

**Approaching Aesthetic Positions for Neo-Commedia (1946-2016): A
Dramaturgical Investigation, Mindful of the Potential for Local, Social
and Political Relevance.**

“To make theatre for the present with the angels and demons of the past”

Carlo Boso

(Simioni: 1983)

Vol I: Thesis and Bibliography

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**This thesis is submitted to the University of Edge Hill in partial fulfilment of the
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Declaration

This thesis is entirely my own work and has not been submitted, in full, or in part, for the award of a higher degree at any other educational institution.

Abstract

This thesis articulates a range of dramaturgic and aesthetic positions within the contemporary theatrical form termed Neo-Commedia, being the twentieth and twenty-first century reinvention and re-imagining of the Renaissance and Baroque European theatre form Commedia dell'Arte. Mixed-method research involving existing sources, when combined with structured interviews with current practitioners, yielded information which is presented in three ways: the identification and critical comparison of existing academic sources concerning the genre's founders; qualitative conclusions on current practice drawn from the interviews; and critical dramaturgic hypotheses which emerged from interrogating the previous two strands. It produces an evaluative study of praxis between 1946 and 2016, making the case that there is no single canonical definition of the genre, but rather a series of inter-connected artist led practices. Sections 2 and 3 contain case studies of the genre's originators, and their immediate disciples. I identify Giorgio Strehler, Jacques Lecoq, Giovanni Poli and Carlo Mazzone-Clementi as the originators, and Dario Fo, Carlo Boso, Antonio Fava, Joan Schirle and Ronlin Foreman as significant second-generation practitioners. Sections 4,5 and 6 explore a range of dramaturgic positions within Neo-Commedia, and then deal with dramaturgic conclusions involving both mask-use within the genre and the evolution of new generic critical positions. As the form is complex and still evolving there will be anomalies present as well as correlations, and I aim to make these transparent to the reader.

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The conclusions drawn within my thesis are not necessarily those of the interviewees.

I dedicate this thesis to all those involved in the ongoing conversation as to the nature of Commedia dell'Arte and Neo-Commedia, then and now.

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Section 1: Prologue

The notion of a 'tradition' of Commedia dell'Arte as an unbroken line from the Renaissance to now is highly contested. There are certainly theatre forms that have, over several hundred years, evolved from the masked roots of the renaissance to the current day, and these include the UK's Seasonal Pantomime and Punch and Judy puppet show. To state that 'Nor are its techniques forgotten. They are still with us, for example in the work of actors from the Lecoq school, and in the...live performance of Dario Fo.' (Frost and Yarrow, 1990: 8), is to make two huge assumptions: that today's techniques of performance are identical to those from history, and that there is an unbroken line of technique existing from then till now. Live performance, especially a historical one with an element of improvisation included, is a culturally mediated existential event, and hence unrepeatable. All one can be sure of is that today a self-selecting group of theatre practitioners adopted the outward forms of the past in order to produce contemporary theatre. A picture of how they do this is the matter of this thesis.

The creation of Neo-Commedia performance is therefore characterised by an artist-led mediation between the potentially competing concerns of entertainment and ideology and carried out through the deployment of both masked and unmasked roles based on historical Renaissance social types. Negotiating between historical forms and current performance sensibilities is a feature of the practice, which sometimes challenges and sometimes ignores historical events, often creating effective performances out of historical mismatches and ontological errors. The dynamic tension between the strictures of imprecise historical knowledge and the contemporary urge to create theatre is the area where Neo-Commedia emerges.

1.1 Neo-Commedia Aesthetics

Aesthetics are constructed rules concerning art that apply to both to its definition and, by extension, the ability to reproduce it (Dutton, 2001: 210–212). This study identifies the defining features of Neo-Commedia performance, and the processes and artistic, philosophical or political positions taken by its creators, during their creation. I am indebted to the body of critical theory assembled by Dr Millie Taylor to interrogate the cognate genre of Musical Theatre, foregrounding the genre’s polymodal performance practices, which is equally applicable to Neo-Commedia. She adopts post-war cultural theorist Theodor Adorno’s (1903–1969) position that human experience ultimately underlies the formulation of aesthetic rules (Taylor, 2012). Dr Sally Cook’s adoption of V. S. Ramachandran’s explanation of aesthetics (Ramachandran, 2011) within her discussion of the agency of full masks (Cook, 2012) supports this position and places the creation of aesthetics within the realm of evolutionary neuroscience, thus literally also placing aesthetic judgement within the human body. I do not see this as a reductive argument, but one that integrates innate visceral and physical reactions into Neo-Commedia’s dramaturgic practice. This position will be developed in Section 5. The aesthetic frame is concerned, therefore, with identifying those areas of human experience which Neo-Commedia performance communicates effectively, and in which it excels. As a predominantly comic form, can Neo-Commedia occupy performance territory that both includes ‘non-utilitarian pleasure’ (Dutton, 2001) and more reflective, ideological or didactic audience experience? In developing an aesthetic position for Neo-Commedia, Denis Dutton’s seven universal aesthetic signatures (virtuosity, non-utilitarian pleasure, style, critical response, imitation, focus on human experience and imagination) became highly valuable signposts (Dutton, 2001: 210–212). These signatures inform my research as guidelines but are not applied rigidly as my overall purpose is to illuminate heuristic praxis

