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An Exploration of Commedia dell'Arte in Relation to Modern Western Pedagogies

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An Exploration of Commedia dell'Arte in Relation to Modern Western Pedagogies

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In my acting training, I have experienced an enormous transformation through physical work. When I first began as a student in the theatre department, I knew acting was what I was born to do; there was within me an intrinsic draw to and understanding of the art form. I felt entirely at ease with the idea of the instable, chaotic, and challenging life of a struggling actor, because I simply knew - and still know - that it was what I was supposed to do. However, in my very first class as a BFA Performance major, I became aware of a wall that I had refused to acknowledge up unto this point in my life; for all my intrinsic, powerful understanding of acting, none of my work was translating on stage because I struggled to have an open physicality. I was tense, uncomfortable in my own skin, and even hesitant to speak at my full voice. I would leave midterm meetings with my professors feeling a deep frustration and confusion - I understood that I was not connected to my body, but why should that matter? The idea that I was scared of and not utilizing my own body was an incredibly frightening thought for me to face.

However, after my first year of training, I got cast in a leading role in *The Servant of Two Masters*. Written by Carlo Goldoni, *Servant* is a high-energy, tightly wound comedy based off of the theatre form Commedia dell'Arte. Commedia dell'Arte is a style of theatre which uses masked, archetypical characters to create comedic sketches, with large portions of the shows being improvised by the actors on the spot. It is also highly, highly physical. I was challenged in a way I had never been before. I was forced to face head on the tension that took over my body when I got onstage. I would get stuck in my characterization of the passionate and beautiful Beatrice. I felt more vulnerable than I ever felt before. Yet, I fell in love with the form and felt, ironically, a great "unmasking" of myself through the process. I gained the bravery to dive headlong into this physical block. I got in shape, studied physical pedagogies, began to experience what it felt like to be physically present on stage, and fought through the
overwhelming fear that over took me on such occasions. All through it, I would return to recordings, readings, and photos of Commedia - it inspired me to continue through this journey, to quash a fear that was holding me back from my full potential.

Now, approaching graduation and facing the demands of the professional acting world, I have begun considering what my personal acting pedagogy is - I have finally begun to find comfort in myself as an artist and performer, so what type of actor am I? Through my work, it has become increasingly obvious to me that Commedia now plays a fundamental role in how I approach a character, and by applying the basic tenants of Commedia to my traditional, psychology-based training, I have found a power, clarity, and elegance in performances without sacrificing the perhaps more subtle characterization demanded by non-Commedia productions. It has dawned on me that Commedia would be an incredibly effective addition to traditional acting training - while my struggles with embracing physicality has been more extreme than others', there is the unfortunately common tendency in contemporary acting to over-emphasize the psychology of characters, resulting in messy, indulgent, hollowly emotional performances.

Antonio Fava, a highly regarded teacher and performer of Commedia dell'Arte, writes that: "Commedia dell'Arte is a powerful training method... that provides the ability to expand what we normally call the psychological into the multiexpressive play of mask performance."

For my honors thesis, I wanted to dive into this "multiexpressive play" of Commedia through developing my own Commedia show, to test out this new, personal acting pedagogy I had developed and to further understand what it is in Commedia performances that make them so astonishingly clear, honest, and - above all else - effective. I wanted to push past this emphasis on the psychological that dominates our acting approaches, and to focus on physical action, characterization through physicality, and a simplicity in motivation, all of which make up the
fundamentals of Commedia performance. Through our development and performance, I want to test the effectiveness of my personal acting pedagogy for myself, see how it works on my fellow actors, and further understand what role an actor's physicality must play in the development of a character. Through this project, I hope to further solidify my acting approach and perhaps, begin to develop a mode and entirely new way of thinking about acting by merging two, wildly disparate styles of acting.

**PART 1 - PERFORMANCE THEORY OF TRADITIONAL WESTERN PEDAGOGIES AND COMMEDIA**

The great majority of western acting pedagogies are characterized by a focus on the psychology of both the character and the actor. These pedagogies evolved from the works of Russian theatre practitioner, Konstantin Stanislavski. Stanislavski's teachings have been passed through decades (Richard Boleslawski, Lee Strasberg, Stella Adler, Sanford Meisner and more), effectively rendering him as the father of contemporary actor training. Stanislavski's teachings focused on tapping into the subconscious impulses of an actor through in-depth analysis of a character's internal experience. Often, this analysis would involve the actor using their own life experiences to connect psychologically and emotionally to their character. While his later books would explore physical expression and control of one's body, the lessons of his first book, *An Actor Prepares*, are what we see the most in acting training today: issues of the subconscious, discussions on the importance of imagination and empathy towards the character, and, most importantly, the concept of "emotional memory".

The introduction of emotional memory marks the beginning of western training's focus on an inward experience of emotion. Emotional memory, according to Stanislavski, is described as "that type of memory, which makes you relive the sensations you once felt when seeing
Moskvin act, or when you friend died... (emotional memory) can bring back feelings you have already experienced" (182). Stanislavski wanted to use an actor's personal experience in the characterization of their role - an actor could recreate an emotion they have felt previously at a point in the play where the character is feeling something similar. While forms of this have developed to become useful acting tools, it often results in murky, internalized performances that do little to express the character's experience to the audience. Too much of the actor's attention taken up by the impossible task of trying recreate an emotional reaction, a task Stanislavski admits himself an actor has no control over (183).

