

Knots and Doubleness
The Engine of the Commedia dell'Arte

Ferdinando Taviani

In Italy, in the last decades of the sixteenth and first decades of the seventeenth centuries, a form of theatre developed which was based on the dramatic and the comical, on the union of opposites, like the contrast between dark and light in some paintings of those years. This theatre was based on contradictions in terms: exquisite vulgarity, youthful old age, manly femininity, loving ferocity, intelligent folly, buffoonish tragedy and joy and horror. Joy and horror are not exaggerations; when the contradictions in terms are transferred from words to bodies, from the play of images to physical actions, then they elevate the mind and the heart, with the purpose of making us laugh and scaring us, thus bringing on joy. *Joie*: In Italian the word *spasso* derives from *espandersi*, a momentary expansion of life, like an elixir, which can inspire love as much as sex or power can. We can imagine *spasso* as a higher form of entertainment and pleasure, the difference between *spasso* and pleasure being the same as that between the experience of liberation and the illusion of liberty. This explains why some *spassosi* men – men who could give *spasso* to other people – could be loved and venerated as paragons in life and mourned in death, as Yorick is mourned by Hamlet.

Very little information survives on what might be called the 'lost theatre'. It was a form of theatre based on exception, composed of a small number of groups which excelled in this art and were foreigners everywhere. Excellence, exception and the sense of not belonging anywhere developed from an interplay of coincidences, not from a project or a programme. Only later, and always a little covertly, did the ideas emerge which were identified with a way of thinking and then translated into a libertine, artistic consciousness. This lost theatre was separate from but part of the overall tradition of the *commedia dell'arte*. It was the yeast in the bread of this genre and a source of popularity.

The *commedia dell'arte* had a very long-lasting and varied influence on world culture because it nurtured an interacting system of ideas and

illusions, reincarnating itself as an image, a dream, a theatrical genre or as myth and the shadow of a tradition. This lost theatre was a spark which was soon buried by the cluttered, complex and restricted world of the *commedia dell'arte*. On the other hand, it was its quintessence, the secret source of the living contrasts which made the *commedia dell'arte* into a recurrently alluring episode in the history of theatre – at the same time, elementary and difficult to understand. Those who try to get a general idea of the *commedia dell'arte* experience, a strange and interesting phenomenon, start to see double.

Nowadays the term most commonly used, 'commedia dell'arte' had many predecessors: *commedia all'improvviso*, because actors seemed to improvise the lines for their roles; *commedia mercenaria*, because people paid for performances sold by professional troupes; *commedia delle maschere*, because it was based on stock characters and some of them wore masks; *commedia degli zanni*, because it featured grotesque servant characters, often masters of laughter; and *commedia italiana* or *all'italiana*, because it travelled across Europe and seemed to represent everything that was considered Italian. *Commedia dell'arte*, the most recent and enduring term, was originally a derogatory epithet which eventually became a crown. It began to be used frequently in the eighteenth century in a negative sense – as opposed to the more positive, 'art' of the *commedia*.

Commedia dell'arte appeared in Italy in the second half of the sixteenth century and had great success throughout the seventeenth century, while touring in many different places. We find references to it in the Spanish theatre of the Golden Age, in Shakespeare and in the English theatre. Its impact was particularly strong in France, even more than in Italy. Without the *commedia all'italiana*, neither Molière nor Marivaux would ever have written the way they did. It declined during the eighteenth century. If it had not existed, the works of Carlo Goldoni, for example, would not have been what they are. It was Goldoni who gave weight to and popularised the proposition that an authentic art of the *commedia* could exist only by denying that the *commedia dell'arte* was performed by money-grubbing actors. Nevertheless, it was nourished by what it denied. It may be said that Goldoni extracted the tastiest juice from the theatre performed by professional troupes and threw the skins away. Unexpectedly, new roots sprang up from those skins and bore fruit. Although the history of theatre tells us that after Goldoni the *commedia dell'arte* declined and although this is to some degree true, nowadays the *commedia dell'arte* is often discussed as if it were still a living theatrical genre. What can this mean for us? How did it become a legend – not only

in the field of theatre? How is it possible that after four and a half centuries it still stands for 'new theatre'?

