

The Acting Style of the Commedia dell'Arte

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The Italian comedians learn nothing by heart: they need but to glance at the subject of a play a moment or two before going upon the stage. It is this very ability to play at a moment's notice which makes a good Italian actor so difficult to replace. For a good Italian actor is a man of infinite resources and resourcefulness, a man who plays more from imagination than from memory; he matches his words so perfectly with those of his colleagues on the stage that he enters instantly into whatever acting and movements are required of him in such a manner as to give the impression that all that they do has been prearranged. There is always a happy blend of gesture and inflection with the discourse, and the actors come and go, speak, and act as informally as in ordinary life.

These quotations do not make clear exactly what improvisation is, and Duchartre's assumption that dialogue and action were completely spontaneous has been questioned. It may be true that there was no written play, but it does not follow as a matter of course that the actors invented all their speeches and actions on the spur of the moment. From the research, it is clear that the term 'improvisation' covers a highly complex acting style that included comic tricks, mime and dialogue. What we need to discover is the extent to which these were unplanned.

Allardyce Nicoll is concerned to bring to our attention the spoken aspect of this style of acting: This comedy was based on a combination of language and action, not on pantomime alone. Often those who, in our own times, make an attempt to describe Commedia dell'Arte performances tend to stress the movements of the actors and to insist upon their purely physical tricks; yet this is a false view.

This inquiry, therefore, first considers improvisation in language and second examines improvisation in movement.

Language

As actors were presented with very sketchy scenarios, some with a little dialogue, others with indications of dialogue, and still others with the outline of the plot only, they had to improvise the words that they spoke. But words are the end product of thought, intention and action and all these are inherent in a scenario. The actors, therefore, had the scenario as a guide for speech; they had to find words for intentions and actions already indicated in the plot. In preparing for their roles, the actors would have studied the scenarios, known them well and in playing would

have spoken words that followed the plot. Much of their speech would have been premeditated and as they were encouraged to build up a stock of memorised passages appropriate to their characters and to the action, very little would have been spontaneous.

When they were advised to read books of a style suited to their roles, we realise that this was designed simply to whet their imaginations, so that on the basis of such reading they could create their own improvised speech; but in addition to that they were specifically instructed to pen out and to learn by heart a variety of passages which might serve them in good stead during their performances.

So in addition to the outline of the comedy, which gave them the basis for their words, they had a repertoire of stock passages that they had committed to memory. According to Nicoll, some of these stock passages, those called *uscite* and *chiusette*, were generally written in couplets. The former were used for making exits and the latter for bringing speeches to a suitable conclusion. Other stock passages were longer, single speeches. The actors were warned, however, that these had to blend in with the rest of the improvised dialogue. In addition, actors “wrote songs and sonnets and ‘conceits’ to express their ideas on the philosophy of love and other intellectual problems of the time.”

Stock passages seem to have formed the basis of their dialogue and it was when their memories failed them that they improvised

It is well-known that Italian actors were particularly apt in improvising dialog – they had had enough practice on the charlatan’s bench – and in changing their program according to their audience. When they were performing as they often did, for weeks together at some aristocratic house where the one cry was for variety, they would naturally be unable to learn by heart the number of plays demanded, and would be forced to help out their memories by their wits.

Improvised dialogue seems also to have been a response to the unforeseen when unexpected circumstances were incorporated into the playing and used as entertaining interludes. Spontaneous speech, therefore, seems to have been opportunistic and outside the bounds of the scenario that was being performed.

As an actor took on the role of a stock character, Harlequin (Zanni) or Pulcinella, or Pantaleone, for instance, which he played for the whole of his career and in every scenario, he developed a complete understanding of the character’s personality and idiosyncrasies, and through constant repetition, he built up a routine or habitual sequence of ideas and expressions for communication. He could, therefore, command dialogue that had become fixed in his memory.