In Western pedagogies, psychological analysis is used to discover the impetus of action. In Commedia, such analysis is unnecessary and excessive. Instead, the actor is the impetus of action, and performers require no such analysis in order to play complex and fully realized characters. Because Commedia was originally performed in the streets to large crowds, it relied on clarity, immediacy, and recognition - of the characters, what they want, why they are there. Its highly physical and archetypical characterizations were necessary to communicate their stories to large audiences and to fill their spacious outdoor stage. Thus characterization is externalized, with all the characters having a distinctive movement, voice, and body shape.

In addition, the characters’ wants, needs, and motivations are similarly direct, easily understood, and powerfully effective. The modern Western actor can overburden their characterization with extensive backstory and overly elaborate objectives. Avner Eisenberg writes that the world of Commedia "is a world of life and death decisions, crime and punishment, war and peace, and hunger. There is always hunger, not just for food, but also for wealth, sex, and power" (Eisenberg, xiii). Commedia characters are motivated by their survival, by hunger, by lust. Pantalone is a miser, because holding onto his wealth and power is how he clings onto
life in his old age. The Capitano pretends furiously so he may come off as a great hero because if the shameful truth of his actual cowardice was realized, he would effectively die. The Servants must undo the chaos that they so often create, because if they do not, they lose their occupation, house, and source of food. These are visceral, powerful motivations for an actor to play. The immediacy of these needs makes Commedia a remarkably active form of theatre to watch - characters fight for their form of survival every moment they are on stage.

There is no time for introspection, nor is it necessary. Therefore, the Commedia performance is not only highly physical, but also immediate. An actor need not invent the character's objective from their own experiences - Rudlin writes: "[the personality of the actor] disappeared to be replaced by type: the personality of the actor is thus overtaken not by an author's scripted character, but by the persona of the mask to be played" (Rudlin, 34). The objective and the life of an actor's character laid out for them in the very core of the mask and in the fundamentals of their archetype; an actor does not need to draw on their own experiences for anything. Extraneous backstory and motivation are stripped away, allowing for powerful, and often very funny, truths of humanity to come through.

Commedia rejects notions of internal experience in favor of an expansive, expressive and vividly alive outward expression. This is what Antonio Fava calls the multiexpressive play of mask performance. In many ways, the multiexpressive play is necessary because of Commedia's use of masks. The masks, which began as yet another way to distinguish characters for a large audience, became complex representations of the characters themselves. The terms "mask" and character are used interchangeably in Commedia; the character's motivation, history, and even their physicality is embodied in the mask. Thus, an actor's job is supporting and fulfilling the life of the mask, rather than creating a character of their own. The actor must help support the life of
the mask, sustain the mask's gaze, breath, and spirit, lest the mask die while the actor waits for "inspiration".

When Antonio Fava writes on the typical western actor, he writes on their tendency to focus on the internal, and how they fail when asked to perform in a Commedia mask: "A modern actor of Western culture ... slips into the mask and waits - or believes - that the mask itself will put into action all its aesthetic dynamic signifiers, simply by virtue of the presence and visibility of the mask itself... In all this, no attention whatever is given to what the character does, or should or could do or not do... Once again, the modern Western actor merely reproduces and is therefore not truly an actor, one who makes, who carries out the actio, who actualizes. This is the kind of non-mask actor we have inherited from a century and a half of obsession with psychology in theater. We must explain to this actor that the mask is not the explosive but the detonator. The explosive is always the actor" (Fava, 3). In Fava's view, nothing is made when the actor only searches for the psychology of their character; an actor must do to create character, and is responsible for bringing their mask to life.

Fascinatingly, Stanislavsky, towards the end of his life, echoed complaints very similar to those of Fava: "[the actors and director] spend several months analyzing the play and the individual roles in detail... they decide, down to the most trivial detail what each of the actors will do, what each of them must feel... In the end the actor's heart and mind are filled with a mass of details, some useful, some not... the actor loses contact also with those rare moments when he was able to identify with the role" (Creating a Role, 17). Stanislavski later adapted his methodology further to involve physical action, acknowledging the importance of physical work to stimulate the imagination. While by no means a rejection of his previous writings, just before his death, Stanislavski began to experiment with and develop a technique called "The Method of
Physical Action". No extensive writing exists on the technique (Stanislavski died during the production of *Tartuffe* in which he was testing these new concepts), he does briefly touch upon it in his description of the development of *Othello* in *Creating a Role*, a performance in which this physical work came before text and psychological analysis: "An actor on the stage need only sense the smallest modicum of organic physical truth in his action or general state and instantly his emotions will respond to his inner faith in the genuineness of what his body is doing... it is incomparably easier to call forth real truth and faith within the region of our physical than of our spiritual nature" (*Creating a Role*, 150). In both Commedia and the final experiments in Stanislavski's work, the discovery and exploration of characters are done physically instead of talked over. What begins to take precedent over the actor's understanding and thoughts on the character is, quite simply, the actual experience of playing the character.