To these questions, we will attempt to find plausible answers. However, the really crucial question here is: What kind of joy does the commedia dell'arte evoke? Was it a sour and contradictory joy, able to spread because of the existence of pockets of tolerance in substantially intolerant cultures, in a Europe ravaged by religious wars, absolutism, the Thirty Years War and great pestilences? The commedia dell'arte was a libertine institution in an age of bourgeois seriousness and unilateral beliefs. It was a hybrid, which assumed the appearance of an indigenous cultural establishment, as well as a form of prostitution turned into its opposite. Knots and doubleness were its backbone.

Poverty and humiliation created nearly all those striking aspects. It seemed to be fantasy but was in fact audacity; it seemed to be experimentation but was really anxiety. From the distance of our chair on an expensive cruise ship, we can see that world rejoice merrily, like an island of liberty. Yet, for those who inhabited it, that world was often a clever or forced refuge. Just as often it was a prison. The great success, the ovations and immense popularity enjoyed by some actors or actresses existed on a sea of indifference, contempt and threats. The reports of that time emphasise the fortunate cases. History, however, should not forget the precarious 'normality' of the lives of members of those theatrical troupes who often suffered persecution. It is a pity that, seen from a distance, the commedia dell'arte can appear to be a friendly, childish form of theatre, while it is in fact a whole theatre-world, an encyclopaedic summary of the multifaceted forms making up the fragmentary universe of theatre – but only when it is not conceived as the performance of a written text. As we look deeper into the subject – like a vagabond character in a Baroque play who is forced to metamorphose – we have to come to terms with misunderstanding and challenges.

Even a condensed treatment of the commedia dell'arte should not overlook some aspects of doubleness. In particular, this term denotes two different theatrical realities, which overlap but do not coincide: on the one hand, the profession of theatre between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries in Italy; on the other, a formula, a way of performing based on the use of masks and improvisation. This dichotomy is evident in the list of descriptive terms which have been used: *commedia mercenaria*, which underlines the fact that it is a profession; and *commedia delle maschere*, *all'improvviso* or *degli zanni*, which focus on the formula. *Commedia all'italiana* also emphasises the profession, but does not exclude the

formula. As explained earlier, the term *commedia dell'arte*, originally coined to discredit a declining profession, is today associated mostly with the idea of a formula, used in a genre set to last forever. From the point of view of the formula, the *commedia dell'arte* stands in sharp contrast to the *commedia erudita*, namely that form of theatre based on a literary text composed by an author. However, from the standpoint of the profession and of theatre as commerce, there is no contrast, because professional *comici* often performed and wrote *erudite commedie*. Theatre as a profession is often juxtaposed with a free form of theatre conceived as a festival and performed in courts, academies, parishes and colleges by merry troupes, by intellectuals and also by aristocrats during Carnival time. However, the stark contrast between the two does not concern genres, because the improvised *commedie*, which were performed in the courts and in the academies, were based on the same scenarios used by professional actors. Therefore, a summary approach may create confusion. As mentioned earlier, there was a time in which the *commedia dell'arte* was in a state of decline, but then started to flourish again. As a matter of fact, what declined was the predominant use by professional troupes of the formula of improvisation. What flourished again was that same formula, but with its commercial context removed.

When referring to the *commedia dell'arte*, it is important to take into consideration which of its two sides is being emphasised. This requires patience and the acceptance of nuances. The issue of doubleness also involves the 'popular' nature of the *commedia dell'arte*: Does 'popular' refer to its content or to its origins? Its characters often speak in dialect, using common or vulgar language. The fact that the poor are placed at the centre of the *commedia* does not mean that they placed themselves there; it was often the *aristocrats* who had fun mimicking characters supposed to represent the common people. In the case of professional actors, performing roles portraying these kinds of characters had a double advantage: The lower-class audiences liked it, because they laughed and cried about people like themselves and not about the traditional heroes of sacred stories, myths or tragedies; the *signori* liked it too, because it was a way of mocking the lower classes.

Despite the misunderstandings which may arise from the presence of doubleness and various nuances, the *commedia dell'arte* is clearly recognisable, and easy to define in a few words, unlike the 'normal' theatre of modern European culture from the sixteenth century on. In general, theatre was and is done by choosing a text, or having one written expressly for an occasion, learning it by heart and then performing it. In the text

there are several characters who have a specific function in relation to the story being related in the performance. The *commedia dell'arte* is different: First a plot is chosen and then the *commedia* is improvised. There are no real characters, only stock characters who always have the same name, the same costume and the same mask, passing from one *commedia* to the other. The performance, as a whole, does not strive to imitate reality, but tends towards farce, the grotesque and the fairy tale.

