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THEATRE

COMMEDIA DEL ARTE

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PREPARATION

Hardest part of teaching commedia: Where to start? It's such a paradoxical form. On one hand there is mask technique and the precision involved with performing in a mask: head gestures, isolations, segmented body movement... one could spend a full year studying these aspects alone! To perform in mask it takes a tremendous amount of physical self-awareness, a concept that most dancers are very familiar with, but the majority of today's actors, with the exception of those coming from a physical-based training background, are not at all "at home" in their bodies! Then, on top of mask technique, there are all of the physical traditions and confinements of acting in the Commedia style: *passagios*, an 8'x8' playing area, giving and receiving focus, not to mention the acrobatic and physical comedy expectations latent to a farcical acting!

Then there is the other side of Commedia: spontaneity. It is a form that is so reliant on improvisation and a sense of play. The audience must always believe that "anything can happen" and then be rewarded when they find this belief to be true! However, in order to achieve this sense, there needs to be an understanding and trust between all of the actors, as well as a sense of camaraderie. There are very few things that compare to the joy of watching an ensemble play together effectively and creatively!

So the question remains: "Where to start?." With the acting styles class, mask technique will most likely be best, as it is a "style" of acting. Beginning exercises to include "The Villain" (warm-up, openness to suggestion), "Stop turn twizzle" (same reasons). Then will have class pick a mask, go over "Schirle's Ss" sheet, and then go right into birth exercise, stressing the initial presentation of the mask to the audience and moving at mask speed. Following that, a brief introduction to Commedia Characters.

For the "workshop," give a brief history of Commedia, including a description of the stage layout, and an introduction to *passagios*, entrances, takes, etc. Depending on number of people, will break into groups of two or three and have them work on the "Conflicting Wants" lazzi, or the lazzi of the flea, letting them work for 20 minutes or so, and then show it, work for another 20 minutes, adding some of the style into it, and then show it, until we're out of time!

DAY 1:

Acting class (12 participants)

Began with warm up, went well. Think that concept of "the villain" and "Stop, turn, twizzle" made some sort of sense, and got the blood moving, if nothing else. Following that, a brief introduction to mask "rules" (care involved, life of mask, no touching mask on your face), and then went over "Schirle's Ss." *In future, may be better to hand this out 2nd day or so- too much to grasp before you've actually acted in/watched mask performance.* Then went into "birth exercise." First group went well, had some very nice moments of discovery/exploration, as did the second group. Very interesting to watch actors who don't come from a physical background inhabit a mask. Body awareness is much less, which often weakens the mask, as the entire body is not connected to it. Nonetheless, they are also far less worried about doing it "right" and therefore a lot of the movement and impulses seem more "natural". After "birth," had time move to two-mask interaction of wanting the same object. There were some excellent moments of discovery and interaction. Attempted to coach them vocally within the scene- "open your mouth" "don't turn away from us" etc. Think it helped the class see how intricate mask acting can be, as well as how amplified certain things become with the mask on. *Arlecchino mask was very alive, although hard to follow sometimes because it is so dark (especially indoors). Pulcinella had some great moments, but had less zeros. Capitano mask (Larry's) works well, although chain is too long and clacks against mask. Teeth work very well to connect mask to face. Venetian leather masks are relatively lifeless, but could be animated with paint...* After that exercise, went into a brief introduction of the commedia characters, to be continued...

Plan for next class...

- reintroduction of characters with masks
- Character stance/zero work (using "Garibaldi")
- Pantalone/Arlecchino scene ("Coming!")

Workshop (4 participants)

Started with quick overview of Commedia History and then ran thru some of the physical limitations/traditions of the style. Quickly ran over the

characters once again, had them choose one, and then jumped into the "conflicting wants" lazzi/scene, assigning one group of a Pantalone and a Columbina, and another group of a Capitano and a Brighella. Then let them work for 20+ minutes, with no instruction or involvement of myself.

Pantalone/Columbina created a very funny scene of Pantalone wanting to sleep with Columbina, who would of course have nothing to do with him. Was especially funny because of their physical differences (Pantalone- very skinny and lithe, while Columbina was rounder and more womanly). Offered up some suggestions of clarification and some opportunities to explore.

Capitano/Brighella scene also very funny- Brighella was stealing apples from a store Capitano was guarding. Capitano especially grasped character and started off with a good idea of the physical habits and stance of the Capitano. Also gave them suggestions/lazzis to explore. Brighella had to leave, so Capitano and I continued work with his character/physicalization, including a "lazzi of the hand stuck in the pants" which was very funny.

Pantalone/Columbina scene worked for another 20+ minutes, incorporating what had been discussed. Resulting piece was cleaner and funnier, one step closer to the style...