**PART 2 - PROCESS AND DEVELOPMENT**

I began the development of this project the summer of 2017 when I started my research on the performance theory of Commedia, I wrote the first draft of my canovaccio - what is essentially the script of a Commedia performance - and cast a large portion of my actors. Heading into my fall semester, I ran character workshops with each actor, where we began to develop their mask's body and I explained to them their character's fundamental drive. I provided each of my actors with a number of readings on their character, and wrote out a reference page for them in which I organized the fundamentals of the mask to help guide each actor if he or she got lost. After these character workshops, in the spring of 2018, we began to meet and work with the script. This is where I began coaching the actors and experimenting with this idea of characterization through physicality. To help prepare for this project, I took an improvisation
class and a playwriting class to help me with the performance and writing the canovaccio respectively.

**Initial Research**

In the earliest stages of development, I started with watching and researching Antonio Fava's Commedia shows, a number of which are available online. This informed me on the general 'feel' of the form: the pacing, the many different ways the physicalities of each character could be translated by different actors, and the musicality of the form. Because my first experience with Commedia had been with a Goldoni show - something inspired by Commedia, but fairly removed from it - it was initially shocking to see what an actual Commedia performance was like.

Antonio Fava's productions are briskly paced, easy to follow, and borderline absurdist. Fava writes, "We are not seeking the credibility of true truth, the real, or the truth of "realism" but rather that of formal exaggeration. We demonstrate a recognizable, known truth but in a different form than that found in reality" (Fava, 7). In a Fava directed performance of "Canovaccio 1" at the Stage Internazionale di Commedia dell'Arte, Pantalone plays dead to avoid his family, friends, and servant after they begin harassing him for money. When he is left alone onstage, seemingly dead, (immediately after his death, the other characters race off stage in search of his will, much to Pantalone's dismay), Pantalone replaces his body with a chair and places his will underneath it. Later, the Dottore tells the other characters he has not searched for the will in the most delicate place of all and reaches "inside" Pantalone's dead body - grabbing it from underneath the chair - while the other characters watch on in disgust and terror (Fava, 2014). It is absurdity built upon absurdity. Yet, in performance, we do not question the actions of the characters. The characters behave according to the logic of their mask and the situation the
mask finds itself in - however, in Commedia, reality has expanded into the realm of the ridiculous. It was fascinating to see the absurd, grotesque, and slightly nefarious nature of Commedia in action, and very inspiring to see how deeply funny it can be. The many productions of Fava's that were available to me provided me with a tangible example of Commedia performance, and were invaluable in my work moving forward.

**Developing the script**

The development of my canovaccio was an essential step in my process. In order for us to practice Commedia performance, we had to have a script that stayed true to traditional Commedia. The Commedia canovaccio is made up of only plot beats, with no written lines, leaving the actors to fill in the rest of the show. It is almost always developed through rehearsal with actors, so I understood that, while I might take inspiration and guidance from canovacci I found in my research, we would have to develop our own in order to stay truthful to the spirit of Commedia performance.

My canovaccio was based on a script I found in the book *La Commedia Inglese: English Plays of Commedia dell'Arte*. This script was not traditional Commedia - it had lines for all its characters, the relationships go against traditional Commedia conventions - yet "Sleepless in Sienna" had the characters I was interested in working on and featured Columbina as a prominent role. The author wrote that all her scripts were free and open for development and adaption, and I found myself excited by the skeleton of its plot: Columbina fighting to bring the young lovers together, falling in love with the Capitano, and tricking the old man into officiating her own wedding.

Antonio Fava's canovaccio for "La Creduta Morta (Love is a Drug)" proved to be the most helpful reference I found when I was finishing my first "workable" draft of the canovaccio.
"La Creduta Morta" is an exciting display of the amazing elegance of Commedia. The story is tightly wound with many intricate plots developing at once, all of which come together cleanly at the end. This is all done while providing ample comedic opportunities for all the characters. This is particularly well-executed in Act 2. Act 2 begins with a set of clothing onstage, and involves character after character coming on stage, changing their clothes to disguise themselves, and running back off, only for the next character to take the set of clothing left behind: Arlecchino dresses in the clothing of Flaminia to hide from what he thinks is a ghost, Flaminia dresses in Arlecchino's clothing as she is running from her father and is worried about being a woman out alone late at night. Finally, her father's servant Pedrolino, who is searching for Flaminia, comes onstage only to find her clothing. Eager for a reprieve from this chase, he changes into her clothing for pleasure,¹ and is then mistaken by the Capitano, who arrives and is immediately taken by this mysterious woman's enchanting beauty. Pedrolino plays along. Flaminia's lover Orazio arrives onstage, sees who he believes to be Flaminia being wooed by another man, draws his sword, and chases both the characters offstage, thus bringing the act to a clear and concise close.

