

## Contrast in Comedies :

Japanese *Kyogen* and Italian *Commedia Dell'Arte*

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### ABSTRACT

Two types of comedies, the Japanese *Kyogen* and the Italian *Commedia Dell'Arte* developed at relatively similar periods in history, i.e., *Kyogen* in the late 14<sup>th</sup> Century and *Commedia Dell'Arte* in the mid 16<sup>th</sup> Century. Both of their origins are murky, but they did lead to a great blossoming of comedic theater during their periods, and even continuing into the present day. While both comedies seek to create laughter and mirth among their audiences and share many similarities, the few differences that do exist create a totally contrasting theatrical environment. *Kyogen* contains elements of farce, burlesque, and satire within a whimsical reality that wishes to be funny without being vulgar. *Commedia Dell'Arte*, however, uses whatever comedic forms may be needed to elicit laughter from its audiences, including slapstick, farce, burlesque, vulgarity, lewdness, and so on.

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### Introduction

It is probably safe to assume that comedy, in one form or another has been incorporated into human drama since the earliest known human. Even before he could speak, mirth could have been already present within the social structure of the earliest humans.

In particular, that form of comedy known as farce would have been present at a very early stage. When an early hunter somehow slipped on a banana peel and felt flat on his duff, it was sure to arouse grunts or sighs, or other sounds of mirth and laughter. Making a fool of oneself was sure to have been present from the very earliest social groupings of Man.

As speech developed, the comedic form also evolved and became more sophisticated, satirical, and subtle. Now, words could be used to describe a comedic episode between two or more characters. It was during this development in language that what we know as comedy began to develop. The earlier forms of comedic actions that had occurred without the benefit of the interplay of words, i.e., slapstick or pantomimes used exaggeration and ludicrous situations to elicit laughter. When speech developed, the comic interlude could be formed and guided by the interplay of words between two protagonists, creating a more subtle and deeper repartee between the two or more characters in an action.

The goal of both farce and comedy is to elicit laughter from its audience, but while comedy generally tries to constrain itself in realistic, natural human conditions, farce is under no such constraint. It bases its humor on the exaggeration and improbability of na-

ture, society, and human personal peculiarities. It has no bounds as to what can be said or used to elicit laughter. However, that is not to say that farce does not contain elements of comedy or vice-versa, the contrast is not that clear cut. For the audience, when the action begins, it is not too difficult to understand which comedic form is being primarily utilized ; farce with its pratfalls, hilarious props and actions, and its exaggerated forms of acting and speaking, or comedy which seeks to use the normal world and bend it in such a way to make it a bit out of the ordinary and funny. Pithy language, subtle exaggerated expressions of the human condition and satire are used to much effect in a good comedy.

As we shall see, *Kyogen* can be considered as comedy in the sense that it seeks to take natural, everyday occurrences and make them into something hilarious either by comedic dialogue, or quirky movements, dances and actions, or through dancing and singing.

In *Commedia Dell'Arte* the whole action that unfolds is to elicit the greatest amount of laughter using whatever is required to insure that the audience does, indeed, convulse with laughter.

## Origins—History

As with much of the early development of the Japanese culture and society, *Kyogen* is thought to have its roots in forms of entertainment that found their way from China. While there is no clear cut evolution of *Kyogen* from its early Chinese antecedents, it does owe much to the various forms that found their way into Japan, including such forms as *Sarugaku*, *Dengaku*, and *Sangaku*. These entertainment forms appeared in Japan as early as the 8<sup>th</sup> Century, and in the ensuing 600 to 700 years, were amalgamated, integrated, and evolved into the drama known as *Kyogen* by the Muromachi Period from 1336-1573.

*Sangaku* arrived from China with no one type of entertainment. Some troupes consisted of acrobats and gymnasts. Other groups were concerned with presenting various forms of magic, while others concentrated on various types of folk dances, songs, and music that sometimes may have been presented with some kind of performance. Still other groups included performers intent on presenting comic interludes, using pantomime, disguise, farcical exaggeration, and short dialogs, in other words, a forerunner to a form of dramatic action.

*Sarugaku* performances took place at village festivals or at the courts of important leaders and incorporated many dramatic elements. There were still many elements of *Sangaku* such as the acrobatics, singing, dancing, and pantomimes. These dramatic sketches were short and oftentimes incorporated farcical elements into their performance. In addition to the *Sangaku* elements, these sketches contained prologues and dialogs.

*Dengaku* evolved from folk rituals that were performed as part of the rice culture and was mainly performed in the fields of peasant farmers as opposed to the villages or lords' enclaves. Performers sang and danced in a magical ritual that would hopefully appease

the gods and ensure a bountiful rice harvest. These performances became very popular among the common people and eventually evolved into a tradition of folk performing arts which incorporated entertainment and religious meanings into their acts.

All of the actors among these antecedents became fulltime, professional performers and formed groups that would travel throughout various regions of the Japanese Archipelago.

Various elements among these kinds of entertainment were fused into what became known as *Kyogen* by the 14<sup>th</sup> Century. While *Kyogen* is traditionally considered as part of the *No* performance cycle of plays, providing comic relief between each *No* play, *Kyogen* as an entertainment form was as fully developed as the *No* before they were incorporated. For many years, *Kyogen* and *No* were separate types of entertainment and the groups of professionals who performed them came from completely separate groups of professionals, and even in the present time, *No* and *Kyogen* "families" have not been assimilated.

In the early 16<sup>th</sup> Century in Italy, most dramatic actions or skits, known as *Commedia Erudita*, were performed by groups of amateurs in the palaces of the rich and powerful. Based on Roman and Greek plays, their performances were said to have been classical, one-dimensional, over-stylized, cold, and strictly defined, in other words, bordering on the ponderous and boring. These plays were scripted and the actors wore no masks but did perform in colorful costumes. Perhaps in reaction to this stultifying form of entertainment, the common people clamored for a more robust and outrageous form that would help to alleviate the suffering and pain of trying to survive in the early 16<sup>th</sup> Century Italian countryside. Out of this desire arose the *Commedia Dell'Arte* which was based on the masked comedies of ancient Rome and incorporated tumbling, acrobatics, coarse and humorous dialog with many pratfalls on a stage that was set up outside in the market place or square of a village or large town.

It appears to have first emerged from Tuscany around 1550. It seems to have stormed the Italian countryside, and by the end of the Century, it had spread throughout Italy and into France, Spain, and England.

Its original purpose was to entertain the common people and was considered primarily as a form of folk art. However, as it gained in popularity, it came to the attention of high-society and eventually began to be performed in the houses of the rich as well as outside.

Much of their repertoire was inserted from Carnival festivities, and the *Commedia Dell'Arte* groups would travel the Italian countryside according to a Carnival festival schedule and entertain the local folk in the squares of the towns and villages.

These early groups' purpose for setting up a stage in the middle of a crowded square during a festival was to sell some kind of product. The main leader, the charlatan or mountebank as he was called, would ascend the stage and try to attract a crowd with

witty phrases or outrageous actions. Other members of the group would assist him in selling the product or enhancing the outrageousness being conducted on the stage. Once the master felt that he had gleaned as much money as possible from the crowd, all of the members would gather and give a masked performance on stage as a reward to the buyers of their product.

As time passed, the purpose of the groups turned to providing entertainment more than trying to sell a product and their acting skills progressed to a very high level. These skilled actors began to consider themselves as fulltime acting professionals, and it was when the *Commedia Dell'Arte* reached its prime that the professional actor was born in Italy. These groups went on to create their own "families" and jealously guarded entrance into their troupes.

