters and plots derived from New Comedy into actor-centered, improvisatory romps.

As *commedia* gained ground during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, comic playwriting revived after a nearly a thousand-year hiatus. Shakespeare invented his own comic mode: plays like *As You Like It* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream* place the lovers of New Comedy in “green worlds,” pastoral spaces in which social hierarchies are reversed and social codes rewritten. Half a century later, the young Molière encountered *commedia* performances while touring the French provinces with his own theatre company; a famous *commedia* troupe took up permanent residence in Paris just as he began writing his mature comedies. Molière embroiders on the form's standard characters and scenarios, wedding them to his own elegant verse.

In Italy, Gozzi and Goldoni reinvented *commedia* as a literary genre just when it was dying out as popular, actor-driven performance. While Gozzi strove to preserve *commedia*'s boisterous energy and tradition of improvisation, Goldoni tempered its bawdiness and introduced a more sentimental tone in order to appeal to a growing middle class audience. Goldoni proved the more foresighted of the two: as the eighteenth century progressed, sentimental comedy triumphed over older, less genteel forms. Not until that century's final decades would comedy begin to free itself from the corset of middle class respectability.

—MONICA ACHEN

COMIC LIVES

In theatre history, the comic torch has been passed down from playwright to playwright. Here's a timeline of when the playwrights mentioned in the article lived and when one of their comic masterpieces premiered.

ARISTOPHANES

ca. 446–386 BCE

Lysistrata, ca. 411 BCE

MENANDER

ca. 342–291 BCE

The Grouch, ca. 317–16 BCE

PLAUTUS

ca. 254–184 BCE

Menaechmi

(no performance date recorded)

TERENCE

ca. 195–159 BCE

The Girl from Andros, 166 BCE

SHAKESPEARE

1546–1616

The Comedy of Errors, 1592–94

MOLIÈRE

1622–1673

Tartuffe, 1664

GOLDONI

1707–1793

The Servant of Two Masters, 1745

GOZZI

1720–1806

The King Stag, 1760

A FORM OF POSSESSION

Constance Congdon on the Process of Adaptation



Vacationing in Venice, Italy, playwright and adaptor Constance Congdon and her family got lost looking for their hotel. Together, they wandered the streets, searching. Suddenly, upon turning a corner, Connie “felt this nice presence and just knew everything would be all right.” There she stood, face-to-face with a bronze statue of Goldoni—and, to his left, the hotel! At that moment, she was more certain than ever that adapting Goldoni’s *The Servant of Two Masters* had been a great choice.

Connie Congdon is an experienced adaptor. She’s published faithful verse versions of Molière’s *The Misanthrope* and *Tartuffe* and did a major adaptation of his *The Imaginary Invalid* where she cut characters and scenes. She also slashed characters and trimmed scenes from Russian playwright Maxim Gorky’s *Vassa*

Zelezhnova and called her version *A Mother*. Her rendition of the famous fairy tale “Beauty and the Beast” has been performed widely. That adaptation premiered at the Children’s Theater of Minneapolis, where she also put as many Mother Goose rhymes as she could in a musical story starring Mother Goose herself—who entered by being lowered on the moon! Adaptation proves a common project for playwrights, because theatre companies remain continually interested in staging new versions of works the audience already recognizes. In fact, her adaptation of *The Servant of Two Masters* was originally commissioned by Hartford Stage, where she collaborated with director Bartlett Sher and translator Christina Sibul to create a script that preserved Goldoni’s canny comic impulses but would feel fresh for a modern audience. The draft of the script was carefully honed during rehearsals with actors. It might seem strange to spend so much time rewriting a play that has been performed successfully for centuries, but it was all necessary to achieve the delicate balance between the playwright’s original intentions and voice, the translator’s version of the text, and the interpretation of the adaptor, the director, and the actors.

So what exactly is adaptation? Adaptation differs from literal translation, in that an adaptor doesn’t only transpose an author’s words into another language, but she also might put her own spin on story, characters, structure, or plot. For example, when Connie taught an Intro to Literature class at the University of Massachusetts, she gave her students an assignment: take a piece of literature from the textbook and rewrite it in another genre. Poems became stories, stories became plays, and the results fascinated and inspired her. Her students had found

ways to make another author's words new, surprising, exciting, relevant—they'd become *adaptors*. Of course, the degree of authorship involved in adaptation is different for every piece. Adapting fairy tales for the Children's Theater of Minneapolis required Connie to do a lot of original writing; because they were being made into musicals, she got to write both dialogue and lyrics. *The Servant of Two Masters* has been a play all along, so Connie's work was more concerned with examining and shaping a new translation, based on how she and the director wanted the audience to receive Goldoni's words. She describes *Servant* as a "perfect comedy" and states that she hoped to highlight "the comic intent of every moment, because every moment [has] one." She worked carefully with Christina Sibul to make sure the adaptation would convey Goldoni's spirit but also sound engaging to a modern ear. Finally, she gushes about the importance of Truffaldino in the story: "He's the basis and/or brother of so many great clowns. He's the absence of manners. He's the god of chaos, the anti-hero, the two-year-old child, the survivor."