As speech, for the most part, consisted of memorised passages or habitual responses, improvisation to a large extent consisted in the freedom of the actor to select from his stock of passages. Spontaneity, which is what is generally thought of by the term 'improvisation', seems to have been resorted to for expedient reasons, mainly when audiences needed or demanded stimulation. Actors then incorporated incidental occurrences, unforeseen circumstances, bravura performances, quips and jokes into their dialogue which either brought freshness to familiar situations and novelty to stock portrayals or gave relief in departing from them.

It seems, therefore, that dialogue, though not written, was well prepared for and words that appeared to be off the cuff came out of habitual situations in stock scenarios from actors in stock roles. The fixed framework of scenario and stock characters provided the solid foundation upon which to invent. And because spontaneous speech, which occurred mainly in digressions from the scenario, was vivid, highly entertaining and had immediate impact, it was made to characterise all Commedia language. But the improvised language of Commedia was spontaneous only in part; much of it had been fixed in memory even though there was no formal script.

Movement

Turning now to improvisation in movement, we see that, as with dialogue, actors built up a stock of tricks, gestures and actions.

The word (*lazzi*) means 'turn' or 'trick' or 'Italian business' and an actor would resort to *lazzi* whenever a scene began to drag or his eloquence gave out.

Certain comic tricks became trademarks of different characters. "For example, Harlequin would pretend to throw cherry stones in Scapin's face, or to catch a fly on the wing and munch it with great gusto." (Duchartre, p. 36) Other types of pantomimic *lazzi* were the stock-in-trade of all and were used by different characters in different situations. "Lazzi of joy, of recognition, of kissing the hand, of hiding, and falling asleep, merely call for appropriate gesture. Others such as *lazzi* of nightfall, of the gun-shot, of hiding in the corner, demand dumb-show." *Lazzi* also included all kinds of hoaxes by which actors got out of difficult situation.

Lazzi that were developed into comic routines depended on a group. "Two of the most important of these devices may be described as repetition and thievery." (Nicoll, p.144) Here the comic trick was not entirely irrelevant to the plot. It may even have been directly connected with it. It generally involved an action or words repeated in a continuous sequence by several actors who each gave it a different quality. The comedy rested upon the repetition.

"Let us take an example, expanding slightly upon the bare description given us in the scenario. Pandolfo hands over a gold collar to Zanni for safe keeping, bidding him guard it carefully. Pulcinella, watching from the side of a house, determines to get it, hastily slips on a devil's

disguise, roars at Zanni and snatches the collar as the latter rushes away in abject terror. Pulcinella, however, has not been alone in his eavesdropping, for Cola has secretly spied on this piece of chicanery; in turn, he puts himself into a shroud, confronts Pulcinella with awesome ghostly movements and sepulchral tones, and triumphantly seizes the collar. And there is still more to come. Pandolfo and Ubaldo have also witnessed the trickery, hurriedly put on gendarme dress, threaten to arrest Cola and let him go only when he surrenders his booty.

Sometimes lazzi were simply exhibitions of acrobatic and athletic skill.

Many actors were acrobats, and could easily turn a somersault, walk on their hands, and do the grand ecart, or 'split'. Some were as accomplished as the agile Scaramouch who, at eighty-three years of age, could box his fellow actor's ears with his foot without the slightest difficulty.

There was an actor who turned a somersault with a glass of water in his hand without spilling a drop, and another actor who walked along the outside of the boxes in the theatre to the great trepidation of the audience.

In addition to lazzi, the actor's bag of tricks also contained stock gestures and attitudes that were characteristic of his role. Harlequin, for example, appears fairly often in what seems a typical pose. He leans forward and slightly to one side, with one hand on his slapstick and the other, either on his belt or touching his cap. In illustrations in Nicoll's book, *The World of Harlequin*, many different actors are shown in this characteristic attitude. Actors were probably identified as much by stock gestures and actions as by their costumes which never changed. New actors, who succeeded to the roles, brought different qualities and competences to characteristic attitudes and movements. An actor called Bigottini who took over the role of Harlequin from Carlin Bertinazzi is described as follows. "His movements, without having the suppleness which characterise the slightest gestures of Carlin, are of extraordinary precision and lightness."