### Staging—Performing

Early *Kyogen* performances took place wherever a crowd could be gathered. It could be in a field, a town square, or at a Buddhist temple. Sometimes *Kyogen* was used as a comedic way of explaining Buddhists principles to the faithful at their local Buddhist temple. Itinerant troupes traveled throughout Japan and performed *Kyogen* plays in rice fields or in town squares during festivals throughout the year. Being constantly on the move, the *Kyogen* stage was almost non-existent and few props were utilized.

After *Kyogen* became incorporated into the *No* cycle of plays to provide comic relief to the heavy and spiritual mood of the *No*, it then was performed on the *No* stage which was a raised wooden stage with four pillars in each corner and a screen with a large pine tree in the back.

The sketches are short, averaging 20 to 30 minutes and usually presented in real time as a one act play. As a result, the story and plot were very clear and easy to understand. The themes usually center on human weakness and the interaction between a minor lord and a servant or a peasant and his wife. It was dangerous to poke fun at the high and mighty so the actors made sure to limit the scope of their satirical attacks and verbal interplay so as not to offend the ruling classes. The performances utilize satire, slapstick and poke fun at the pretensions of authority figures such as priests, minor lords, and village leaders. The dialog can sometimes be simple, direct, and cruel, reflecting the harsh reality of everyday life for the common people in 15<sup>th</sup> Century Japan. The underdog is often set at center stage during a sketch. Such human weaknesses as greed, lust, and cowardice are given the full comedic treatment and shown in all their vain attributes. Along with the verbal repartee, physical action such as running or falling and dancing are used to elicit laughter from the audience. *Kyogen* plays portrayed the habits, customs, and lives of the peasants of the Muromachi Period. During this period, a style of singing, "kouta", and resembling a kind of ballad, was very popular among the common people, and so many of these songs were incorporated into the plays.

A *Kyogen* performance is highly stylized with every bit of action predetermined. All movement, walking, staging, and every bit of action is defined. The differences could be found in how each "family" would define the actions of their particular version of a common play.

*Kyogen* is performed in the everyday language of the Muromachi Period and does not require musical accompaniment as the play itself contains no mystery. Because the language was vernacular and common, it is still easy for today's audiences to understand what is being said. Until the 17<sup>th</sup> Century, *Kyogen* utilized much improvisation in its performance because none of the plays were written down. The plays themselves were handed down as an oral tradition from father to son in their "families". There were no manuscripts so it is almost impossible to know who wrote what during this early period.

During the Edo Period starting in the 17<sup>th</sup> Century, scribes were employed to write down the dialog of the extent plays at the time. However, this action had a rather negative impact as it tended to cut down on the amount of improvisation within the play. The plays became more static and more limited in their presentation. At the present time, approximately 300 *Kyogen* plays are known, and of these about 200 are still being performed today.

In general, a typical *Kyogen* play uses only up to 3 characters, therefore it is easy to follow the action and comprehend the repartee between the actors. All parts in a play were performed by men. There were never any female performers in a *Kyogen* play. Famous actors' children sometimes performed as animals, but they were always male.

Unlike the *No*, the main characters in a *Kyogen* play wear no mask. The facial expressions of the actors are a primary source of eliciting laughter from the audience. In addition, rather than using a mask as an idealization of a character, *Kyogen* relies on typical characterizations and simple, uniform costumes to identify the human characters. However, actors, in particular child actors, wear masks when they are representing animals or spiritual characters. The combination of its faster than life pace, its everyday common language, and its avoidance of vulgarity insured that audiences would laugh and find the play highly entertaining.

The fact that *Kyogen* contains no hint of vulgarity was determined and instilled by the greatest *No* writer of all Zeami, who also turned his attention to *Kyogen* and declared that it should,

Kindle the mind to laughter, but that, neither in speech nor in  
Gesture should there be anything low. The jokes and repartee  
... however funny they may be, should not introduce the vulgar.

(Richie, pg. 12)

The elements that would eventually form to become *Commedia Dell'Arte* were originally intended to attract crowds of people to a portable stage, get them to come closer by acting out in a ludicrous manner, and then having assistants engage in skits to keep

their attention for the purpose of selling a product. The goal was to get money from as many people for a product the leader was selling, and perhaps by entertaining them in the process, they would be more easily and freely conned of their money for whatever was being sold.

At some later point, these charlatans or mountebanks, as they were variously called, realized that there was more to be gained by solely concentrating on the entertainment, and it was at this point that the troupes for performing comic skits and plays in the *Commedia Dell'Arte* manner was born. In fact, the formation of these troupes and the establishment of a strict hierarchy in an actor's status and characterization led to the professional development of actors which was a first for Europe at the beginning of the 17<sup>th</sup> Century.

It has been said that the development of *Commedia Dell'Arte* was in part due to a reaction against the staidness and cold acting of the amateur actors in the courts and palaces of high society as exemplified in *Commedia Erudita*. However, it is more likely that the antics and tone of *Commedia Dell'Arte* were honed by the barkers to keep and hold a large crowd of unruly people in town streets or squares during Carnival festivities. His voice would have had to be loud and out of the ordinary to turn people's attention towards his portable stage. Then he would have to put on some kind of skit that would be silly and humorous because all people like to laugh to forget the troubles of their daily lives. His assistants would need to keep up various antics and skits in the background while he went about his spiel of selling his product. People would lose their concentration quickly if there were no other distractions other than trying to sell something. Eventually, it dawned on these groups of itinerant sellers that acting out skits and performing ludicrous stunts was more profitable and entertaining than trying to sell something that may very well have been a sham anyway.

These sales groups, soon to become acting troupes, would travel around the regions and principalities of Italy according to a Carnival festival schedule. They would arrive in a town where a festival was taking place, set up their portable stage and then sell and/or perform their skits and songs and pantomimes.

The portable stage, or "banco," was the most important item in giving their performances. It was a trestle stage and needed to be carried about in a wagon and then set up at a venue. The height of the stage was about head high so as to be prominently noticeable and to perhaps keep hecklers from disturbing the events taking place on the stage. Stairs were positioned on either side of the stage, and the assistants would ascend the stage to give their performances or descend into the crowd to hand out their sales items or perhaps remain on the steps and throw their goods to the customers as the bagman brought the money up to the stage. Sets were kept to a bare minimum to allow ease of traveling throughout the countryside. There was only one scene painted on a curtain behind the stage, usually of a street with a house at both ends. But many props were incorporated and used in their performances, including animals, food, furniture, watering devices, weapons, and medical devices. These would be used in a highly exaggerated

manner that would cause a riot of laughter among the crowd surrounding the stage.

In late 16<sup>th</sup> Century Italy, people were accustomed to standing for long periods of time so they would not have been inconvenienced by a long comic interlude taking place on the stage.

As the need for longer and longer skits and pantomimes developed, the leaders of the various troupes realized that they needed to standardize much of their repertoire, so they looked to the traditional material of ancient Roman comedy. They selected various standardized characters and incorporated them into their total performance. Roman comedy used masks and masked comedy was known in 16<sup>th</sup> Century Italy, so these troupes decided that masked characters would be an important element of their staging and performing. Some of the earliest characters designated as stock roles included Pulchinella, Pantalone, Il Dottore, and Il Capitano.

