

Using Classic Commedia Techniques to Create New Works for Modern Audiences

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Disclaimer – It is not the opinion of this writer or these improvisers that Commedia should not be presented in its traditional form. This technique borrows elements from Commedia and applies them to a variety of situations where historically accurate Commedia wouldn't or hasn't been well received. So to all you traditionalists out there thank you so much for showing us the possibilities of this wonderful performance tradition.

Opposites!

Commedia creates conflict on stage through the use of opposites. When you begin a project try to identify comic opposites. Here are some examples . . .

Characters

rich vs. poor, happy vs. sad, fat vs. thin, young vs. old, greedy vs. needy

One of my favorite types of character opposites could be defined as philosophical. In my children's play Pecos Bill, the main character is a sort of Taoist or wise fool. I made his opposite (The Black Licorice Kid) a scheming schoolyard bully obsessed with enforcing stereotypes and arbitrary standards of "cowboy" behavior.

Goal

Opposite goals can also be used to strengthen your plot or scenario.

In my version of the Tortoise and the Hare I made the Hare a professional athlete and the Tortoise an amateur Tap Dancer. They both wanted to use "the path" but for very different reasons, Tortoise as nice place to dance and the Hare as a training facility. The Hare races to keep the Tortoise off the path entirely, while the tortoise races for the right to share the path.

Pace/Movement

fast vs slow, consistent vs. sporadic, orderly vs. chaotic

Character Types

In the past Commedia used a variety of stock characters that represented personality types the audience was familiar. Modern writers and improvisers can use these basic types and/or update them to increase their comic potential. Here are some basic stock characters with suggestions on updating their characteristics for contemporary audiences.

Arlecchino or Harlequin – This was a clown who moved from place to place hatching schemes and playing tricks on wealthy or amorous townsfolk. His basic function is to shake up the status quo, disrupting the plans of the other characters.

Pantalone – A greedy miser or dirty old man most often both Ricky Gervais and Steve Correl do a great job of updating this classic archetype. He makes a great boss, father, jealous father or adulterous husband.

Capitano or Scarmouche – These were braggart characters either by way of love or bold deeds. When it comes to performing they both tend to fail at rising to the occasion.

Dottore – The know it all. These characters are full of doubtful information that they are convinced represents the latest in scientific or academic research.

Lovers – Leading man and leading lady types, I like to spice them up a bit on technique I found useful was to have them play the scenes with enormous passion but with conflicting acting styles. My girl was a melodramatic princess straight out of the Sarah Bernhardt school, where as my boy (who was a dead ringer for James Dean) brought his formidable angst to bear through a parody of the Method that had Lee Strasburg spinning in his grave.

Brigella – Traditionally not quite a villain but might as well be, like Bluto in Popeye. I like my Brigellas to be more scheming Machiavelli than brawny thugs.

Columbina – A female servant or confidant usually providing comic relief for the female lover. I like to portray this character as pregnant, for some reason it really works.

There are many other characters that I won't have time to go into but these highlighted above I have found the most useful and modern-audience-friendly.

Now for the fun part let's put these characters to the test with some formulas and scenarios.

Formula 1 The Object

Take an ordinary object an umbrella or a sandwich, maybe some toiletry item and make it the most important thing in the characters world.

Formula 2 The Obtuse Beauty

Your female lover attracts all the wrong suitors. Come up with creative ways they can compete for her attention.

Formula 3 The Sickness

One of the characters has some rare embarrassing totally hilarious disease. The other characters may try to cure it but more likely they will exploit it.

Formula 4 The Lesson

School is in but the teachers are less than qualified. Think of something funny to teach and run with it.

Formula 5 The Secret Love Affair

Combine two or three couples swapping partners and you can really have fun.

Formula 6 The Unwelcome Guest

Get rid of them by any means necessary!

There are countless others but any of these should do to get started here are some tips to make your scene a success. If you want a longer performance simply weave two or three of the above together. Most of all have fun.