

e-Luminations: The Servant of Two Masters

Commedia Basics

In 1745, Antonio Sacco, one of the great players of the commedia stock character, Truffaldino, asked playwright Carlo Goldoni to write down the story of *The Servant of Two Masters*. Originally, it was a largely unscripted scenario, with room for the actors to improvise *lazzi*, or comic business. Goldoni incorporated these *lazzi* into a script published in 1753.

By the time he did this, commedia dell'arte (Comedy of Art) had been around for 200 years. It's a form of improvised theatre that began in Italy and was performed by a company of actors who played recurring stock characters in different situations and relationships.

These companies primarily toured from town to town, setting up in the streets or in a town hall. Stages could be simple ones set in the town square or courtyard, with a backdrop for scenery. Or the square itself could be used as a stage, with actors making their way through the spectators for their entrances and exits. As time went on, troupes played indoors as well, in halls, theatres and even in palaces.

A company was comprised of about 10 actors, including men and women. Each specialized in a specific stock character and wore identifying half-masks. To keep the audience's attention, performers developed a heightened physical vocabulary. A character could be distinguished by his posture, tempo, gesture and vocal inflection. Actors often play Pantalone, the miser, with his back hunched over, both as a sign of his age and to protect his moneybag.

"The commedia is made up of handed-down scenarios," says director Tracy Young. "It's based on eternal ideas about the conflict between parents, on love prevailing over all, on lovers who are always kept apart, on the egos of powerful men."

Actors memorized the highly structured plots, characters and circumstances. They knew many different *lazzi*, which were passed down from actor to actor. They also knew their own strengths and their fellow actors' so intimately that they could improvise fresh material.

This structure gave an actor the freedom to put his own stamp on the character, incorporating his skills at executing flips, juggling plates or doing pratfalls. A classic example is Truffaldino trying to serve both masters dinner in without them finding out

about the other. The *lazzi* the actor chooses in the serving of the dinners is what makes this scene thrilling to watch.

—Daniel Passer

This is an excerpt from OSF's 2009 Illuminations, a 64-page guide to the season's plays. For more information, or to buy the full Illuminations, [click here](#). Members at the Donor level and above and teachers who bring a school group to OSF receive a free copy of Illuminations.