Improvisation was one of the keys to performing *Commedia Dell'Arte*. No plays with written lines, stage movements, scenery layouts, or other such immutable ideas were written down. Instead, a general scenario would be set, and the actors would then improvise their lines and actions around the limits of their chosen scenario. Situations would be clarified and how the action would unfold would be predetermined, and finally how each scene would end would also be decided beforehand. They would orate, mime, give soliloquies, sayings, oaths, brief responses, poems, tirades, and so on as well as carrying out outrageous actions, pranks, deceptions, and other kinds of ludicrous, and oftentimes, vulgar and lewd performances. Oftentimes the actors played musical instruments and incorporated them into the action and scenes. In *Commedia Dell'Arte*, the laugh is the most important result, and how you obtain this laugh has no boundaries. Anything and everything was allowed in the performance that would provoke laughter from the crowd and later audiences.

The members of the troupe, usually with no more than a dozen members, would all have their assigned character roles and would go about developing them to their fullest extent. They were professionals, and as their skills improved, they were assigned more prominent roles.

In addition to their improvising within a scene, there were occasions when an actor would suddenly go completely off-script and do something totally unexpected such as breaking out into song or doing some hilarious action or stating some totally absurd comment that would take the crowd as well as the actors completely by surprise. Of course, the troupe would have to continue performing and seamlessly incorporate this new development into the performance. These stunts were called "lazzi" and there were literally hundreds of different kinds of set actions that could occur. The reasons why these "lazzi" would take place was quite varied, but often not quite as spontaneous as it first appeared.

Perhaps the crowd was beginning to lose interest and something needed to be done to reconnect with them. In other cases, perhaps the audience is anticipating a certain "lazzi" or a certain actor to perform one. Also, in some cases, "lazzi" were incorporated into the

play from the very beginning. Whatever the reason, these actions were highly anticipated and appreciated by the audience and helped to enhance the professionalism of many troupes. Interestingly enough, the many kinds of "lazzi" that happened on stage on a regular basis were never recorded, possibly because each actor wanted to protect his particular "lazzi" talent and keep it within his own troupe.

During its early performances, only males were allowed to act in the troupe. But later, females were allowed and this helped to heighten the passion, tension, and relationship of The Lovers who were a standard set of characters.

During the 16<sup>th</sup> Century, there was no one country of Italy, rather the region was made of many duchies, principalities, and small states, each with its own customs and oftentimes own language. The troupes would travel throughout many of these small independent regions, but their characters did not change language to suit their audience. If the character was drawn from the South, it would speak in a southern dialect, and if it was from the North, in a northern dialect, or from the Tuscany region, the language of that area. This being the case, in *Commedia Dell'Arte*, action is often more prominent or more anticipated than any type of dialog. Rather than rely totally on witty repartee, which of course did take place, the emphasis was on the action, the pantomiming, dancing, music, ludicrous skits, and outrageous stunts that took place on the stage.

Troupes jealously guarded their membership, almost becoming nepotistic. It was extremely difficult for outsiders to be invited to join a troupe.

A great performance of *Commedia Dell'Arte* required incredible timing between the actors and the audience, an incredible control of acting, usually while wearing a mask, meaning the actor had to have exquisite control of body movements and control. He or she needed to be comic, with all that it entails, and had to be quick to take advantage of mis-cues or sudden opportunities presented to him and act on them. He had to be strong physically and mentally to be able to maintain a frenetic pace and withstand the punishment of the more outrageous stunts that would occur. He had to be multitalented, i.e., an orator, an acrobat, a gymnast, a dancer, a musician, and a stuntman. That is, he had to be a professional.

### Characters—Roles

All of the characters in a typical *Kyogen* skit are stereotypes of people living in the Muromachi Period from 1333-1568. Mostly drawn from common people, low level ruling classes, priests, and family relationships, the characters proceed through various trials and tribulations, but the ending is usually a happy one and the contentious issues may not be fully resolved but at least the main issue at hand has some kind of resolution. There is usually a climatic scene involving running, loud voices and various sounds that finally end in laughter and mirth.

In general, the plays are classified according to the type of story and the main



character. The comic interlude is created by the interaction of the characters' personalities and social positions. Kunio Komparu (pgs. 99-104) has categorized the *Kyogen* repertoire, and the following classification is a copy of his system. According to him, the *Kyogen* plays can be divided into five categories :

**Daimyo Kyogen** The hero is an arrogant or foolish feudal lord and the humor derives from his stupidity as he flaunts his ignorance and throws his authority around. The resistance of the common people to the inequity between position and ability is developed in these plays with sarcasm and irony. It is humor by ridicule.

**Taro Kaja Kyogen** Taro Kaja is the prototypical *Kyogen* hero, the servant of a feudal lord or similar character; he is of quite the same nature as Harlequin in the *Commedia Dell'Arte*. Taro is a common man's name for a first son, and Kaja (crowned person) means that Taro has undergone a coming-of-age ceremony, in which the master presents him with a kind of crown, gives him a name, and pronounces him an adult. This binds master and servant in a relationship nearly as intimate as that of parent and child. The first servant, often in league with second and sometimes third servants (called Jiro Kaja and Saburo Kaja), criticizes the master freely, tricks him out of sake, sugar, or chestnuts, and contrives to escape from hard work. In turn, he is scolded, threatened, and chased off the stage by an angry master at the end of the play.

**Kyogen about Bridegrooms or Women** These plays derive humor from the social blunders of the awkward new son-in-law or the cowardly conniving of a weak man with a fierce wife.

**Demon and Yamabushi Kyogen** Frightening demons and powerful mountain priests turn out to be vulnerable, silly, and impotent, and from this surprise the humor derives.

**Kyogen about Priests or Blind Men** In plays about priests, seemingly innocent members of the clergy engage in a raucous sutra-chanting contest, or show great zeal and creativity in trying to collect donations for the temple. (Konparu, pgs. 99-104)

In addition, Konparu has a miscellaneous category with plays that are concerned with bullies, or with temptation in the animal world or lonely men in the court of the emperor of China. Other plays have been adapted from *No* plays.

In *Commedia Dell'Arte*, stock characters are the main element rather than the construction of the play itself. Here, too, most characters are derived from the common folk, lesser important professionals and ruling classes, as well as star-crossed lovers. All of the

stock characters have the same characteristics in all performing troupes. How the individual actor of that role chooses to present that particular character is where distinctions can be drawn. The following list of stock characters and their descriptions and roles are reproduced, in a condensed format, from John Rudlin (pgs, 62-159). As will be seen, these characters are numerous and varied. He has selected to create his list in the expected order of appearance in a *Commedia Dell'Arte* performance.

## Zanni

Zanni is both singular and plural, the Venetian diminutive of Giovanni. It can be either a generic name, referring to all Zanni or the name of an actual Mask when the character is not defined further as being Arlecchino, Brighella, Pedrolino, etc. In Italian, it is simply the name given to any unnamed character, a person whose actual identity you cannot be bothered to discover.

He is at the bottom of the pecking order. Zanni is that regrettably eternal unfortunate, the dispossessed immigrant worker.

His pre-Christian, animistic view of the world means he senses a spirit in everything: therefore it could be eaten.... Zanni is ignorant and loutish, and has no self-awareness. The very act of thinking is alien to him – the very sight of Zanni straining to give birth to an idea is risible. But he is astute in knavery; a loafer, but willing and able to dish out heavy thwacks with his slapstick; intolerant of discipline and authority, but very faithful.