The disguises piling onto disguises, the characters rushing through the scene on their own mission only to be taken through a loop by what they find onstage - all this provides rich comedic possibilities for the actors while be driven by a clear, if not exaggerated and slightly ridiculous, character logic. This results in a ripe and potentially very funny scene in which this game of mistaken identities reaches a head, which then carries on into Act 3, where the disguises

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¹ Pedrolino is a mask who is commonly performed as somewhat effeminate and understood by Fava to homosexual. I understand the potentially problematic connotation of having a homosexual character dress up as a woman for pleasure, and believe that, elegance of the act's construction aside, this scene would need to workshopped heavily to see that Pedrolino's homosexuality does not become the butt of the joke. I am using this example because of how the act develops around and into this final character beat, where Pedrolino may flirt with the unassuming Capitano, who does not realize he is being aroused by another man.
cause even more confusion and conflict (Orazio weeps to Pedrolino about how 'she' flirted with the Capitano, Arlecchino sees Flaminia wearing his clothing and panics, believing her to be a ghost), before all is revealed and forgiven. The lazzi are not written into the script - they flow naturally from it, with the script's humor coming from the characters behaving logically in the situation they are placed in.

While I understood this concept logically, this was a difficult concept for me to exercise artistically. The script began to come together when I focused on keeping the logic of each character intact, and began to better understand what that logic was. I learned eventually that if I wrote a narratively tight script, I could trust myself and my actors to find the humor within it. Many of the scenes I wrote in my canovaccio changed drastically after working it with the actors. This excerpt comes from the beginning of act 2 in my canovaccio:

1. Night falls. COLUMBINA enters and curses PANTALONE. She needs to figure this mess out so her mistress isn’t miserable for the rest of their lives. There is a knock at the door. COLUMBINA was not expecting anyone so late. She lights a candle, opens the door.

2. THE CAPTAIN enters. He is angered as it took him hours to find the home of Pantalone. He talks of the great pains and perils he faced to get here.

   COLUMBINA falls in love with the CAPTAIN.

3. COLUMBINA attempts to seduce the CAPTAIN, but the CAPTAIN, having no capacity to flirt, takes it as an invitation to talk more of his great feats.

   COLUMBINA struggles to make him realize her intent. The CAPTAIN is intrigued by her.
In my first draft, this scene was simultaneously much more bare and much more complicated; Columbina was disguised as Silvia, ready to scare the Captain off to prevent the arranged marriage of Silvia and the Captain from occurring; when he arrived, she fell in love with him, and attempted to convince him to run away with him, still disguised as Silvia. This was not particularly effective, as I had given myself action but had not found any solid motivation for the Capitano to stay in the room. Simply adding in the element of disguise that I enjoyed in "La Creduta Morta" wasn't particularly needed by the scene as well. However, once Jack and I found this game of seduction - Columbina flirting and the Capitano misunderstanding her advances and taking them as an invitation to further list his great accomplishments - we found something that could be built upon, played with, and that we were both invested in as our characters. We stripped away the unnecessary plot elements I had written in and the scene went from the Columbina attempting to overpower the Captain, to interactions like the following (taken from my rehearsal journal):

COLUMBINA: Your arms are enormous, so big and manly...

CAPITANO: Ah, yes they come from fighting off the hordes of men who ambushed me upon my arrival in town. Did you know I've killed thousands?

COLUMBINA: Yes, so you've said... it's very impressive.

CAPITANO: Yes, a million men. And with both my arms tied around my back.

Such interactions are still developing as we continue the rehearsal process, but moments such as this are when I felt like we were truly fulfilling the characters and beginning to approach
what I observed watching Fava's performances - scenarios and humor coming from fulfilling the heart of the mask. I also found that, the further we get into the rehearsal process, the simpler the descriptions of characters' actions in the canovaccio become; when we first began, I found myself explaining character's motivations for a scene, or adding reactions for what the other characters that weren't playable actions. These were me attempting to guide the actors more than is necessary, rather than discovering an action with them through rehearsal.

Casting

After finishing the rough draft of my script, I began casting the show. While casting was a difficult and nerve-wracking process, I eventually got a cast I was happy and excited by. Because I had to choose my cast from a pool of actors who, on the whole, had not had any experience or training with Commedia, I attempted to find actors whose natural physicality matched those of their character. I also wanted a cast that I felt would be comfortable experimenting with new ways of thinking about acting and who would be willing to go out on a limb in terms of embodying the masks' highly expressive bodies.

I cast Aziza Gharib and Eli Davis as the lovers. Aziza's petite, graceful physicality was a perfect match for the light-footed lover. I cast Eli Davis because he had very successfully played a lover before, and his slight physical presence on stage paired beautifully with that of Aziza.

Both Michael Tandy and Jason Toennis fit the physicality of their characters and have extensive improvisation experience. This excited me, as I found in my character workshops with both of them, they naturally sought and discovered potential lazzì; when I asked Jason to attempt Il Dottore's sproloquio (his waffling lectures) Jason jumped headfirst into a monologue on the dangers of getting struck by lightning that was both inventive and seemed very much in line with the character. I knew I would benefit greatly from their participation.
I cast Jakob Rasmussen as Pantalone and cast Jack Janzen as the Capitano. The Capitano was the only character I had had no direct experience with. Because of this, I wanted to pick an actor with a genuine interest in the project and someone who I knew I could collaborate and communicate with well. Jack's experience with Commedia, his great comedic talent, and most of all, his positive attitude and passion for the project. I also believed that, with his height and lanky build, Jack could beautifully carry off the peacock that is the Capitano.