within the genre. An indicative correspondence between his seven signatures and their occurrence in Neo-Commedia is shown below:

Table 1.1: The Neo-Commedia manifestations of Dutton’s seven aesthetic signatures.

Dutton’s Seven Aesthetic Signatures		
Aesthetic Signature		Neo-Commedia Manifestation
1	Virtuosity	The skill and rigour of the performance and performers, as practised by them, and experienced by the audience.
2	Non-utilitarian pleasure	The audience’s visceral response, enjoyment and delight in the performance, and the artists’ response to creating that performance, which is experienced through a technical appreciation of the visual, aural and dramatic patterns of theatrical performance.
3	Style	Through half masks, societal hierarchies, comic Gestus, improvisation, lazzi, aural and lingual variety and ensemble performance. (The immediate outward recognisable characteristics of the genre.)
4	Critical response	How the practitioners and audiences create discourse about their art and engage with it. (This thesis is part of this process.)
5	Imitation	How the form is learned and passed on. (The area of process focussed on predominantly by its trainers, but also explored by the genre’s innovators.)
6	Focus on Human Experience	The fundamental connection between the performance and the audience, with the drama composed entirely on emotional

		and reactive responses to recognised human traits: dramatic mimesis.
7	Focus on Human Imagination	The extrapolated fictional events that make up the drama, grounded in (6) the representation of human experience.

The incidence of particular practices and the relative value assigned to them by each practitioner (as detailed in my interview methodology) is one of the two cornerstones upon which I base my aesthetic definitions; the other cornerstone being specific praxis-based observations by each practitioner. These individually constructed positions often serve as conceptual links between existing practices, or show evidence of original and evolving practice, as in Adriano Lurissevich’s statement that links the genres of comedy and tragedy:

The irony is that humans are a disaster, but we can do nothing about it, but there is a need at the end to forgive humanity... Commedia is tragedy without catharsis. Somehow to me Commedia is far more tragic than tragedy. In Classical Tragedy at the end you have... the catharsis, you get purified... somehow you get de-responsibilised... all your sins are taken away... with tragedy at the end you are purified, somehow, somehow... but for me it is far more tragic admitting that humans are a disaster. (Lurissevitch, Appendix A, 2015: 91)

The aesthetic positions within this thesis, in the main, function as the theoretical bedrock upon which Neo-Commedia dramaturgy exists; dramaturgy being the practice which actualises aesthetic theory into live performance. Amongst those interviewed there is considerable variation in aesthetic position, which, I argue, leads to considerable variations between individual practices.

1.2 Dramaturgy

Throughout the thesis I will employ Bertolt Brecht's definition of dramaturgy, as it includes the application of purpose, which, allied to fundamental aesthetic principles, he places very firmly in ideological terms. Brecht's description of a dramaturge, and by extension the function of dramaturgy as a methodology, is as a term fundamental to both the process of creating a performance, and also the analysis of a performance text. To him a dramaturge is:

A critical facilitator with an inherently collaborative sensibility driven by an ideological commitment to realize the ideas of the philosopher in practical terms. (Quoted in Sigal, 2016: 15)