So far, Connie's greatly enjoyed being an adaptor. "[All my adaptations] were fun because I knew they would be produced," Connie says. "And being produced is what every playwright wants." But playwrights don't pursue adaptation work only because it's marketable. In her work on *The Servant of Two Masters*, Connie relished the sensation of both creative and personal connection to the material. "We had a blast, and you can feel that in the script," she proclaims. "Adaptation takes no less than total immersion in the head and heart of the [original] writer. It's a form of possession. Thank the fates, all the playwrights I've adapted are no longer living, or they might need to call an exorcist to get rid of me, and then I'd end up hovering around some ceiling in some theatre!"

—HANNAH RAE MONTGOMERY, PRODUCTION DRAMATURG



THE MASK MAKER'S SHOP
BY GIOVANNI GREVEMBROCH,
EIGHTEENTH CENTURY.

COMMEDIA ON THE SMALL SCREEN



If you flip on your television—or sit at your computer—to take in your favorite funny shows on a Thursday night, chances are, you won't be thinking of traditional *commedia* actors donning masks and performing *lazzi*. However, when you look closer, you'll see that situational comedies from *Seinfeld* to *The Office* owe a debt to *commedia dell'arte*, whose improvisational underpinnings birthed sketch comedy and whose lovers and servants have grown into the freaks, geeks, and middle-management wonks who grace prime-time TV screens.

Commedia-inspired TV shows and movies delight not so much with the surprise of what happens but rather with how—and in how many ways—its formulas can be reinvented. Each episode of *The Simpsons* is predictably unpredictable: somehow, Bart will get into trouble, Mr. Burns will scheme (just like Pantalone), Homer will get hungry (just like Pantalone or Arlecchino), and the other stock characters of Springfield will perform their accustomed bits just like the *commedia* types they're modeled on. In the episode "Homie the Clown," for instance, Homer, seeing a billboard for Krusty's clown college, becomes obsessed with attending (an aspiration befitting a lowly *zanni*); as Krusty passes down his *lazzi* (i.e., riding a small bike in a loop-the-loop), Homer starts to look more and more like his clowning mentor; and eventually there's a classic case of mistaken identity, when mobsters hold up the transformed Homer for Krusty's debts. And of course, by the end of the episode, all's well in Springfield once more.

While situational comedies or cartoons like *The Simpsons* feature casts of *commedia*-inspired stock characters, sketch comedy shows like *Saturday Night Live* and *Punk'd* have some of *commedia*'s DNA. Members of both casts trained with the improv-comedy group the Groundlings, and, although sketches are "scripted," the shows each have much room for actor improvisation. These shows also mine current events for material and become topical, but often fleeting, entertainment in our fast-paced world.

Saturday Night Live expands the cast of stock characters to include a wide variety of recognizable contemporary types, ripped from the headlines of *People* magazine. *SNL* ensemble member Kristen Wiig has become famous for her ability to morph into a range of characters, from financial guru Suze Orman to an über-talkative Target cashier, disappearing under a blonde wig or into a red smock, much as *commedia*'s original performers vanished behind their leather masks. The show also finds ways to create contemporary versions of *commedia*'s domestic scenarios. *SNL*'s skit "Wii Guys"—in which Alec Baldwin plays a dad getting his first lesson in how to play the game—riffs on the funny generational rifts technology creates, throwing in a characteristic dose of humor as each character repeats the *lazzo* of shaking the controller ("it's all in the wrist").

Like *SNL*, MTV's series *Punk'd* relies on stock types and scenarios for its spoofs and stunts; *Punk'd* takes this formula to a newly spontaneous level by pranking its celebrity guests instead of including them knowingly in its *lazzi*. As the camera zooms in for Hilary Swank's reaction when the Nerdy Guy's robot goes crazy at the comedy convention, the modern-day celebrity is cast as *commedia*'s befuddled Pantalone, turning to the audience in an amazed aside. Almost every comedy on television has some hints of *commedia*. So, next time you troll through a hundred stations on a high-definition television set, think about how what you're seeing actually has its roots in a classic art form.

—APRIL DONAHOWER

BEFORE

1. Goldoni's plots tend to follow a carefully crafted pattern (see page 7). Does *The Servant of Two Masters* fulfill Goldoni's pattern? What troubles affect the characters? What complications stir the plot, and how are these problems resolved? Who has a happy ending?
2. *Commedia* characters belong to distinct social classes. Think about how the masks, traditional costumes, and physical gestures shape what we think about the characters. If you were the costume designer, how would you show the differences between the characters in their clothing?
3. *The Servant of Two Masters* has a large ensemble of characters. Is there a clear hero or heroine? If so, who would it be? If not, what do you think that means?