In normal theatre, each scene depends on the story which is being related in the performance. There are no identical scenes which are repeated in different *commedie* or in different plays. There might be similar scenes, such as recurring, everyday happenings, but they are never completely identical. By contrast, in the *commedia dell'arte* there are jokes, comic acts, gags and sketches which always appear in identical form, in the most diverse contexts. If we wanted to be even more concise, we might say that the *commedia dell'arte* is the kind of theatre that, in the history of the last four or five centuries, has stirred up both the most fascination and the most contempt, one sentiment next to the other, one within the other, to an extreme beyond comparison.

Fascination and Contempt

From a distance, the *commedia dell'arte* appears as a landscape of masks, laughter – laughter – laughter and improvisation. It is characterised by its indelibly Italian spirit and by its universally known anti-hero, Harlequin. He is so well known that, at first sight, only the Crucified Christ is more easily recognisable. This comparison may reek of blasphemy to some and is undeniably in poor taste. However, it is useful. By means of this incongruous but obligatory comparison between an icon representing a great story, the 'great tale', a source of values, a story which is for many the story of all stories, and the icon of Harlequin – a modest, modern and mundane, but equally (and funnily) universal figure. The latter is revealed as being essentially empty of history. He is so empty that even the body of the character risks being extinguished. It seems impossible to imagine a naked Harlequin. Before being a body, Harlequin is a costume. Nothing but his multicolour costume gives him consistence. That costume and the space surrounding him seem to float beyond time and history. The fascination they engender lies mainly in their radical extraterritoriality, which is also the source of the contempt in which they are sometimes held.

To some it may seem pointless to wonder what actually happened in the times in which the *commedia dell'arte* had a powerful presence in the

imagination of Europe. Apparently, the fairy tale they told was everything, or what they did consisted of nothing but the formula they used. It was as if their theatre – once realistic characters were abolished and replaced by Rosauras, Isabellas, Columbines and fake mad women, Harlequin, Pulcinella, Pantalone, the Captain and the Doctor – was a theatrical vessel in which it did not matter when things happened, which had broken its moorings and which turned at times from its space among the clouds ('pure theatre', as some define it) to sneer at the world considered 'real'. Why did this beautiful fantasy also become an object of contempt? In some periods, this contempt was evident and proverbial. Nowadays admiration prevails and the contempt lies in the dark.

At its peak, the commedia dell'arte seemed to be a culturally arbitrary reality, alien to civic traditions, illegitimate, morally irresponsible and only focused on scraping together money by appealing to the worst instincts of spectators and exploiting the basest tendencies of mercenary actors. For us, centuries later, the commedia dell'arte is an inventive form of theatre which, however, was seemingly incapable of conveying any idea or echo of the terrible times in which it developed. It seems to sail into abstraction, almost as if it did not care about blood being shed and slaughter taking place around it. It laughed, using jokes to turn hunger, humiliation and rape into trifles. The difficulty of identifying bridges between its comic formulas and the mephitic times, which were its operational context, may prove intolerable.

The indolence of the commedia dell'arte in the face of such intense suffering is both an ethical and an aesthetic problem. As a result, some consider this theatre to be a world reduced to formulas, a comedy reduced to a framework or mechanism, impermeable to reality, a cold virtuoso display or just theatre which is an end in itself. Others recognise in those formulas, in those mechanisms, the levers to make life as well as laughter emerge suddenly and open up the mind and the heart. They make a laugh that thinks and leaves its mark not through explicit messages, but through the spiritual metabolism of each spectator. In other words, *spasso*.

Further Doubleness

If we come a little closer, we realise that the land of Harlequin is extraterritorial and beyond history in a contradictory, complex way. In fact, it is divided into two distinct and puzzling narratives – myth and documented chronicle – which are so similar and yet so contradictory as to short-circuit the minds of those who observe them.

It was not only a joyous form of theatre which developed in those foul and pestilent times; it was also an improvised theatre with fixed features and repetitive, unperturbed and long-established characters. It was a synonym for *Guittalemm*, the imaginary town of unattached, low-ranking actors. However, it was also recognised as the invention of excellent actors and actresses, whose names have endured down through the centuries. In fact, the term *arte* – which in the expression ‘*commedia dell’arte*’ only meant ‘job’ or ‘profession’ – still has a noble resonance to it, as if it denoted something particularly refined, an artistic sense in action. It is theatre according to old Italian customs, but also a symbol of the international ‘new theatre’. As previously said, it has been so for four and a half centuries, which may seem like a contradiction; yet, even this contradiction has its justification.