Reproductions of paintings and engravings depicting Commedia dell'Arte show a great variety of attitudes and gestures and suggest modifications in style over time. The engraving entitled *Pantalone woos his Lady* shows the characters in greatly exaggerated attitudes and gestures. Pantalone and his Zanni appear almost contorted. The torsos of both are twisted unnaturally. Nearly all the characters in the picture use big hand and arm gestures. The style is far removed from the realistic. The reproduction of Pantalone in a rage, displays the same style; the highly exaggerated attitude and almost distorted body. In the picture of Harlequin on stilts, the exaggeration is in the situation and in the affectations of the characters as well as in their gestures and attitudes, which are exaggerated but not distorted. The burlesque in this scene is connected with properties, the slippers, the glass of wine and the sentimental flower, and is not made to depend on gesture alone.

In reproductions of early seventeenth century paintings, there is less exaggeration in gesture. Pantalone stands on his toes in a fairly ridiculous attitude, with stomach pushed forward and hands behind his back. His Zanni too leans back in an artificial manner with arms crossed in an unnatural fashion. This picture shows us a heroine, one of the 'serious' characters of Commedia and we see that her gestures and attitude, though exaggerated, are altogether graceful and beautiful. In the second reproduction, the heroine is shown with Harlequin and the Captain. We have again the graceful, stylized attitude of the heroine, but the Captain, who retains a more burlesque attitude, does not present a spontaneous expression of emotion, unlike Pantalone in the wooing of his Lady; the Captain's attitude is clearly calculated.

In Johann Probst's engravings, gestures and attitudes though still unrealistic and large, have a lustiness and tongue-in-cheek quality that give a sense of great energy and vitality. The burlesque element is very apparent and applies more to the situation and madcap tricks of the characters than to their pretensions. Great use is made of properties and the comedy appears to be more slapstick than burlesque. For more tomfoolery, actors also resorted to disguises, which Duchartre describes as "theatrical 'hokum'." Zanni is often disguised as a woman. One picture shows Harlequin, in his black mask, wearing a dress with the skirt sticking out where he is holding his slapstick in its usual position.

Though illustrations portray markedly different styles, common characteristics in the quality of acting are clearly apparent. They all show that the style of Commedia was not realistic. It involved exaggeration, burlesque, stylised attitudes and gestures, great vitality and zestful movement. The actors "are very ready in imitating all kinds of persons and all human actions, especially those which are apt to rouse laughter, in which they are so excelling that they move to mirth Heraclitus himself."

The pictures also show a distinction in style between the comic and the 'serious' actor. Comic characters wore half-masks that did not cover the mouth. It has been suggested that the use of masks placed greater emphasis on the body and that actors had to be supple and able to use all their physical attributes to help them give expression to their roles. So comic actors indulged in exaggerated gestures and attitudes often undignified and lewd, whereas 'serious' actors were always dignified, but their gestures and actions were equally removed from the realistic. Victoria is a 'beautiful witch of love with harmonious and pleasing speech, accomplished and graceful actions, enticing and charming sight, savorsome and sugared smiles, a carriage haughty and noble.' But even 'serious' actors were tempted to indulge in comic business. "Lelio, as Andreini invariably called himself on stage, preferred comic effects to tragic and rarely missed a chance for burlesquing in his role."

This mixture of styles was not uncommon as the following quotation illustrates:

"Amid the laughter excited by his (Harlequin's) buffoonery he would at times suddenly surprise his audience into tears. 'Often after beginning by laughing at the manner in which he expressed his pain, one ended by experiencing the emotion by which he was penetrated.'" In order to move the audience, this actor would have had to convince them of his humanity so that they would sympathise with him in his predicament. The acting, therefore, would have moved from the presentational to the representational, so that the audience could be caught up in the

illusion. This was the style of Thomasin, who was considered a very great actor.