For myself, I wanted to work on the Columbina. Columbina is a character that, in the past, I felt very comfortable in and who I enjoyed performing as. I also knew she would be an excellent challenge, given that it is the Columbina that is responsible for rallying the audience - she opens the show, and communicates directly to the audience throughout the performance a great deal. She is also not the most obviously humorous character. I believed that, if I were to play a character like Pantalone or the Capitano, it would be tempting for me to go for the easy jokes, as has been my wont in many of my performances, rather than focus on maintaining and supporting my "mask". I feel very passionate about the character of Columbina, and was very motivated to perform the mask honestly and fully.

Rehearsal Process

After casting, I began preliminary character workshops, where I would teach my actors' the different body shapes for each of their characters. In these workshops, I would describe the physical body of their characters, where the mask would carry themselves from, how their characters moved through space, and other movement based coaching. We developed each actor's character through this movement work, and focused on exploring a character's physical action by running through brief, improvised scenarios.

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Columbina, the lovers, and Pedrolino are all characters who do not wear literal masks. Yet they are still understood to have "masks" - the exaggerated beauty make-up of the lovers or the ghost-white face of Pedrolino, for example.
To help guide us through this development process, I compiled my research on each mask and created character sheets for my actors and myself. These would serve as a basic introduction to their character and a resource for us to reference as we worked. This included sensual and symbolic imagery of Fava and Rudlin that relate to the different characters, including animals, elements, and even astrological signs that are traditionally linked to the character - I was interested in exploring any non-psychological, sensual means of tapping into our characters. I also included several pictures of their character, and, if we got particularly lost, Fava's description of what each character's function was in a Commedia plot. The following are the sheets I created for Columbina and the Capitano:

**COLUMBINA**

![Columbina Images]

**FUNCTION**

*The Servant: Function of Making-Unmaking*

"The servant is the one who has to remedy the problem posed by the Old Man and all the problems that flow from the first one. In the grip of a double tension, promise of reward and threat of punishment, he tries out solutions that fail, leading to new problems. Trying to make, he unmakes, and vice versa. The accumulation thus produced leads to the maximum crisis point, the maximum mix-up, that precedes the final solution, which is usually almost immediate and very simple. The mechanisms of complication are what draw the interest of the audience in Commedia. There is always a solution at the end, which returns us to normality. Reward and punishment, both “deserved”, inexorably come to the Servant at the end of the play." (Fava)

"The still centre of the turning wheel, in on everything that is going on, she exerts a benevolent influence on the outcome." (Rudlin)
Weaves intrigue - Columbina tells the lies, Arlecchino has to deal with it and deals with it in the wrong way

Keywords
Sensual, carnal youth

Movement/Position
Like a dancer, one leg bent, the other extended. Bends at hip to show off breasts. Zanni walk with a delicacy. Moves briskly.

Symbols
ANIMAL: Dove, pigeon, pheasant, hen, sparrow
ASTROLOGY: Virgo - charming, vivacious, spicy, intriguing

THE CAPITANO

FUNCTION
Capitano: Function of Complicating
“The Capitano is almost always an extra inconvenience. He may or may not know this, it may be important to him or not, he may be concerned with the complication he creates or not. It doesn’t matter; it doesn’t alter his behavior in the slightest. The Capitano’s function has a “disposable quality to it: once the tragedy has been set in motion, he may well have no further purpose. He keeps in reserve, however, other functions, by no means secondary: there is a need for a pure, totally guilty party, a scapegoat, and, fool that he is, he fits the bill perfectly.” (Fava)

Keywords
Pompous, explosive, vain.

Movement
“Mountain walk”, heels hit the ground first, rolls clearly through the ball of the foot. Big strides in which he doesn’t actually move forward very much. Footfalls that feel could cause earthquakes. Straight back. “Feet on ground, head in clouds.” When standing, feet are spread wide apart, back straight, he is taking up as much space as possible.

Symbols
ANIMAL: Rooster, peacock, stallion (“A peacock who has moulted all but one of his tail feathers, but does not know it.”) (Fava)
ELEMENT: Air - "A balloon. He gives himself airs. He flaps however the wind blows. He arrives blown by a good or evil wind. He goes with the wind. He gets by, thanks to the four winds.

Relationship to the audience
He thinks of himself as constantly in front of an audience. He is constantly performing for both the characters and the actual audience. Initially, the other characters on stage may even buy it.

After the groundwork for each character was laid out, and we had gotten more comfortable and familiar with the bodies of the characters, we began to workshop the canovaccio. I would give actors the section of the canovaccio that I wanted to work that day, and then rehearsals would be structured as follows: we meet, physically warm up, go through the necessary plot points of that section of the canovaccio, review the physical bodies of their character, and then we run through the scene. We would discuss the experience of the first run, do another run with slight adjustments, and continue running and adjusting, often with games, discussion, and additional physical work scattered in between. The initial run through was always slightly tense, with the actors and myself occasionally feeling at a loss for what to do. When we got stuck on objective and motivation, I would step back and let the actors improvise - based on what their impulse was, I could adjust the script. This was initially very challenging for all of us. The vulnerability involved in trusting the mask so entirely, especially as we were all still learning what our mask was and how to support it, was overwhelming at times.