It may seem strange that the *commedia dell’arte* was regarded as new theatre from the beginning. The adjective ‘new’, however, did not always have a positive connotation. When in the late sixteenth century or at the beginning of the seventeenth century a ‘new way of doing *commedia*’ was mentioned, it was associated with the ignorant practices of uncultivated men who, as audacious novices, thought they could enter a cultural territory which they were supposed to recognise as being superior and alien to them. The *commedia dell’arte* does not exist any longer, having been relegated to the past. It is at the same time a form of theatre which is practised and taught by many people today, as if it were a tradition with its own set of codes. Maybe it resembles a tradition or maybe it is even the ‘ghost’ of a tradition.

An Italian form of theatre earned acceptance, success and legendary status abroad – in France, Germany, England and Russia – and from there the underlying idea returned to be admired in Italy, where mere contempt had prevailed hitherto. In saying so, we are relating, in just a few lines, a story which extends from the end of the sixteenth century well into the twentieth century. Let us now stop and look at the origins: For instance, we can see its anti-hero, Harlequin, becoming a protagonist in Paris and not in Bergamo, where he was said to have been born, nor in Venice, where he got married. It was in Paris that he first imposed laughter, tears and fear on his audiences. He was interpreted by a continual series of Italian actors, extending over a period of almost two centuries, from the end of the sixteenth century (who was the first Harlequin? Tristano Martinelli?) to Carlo Bertinazzi in the eighteenth century, the time of Diderot, Voltaire and Goldoni.

The actor who, in the role of Harlequin, was to make the greatest impression on the memory of spectators was Domenico Biancolelli, whose

name came to be widely known there in its French version: Dominique. Born in Bologna in 1636, Dominique died in Paris at the beginning of August in 1688. The cause of his death was pneumonia; he had sweated excessively while showing the Sun King a parody of a particularly refined dance created by Pierre Beauchamps, ballet master at court. In order to reorganise itself (and in mourning), the Italian theatre in Paris remained closed for one month. Eight years earlier, in a royal decree, Dominique and his wife, actress Orsola Cortesi, had been granted French citizenship. As the king wrote in the decree, both of them 'desire to end their days as our subjects'.

When Dominique died, he was a little over fifty years old, the same age as Molière, who had died in February 1673, fifteen years earlier. In a certain sense Molière died of theatre too: On stage, on what was to be the last night of his life, he had started to vomit blood in the middle of a bout of laughter during the performance of his play, *The Imaginary Invalid*. In 1691, the other great figure of the triad of *comici* in Paris, Tiberio Fiorilli, known as Scaramuccia, or Scaramouche, also died. Of the three, he was the oldest and the one who lived the longest. He kept performing even after he was over eighty years old. This great triad of *comici* – which may be regarded as the greatest not only in Paris but throughout European theatre as well – was composed of two Italians and one Parisian. This, however, is not important. What is really important is that Jean-Baptiste Poquelin, known as Molière, Dominique-Harlequin and Fiorilli-Scaramuccia, or Scaramouche were considered by theatre-lovers of the time to be, in equal measure, geniuses in transmitting the irresistible force of the comic – with its mysteries, as the comic has its mysteries too.

In comparison to Dominique and Scaramouche, who belonged to the small group of the greatest actors of his time, Molière now seems to occupy a totally different place, that of the creator of books for eternity, classics of literature. Yet, when he was alive, he was an actor who also wrote. He was considered an actor-philosopher – the most brilliant, independent, unpredictable, restless and dangerous of the actor-philosophers, among whom Dominique and Scaramouche also had their places. Although this may sound like a silly remark, not belonging in a serious scholarly study, I would nonetheless like to support the thesis that Molière should be included in the history of the commedia dell'arte and be considered a *comico dell'arte* among the others. The philology of influences can be left aside. He was French, but does it really matter? Was he the greatest? Undoubtedly.

The fact that the Italian actors of the commedia dell'arte were supposed to be aliens in the world of literature is one of those legendary tamperings

with history. These actors and actresses were at times original and spirited creators of books and experimenters in the fields of both publishing and literary genres. They wrote tragedies, comedies and pastoral plays. Nowadays, even historians of literature are beginning to acknowledge that the actor-poet Giovan Battista Andreini should be regarded as a classic figure in seventeenth-century Italian dramatic literature. Previously, he has always been excluded by academic convention from manuals on the period. It is likewise inexplicable that, even today, his mother Isabella is almost always forgotten in the collections of Italian lyric poets covering the period between Tasso and Marino – a meagre period in which she, however, stands out.