He lives totally in the present: he never, for example, looks for somewhere to sleep, sleep just happens to him, often in totally unsuitable situations. All his reactions are emotional.

(Zanni) is the principal contributor to any confusion.

**Arlecchino**     Servant, usually to Pantalone, but also frequently Il Capitano or Il Dottore. Second zanni if Brighella or Pasuariello is in the company, otherwise the first.

Never pathetic, always knows: he is never a loser. Never just does something. For example, if, in the heat of the moment, his slapstick gets left on the ground, he somersaults to pick it up again. His paradox is that of having a dull mind in an agile body. Since, however, his body does not recognize the inadequacy of the mind which drives it, he is never short of a solution: the fact that he cannot read, for example, does not hinder him from divulging the contents of a letter.... But even then he could only entertain one idea at a time, and never contemplated the consequences of an action or learned from the experience of it. He responds to everything – hunger, love, danger – in a way that is taken to apocalyptic proportions and then forgotten entirely – until the next time. A very Latin temperament... but never malicious. He is very likely to become disguised later in the action, for example as a priest in order to conduct a mock wedding, a Turk, a pilgrim, a rich benefactor, or cross-dressed in order to fulfill a rendezvous.

(Arlecchino) is distinguished from Zanni by having enough intelligence to hatch

schemes, although they rarely work out as planned. But he is basically reactive rather than proactive. Complications of plot often derive from his mistakes or his refusal to admit shortcomings, illiteracy for example. He is possibly the world's worst messenger because something is bound to happen along the way which will be of more interest than delivering the message.

**Brighella** Whenever he appears he is always first zanni – he's the boss. In the social scale only a little boss, the keeper of an inn or the proprietor of a shop, but in the *Commedia* world, the very fact that he has managed to better himself to that extent gives him high status.... More than a servant, he is thus a jack-of-all-trades who can be a recruiting sergeant, a hangman, a fortune-teller or anything that's required of him. He is never a victim and always maintains his status.

Astute, ready (for anything), humorous, quick-witted : he is capable of intrigue, deceit, making a mockery of the entire world with his mordant, salacious wit. He likes a good time but is also criminal. Despite his devilish origin, he is amoral rather than evil. He appears relaxed and calm with lateral movements behind the action until his schemes hot up when he reverts to the urgency of Zanni. He is an observer, an amateur psychologist, a sometimes professional spy. Ingenious, making the most of every occasion. Cynical, a past master of cunning and deceit. Unscrupulous, always ready for a trick. Pitiless, never repenting of his crimes. Crafty, bold, a habitual liar who looks out only for himself.

He thrives on quarrels, intrigues, secrets. Strong and lithe like a panther. Has flair and savoir-faire. Is always explicit about his own character.

Like Zanni he is always hungry and thirsty, but much more likely than his fellow servant to get food and drink through trickery or theft. Will go to enormous lengths just for one tidbit.

As with food, will do anything to make money. However, the moment he has some he stops work and spends it in self-indulgence until it is all gone.

Attitude to women very similar to food, drink, and money. Very persuasive and has a rakish attraction, especially as he sings, dances and plays the mandolin.

His job is to guide the action of the comedy, to stir it up with intrigues and to give it movement.

## The Old Men

**Pantalone** (He is the) top of the pecking order. Pantalone is money : he controls all the finance available within the world of *Commedia Dell'Arte* and therefore his orders have, ultimately, to be obeyed. He is the employer, giving orders to his servants, and the father, dictating to his children, controlling the social structure which obtains before the events of the scenario take place.... Inherent in this attempt to hold on to an old order is Pantalone's influence as a stabilizing figure, limiting the world view of *Commedia*,

and thus enabling it to endure while bursting at the seams as the young (the Lovers) and the dispossessed (the zanni) eternally attempt a take-over.

(He has) two only (characteristics) : avarice and trouble with his prostate gland Pantalone operates on the assumption that everything can be bought and sold, and this turns out to be true, with the exception of loyalty (and love). But he also loves money for its own sake and will therefore only part with it when there is no option.... When things do not go his way he quickly slips into emotional extremes, particularly enraged petty tyranny. He has a long memory and never forgets or forgives the slightest past transgression. Pantalone is action, not words—in contrast with Il Dottore.

(He is) an impediment to the action.

**Il Dottore** (He is a) bachelor or widower. When he does marry he is immediately cuckolded. Often father to one of the Lovers.

(He is) from Bologna, the home city of Italy's oldest university, not that he ever went to it. Specialises in everything, and can talk a lot of baloney about it. Very oral, both in and out : he eats a lot (Bologna is the home of Lasagne). He is essentially belly, not intellect-centered. Il Dottore is inclined, like Pantalone, to be stingy, but in his case it is because he doesn't have any money. He is never put off his stroke by parody, interruption, or even physical abuse. Makes crude sexual jokes and has a weakness for pornography.

(He) gives the other characters a break from physical exertion by his prolixity – sometimes to the point where he has to be carried off by them, still talking. For this reason, he stays a relatively long time onstage. A survivor, not a target figure like Pantalone.

**The Lovers** In Italian, the Lovers (of whom four – two would-be pairs – are usually needed for a full scenario) are called innamorati. The males have such names as Silvio, Fabrizio, Aurelio, Orazio, Ottavio, Ortensio, Lelio, Leandro, Cinzio, Florindo, Lindoro, etc. ; the females : Isabella, Angelica, Eularia, Vittoria, Silvia, Lavinia, Ortensia, Aurelia, etc.

(They are) high (society) brought low by the hopelessness of their infatuation.

(Their characteristics are) three, like primary colors : fidelity, jealousy and fickleness. They are vain, petulant, spoilt, full of doubt and have very little patience. They have a masochistic enjoyment of enforced separation because it enables them to dramatise their situation, lament, bemoan, send messages, etc. When the Lovers do meet they are almost always tongue-tied and need interpreters (i.e. a zanni and/ or a servetta) who proceed to misinterpret their statements, either through stupidity (Zanni), malicious desire for revenge (Brighella) or calculated self-interest (Colombina). Their attention span is short like young children's. The fear that they might be nobodies keeps them hyper-animated. Their element is water : they are very wet creatures indeed. The females are more passion-wrought and energetic than their male counterparts.

The Lovers exist very much in their own world – and in their own world within that

world. Self-obsessed and very selfish, they are more interested in what they are saying themselves and how it sounds than in what the beloved is saying. They are primarily in love with themselves, secondarily in love with love, and only consequently in love with the beloved. What they learn, if anything, from the tribulations of the scenario is the need to reverse these priorities.

They do, however, come off better than most other *Commedia* characters: there is no viciousness in them, and less to be reproached for – except vanity and vapidness, which, given their parents, they can hardly be blamed for. They represent the human potential for happiness.

(They are) indispensable. Without them and their inability to resolve their own problems, there would be no function for the zanni, no struggle between the ineffectuality of youth and the implacability of age. The Lovers are never alone on stage – they always have someone with them or spying on them.

**Isabella** (A) prima donna innamorata, but less dilettante, more perspicacious.

(She is) flirtatious, provocative and stubborn in turn, so headstrong she usually gets her own way, even over her father. Men continually fall in love with her and she continually teases and tests their veracity. Can be something of a prude.

(She is) less at the mercy of events than the innamorati: initiates solutions on her own account.