When working with my actors, I focused on giving notes on physicality and, if they were still struggling with the character's shape, I would provide imagery or symbols I found in Rudlin and Fava's work related to their characters. Rudlin writes on Brighella that he is like "a lazy cat combined with a rat", which proved to be very useful imagery when Michael and I were working on the very difficult movements of Brighella (Rudlin, 86). Connecting sensually to characters
proved to be an enormous asset in my directing. I would describe the physical body of their characters, where the mask would carry themselves from, what the steps of their character were like, how their characters moved through space, and other movement based coaching.

I found that characters would really come together when we worked on some of the most characteristic lazzi of each mask: running the boast with the Captain, the *sproloquio* with the Doctor, having the lovers greet each other, etc. By tying the essential objective of each character to a physical action, the actors became much more comfortable embodying their character, and going "all-the-way" with their physicality. If characters did not have an essential lazzo like the Captain's boast, I would come up with a scenario which revolved around the major driving force of the character, and in which the character had an obvious objective. For example, while working with the lovers, I asked them to both enter the stage from opposite sides while calling out to each other. I instructed them that, because they are so enveloped in themselves, they cannot actually see the other, forcing them to continually seek the other out while simultaneously being driven to raptures by the sound of the other calling their name.

While working with my actors, I focused on giving notes on physicality and movement. If an actor was losing their character's shape, I would offer imagery or symbols to help them find it again (the animals related to each Commedia character were particularly helpful in this regard). My advisor offered that, if an actor was particularly struggling with the character's body, I should give them highly specific physical suggestions for them to focus on. For example, when I was working with Jack, instead of offering him imagery, I told him to relax their knees, keep their chest up and out, and have his footfalls be heavy and powerful. I took note of these moments in rehearsals when we lost the character's shape, particularly when it happened during my own process.
PART 3 - REFLECTION

If I could boil down the acting process we developed and utilized during our work together, it would be that the Commedia mask effectively become an actor's text. An actor must study, break down, and understand the mask before it may be played successfully. However, the actor must explore the mask through physical work to understand it.

I first became aware of this while working with Jack, my Capitano. Jack was previously cast as a lover in the production of The Servant of Two Masters, and I saw him struggle to shake off the physicality of the lover for the more grounded, heavy-footed Capitano. Jack is easily the most passionate about the project, so I knew he would easily accept and grow from the specific notes I gave him on his physicality. However, what I observed while working with Jack was that, in order for him to connect to the mask, we were effectively building the body of the Capitano. When rehearsing with Jack, I would find myself moving from the bottom of his body to the top, reminding him of the Capitano's wide stance, long legs, straight back, and outward chest. Once Jack had taken this on, then he would walk around the space, attempt the Captain's boast, and eventually we would start running scenes, but not before this careful breakdown at the beginning of rehearsals. We were, essentially, doing a similar breakdown and analysis that an actor might do with a script - instead, we were breaking down the physicality of the character.

When I first approached this project, I imagined that once we had found the bodies of the characters, we would be able to return to them quickly and easily. However, the discovery of our masks took time. Every day I met with someone, their character shape would be different, with us all still searching and adjusting every day to find our mask. There were moments of great success and excitement, and there were moments when we got lost and had to return to the fundamentals to find our masks again.
However, the vulnerability and initial discomfort that we all experienced was proof to me that we were headed in the right direction. Fava writes that "Commedia dell'Arte is the genre of theater that expresses the present as it moves" (Fava, xiii). Conventional acting training places an enormous importance on the actor's ability to remain present to what is occurring onstage: Meisner's repetition work, Strasburg's work on concentration, etc. Commedia essentially forces the actor to remain present through its need for full embodiment. When an actor is focused on physical action, they are made present automatically. Movement, physical embodiment, and constant activity in Commedia performance is needed to keep the masks alive, and because of these demands the actors must remain present onstage. Commedia, and its emphasis on physical action, is effectively a perfect illustration of what Stanislavski meant when he wrote on the importance of action.

Rehearsals were - and still are - a nerve-wracking and rewarding process. So many of my actors felt trepidation when we began, as did I. In order to have successful and productive rehearsals, we have to put so much faith into our masks. When we are trained to connect to our characters through textual analysis and psychological understanding, a process like Commedia becomes an enormous challenge.

My own experience as Columbina was a difficult one. While I found myself slipping more easily into the other masks as I demonstrated them in rehearsals, I would struggle with Columbina's height and grace, with sustaining her body even when we got lost in rehearsals. Her movement had to be ever-moving, while never being pushed or becoming excessive; to remain alive and present with the mask and its body is thrilling, exhausting, and very difficult.
As Fava wrote, Commedia is a deeply powerful training method for the contemporary Western actor. Through practicing Commedia, we are practicing acting tenets similar to those of Stanislavski. When Stanislavski wrote on the importance of physical action as both creative stimulus and as a necessary first step in rehearsals late in his life, I believe the process he was describing was similar to the one my colleagues and I have been practicing. While Commedia dell'arte must be understood and celebrated as a unique theatre form in-of-itself, it has also evolved to perfectly encapsulate universal tenets of successful performance such as action, present-mindfulness of actors, and clarity of expression. The elegance of the form’s structure is stripped of all the additives that contemporary western training has layered onto the craft of acting; thus, Commedia becomes a remarkably effective expression of some of the most fundamental lessons every actor must learn.