This tampering with history works in two directions. On the one hand, it strengthens the belief that the actors and actresses of the *commedia dell'arte* had nothing to do with literature; as a result, their rich, illustrious literature has been ignored and has remained in oblivion. On the other hand, the legend of the *commedia dell'arte* would not otherwise have held together so long. The two hemispheres of the *commedia dell'arte* – its myth and its history – continuously distort each other in such a way as to stimulate a 'mirror' narration of their story. Thus, there are two stories of the *commedia dell'arte*.

The First of the Two Stories: The Myth

If we were to imagine that these two stories were to be summarised and printed in two adjacent columns, the column on the left ('myth') would tell us that in Italy, in the second half of the sixteenth century, a more or less illiterate kind of theatre developed, in which folkloric images and procedures were combined and developed. This form of theatre was connected to the magic of the masks, to the comic and underworld characters of popular tales, to the rituals of fertility and to Carnival as an upside-down world. It was a kind of theatre that made faces at everything that was either great, high, solemn, cultivated or close at hand. It stood for a satire of the ruling class, the clergy, academics, aristocratic etiquette and the rules and ideals of bourgeois life.

According to the myth, it was performed in streets and squares, in front of small groups of people or crowds at the markets who were attracted by the grotesque virtues of the itinerant buffoons. In fact, it was performed everywhere. This is not only because it was itinerant, or because its popularity spread and reached the courts, but also because its essence – legend has it – can be found, in different guises, even in the most remote cultures,

in Asia, Europe and Africa, among the Mediterranean populations as well as in the distant Russia. Therefore, countless Harlequins and Pulcinellas, with different names, seem to meet and discover their kinship, crossing the expanse of history, beyond times and seas. Is it not true that there was a Harlequin in ancient Rome who mimed and who was called *mimus centunculus* because his costume was made of pieces of cloth with patches? We need hardly mention *mimus albus*, as white as Pulcinella, hatching like a *pulcino* (chick) from an egg and showing its *albume* (white of the egg). Other relatives of Pulcinella can also be found in the farce-genre of the *Atellana* or in the Turkish version, the shadow theatre named after the lower-class stock character Karagöz, who was born in Turkey but later became popular in Greece as well as in parts farther east. It also seems possible to recognise Pulcinella in the features of small prehistoric statues or in the Nahuatl culture of ancient Mexico.

Therefore, the popularity of the commedia dell'arte presumably gave visibility and organisational form to the scattered relics of a representative cultural substratum which, according to the tenets of cultural archaeology, had spread all around the world. As far as the history of modern Europe is concerned, these relics were no longer scattered and unknown, but emerged in a spontaneous, anti-Renaissance, Italian form of theatre. Collectively they formed a theatre genre which was based on improvisation and did not tolerate the burden of literary prescriptions (or pre-scripts). By its own nature, it was not only on a collision course with the dominant social and ideological order, but also drilled through the crust of reason, causing the energy of dreams and what had been slumbering in the collective unconscious to gush out onto the surface and be seen by all. It gained prestige and visibility; it became more refined, entered the salons and inspired a small multitude of porcelain figures, but its roots were deeper.

Its core was the mask and its dual identity, both of a grotesque face covering the real face and of a stock character, characterised by a costume, a name and often a peculiar way of speaking. Both inhabit the upside-down world of Carnival but the mask, as a black face, is typical of demons, shadows, the dead who return and of the faces burnt by the fire of purgatory or hell. The actors identified themselves with the mask, which was intended as stock character to perpetuate the legend. They also changed as individuals; they were no longer themselves, but Mr Harlequin, Mr Pantalone, Mr Brighella, Mr Dottores, Mr Capitano Spezzaferro or Spaccamontagne. In other words, they entered the world of theatre by leaving the real world behind them, almost changing their state (and thus changing their name, as often happens among new members of religious orders and of certain sects and guilds).