## II Capitano

(This character has) various names :

**Giangurgulo** Spanish/Calabrese. (Has a) long phallic prick of a nose, long pointed felt hat, rapier rather than sword, scarlet doublet and hose with yellow sleeves. Name means Jack Glutton or John Gargler. Obsessed with women, but also terrified of them. All usual Capitano traits, but is also impoverished and famished (hence his Name). Often resorts to theft in order to eat. Vain, stupid, and sneering.

**Cocodrillo** A crocodile who never bites, he is all fanfarone and easily deflated.

**Fanfarone** Calabrese. An imposter, pretending to be Spanish when he is in fact a trumped-up Zanni.

**Matamoros** The original Spanish mercenary – name means killer of Moors – created by Francesco Andreini. Powerfully built, very lavishly dressed, clothes of his servants supposedly made from the turbans of his victims.

**Spavento** Has the shortest nose and therefore the most to prove (spaurire

=to terrify).

**Meo Squasquara** A "little shit", a parvenu who wants to be a Capitano.

A loner. Il Capitano is never indigenous to the town where the scenario is set and is able to pretend to high status as a result. His downfall to the level of his actual social standing is an essential part of the denouement.

(He) exists to be "de-masked" by the plot. Always a complete transformation from pride to humility, confidence to panic.

**Il Cavaliere** There is an unmasked Capitano, Il Cavaliere, who is not an imposter, but a real soldier. He is usually after revenge and/or Isabella. Laughs and sneers and is above everyone, including the audience. Constantly unfaithful and flatters any woman who happens to be present.

**Colombina** (She is the) personal maid to the prima donna innamorata.

The only lucid, rational person in *Commedia Dell'Arte* ; analogous to Maria in Twelfth Night. Autonomous and self-sufficient, she has no negative attributes ; she has enough to eat, decent clothes and no ambition to be rich. She can read and write : in fact she is very fond of books and owns several. She sings, dances, captivates, but has gone beyond her entremetteuse origins to become a self-educated woman.... The main difference between serviette and zanni is that whereas Arlecchino thinks on his feet, Colombina uses her brain and thinks things through. Like Il Capitano she is a lone figure, capable of appearing solus. Often, in fact, the prologue is entrusted to her. Although capricious and coquettish she is good at her job, careful with her money, and will, with great reluctance make an excellent housekeeper one day.... Although she seems sexually very knowing she is sometimes a virgin, when it suits her.

(She is) the still centre of the turning wheel, in on everything that is going on, she exerts a benevolent influence on the outcome.

**Pedrolino** Most Commedia troupes were family-based. Pedrolino, being the role given to the youngest son, is therefore the bottom of the pecking order, the one who has to sleep in the straw with the animals.... He is often the butt of jokes, especially concerning his cowardice, but he never loses his dignity.

Stoicism in the face of misery, survived his oppression by pretending to be simple. Gives vent to his feelings only when alone. Totally honest. Always tired due to his poor accommodation : frequently falls asleep, especially when ordered to watch over something. Conscientious and full of remorse at the slightest harm to another.

Initially (he was the) warmer-up for the barker for the show, later grew... to be the linchpin. He takes a child-like delight in practical jokes and pranks, but otherwise his intrigues are on behalf of his master – he is too honest and self-effacing to do otherwise.

At times, however, the best he can scheme for is to escape the punishment others have in store for him.

**Pulcinella** Can either be employer or employee : no respecter of persons either way, e.g. magistrate, baker, schoolmaster, spy, even poet.

He can be played as either stupid pretending to be clever, or clever pretending to be stupid. Either way he is a complete egoist. His good-humoured exterior conceals a ferocious interior and he cares no more for human life than that of a flea. He delights in quarrels, makes a point of seeking them, and takes great pleasure in bloodshed. He is not, however, a boaster, and does not speak of his dastardly deeds. His chief predilections are women, drink and food (he is very fond indeed of macaroni – the Neapolitan pasta – and gnocchi). A chameleon, despite the distinctiveness of his appearance, he can be any type by turns : faithful, revengeful, sly, gullible, nervy, audacious, jealous, cowardly, bullying, sentimental... yet behind all these there is an essential quality which we recognize as Pulcinella, just as we are aware of his nose and accent (whatever his disguise). He has a fatalistic philosophy – nothing gets to him. He sees all nature in his own image : brutal, ugly and destructive. Since he has no capacity to receive human kindness, he has no concept of how to extend it to others.

Pulcinella has a secret : he cannot help telling everyone everything.

A loner, if he does not fit into a northern scenario structure he becomes second Zanni.

**Scapino** (He is) first Zanni.

Scapino is bereft of all sense of logic ; he makes confusion of everything he undertakes, and forgets everything except to hold his hand out for a gratuity. He is a liar by instinct, but his lies, like himself, are of slight importance.

(He) schemes against old men for the sake of money, revenge or both.

**Scaramuccia** (He is a) servant to an impoverished gentleman, often employed as a go-between.

He boasts not so much of his physical prowess as that he is a marquis or prince of several countries which exist, however, only in his own imagination. He loves women but they will not have anything to do with him, so he brags of imaginary conquests and pretends to have rebuffed those who have jilted him. A sly thief.

(He is) a stirrer (of the action).

**Tartaglia** (He is) a utility figure. Frequently a lawyer, but he can be a retainer or minor official, apothecary, coachman, policeman.

(He is) a stammerer. Liable to get stuck on the most obscene syllable in any given phrase. The comedy does not lie only in the stutter but in the nature of the words he tries as alternatives in order to get past the block.... Tartaglia flies into perpetual rages

with himself and others when thus failing to communicate. As always in *Commedia*, there is a social reality behind a comical shortcoming : he represents the southerner worn out by the climate, suffering from chronic ophthalmia, and in a condition bordering on cretinism.

Rarely has more than one scene in a scenario, thus giving extra emphasis to, say, a trial. Often has no function other than as additional comic opportunity.

(Rudlin, pgs. 62-159)

Also, according to Rudlin, there are other minor masked characters with the following names : Amarilli, Bertolino, Brandino, Brigante, Burattino, Cassandro, Cola, Coviello, Fedelindo, Fichetto, Fiorinetta, Gabba, Gianduja, La Ruffiana, Lattanzio, Menenchino, Pasquariello, Pepe-Nappa, Roberto, Rosaura, Rosetta, Stenterello, Trappola, Tristitia, Trivelino, Ubaldo, and Zanobio.

Of course, not all of the characters performed at the same time since a normal *Commedia* troupe only consisted of approximately a dozen performers. However, the numbers of characters that could be on stage at any one time could be enough to create quite a complex scene, and the audience would be forced to concentrate on the performance and repartee taking place so as not to miss any of the action. Also, with so many people coming and going, again, the audience would need to concentrate to be able to follow along with who was who and what he/she was about. In time, regional audiences would adopt favorite plays and the itinerant troupes that stopped to play at these venues would be well aware of the audience's favorite characters or scenarios and would pander to the audience's taste. This could have caused intense anticipation on the part of the audience, and if the performance was on a grand scale, it would have enhanced audience enjoyment and would have increased the popularity of certain troupes.

### Performers—Actors

Early entertainment in Japan, before the development of *Kyogen*, included acts that performed as storytellers, imaginatively and creatively reciting tales of the ancient past or of super-human feats of the gods. Other troupes were centered on physical activities such as jugglers, acrobats, tightrope walkers, actors and singers, and sword swallowers. Another kind of performance retold folktales with the accompaniment of musical instruments. Early *Kyogen* actors were drawn from these various kinds of performers and so early *Kyogen* would have been infused with all of these elements. As it evolved, the focus of the performance turned to the comedic and actors would need to be proficient at speaking, exaggerated movement, and good comedic timing. When *Kyogen* was adopted as part of the *No* repertory, music was dropped so as not to impinge upon the mood being set by the *No* musicians. He had to be athletic, physical, erudite, eloquent, expressive, and funny.