Commedia, as an art form, relies on trusting and using the mask. The character is not developed through discussion of psychology, but rather is played through action. The actor performs the mask and, through supporting it, finds a fully realized character, without endless analysis or even text. We felt vulnerable through the process because this form demands presence and embodiment in a way that we are entirely unaccustomed to. Yet, the fact that we as actors are unaccustomed to such effective methods of performance, particularly when these methods relate so closely to later developments of Stanislavski’s work, suggests that conventional pedagogical training could benefit enormously from Commedia’s inclusion.

The following is the current draft of "Sleepless in Sienna", after a month of rehearsal:

**SCENE 1**

WHERE: Pantalone’s home, inside Silvia's room.

WHEN: Late at night.

1. COLUMBINA enters. She is exhausted by Silvia and Flavio’s romance, running errands, delivering letters, soothing Silvia’s worries, but there is an end in sight -
Flavio will ask for Silvia's hand tomorrow night, and there will be no more letter delivering necessary. Then -

2. FLAVIO enters and comes to the window. He wants to serenade Silvia again. It is the third time that evening. COLUMBINA tries to send him away, concerned PANTALONE will hear him again. But then:

3. SILVIA enters. She heard FLAVIO. COLUMBINA is distraught. FLAVIO and SILVIA sing to each. Then:

4. PANTALONE and BRIGHELLEA enter. FLAVIO hides. PANTALONE has exciting news to share. He has found a very rich bachelor from overseas to marry SILVIA.

5. The lovers despair. PANTALONE realizes FLAVIO is outside and tries to get through the window to chase him away. He asks COLUMBINA and BRIGHELLEA to help him through the window. FLAVIO escapes. SILVIA runs off in a state.

6. PANTALONE is stuck in the window. BRIGHELLEA and COLUMBINA help get him out.

7. COLUMBINA beseeches PANTALONE to be kind to her mistress and let her marry for love. PANTALONE dismisses this on account of the CAPITANO oft-mentioned great wealth. PANTALONE asks them to come and help prepare the home for the CAPTAIN's arrival. PANTALONE exits.

8. Alone, COLUMBINA expresses her sympathy for her mistress (and realizes the trouble this will cause her, being with Silvia all day). BRIGHELLEA offers that she could do something about it if it means so much, and both exit, following PANTALONE

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**SCENE 2**

**WHERE:** Pantalone’s home, in the foyer.

**WHEN:** Later at night.

1. IL DOTTORE enters in a great flurry. He is furious that PANTALONE has both rejected his son and has not asked him to officiate the wedding.

2. PANTALONE enters with BRIGELLA and COLUMBINA, thinking that the late visitor is THE CAPITANO. He is disappointed to see IL DOTTORE, angering the doctor more.

3. IL DOTTORE attempts to explain to PANTALONE the mistake he has made.

4. PANTALONE is annoyed. COLUMBINA begins imitating both PANTALONE and IL DOTTORE to get them to agree to Silvia and Flavio's marriage.

5. PANTALONE catches on. He goes to beat COLUMBINA. She runs away, dodges him. PANTALONE gets tired and must be helped up by BRIGHELLEA. He orders COLUMBINA to stay up all night and wait for the CAPITANO to arrive. The exhausted COLUMBINA despairs. PANTALONE exits. IL DOTTORE chases after him.

6. BRIGHELLEA tells her she'll have to be smarter than that to get what she wants. COLUMBINA complains about BRIGHELLEA's lack of loyalty. BRIGHELLEA defends himself.

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**SCENE 3**

**WHERE:** Pantalone’s home, in the foyer.

**WHEN:** Far too late at night.
1. COLUMBINA curses PANTALONE. She needs to figure this mess out so both her and her mistress aren’t miserable for the rest of their lives, and she can get some sleep. There is a knock at the door. COLUMBINA was not expecting anyone so late. She lights a candle, opens the door.

2. THE CAPTAIN enters. He is angered as it took him hours to find the home of Pantalone. He talks of the great pains and perils he faced to get here. COLUMBINA falls in love with the CAPTAIN.

3. The COLUMBINA attempts to seduce the CAPTAIN. The CAPTAIN, not realizing her intention, takes it as an invitation to talk more of his great feats. COLUMBINA struggles to make him realize her intent. The CAPTAIN is intrigued by her.

4. PANTALONE enters. COLUMBINA, not wanting to be caught with THE CAPITANO, blows out her candle and hides. THE CAPITANO falls into a panic, but swears he will protect this mysterious woman he has just met; the PANTALONE, hearing THE CAPITANO's voice, struggles to find him in the dark room. COLUMBINA attempts to get to the door with being caught by either.