Commedia players were much praised for being able to play together seamlessly despite the fact that they were improvising. This is probably partly due to the fact that they worked in small companies. Commedia dell'Arte consisted of many troupes of travelling players such as I Gelosi, I Accesi, I Confideti and I Fideli. These companies were generally held together by a strong leading actor or actress and usually received the patronage of a nobleman. The actors travelled and worked together as a company, were used to performing with one another and were familiar with one another's styles. Their closeness as a group facilitated their ability to play together as an ensemble and to improvise,

In addition to being accomplished acrobats and actors, Commedia performers had also to be accomplished musicians, singers and dancers as music played an important part in the staging of a Commedia play. Music and singing provided interludes between acts and scenes, were background accompaniments to scenes or part of scenes when actors played and sang in character. The following account of the performance of an improvised comedy at Trausnitz in Bavaria 1568, makes reference to the interludes of music.

After the prologue Messer Orlando arranged for a madrigal in five parts to be sung.

Then followed the first episode, (of the play) after which Pantalone entered. He touched his lute and sang; 'Whoever passes down this street, and sighs not, happy man is he,' and after repeating this twice he left the stage.

Another episode.

Then there was music by five violas-da-gamba.

(The account ends with the following)

"Peace made, Camilla was given to Zanni as his wife and in honour of the marriage they joined in a dance after the Italian fashion."

In Sand's chapter on cantatrice in History of the Harlequinade, Vol. II, he speaks of young singers who were actresses and played a variety of roles. Many pictures show actors and actresses with musical instruments in their hands. Many of the actors are also shown dancing. "The courtly demands for splendour of costume, for music wherever possible and for a dance at the close of the play were as carefully regarded by Massimo Trojano as by his followers in the creation of scenarios." Dance seems always to have provided the grand finale to the comedy.

Conclusion

As both improvisation of action and speech depended on the actor's selection from his stock-in-trade, only he was aware of what he would pull out of the bag, so he worked with the element of surprise and could thwart the audience's expectations and thus give rise to laughter and enjoyment. Since the plots and characters did not change much, the acting had to incorporate the elements of surprise and the unexpected and a successful actor of Commedia had to be wide-awake and alert to all kinds of possibilities in the immediate situation on stage

and in the audience. Like stand-up comedians, it was the aim of the actors to raise laughter and they would go to any lengths to do so. They give the impression of being practical jokers ready to put anything over on the audience and other actors. In his comparison of Hamlet to Harlequin, Allardyce Nicoll explains that Commedia characters were non-finite creations within a framework that was finite. In their ever-changing performances, Commedia actors made it difficult for audiences to pin them down and their flexibility brought spontaneity and novelty to well worn plots. Thus they became renowned for improvisation. Theirs was an exciting challenge that resulted in many brilliant performances.

What we can learn about acting from Commedia dell'Arte:

1. Physical and mental resourcefulness and concentration. The actor's body has to be so skilled and his head so full of ideas that he can respond spontaneously to any situation.
2. Concentration on the immediate environment and complete awareness of the immediate present during performance. Although the actor nowadays is not required to improvise his speeches, it is only by trying to exist within the moment and from moment to moment on the stage that his art can acquire spontaneity. It was easier for the Commedia actor. As he was not tied to a written script, he was able to live in the moment and thus infuse his art with vitality and dynamism.
3. Ensemble acting, the ability to play off one another requires the ability to communicate at all levels.
4. In addition to technique, it is necessary to broaden one's experience, to stimulate the imagination through wide reading. The actor should be familiar with great writings.

In other words, the actor must be well prepared and have built up huge resources to give life and vitality to a character.