There was never any room for female entertainers in *Kyogen*, and to this day, no females perform in any of the existing plays.

As *Kyogen* evolved, the performers began to jealously guard their styles and presentations and developed families or "za" as a way of protecting their unique and professional acting techniques. Early in this development, there were three professional *Kyogen* "za," but today there are only two still in existence. What is truly amazing, however, is the fact that these two families have existed for hundreds of years and *Kyogen* is still a popular form of entertainment in modern Japan.

A family consisted of several generations of males. The oldest would be the main actors, or "shite," with the next generation performing the secondary roles, and the youngest children would perform the animal roles. Training usually started from the age of 3 with the child being trained one-on-one with the "iemoto" or leader of the family. The young performer would learn traditional dances and songs as well as learning how to act and perform according to that particular families' technique and presentation style. The youngster would start to learn his acting skills by spending many hours mimicking everything his teacher did during the course of the day. It would be tiring, difficult, and frustrating, but as a future performer for his family, he would have to learn to persevere and be tough when the going got tough. When his teacher felt he was ready, the young man would begin performing on stage, usually in the masked animal roles. Even at this young age, he would be required to speak some lines, dance and perform acrobatic movements all over the *No* stage. It was sure to have been daunting and extremely high-pressured.

Then, once he reached his teens and his teacher was satisfied with his development, he would begin to appear on stage in minor unmasked roles. Then, he would continue his training and performing until such time as to gain master performer status, and he would then begin to perform in the major "shite" roles.

These families would form smaller troupes that would travel throughout a region, performing at festivals or other important events. In general, these small troupes would have up to six performers, ranging from the very young to the senior members. Most plays called for 2 to 4 actors.

Donald Richie observes :

He is a real professional, the *Kyogen* actor. He delivers fast, is  
Always on his feet, a real stand-up comic. When he has something  
To say, he gets it out at a great clip, none of the drawl of the *Noh*  
For him. He bubbles over, aspirates hissing, a cool fifteenth-century  
"in" talk. He is very funny.

(Richie, pg. 11)

The goal of a great *Kyogen* actor is to perform in such a way that the audience knows that he is performing something that he himself is not. He should be detached

from his character, but at the same time, he should fully express that character's personality and traits in such a manner that the audience is filled with mirth. Movement is exaggerated and very stylistic. He is an impersonator rather than a person who is trying to get under the skin of the character he is portraying. This is very difficult, and the audiences of 15<sup>th</sup> Century Japan were highly appreciative of actors who had developed their performance skills to a high level. He is intent on presenting his flawed or tainted humanness in a comedic manner.

Before the 17<sup>th</sup> Century, *Kyogen* plays were transmitted from father to son in an oral tradition which allowed for a great deal of improvisation and personalization of characters.

Dances and songs had a unique family presentation, but within these boundaries, the actor was free to extemporize and instill his unique talent in his performance skills. Then, during the Edo Period, starting from the mid-1600s, scribes wrote down most of the plays that were being performed. This had the unintended consequence of freezing each play in the manner it was being performed at the time of being written down. This led to a drastic reduction in the amount of improvisation an actor would be able to incorporate in his performance. Eventually, all movement, dances, staging, and dialog became fixed, and the actor's duty was to totally mimic the performance as written for a particular family. Some families performed the same plays, but their manner of presentation was different.

A *Kyogen* actor need to be disciplined, outgoing, and focused on his character's performance when he was acting that particular role.

There are perhaps two main reasons why *Commedia Dell'Arte* developed in the manner it did. In the first, most common people were not always able to see a performance of *Commedia Erudita* because it was usually performed indoors in the houses of high society, or if they did see or hear of a performance, they were probably turned off by its plodding action and amateurish acting. They yearned for something more dynamic, active, and funny to help them overcome the heavy burden of living in Italy in the mid-16<sup>th</sup> Century. In the second, the barkers or mountebanks who traveled the countryside trying to sell their concoctions would have become aware of this desire, and perhaps they reckoned that if they incorporate some kind of acrobatic, comedic action into their sales pitches, they would be able to attract bigger crowds, hold their attention for a longer period of time, and ultimately sell more goods. Perhaps for these reasons, the traveling barkers began to include performance routines into their sales routines and began to seek out festival and Carnival events as a way to enhance their ability to sell their product.

The charlatan or mountebank would have needed a deep, booming voice to be overheard from the noisy crowd. He would also need to be acrobatic and physically talented to perform various tricks and pranks to attract peoples' attention. His assistants would also need to be acrobatic and talented dancers or musicians that could also help to attract and keep a crowd from dispersing too soon. At some point, the leader and his assistants would have become aware that their performances were becoming more and more popu-

lar and perhaps it was time to drop the pretense of trying to sell something and concentrate on giving a rousing theatrical performance in which a crowd of people would be willing to pay money for. Thus could the *Commedia Dell'Arte* have been born.

The next step would be to create scenarios and stock characters that the troupe could use in a standard repertoire that would help to professionalize their performances. For material, they looked to ancient Roman masked comedy for some of their stock characters, and to *Commedia Erudita* for those roles close to the life of the common people, as well as developing their own roles that became standardized and mirrored life and the types of people so prevalent in 16<sup>th</sup> Century Italy. The actors needed to study their character's role and the larger society in order to insure that they would in fact be able to elicit laughter from their audience. The characters needed to be larger than life but also a mirror of the society around them. This discipline, training and deep study made the actors into very professional performers.

In time, these itinerant troupes would develop their own styles, techniques, pranks and pratfalls and would feel the need to closely guard their acting and performance styles, so they developed professional "families" that jealously guarded their dramatic style.

New actors were developed from within the troupe from generation to generation.

Since masks became an integral part of a character's identity, the actor had to learn how to present his character's personality and quirks through body language, dialog and peculiar actions or traits unique to that role. Other than the Lovers, all of the stock characters wore masks, so each character had to have a unique personality and character traits that the actor would adopt when he assumed that particular role. Many actors spent decades perfecting their character roles and became famous throughout Europe.

Commedia actors needed to be athletic, acrobatic, verbose, emotive, coordinated, musically inclined, and above all have a sense of comic timing. Convulsing the audience with laughter was the Commedia actor's ultimate performance goal, and early on, the manner of how this laughter would be elicited was not determined. There were no limits to what could be done to cause mirth within the audience. Therefore, Commedia actors needed to be acrobats, gymnasts, tumblers, dancers, singers, fighters, musicians, audacious, outgoing, and able to give and take tremendous punishment from the many pranks and pratfalls that would occur during the play. It required incredible discipline, training, and stamina.

The actor's training would begin at an early age, in a similar manner to *Kyogen*, and a child actor would be trained by one of the leading actors. He would most probably start his professional stage performance as the character Pedrolino. As he aged and became more proficient in his acting skills, he would progress to more complex, important, higher in the pecking order characters. Ultimately, if he was talented, he could reach the pinnacle of character roles and perhaps become famous throughout a region or even all of Europe.

In the beginning, all female roles were performed by males. But, perhaps due to pres-

sure from their public for more rowdiness, lewdness, and even nudity, females joined the troupes and took over the female roles. These women also needed to be professional, disciplined and as tough and willing to give and take punishment as their male counterparts.