How could this theatrical genre characterised by a 'savage mind' relate to the modern world? It related as the shadows relate to the body, the conscious to the unconscious or the repressed to the liberated. In another sense it did not really relate; it was able to coexist with it thanks to the friction generated. It was the alternative face. It preserved its subversive force even within the boundaries of civilised theatre and adjusted to some of their rules while imposing its capricious insolence. It declined in the age of the Enlightenment in the eighteenth century after being almost suffocated by the spirit of that age (the great man who imposed some order was Goldoni, who gave Italy the modern comedy of characters and situations). It soon flourished again (its saviour was Carlo Gozzi, who wrote the ten *Fiabe teatrali*). In unwritten form, relics of the genre were preserved in the lower ('popular') layers of the performing arts, in international mime, in the Italian dialect theatres, in isolated pockets of resistance existing in peasant culture and in a flood of images related to the different facets of the taste for the picturesque and the commonplace – from the seventeenth-century engravings of Jacques Callot to the eighteenth-century canvases and frescoes of Jean-Antoine Watteau and Giovanni Domenico Tiepolo, down to Pablo Picasso and the present day. With the coming of cinema commedia dell'arte achieved new popularity thanks to the comedians who used the medium. In fact, Charlie Chaplin and Totò – with regard to the legend of the commedia dell'arte – can be considered as prime examples of the genre and as its eternal heirs.

A continuous tradition, following different paths, was maintained from earliest times through the period of Italian theatre dominance to the Romantics, especially the German and French varieties, and was incorporated by Hoffmann and Gautier in their short stories and novels. Through them, it reached the reformers of twentieth-century theatre, for whom it was a fertile legend – the theatre of yesterday ready to become the theatre of tomorrow. This was the point of view shared by Edward Gordon Craig and Jacques Copeau, by Vsevolod Meyerhold and Max Reinhardt, by Yevgeny Vakhtangov, Alexander Tairov and Charles Dullin.

The difficulty and fascination of writing the history of the theatre genre under consideration here is similar to the task of depicting a country wholly in the clasp of extremes, where the most depraved realities coexist with the noblest, where the most tepid traditionalism stands next to the ice and fire of the revolution, where the boldest experiments in freedom are not jeopardised by their proximity to the numerous cases of intimate subjection and the most stubborn mediocrity. This is a country composed only of suburbs and outlying territories, with no developed areas. Depending on

the way it is looked at, it can be seen as small or extremely vast and some can live or travel there or study it, in the course of an outing, a longer stay or as a career. For others, it is a microcosm permeated with omens and intimations of destiny, suggesting a history and geography of love and honour. It is not only in the commedia dell'arte that the contrasts are alive. Hence the commedia dell'arte can be a symbol of the whole theatre – a theatre-world.

The Non-Mythical Story

Now, let us return to the synoptic stories of the commedia dell'arte and concentrate on the column on the right ('history'), where a kind of theatre which developed in Italy in the second half of the sixteenth century is analysed. One date immediately stands out: 25 February 1545, when in Padua, in a notary's office, the first surviving contract creating a theatrical troupe was drawn up, a profit-sharing venture called a 'fraternal company'. It was composed entirely of professional male actors – eight in all – who aimed to sell comedies between the Easter of 1545 and the Carnival of 1546. Their plays were probably centred on the relationship between the Magnifico and the Zanni or between the Zanni and Doctor Graziano, in other words between masters and servants. 'Magnifico' was a title granted in Venice to wealthy representatives of the middle class (today, it is given to rectors of Italian universities). For instance, Pantalone is 'Magnifico'.

After this first surviving contract, other notary documents creating troupes or settling disputes between them followed. Among these, one contract stands out. It was drawn up in Rome on 10 October 1564 and among the contracting parties, all commonly called *commedianti* (*omnes ut vulgo dicitur Commedianti*), the name of an actress, Lucrezia da Siena, appears for the first time. This column should probably be punctuated by 'yes, but . . .'. Yes, it was the theatre of stock characters, of Zanni, Graziani, Pantalone and servants but, at least in the decades between 1570 and the beginning of the seventeenth century, the popularity of actresses such as Vincenza Armani, Flaminia, Vittoria Piissimi and the actress-poet Isabella Andreini became predominant. It was then that actors and actresses attempted to establish a sense of equality in status between the profession of the actor and that of the poet. To this end, Adriano Valerini published poems, a tragedy and a description of Verona; Isabella Andreini associated herself with Torquato Tasso; Flaminio Scala published a collection of scenarios in an elegant edition, almost venturing to create an independent literary genre, like collections of short stories or of comedies; Francesco Andreini

published monologues of and conversations with Capitano Spavento, like one of those books with two faces, one crazy, the other serious, and contained a collection of sayings and anecdotes of bizarre characters.