Plans for Day 2:

- Continue work on scenes
- depending on additional participants, exploration of "flea lazzi" scene
- incorporation/work on looks and passagios

DAY 2

Workshop (3 and 2 participants) videotaped

Set up backdrop outside (which instantly blew down), *would be good to broaden the base of the pole anchors to solidify backdrop*. Set actors to work on "lazzi of the flea," setting scene in a t-shirt folding factory, Capitano as boss, Arlecchina and Coviella as workers. Watched them work through a window- *very interesting!* Loss of sound reveals physical action (and need for gigantic proportion) even more. Capitano (same from day 1) had some interesting zeros, and all three began to subconsciously work on takes/focus throwing... After performing it, discussed focus giving/taking with looks, and then worked through scene, beat by beat, adding looks, cues, and physical amplification. Resulted in clarification of scene and scene also became much funnier! Addition then of passagios was extremely beneficial. *It became very clear that by doing all these things there was already a built in crowd gatherer- throwing and receiving focus, when it worked, was crystal clear, as it needed to be when commedia performers were competing against the yelling and screaming of a plaza full of vendors!*

Moved indoors and continued work on the Pantalone/Columbina scene from Day 1. Walked through it, eliminating some elements while adding other lazzi. Was especially fun because Pantalone was very physically capable, and able to at least attempt some minor acrobatics, using the good natured actress playing Columbina as a base. Then also ran scene, integrating looks/focus throws and then passagios. *It's amazing how out of place the Commedia-esque movements look in an indoor environment, while they looked almost completely at home outdoors... Another testament to the fact that true Commedia is an outdoor form... Looking at work, may have been a better idea to start first day explaining the appetites and improvising scenes in them with appetites as main drive*

Plans for Day 3:

- work on physicalization of individual character
- addition of costume
- exploration of appetites
- continual work on scenes

DAY 3

Acting Class

Started with "the villain" and "the showers"- good exercises to get the blood moving and to stress connection to the ground. Also begins linking mind with external object, nice transition to acceptance of mask into the body. Reiterated Commedia characters, using masks this time, also mentioning status this time. Then went into "Status Party" game- *very interesting to see how some people are natural #1s, and simply cannot be #4s.* Also talked about the interest/difficulty in playing a #2 or #3- how does one order some around while at the same time completely succumbing to the will of others. #2 almost becomes an apprentice to #1 at times, learning to be in charge. Also explained how the status of the characters in relation to each other does not change, giving the audience the pleasure of seeing the high and mighty #1 lose status and then try to regain it. Next, we worked on the "Jailer exercise" (Sleeping guard has keys, #1, #2, #3 try to get them). **Very** funny and well explored. *The characters/actors need a task to perform, early on. Write a plot so they don't have to think of one, and can focus more on character/opportunity!* Then went on to discuss Pantalone/Arlecchino relationship, and went into "I'm Coming" exercise. *Exercise is tricky, especially so early on. May be better to save it for later. into study.* Finally ended with "flea lazzi" exercise, *too much setup time to be effective/funny- a cool down game would have served better!* Ended with Commedia's ties to modern equivalents.

Overall Notes:

With only two 1.25 hour slots, to teach a basic understanding of Commedia, although the masks are integral to the art form, one would be better off starting from status and character driven improvisation, having the students explore modern day equivalents of the masks. This allows them to focus less on the use of the mask, and to further explore the concepts that were truly responsible for Commedia's overwhelming success: Character and Spontaneity.

The other approach would be to focus strictly on masks and the physical commitment involved in the use of them. Then, however, it becomes more about working with masks, and less about the play and excitement of Commedia.

Workshop (3 people)

Continued work on "Lazzi of the flea" with Capitano/Arlecchina/Coviella-clarifying beats, simplifying, cleaning. Scene's in good shape. Discussed plan for tomorrow, i.e. performing the scene once realistically, then once with mask to show different styles, etc. *These workshops would ideally be held over a break period of time, as students' schedules are very tight. Best work happens when they have awhile to work on it!*

DAY 4

Final performance went very well- had initial warm-up with actors, putting lazzis/scenes in an order that made some sort of sense. After running it a couple of times, had a few minutes to gather some chairs, and then did the performance. Very well received- audience seemed to really enjoy it, and actors did a marvelous job.

Final observations...

-Character and appetite are really the way to initially approach the work. If the actors know these, scenes will form organically, allowing the actors to play more, and worry about "story-writing" less

-As far as scheduling, it would be ideal to have a good solid week of 2-3 hour classes to assemble a good amount of material

-Participation was limited, but those who did show up were fantastic and eager to work! A real joy to work with such dedicated actors...

-One of the main realizations in watching the performance: *The majority of waiting for things to happen was caused by movement through space.* Acting on a true commedia stage(8'x8') would allow scenes to be less about movement from here to there, and more about direct confrontation/conflict

-another good initial thing to do would be to pick out one or two costume pieces the actors could rehearse and then perform in- would allow for less damage (rips, tears, abrasions) to real clothes, and would help actor really get into character

-a backdrop that was stable in strong gales would be most welcome!

-A wholly exciting and wonderful teaching/learning experience- one to repeat!