AFTER

1. Be prepared to describe in detail one *lazzo* moment (see page 8) from the production. Identify both the character who instigated the *lazzo*, what the "moment of comic physical business" was, and which characters participated. Did the *lazzo* help any of the characters get what they want, or did it prevent them from achieving their goals?
2. How much time passes for the characters during the course of the play (i.e., hours, days, weeks, months)? What elements of the production helped to show the progression of time?
3. In Goldoni's script, the play begins in Pantalone's home. How did director Christopher Bayes choose to start the play? What elements of traditional *commedia* performance did he draw upon? Why do you think he made the choices he did?

RESOURCES

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ONLINE RESOURCES

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- theatredatabase.com/16th_century/commedia_dell_arte_001.html
- artandpopularculture.com/Unities

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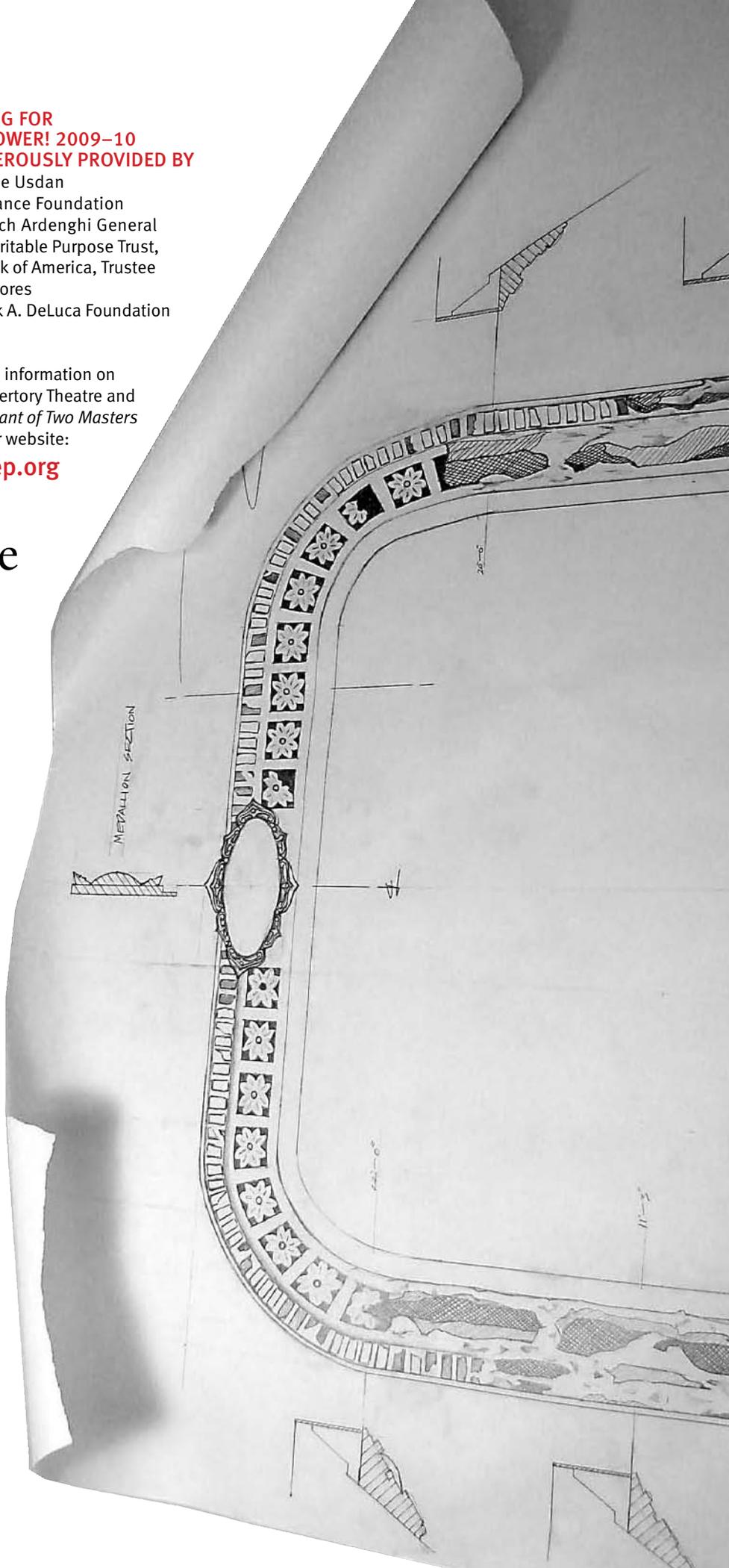
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FRONT COVER: SKETCH OF *THE SERVANT OF TWO MASTERS* SET, COURTESY OF KATHERINE AKIKO DAY, WITH A COSTUME SKETCH BY VALÉRIE THÉRÈSE BART. BACK COVER: BLUEPRINT OF THE PROSCENIUM FOR *THE SERVANT OF TWO MASTERS*. COURTESY OF KATHERINE AKIKO DAY.