Yes, the commedia dell'arte incorporated themes and characters from popular and carnivalesque culture; but it also adopted the plots of classical and sixteenth-century comedies and of the short stories of Giovanni Boccaccio and Matteo Bandello as well as episodes from Ludovico Ariosto's *Orlando furioso* or Miguel de Cervantes' *Don Quixote*. These were mostly comic stories that also contained chronicles of blood and revenge and adventures of kings, paladins and *condottieri*. The legend of Don Juan, opening with a duel and ending in hell, was regularly utilised. It was a form of theatre often based on improvisation but precisely for this reason, it was planned in detail – not text by text but actor by actor. In other words, each actor could rely on a constantly updated and improved repertoire of spoken or gestural pieces with which he could make his contribution to the construction of the whole (this is one of the crucial issues of the commedia dell'arte, which will be mentioned here only briefly and only in rough, summary form).

It is true that it was a spontaneous form of theatre, but not because it practised the spontaneity of acting (this would have been horrible to watch!). It was spontaneous in the sense that it was born and developed on its own, as no one asked it to come into being. The actors and actresses were true professionals, who could perform the whole range of theatrical genres, not only comedy: *commedie all'improvviso*, written comedies, tragicomedies, tragedies, tragedies set to music and pastoral plays (the pièce de résistance of the troupes was Torquato Tasso's *Aminta* or Battista Guarini's *Pastor Fido*, the most popular pastoral plays in Europe).

What surprised audiences and above all the literary establishment, was that part of the repertoire which consisted of improvised plays and which was produced and changed quickly, with stock characters and without written texts. It was something radically different from the way plays were always supposed to be performed. It had a distinctive character, because it was improvised and codified. It was also something inherently different from the monologues and comic duets of itinerant actors or buffoons. It looked like 'regular' comedy, but without being ordinary. When professional Italian actors travelled abroad with their small troupes, their quick and characteristic way of performing comedies was highly appreciated. It looked like an Italian genre.

In the eyes of professional Italian actors, however, their troupes stood out in the scene of European commercial theatre during the last decades of

the sixteenth century, not so much for their improvisational skills but rather for the versatility of their actors, for their metamorphic talent and for their ability to make do with a small number of company members. By comparison, other theatrical companies could rely on a far larger group when touring abroad. The Italian actors could perform the role of a spectacularly funny Zanni one day and the day after that of a tragic tyrant; the night before the role of a cowardly Capitano and the night after that of a lyrical, sentimental poet. The actor Nicolò Barbieri, known as Beltrame, proudly remembered this in *La supplica*, published in 1634 (Molière's first 'regular' [scripted] comedy, which appeared in 1655, in five acts and in verse, was adapted from the *commedia*, *L'inavertito*, published by Barbieri in 1629). Barbieri said that the actor who performed the role of Harlequin could take off the mask and play a tragic character. This is what characterised the art of professional Italian actors. Almost a hundred years later, this opinion was shared by Luigi Riccoboni, an actor and literary man who tried to question the identification of the *commedia dell'arte* with the 'Italian theatre'.

It is true that actors and actresses were often called by the names of the stock characters they played in the improvised plays, but not because the newly adopted names replaced their old ones, nor because the actors identified themselves with the fake characters. The new names became something between a *nom de guerre* and a nickname; they did not denote fixity, but excellence.

Even in the academies of high culture, which became common in Italy from the sixteenth century onwards, academic men and women chose new names for themselves, to add to their own given name. It was often a funny name, like the stage name of actors. Even in the Arcadia, the academy which, in the eighteenth century, unified literary Italy into a national cultural institution with 'colonies' in various cities, this tradition of adopting a new ironic or funny stage name lasted for a long time. This aspect of how and why names were chosen may seem marginal, but it is not; it shows that troupes of actors and actresses were organised as commercial enterprises and that they considered themselves in their organisation as constituting an academy. In fact, some troupes adopted names which were very similar to those of the literary academies of the various Italian cities: *Gelosi*, *Confidenti*, *Uniti*, *Accesi* and *Desiosi*.

It is true that on tour, performances were held in streets and squares, in markets and fairs, on small stages and at the corners of streets or under the monumental bridges of large cities. However, this is not a distinctive feature of the *commedia dell'arte*. Wherever there were festivals, crowds

or markets, there were always itinerant comedians, acrobats, charlatans and farce-actors. Nor is the use of the mask a distinctive feature of the *commedia dell'arte*. Masks were used everywhere in Italy between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries: in performances, at parties, at public and private meetings, at Carnival, on walks, on stages and in the upper-tier boxes reserved to high-rank spectators, in brothels and in convents.