Female actors probably helped to enhance the popularity of *Commedia Dell'Arte* even more than before.

In the mid-16<sup>th</sup> Century, mechanical devices were introduced into the repertoire, and soon greatly enhanced phantasmagorical action was taking place. People magically appeared or disappeared, props began to fly through the air, people suddenly dropped down out of the sky, trees suddenly would fall over, inanimate objects would begin to move, animals would go through incredibly morphing scenes, and so on.

Plays, as such, with their acts, scenes, exits, stage directions, and so on, never existed in *Commedia Dell'Arte*. Instead, a bare scenario, consisting of a few sentences, would be put down, then who would take what character would be decided, after which the direction of the scenario would also be decided as well as the outcome. With only a shell of a play, the actors would be required to call upon their considerable improvisational skills to flesh out the ensuing performance. Certainly, as the years passed and an actor continued to perfect a certain role, the improvisation would give way to a professional, skillful performance. At times when the action seemed to be slowing, or the audience was expecting something unique to happen, or the troupe had decided to include it in the play, seemingly spontaneous pranks and pratfalls would occur when the audience and, often-times, when the other actors were not expecting it as well. These comic routines were called "lazzi" and required an actor to have an impeccable sense of timing to pull it off with aplomb. In addition, the other actors had to be professional and disciplined enough not to allow this comic routine to negatively affect the flow of the performance. They had to act as if it was a normal part of the action, not drop a beat, and continue on with the flow of the play as if nothing untoward had just occurred. Audiences loved them.

It has been said that *Commedia Dell'Arte* introduced the first professional actors to Europe, and with the extreme skills and physical attributes that the *Commedia* required, it is safe to say that *Commedia Dell'Arte* is a form of professional theater.

### Costumes—Props

In *Kyogen* costumes are used to identify the character. Therefore, the same costumes are always worn by the same characters. The material used is similar to the materials that the common people or minor lords would use for their clothing i.e. hemp or linen. The cloth is dyed in bold patterns which can also be used to distinguish the social standing of the characters. These patterns usually consist of checks, squares and diamonds. Usually, the bigger the pattern the nobler the character. The costumes are always clean, starched and pressed, but of a lightweight material that allows freedom of movement as the characters dash about the stage or dance or take exaggerated pratfalls. For the most

part, browns, grays, and light blue colors characterize the appearance of the characters which were the typical colors worn by the common folk and minor nobility in the Muromachi Period. The costume itself always consists of a kimono, usually with some kind of undergarment, a traveling coat, a Japanese belt worn around the hips, and socks that have the big toe separate from the other toes.

Minor characters, such as animals wear furry costumes and there are special costumes for such unique characters as vegetables or fish. Gods that may appear in the play also have special, unique clothing, while mountain priests wear their typical religious garb.

Wherever a *Kyogen* troupe would travel to, the characters and roles would be easily recognized, and the stability of the costumes and use of props would help enhance the performance as the crowd eagerly awaited their favorite performer and his characterization of a particular role.

Few props are used during a *Kyogen* play. The most important one is the fan which can be utilized for a myriad of purposes. The actor uses the fan as a drinking vessel, or saw, and at the same time as he mimes those actions, he vocalizes the sounds that occur when one chugs sake or saws wood. The character can also just announce what the fan is supposed to represent and then mime it in that appropriate manner. Other props that are used often can include a sake gourd to be used when traveling, a stuffed badger, a Japanese-style umbrella, or various farm implements. In addition, an extra large lacquered shallow sake cup may be used to illustrate the character drinking copious amounts of sake, and real ropes and a pole to tie one of the main characters during some plays.

As in *Kyogen*, stock characters in *Commedia Dell'Arte* wear stock costumes, and it is through their attire that the audience can identify who is who and what kind of personality he or she has. The costumes themselves mirrored the society of 16<sup>th</sup> Century Italy but were exaggerated by being baggier or being almost skin tight or being dyed with bold contrasting colors. Because the troupes would tour throughout a region, often with different languages being spoken and no adjustment in language being made by each character, the costume is the main identifying feature of each character. His or her personality is usually predetermined, as well, but each individual actor was free within the confines of his her role to adapt the character's personality to his or her own performance style. As examples, most Zanni are dressed in white, except for Arlecchino, who because of his disheveled attire has had his clothing patched numerous times until the character can be identified by his colorful patchwork clothes. Il Dottore always wore black. Even The Lovers, who did not always wear the exact same costumes, could be identified by their clothing because Italian society at that time dictated certain kinds of garments, colors, or patterns for the various social classes. In addition certain colors were associated with certain emotional states which the audience would be quick to recognize. The Com-

media troupes could always be assured that audiences, wherever they would travel to or in whatever language was spoken, would be able to follow the action and performance of the scenario since all of the characters would be easily recognizable by their conventional clothing and their familiar roles.

Contrary to *Kyogen*, Commedia troupes utilized a multitude of props. The kinds of props used during the course of action would only be limited by the troupes' imagination in how they could be used. These props included food, eating utensils, animals, weapons, medical devices, furniture, and later on, mechanical devices that would aid in enhancing the action through magical appearing tricks. Props were such an integral part of the unfolding of the action during the course of the performance that oftentimes the kinds of props to be used would determine how the scenario would evolve and in what direction the improvisation should follow. Since a typical Commedia troupe could consist of up to twelve performers, they could all assist in loading and unloading them from the wagon or wagons they used to move from town to town. In contrast, because the stage was of such a limited size and usually quite high above the audience, it was difficult and cumbersome to attempt to haul and put up various heavy scenes. All Commedia troupes normally only utilized one piece of scenery as a backdrop to the stage. The imaginative use of props helped to enhance the absurdity, foolishness, outrageousness, and vulgarity of certain actions that would make the audience laugh even harder and with more abandon.

## Masks

Masks have always been worn in *Kyogen*, but it appears that the use of the mask decreased among the principal characters as the need to present human emotions rose to a prominent position in the performance of the action. Where at least some of the main characters may have worn masks at the very early stages in the development of *Kyogen*, as the form evolved more and more importance was attached to the expression of a character's feelings and emotions. However, masks have not completely disappeared. There are approximately 20 varieties of mask and are worn by very old or ugly characters, or gods, demons, spirits, or animals. In one play, a monkey is one of the characters. This character is always performed by a child, one of the younger generation *Kyogen* "family" actors who is getting his first theatrical exposure. He wears a monkey costume with a monkey mask and prances about the stage at the end of his master's leash making monkey-like sounds. These minor characters are usually non-human, so it is not necessary to show their emotions since, we as humans, don't really understand the emotions of animals, gods, or spirits.

A *Kyogen* mask is carved of wood, usually Japanese cypress because it is strong, long-lasting and is of a light color. After carving, the mask is painted, first with a layer of Chinese white and then the characteristic facial pattern is painted using specially mixed paints in the ancient Nihon-ga manner of painting. In general, masks were carved not for

the individual actor, but rather, for the particular "family" that had its own representation of how that masked character should look. The actor would only be able to see from the two eye slits or holes, so it was necessary for him to stylize his movements and dancing so as to be aware of the limitations of the stage and not go beyond them and injure himself. One possible reason for choosing wood as the mask material could be due to the fact that the Japanese Archipelago is very hot and especially humid in the summer. If it was made of leather, for example, the actor's sweat would soon soak into the leather itself, and because of the humidity, the mask would not dry soon and mold could soon take hold and ruin the mask. The masks, especially the animal ones, usually carry expressions that soften their ferocity into a more human-like aspect that is part of the human expression that leads to laughter in the audience. In one example, a demon or "tengu" in Japanese is rendered in red paint with an incredibly long nose that has demon-like intimations of evil but also represents a sexual element of male arousal.