Brecht's definition implies that there is a philosophy or a purpose behind performance, in this case Neo-Commedia. Dramaturgy, by extending Brecht's definition, becomes the realised practice of a dramaturge, whose job description, therefore, relates to critical and collaborative activity, facilitating the creation of performance embodying abstract, political or philosophical thought. As will become apparent in Section 3, a significant group of current practitioners believe that Commedia functions best when it is contemporarily relevant; negotiating between its structure, and the expressed ideas selected as fuel for that structure. Dramaturgic activity, for example, within Neo-Commedia could initially be defined as a collaborative process aimed at negotiating the relationship between the ostensibly comic form and the purpose for which it is being created, through a set of aesthetic constraints. How the collaborative process unfolds within Neo-Commedia is discussed in Section 4, relating to the terms 'ensemble' and 'capocomico' (literal translation: head comic). To apply Brecht's dictum to my three identified models and practices of Neo-Commedia purpose (entertainment, engagement and ideology) it becomes necessary to see the entertainment position taken by some practitioners as an ideological stance. As with the process of dramaturgy, this thesis also adopts Eugenio

Barba's dictum that an analysis of generic praxis will "try to furnish the practitioner with tools or methods that would enable him to develop his art" (Barba, 2009: 72).

1.3 Research Methodology

My practical experience within the field Commedia informs the research and interview questions¹. I am, in effect, contextualising my own experience with other practitioners inside the genre. It is axiomatic that the effects of my own physical-theatre training, taken in conjunction with an immersion in the emerging field of academic Commedia dell'Arte studies, has shaped a tacit and practical body of knowledge, giving me a position of informed bias within my embodied knowledge. This knowledge has been informed by, amongst others, training in Decroux technique mime under Desmond Jones and Anne Dennis; Clowning with Phillipe Gaulier, Franki Anderson, Simon McBurney and Jonathan Kay; Mask performance with Intriplicate Mime and John Wright; Improvisation with Ben Benison and Ric Morgan (both from Keith Johnstone's seminal company Theatre Machine), and Commedia dell'Arte with Barry Grantham, Carlo Boso, Marcello Magni and Feruccio Soleri. In terms of inherited practice, I exist as a synthesis of the Piccolo Theatre of Milan, Lecoq and Poli dramaturgies, with additional training from autodidacts Anderson and Kay, and eccentric dancer, Barry Grantham.

The data underpinning much of my research is derived from interviewing current practitioners, and how it was gathered and interrogated is explained in Section 1.4, immediately following this section. My interview questions were initially conceived within the range of my own experience. The process of information gathering, therefore, became a negotiation between this experience and that of each interviewee. My own praxis emerged as one amongst many but was invaluable as a dynamic reference point in developing an understanding of the wider field. Practitioners of Neo-Commedia are a distinct micro-culture within the far larger world of performance, so this thesis is also

¹ I performed in Barry Grantham's Intention Company 1982–1983, with Unfortunati 1985–1988, with TAG Teatro di Venezia in 1990, ran The Fabulous Old Spot Theatre Company between 2004 and 2013, and The Fabulous Lancashire Revels between 2014 and 2017.

offered as a study in the “relational practices, common values and beliefs, and shared experiences for the purpose of helping *insiders* (cultural members) and *outsiders* (cultural strangers) better understand the culture” (Maso: 2001). With regard to Gubrium and Holstein’s term ‘Idiom’ (1997) which, as cited by Silverman encompasses “both the analytical preferences... and the use of vocabularies, investigatory styles and ways of writing” (Silverman: 2011:23), I am investigating contemporary practice through ethnomethodology, placing value on exploring individual praxis through interviews and field recordings.

1.4 Research Method: Commedia Cards, Interview Method for Section 3

My interview process began with creating a series of statements about Commedia dell'Arte written on a set of prompt cards (Appendix C), based on my then current understanding of Neo-Commedia. I presented each interviewee with these cards and asked them to rank these statements in order of importance as they related to their practice, and to then explain why they had positioned each card as they had.

Interviewee responses generated a considerable body of data, which in its entirety represents an archive of praxis for Neo-Commedia (Appendix C). The individual statements on each card, however, were the statements around which the interviewees and I negotiated. In order that both their answers and lists of priorities did not merely reflect my own praxis, and hence become defined by it, it became necessary to modify my method, and to allow interviewees to break out from the structuring implications implicit within my definitions by adding new cards or rejecting existing cards. This enabled each practitioner to create a card set that best represented their praxis, whilst simultaneously adding to the overall set of initial propositions, enriching the research and expanding our understanding of current practice.

What emerged, as my research developed, was that the initial research position I had taken was very clearly that of a student of Carlo Boso (Crick, 2014, Appendix A: 11–22). In relation to other practitioners, I followed his rejection of the hyper-directed formality of *Il Servatore di due Padroni* and placed strong influence on Commedia's structural dramaturgy; on the presence of three male Zanni archetypes (Harlequin and Brighella as second and first Zannis respectively from the Piccolo Theatre model, to which he added the generic role simply called *Zanni* as derived from Giovanni Poli); and on an inherent flexibility of the form to encompass a wider range of social types and positions, as required by the purposes and performance qualities of contemporaneously engaged Commedia.

