

# Commedia dell'arte



Commedia dell'arte (*ko-me-de-a dell-art-eh*) is a improvised comedic theatre form that flourished in Italy in the 1500s. The exact origins of Commedia are hard to pin down as not much was documented prior to the 16th century. The term itself (Commedia dell'arte) wasn't in common use until the 18th century. It is generally acknowledged that the form solidified in Italy in the 1550s and reached its peak in the 1650s.

Despite an opaque history, the elements that define Commedia are quite clear:

- Improvised performances based on scenarios – actors worked off an outline and made up their lines.
- Stock characters – the characters were always the same, only the situations changed.
- Use of mask – masks helped to define the characters.
- Use of *lazzi* (*lah-zi*) – short comedic physical bits.
- Use of mime, acrobatics, and music.
- Limited themes – love, money, or food were the basis of almost every scenario.

Commedia performers travelled in troupes from town to town and performed outside in town squares on makeshift stages. Actors relied on costumes and props rather than elaborate sets. The size of the troupes ran from 10 to 12 actors, often made up of close family members. One unique aspect of Commedia dell'arte in comparison to theatre in earlier eras is that women performed the female roles, with three to four women in each troupe.

## The Nature of the Improv

It's a misconception to think of Commedia improvisation as actors just making everything up on the spot. Yes, the lines of the play would have been improvised each time they performed, but the actors were also following well laid out scenarios, well defined *lazzi* (each actor would have had several practised *lazzi* in their arsenal), and specifically detailed characters. Many actors only played one or two characters in their lifetime, so they would have years of practice to draw on as they "improvised."



## Commedia Characters

Commedia characters are not known for subtext or subtle backstory. They are big, bold, and physically exaggerated. They know what they want, they say what they want, and they go after what they want. But Commedia characters never get what they want. They never change, grow, or develop in the course of a play. It's an endless loop of heightened frustration, which is the heart of the comedy. The characters are fixed types who fall into one of three categories:

- The Servants - *Zanni* (*Zan-ee*)
- The Masters - *Vecchi* (*Veh-chee*)
- The Lovers - *Innamorati* (*Inn-ah-ore-ah-tee*)

The masters are usually foolish greedy old men, and the servants are hungry and mischievous. The young lovers are always in love. Most of the characters wear masks, but even those without masks (e.g. the lovers) use their personas as masks. In Commedia, the characteristics of a character (such as a walk, a pose, or gesture) are just like wearing a mask.

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**Pantalone:** (*Pan-ta-lone-ee*) Old greedy miser. Obsessed with money. Always after women and thinks he's good at it. Walks with a hunched back and bent knees. Wears a mask with a long pointed nose.

**Arlecchino:** (*Ar-leh-cheeno*) Servant, poor, wanting money, always hungry. Carries a bat/slapstick. Leads with his knees and is very active, always on the move, never in a straight line. Think monkey.

**Il Dottore:** (*ill-dot-ore-eh*) Spouts knowledge at the wrong time, and his diagnosis of a situation is always wrong. Talks nonsense. Fat. His size affects his movement. Think pig.

**Il Capitano:** (*ill-cap-ee-tan-oh*) It seems that Il Capitano is a brave soldier but really he's a coward. He also carries a sword, but never draws it. Walks like a stereotypical hero – big movements, chest puffed out, shoulders square, marching steps, stands at attention.

**Innamorati:** (*Inn-ah-ore-ah-tee*) The young lovers, male (Innamorato) and female (Innamorata). They are very much in love with love. They love each other, they love themselves. They don't wear masks and are always young and attractive.

**Columbina:** (*Cole-um-bee-na*) Servant. Quick wit, vain, never in love. Usually the smartest character on stage. Though a servant, her movements correspond to her quick witted character – strong steps, hands on hips.



### Scenarios and Lazzi

One of the reasons Commedia actors were able to improvise with ease is that there weren't a lot of different themes to draw from. The scenarios were built around love, money, and food in their most exaggerated forms. The motivation for any Commedia character is to go to the ends of the earth to obtain one of the three. A great way to define a Commedia performance is to find the lust: lust for food, for gold, for wealth, for another person. And since Commedia characters are a mix of high-status and low-status characters, you can be sure any story involves a status clash. Because the dialogue was improvised it was also easy to add current events and local scandals to the story.

A very important part of the Commedia performance is the *lazzi*. These are practiced and predetermined comic bits. They could either be performed individually or in groups. Each actor has a repertoire of *lazzi* at their disposal. *Lazzi* don't connect to the plot or move the story forward. Their purpose was to make the audience laugh.

For example:

- Arlecchino is so hungry he starts to eat his shoes, his clothes, and anything else nearby.
- Columbina stalks a pesky flea.
- Arlecchino convinces Pantalone that removing his teeth will cure his bad breath.

# Commedia dell'arte Quiz

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Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Are these statements True or False? Use a T for True and an F for False.

1. Lazzi are written down story points. \_\_\_\_
2. Pantalone belongs in the vecchi category. \_\_\_\_
3. Women were not allowed on stage. \_\_\_\_
4. The three main themes are love, money, and food. \_\_\_\_
5. Il Dottore is a character who thinks he knows everything, but knows nothing. \_\_\_\_
6. The origins of Commedia are well documented. \_\_\_\_
7. The Servants are also known as the zanni. \_\_\_\_
8. Lazzi are always connected to the plot. \_\_\_\_
9. The Lovers are young and attractive. \_\_\_\_
10. Commedia actors play a wide variety of characters. \_\_\_\_
11. Commedia troupes performed in theatres. \_\_\_\_
12. Commedia focuses on the inner subtext of characters. \_\_\_\_
13. The stories change but the characters remain the same in Commedia. \_\_\_\_
14. Pantalone walks with a puffed out chest and marching steps. \_\_\_\_
15. Innamorati characters never wear masks. \_\_\_\_
16. Arlecchino is a Master character. \_\_\_\_
17. The outline of the performance is called the scenario. \_\_\_\_
18. Commedia is an improvised theatre form. \_\_\_\_
19. Il Capitano is a brave character. \_\_\_\_
20. Commedia flourished in France. \_\_\_\_
21. Current events and local scandals were never added to the stories. \_\_\_\_
22. Commedia characters never get what they want. \_\_\_\_
23. Commedia actors have an arsenal of lazzi to choose from. \_\_\_\_
24. Arlecchino is a fat slow-moving character. \_\_\_\_
25. Columbina is usually the dumbest character on stage. \_\_\_\_
26. The scenarios always showed a clash of high-status and low-status characters. \_\_\_\_
27. The male Lover character is the innamorata. \_\_\_\_