The mask in *Commedia Dell'Arte* is an essential aspect of the characters' roles. Stock characters are not to be mistaken with an actor's personality, rather they are personas of a type of human, and the mask, by virtue of its design, represents what that persona exudes from a physical aspect. The expression of that persona requires certain mannerisms and physical actions that identify that particular character. Audiences are able to quickly identify who it is and will then have the foreknowledge of how this persona will present itself during the unfolding of the action. It requires tremendous training and discipline to subsume oneself to that character's persona as represented by the expression carved on the mask. Each stock character has his own unique mask. As the characters evolved, they developed stock expressions and phrases, long speeches, physical actions and, so on, that were unique to each character.

Masks are carved of leather and cover half the face. Since leather is light and supple, it easily conforms to the contours of the actor's own facial characteristics. Each actor in a troupe would have his own carved mask for his representative role. In addition, as leather ages, it becomes more supple and broken in, becoming more comfortable to wear, almost becoming an extension of the actor's face.

Wearing masks is at the heart of the *Commedia Dell'Arte*, representing each characters persona. Actors have to perform day in and day out during the festival season, so it is vital that the mask be easy to wear and comfortable to put on day after day. Leather is the best material for this role, especially in hot Italy.

## Conclusion

There are many similarities between the development, evolution, and performance of *Kyogen* and *Commedia Dell'Arte*. Both originated approximately at the same time, *Kyogen* in the late 14<sup>th</sup> Century and *Commedia Dell'Arte* in the mid 16<sup>th</sup> Century. It's also possible



to say that there were similarities in the standard of living and surrounding environment with their various upheavals and pestilences and petty wars occurring in both regions. They both developed out of ancient forms of drama from other regions and civilizations i.e. China and Rome and Greece. Both comedic forms amalgamated and incorporated various elements of these earlier styles that evolved into a dramatic comic performance incorporating lots of acrobatic movements, gymnastics, dancing, pantomiming, and soliloquies.

The performers were itinerant travelers that moved around the countryside performing wherever festivals or Carnival was taking place. These traveling groups continued to improve their acting skills into a professional standard, and they decided to form "families" that would protect and ensure maintenance of their skills. They both primarily passed down their skills through their "families" i.e. from generation to generation. Training started at a very early stage, and the young budding actors would begin to appear on their respective stages at an early stage. The groups were kept small. In *Kyogen* the common troupe size ranged up to six performers while the *Commedia Dell'Arte* may have had up to a dozen performers traveling in one troupe.

Early performances were performed principally for the common people, and the types of dramas, characters, and roles were geared to expose all of their foibles, petty jealousies, and rivalries within that stratum of society. Both comedies had to be careful not to insult or in any way displease the ruling classes, so both shied away from including any kinds of high society or royalty within their character roles. They were both oftentimes subjected to harassment by local police authorities and did not become recognized as legitimate theater until later on. Then, at some point, the upper classes and royalty became aware of the popularity of the troupes, and they began to perform in front of the high and mighty as well as the local folk.

In the early years, their stages had to be simple and easy to construct and tear down in haste and then move on to the next performance sight. Early *Kyogen* didn't even use a stage, the actors would just perform in the middle of a rice field, or in a street, or on the ground of Buddhist temples. *Commedia Dell'Arte* stages were very portable and could be quickly set up and taken down and moved to another site. Therefore, scenery was kept to a minimum. In fact, most troupes only utilized one standard scene that was placed as a backdrop to the stage. It usually consisted of a street with houses at either end of the stage. When these comedic forms became noticed by the upper classes, fixed stages began to appear where they would perform. In the case of *Kyogen*, it became incorporated into the *No* cycle of plays and was performed on a classic wooden stage with four pillars at each of the corners and a scene of a pine tree at the back of the stage.

Early performances were highly improvisational and both types of comedies did not write scenarios for their dramas. Plots, such as they were, character roles, and standard movements were passed down by word of mouth from one generation to another. Then, in the case of *Commedia Dell'Arte*, the need arose for standardization of characters so that



each performer could master his role. A list of character types was created, and all of the *Commedia* troupes would draw their character roles from that list and use them in their performances. In the 16<sup>th</sup> Century, the extant plays were finally written down. However, it had the unintended effect of limiting the amount of improvisation that could take place by the actors. The roles became more standardized. In both types of comedies, the characters were central to the drama, therefore the actor was constrained by the personality of the character and had to act within limitations. The character controlled the actor rather than the actor controlling the character.

Masks were an aspect of the standardization of characters. In *Commedia Dell'Arte* the mask became the heart and soul of each character, and all actors had to develop that character persona through his mask. Masks were used in *Kyogen*, but not to the same extent as *Commedia Dell'Arte*. Masks were limited to such characters as animals, minor gods and demons, and assorted inanimate things. It is possible to say that the use of masks was more prevalent in early *Kyogen* than later on when the emphasis shifted to the enhancement of comedic expression through facial gestures.

Costumes were also standardized for both types of comedies. One result was that it made it very easy for the audience to recognize who was who even if he or she was not close to the stage. In addition, by knowing what character is performing, the audience can anticipate what the ensuing action will be like and be better filled with expectation as to what will occur and be even more ready to laugh with gusto.

In the beginning, all the performers of both comedies were males only. While this is true of *Kyogen*, even today, in the *Commedia Dell'Arte*, females joined the troupes probably as a response to a demand by the audience for better sexual interaction and repartee as well as more sexuality among the performers.

While the number of similarities may be interesting and striking, it is the few differences that separate how the humor is portrayed and elicited from the audience. From a very early period, when *Kyogen* became incorporated into the *No* cycle, the type of humor to be performed was strictly defined. The foremost dramatist and guiding light of the *No*, Zeami, was also concerned with how the *Kyogen* was performed. He was totally against the use of lewdness, ribaldry, or pranks. He demanded that a *Kyogen* performance be refined, restrained and fundamentally humanistic in its evocation of humor. He said there was no place for vulgarity in the performance. The audience should be filled with mirth and a feeling of being pleased and satisfied that humans, after all, sometimes do strange and funny things, and even he or she has been known to do foolish things.

Contrast this with the *Commedia Dell'Arte* in which there was no limitation as to how the performer could elicit laughter from the audience. Rude, sarcastic, and vulgar language was used. Overtly sexual pranks and exhibitions were encouraged. Slapstick and extreme farcical elements were introduced. Sometimes painful punishment was inflicted on the performer. Mechanical devices were used to create an atmosphere of phantasmagoria and otherworldliness. Anything that would make the audience howl with laughter

could and was employed during a *Commedia Dell'Arte* performance. As the professionalism of the troupes increased and the level of technology advanced, the ability to create ever more outrageous comedic situations was enhanced. The audience would roar with delight, howl in outrage, scream at the injustice of it all, and wiggle with delight at the overt sexuality emanating from the stage. At the end of a *Commedia Dell'Arte* drama, the audience would be exhausted, but happy and satisfied that for awhile he or she could completely forget about the realities of their daily lives. They could go to the play for a few hours and experience a cathartic moment.

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