Within my own set of research definitions, I had defined, not an objective position, but a statement of individual praxis, highly indebted to Carlo Boso.

From a starting position of forty-two statements, spread over two research questions, I ended up with an additional eighty-five statements. This outcome alone, whilst allowing for subtleties within the original categories, very firmly indicates that there were at least twice as many possibilities again as I had originally hypothesised. The range of values expressed within my sample created some issues of classification, and whilst some areas of common practice are revealed, there are also enough variations for it become necessary to include specific case studies within my thesis. My initial dramaturgic position, as a self-defined follower of Carlo Boso, was revealed to cover only half the possible territory. This thesis does not just present an indicative range of dramaturgic and aesthetic practice within the genre, but through the process of adding and subtracting cards, will also allow future researchers to add to this branch of knowledge.

The relationships and patterns of influence between those interviewed are expressed in the following diagram:

Creating the interview card sets allowed me, as a practitioner, to redefine my own practice in relation to those interviewed, and to be able to propose, as research conclusions, a range of synthesised and inclusive models of contemporary practice. A major research finding is that there is no one universal or correct model of Neo-Commedia; instead there exist clusters of artists sharing use of the term and, beneath its banner, a variety of related training regimes and performance pedagogies. These many and varied self-determined practices are all presented in some manner as Commedia, and all share a degree of validation within the sphere of professional public performance².

² My sample of interviewees was deliberately chosen from practitioners who eschew theme parks, historical recreation, and US-style Renaissance Fairs as their main area of practice and, instead, make their practice from negotiating the efficacy of Commedia as a living and relevant form of theatre suitable for a contemporary audience. For a description of Renaissance Fair practitioners see Rudlin and Crick (2001) pages 104–113 and for US-based historical re-enactment see Chapter 48 in / *Sebastiani, Commedia Geeks*, Chaffee and Crick, 2015: 451–456.

1.5 Epistemology and Text

Commedia dell'Arte can be many things to many people (Gordon-Bland in Chaffee and Crick, 2015: 3) which often leads to concurrent multiple conceptions, which overlap and frequently contradict each other. As Professor Gordon-Bland asserts (ibid.), there can be a strong tendency to see in it what you are looking for. To circumnavigate this issue, I am concentrating on the 'why' of each practitioner and the 'how' of the way they go about achieving their ends.

The nature and status of historical Commedia dell'Arte performance is complicated because, despite blossoming in the early modern period at roughly the same time as Shakespeare, its hey-day has left us very few literary texts as evidence. We have texts, but they are mere scenarios, recorded as sketches of the sequential actions required to create a live performance³. Vito Pandolfi (1969: 154) is of the opinion is that legacy material indicates a performance method that allowed actors to evade clerical censorship. Over time, this evolved into the Italian aesthetic of the actor-author, a position also argued by Joseph Farrell (2013: 58). Examining the original scenarios requires overcoming a bias towards written text, which inherently possesses the quality of repeatability, in favour of what they imply or reveal about performed improvisation, which requires the rarer and far more challenging quality of virtuosity.

The 1976 unpublished PhD thesis by Edward Leon Sostek, from the University of Iowa, titled *Commedia dell'Arte: a study in dramatic form* is still the most precise description of a proposed historical method. He takes the Commedia scenario writer Flaminio Scala's one published play, *Il Finto Marito* (The False Husband: 1618), and using information drawn from contemporary treatises on improvisation, rhetoric and acting, compares it with the scenario version of the text. Whilst the aesthetic conclusion he draws

³ Available in English translations with commentaries: Salerno, 1967; Cotticelli, Francesco, Anne Goodrick Heck and Thomas Heck, 2001; Andrews, 2008 and Crohn Schmitt, 2014.

