

COMMEDIA DELL'ARTE

WHAT? – Translation—Comedy of Art or Comedy of the Profession. It is a form of theatre that is largely devised (not scripted) and involves masked 'types' producing performances based on scenarios. The characters are usually fixed social types or 'stock characters' such as captains, lovers and servants and the performances are funny. The style relies on ensemble acting.

WHERE? – Commedia dell'arte originated in Italy and was usually performed in the open air in popular places such as piazzas (public squares). The first Recorded Commedia performances were in Rome in 1551. The style of drama became popular across the world from Europe to Russia. Commedia's influence can be seen in our Punch and Judy shows (Punch is one of the stock characters) and helped to launch physical comedy in the theatre

WHO?

The actors were both male and female and came from a range of backgrounds. As time went on the actors became professional and specialised in one or two specific characters.

The most famous Commedia company was the Gelosi Company.

WHEN?

From the 16th—18th century



DRAMATIC CONVENTIONS

Improvisation - The plot and characters were known by the actors but there was space within the performance for them to improvise moments to show off their acting skill and make the audience laugh. Actors would often raise topical issues or local customs to connect with the audience (strong link to pantomime here)

Plots—Most plots were about lovers, simple people being tricked or long lost children. The classic, traditional plot is that 2 people are in love and wish to be married, but one or more elders are preventing this from happening, leading the lovers to ask one or more servants for help. Typically the story ends happily, with the marriage of the lovers and forgiveness for any wrongdoings.

Masks—They were originally made of leather and covered the upper part of the face leaving the mouth uncovered so that the actor could speak. Each character had a specific mask that the audience would recognise instantly and their costume also matched the mask. Female characters were not masked and their characters were not well developed—probably because this was the first type of theatre to allow females to act.

Physicality - Each character had a specific way of moving and speaking and these were exaggerated by the actors so the audience could easily recognise the character and their status/class.

The lazzi were hugely, if not entirely dependent on movement, such as Arlecchino catching and eating a fly in a stylised way, pretending to be a statue as a way of hiding, or getting beaten round the head by his master.

CHARACTERS - There are stock groups of characters:

SERVANTS—or clowns (Zanni)

MASTERS - old men - (vecchi)

LOVERS—(innamorati)

CAPTAINS—(capitani)

MAGNIFICO - the ruler/leader

FURTHER READING

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/education/guides/zpfk6sg/revision/5>

<http://libguides.tts.edu.sg/masks>

<https://www.britannica.com/art/>