The column on the right, 'history', insists that the *commedia dell'arte* stood out because it consisted of theatrical enterprises which sold performances by persuading spectators to buy tickets. They were not specialist artisans, limited to a specific genre. Rather, they specialised in not specialising, producing a variety of performances almost on an assembly-line basis, increasing the supply and expanding the range on offer in accordance with demand.

The column of the two synoptic stories entitled 'history' explains why the *commedia dell'arte* was not a product of popular culture, but rather an eccentric combination of commerce and middle-class entrepreneurship, able to amalgamate old and diverse elements (some of them originating in Carnival or popular performance) into an innovative, saleable product, which was essentially ephemeral, consisting of the entertaining and the superfluous. For this reason, it met with much hostility and disapproval. Therefore, it condensed the separation of the theatrical and dramaturgic work into formulas which facilitated the speedy production of its basic repertoire and which, from the point of view of intellectuals, could be defined as the routine, ongoing repertoire necessary to ensure daily earnings.

It is of fundamental importance not to forget that the troupes sold all kinds of performances. The improvised production was not, in the first decades, the most important quality from the perspective of winning artistic and cultural prestige. It was, however, the most frequently used and, most of the time, the most profitable. As stated before, the most striking aspect of this improvised production was the difference between it and performances produced on the basis of written texts. Its formulas were devised so effectively that they seemed to derive from an old, unknown tradition (while they actually derived from the demands of commerce). These formulas were extremely successful in Paris (this is a crucial chapter in the history of the *commedia dell'arte*, but would be more conveniently discussed elsewhere). Furthermore, they conveyed a precise idea of a 'different' kind of theatre to the Romantics, to A. W. Schlegel for his *Lectures on Dramatic Literature*, as well as to Goethe, Schiller and Hoffmann, to George Sand and her son Maurice and to Théophile Gautier. Irrespective of whether these intellectuals identified the difference inherent in the work of the

commedia dell'arte with a primitive, popular form of theatre or perceived its refined complexity, the commedia dell'arte seemed to be a different kind of theatre because, unlike the fundamental tendency in European theatre as a whole, it did not depend on the literary repertoire of theatre and on the art of textual interpretation.

Through its fixed formulas, the commedia dell'arte showed that it was possible to give equal recognition and importance to the dramaturgical and gestural repertoire of the actors, to the realistic expression of feelings and to their intensified acrobatic and metaphoric representation through energetic dance. The commedia dell'arte can thus be considered both a traditional source and the noble proclaimer of a variety of genres: of mime, of comedy films, especially belonging to the period of silent cinema, of some forms of Italian dialectal theatre, of the performances of the *café chantant*, of variety shows, in particular, the *avanspettacolo* tabloid variety and of the circus, which the representatives of the twentieth-century artistic avant-garde, starting from the Futurists, anticipated by Alfred Jarry, often cited as an example of the art of the future. It also inspired the innovators of twentieth-century theatre (from Gordon Craig to Jacques Copeau; from Vsevolod Meyerhold to Max Reinhardt; from Yevgeny Vakhtangov to Aleksandr Tairov and Charles Dullin).

Strabismus

If we used images to symbolise the commedia dell'arte, then the column on the left ('myth') would show itinerant actors on a small stage, one of them a masked actor, the audience in a circle and all out in the open. In the column on the right ('history'), the image would be less vivid: It would show an entry ticket and the room of the commedia, a closed space which is somehow the workshop of actors and, at the same time, their rustic-looking academy. On one side, there would be the vault provided by the sky, on the other side, the paper sky typical of commercial stages – cheap imitations of the festive stages of the courts.

The greatness of the commedia dell'arte lies between these two symbolic images which, however, are flawed by the fact that they clash with each other. They do not contrast with one another or provide an alternative to each other. Each of them is autonomous. Nevertheless, in order to have a general overview, we need to consider both of them with a single glance. In other words, we need to practise strabismus. Could the two synoptic columns be considered as two profiles of the same face? It is impossible, they are too different. Can we just erase one and keep the other? This is

also impossible, as the column on the right is more authentic, but the one on the left is not really false.

The stories which we have related here are a simplification, a mere outline. In the real world, when the *commedia dell'arte* is described, things are far more entangled and complicated; crossroads open up within other crossroads. This strabismus must become 'complicated', a method which is similar to diplopia, namely the simultaneous perception of two images of the same object. The *commedia dell'arte* compels us to transform this visual disorder into a game of patience.