5. THE CAPITANO knocks into PANTALONE. He exits in a panic. PANTALONE follows the sounds of his screams. COLUMBINA lights the candle once again, and bemoans her fate. She announces excitedly that she has a plan, and runs off.

SCENE 4
WHERE: Pantalone’s home.
WHEN: The next day, the time for Flavio and Silvia’s wedding.

1. PANTALONE runs on, desperately searching for both the bride and the groom. SILVIA wasn't in her room when her father went to get her, and the CAPITANO hasn't been seen since last night. PANTALONE is exhausted from his search.

2. IL DOTTORE comes barging in, still insistent that he officiate the wedding.

3. BRIGHELLA enters, with the CAPITANO. He found him hiding outside the house.

4. BRIGHELLA, PANTALONE, and IL DOTTORE all search for Silvia. Then -

5. COLUMBINA comes on, disguised as SILVIA. PANTALONE rejoices. BRIGHELLA prepares the home for the wedding.

6. IL DOTTORE performs the ceremony. Then, COLUMBINA reveals herself. PANTALONE collapses in shock. The CAPITANO is pleasantly surprised.

7. SILVIA and FLAVIO run on, SILVIA disguised in COLUMBINA's clothing. They announce that they have married. PANTALONE has a heart attack, but is magically restored when The CAPITANO lets it slip that he actually has no money. All is resolved.

I kept a detailed rehearsal journal throughout our process, in which I took notes on the development of the script, the growth of our company and what coaching was proving to be most helpful for the actors. The following is an extract from my rehearsal journal, on a day that I worked with both the lovers on their opening scene:

For lovers:
Physical warm up, review the body of the lover - “Light steps, heavy chest and heart, think asymmetry, they cannot approach anything directly”

Run Notes
- A little more joy, lightness
- Eli - don’t turn away from the audience
- Don't be afraid of your voice! Try the Gromalot maybe? (Do more research on this) (Thought - tell this to Jack too: The face being connected to the chest, you keep both out to the audience)

REMEMBER - As long as you’re making a choice and are in character, you’re not doing anything wrong

Lazzo ideas
- Eli sings super well, Aziza can’t keep up
  - Singing her name, she can't sing his
- Jealousy - what if Flavio sees me through the window, thinks he's up there with someone else? try this out
- Flavio needs to play Guitar CONSTANTLY at every entrance
- Silvia startles herself with the fan

Eli being scared of “talking” telling him to return to the physicality to find his character, he says that the physicality and character are still developing, yes but he still needs to commit fully to his developing physicality.

Having the physical body and “mask” of the character being something separate, something that the actors do not feel pressure to create? Something they know and can slip into. THIS IS WHY PHYSICAL NOTES NEED TO BE SPECIFIC AND I NEED TO TELL THEM THEIR BODIES IN AS SPECIFIC A WAY AS POSSIBLE

FOR NEXT REHEARSAL:
The extremities of emotions - HAPPY! Then sad. THEN HAPPY AGAIN! Then sad.
Difficulty with keeping mask out
Get costume pieces for lovers - this will help them maintain the body?
Talk to Tammy about getting rehearsal masks

I believe the next steps in our process are to further simplify the canovaccio - there are many scenes that could more active, more succinct - and push towards the absurdity I described earlier. While the humor we have found has been organic and coming from a truthful portrayal of each of our characters, I would be fascinated to see if we could push the boundaries of this truth, and find the absurdity that Fava explores so effectively in his work. I have also found that the tightness and elegance of Fava's canovaccio that I admired so much likely came through
rehearsal rather than during the writing process. Any moments in our canovaccio that did strike me as clean and active came from what I discovered in rehearsal with my actors.

This process, both of writing the canovaccio and developing our characters, was both unfamiliar and fascinatingly intuitive. Commedia dell'Arte, as Carlo Mazzone-Clementi writes, "[is] the comedy of a known character reacting to an unknown situation" (Chaffe and Crick, xiii). We know these character; Commedia masks are beautifully succinct and comprehensible to an audience at no sacrifice to their - as Fava would put it - poeticism. The challenge of Commedia comes in fulfilling the full, expansive life of the masks without falling into oneself or attempting to push past the mask.

This project, in addition to being performance research, was a challenge to myself. Throughout my acting training, I have always strived to push myself and find what area of performance scared me the most, knowing that that is place I have to grow in. As much as I have taken to and enjoy physical pedagogies and movement work, this has also been the area in which I have struggled the most. Commedia dell'Arte, with the openness of its physicality and the demands it puts on the bodies of the actors, has introduced a potential openness and freedom in my acting that I believe could serve as a keystone to fulfilling my potential as an actor. It is also the form of theatre that I believe encapsulates some of the theatre's best qualities. Commedia dell'arte, more than any other theatre I have seen, is powerfully and viscerally alive. Theatre makers have found themselves competing with television, film, and the internet for the audience's attention. They have reacted to this by striving more and more master and deliver on theatre greatest aspect - a direct and palpable connection between the actors and the audience. The practitioners of Commedia dell'arte mastered this connection, and continue to replicate it again and again, using the same characters and the same story-telling tools that have been used
since the 16th century. To not learn from such an overwhelmingly successful art form would be a horrible mistake on our parts.

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