is that Scala's scenarios represent the same degree of artistic sophistication possessed by Shakespeare or his contemporaries, he also makes a highly convincing case for the practice of actors having a repertoire of adaptable stock speeches, held in memory or in their *Zibaldone* (actor's notebook; Appendix B), being a practical and practicable performance method. He presents Commedia dell'Arte as a discrete and exotic Italian theatre no longer, but as a valid and worthwhile manifestation of early modern theatre. As such practice does not currently exist within theatre as a training practice or performing methodology, though the US-based 'long form impro' style shares some characteristics (Fotis, 2014), it creates the situation whereby any attempts at contemporary Commedia must, by necessity, invent their own synthetic and syncretic performance methodology. Neo-Commedia might usefully be thought of as a series of dynamic negotiations between an artist's existing practice and a toolkit provided by their existing knowledge of the genre. In this light, any suggestion that Neo-Commedia is a direct product of an existing tradition becomes unsupportable. It is a reconstructed genre or tradition and "insofar as there is such reference to a historic past, the peculiarity of 'invented' tradition is that the continuity with it is largely fictitious" (Hobsbawm and Ranger, 1983: 1–2). This position is significantly supported by Italian practitioners Fabio Mangolini (Chaffee and Crick, 2015: 403–404) and Dr Giulia Filacanapa (Chaffee and Crick, 2015: 379). From 1945 in Northern Italy, the genre named by Giulia Filacanapa as Neo-Commedia was created. Although modelled on the historical Commedia dell'Arte, its purpose now was entirely contemporary. The dramaturgy associated with the four key practitioners fundamental to the creation of this new genre are the subject of the following section.

Note on terminology. An indicative glossary will be found in Appendix B, dealing with new terms derived from current artistic practice, the Italian vocabulary used within the genre, which is now part of practitioners' common usage, as well as other conventions,

which may have relevance. It is worth noting here that Judith Chaffee, my co-editor, in the *Routledge Companion to Commedia dell'Arte* (Chaffee and Crick, 2015), maintains that all the characters should be referred to as Masks (capital M) whether they wear a mask or not, and the mask-object itself is with a lower case 'm'. I will employ this convention and will try to avoid confusing terminology such as the Mask of Harlequin had a black mask.

1.6 A Brief Backstory: Pre-1946.

Attempts to recreate, revive or reinvent Commedia dell'Arte were, of course, made before 1946, (notably by Jacques Copeau and Susanna Bing). I have chosen this date as a starting point for my thesis for several reasons; partly because the four artists I identify as founders are still present within living memory of the second, and in some cases the third, generation of its practitioners, and partly because the end of the Second World War signalled an artistic freedom and optimism within which Commedia, among other art forms, could develop and flourish. This thesis presents a picture of generic practice at the beginning of the 21st century, linking current practitioners to their main influences, and allowing them to express how their own practice is situated.

These four founders, of course, did not create their practice in an artistic vacuum. Giovanni Poli, for example, mentions Stanislavski's method acting as a key element in his practice, and Lecoq traces his influence in a direct line to Jacques Copeau (1879-1949) who, "considered by many as the fore-father of a new way of making theatre" (Sartori, 2015:140), experimented with using comic masks in contemporary contexts with "Les Copiaus" in 1924, as part of this new approach (Frost and Yarrow, 1990:20-30). Copeau also trained Charles Dullin (1885-1949) who then inspired a young Pierre-Louis Duchatre to find out more about Commedia, resulting in the 1925 book (translated into English in 1929) *The Italian Comedy*, a work of seminal scholarship on Commedia dell'Arte. In Russia, Konstantin Mikaleševski (1886-1944) published a first draft in 1925 in Meyerhold's *Journal of Dr Dapertutto*, what was later to become the book *La Commedia dell'Arte* (1927) (published under the nom de plume of Constant Mic). Meyerhold himself experimented with Commedia dell'Arte, both in terms of creating work from a scenario rather than a full script, and in the physical preparation of an actor (Frost and Yarrow, 1990: 18-19). Etienne Decroux was also a pupil of Copeau, who trained Marisa Flach in his corporeal Mime, and who was one of the artists responsible for movement training for Giorgio Strehler.

Copeau's influences included Maurice Sand's illustrated book on Commedia *Masques et Bouffons* (1860)⁴ and a friendship with Edward Gordon Craig (1872-1966) whose theatrical periodical *The Mask* (1908-1929) proselytised for, amongst other things, a return to the spirit of the historical Commedia dell'Arte. It is within this reflexive web of practice, influence and inspiration that the founders of Neo-Commedia operated.

Although the end of the Second World War can be seen as catalysing artistic expression, and the war itself potentially as a temporary blockage in artistic development, if there was one single event that signified the start of the current wave of reinvention, it was the meeting of Jacques Lecoq and Amleto Sartori at the University of Padua. Lecoq saw the masks produced by Amleto Sartori for a production of Pirandello's *Six Characters in Search of an Author*, directed by Gianfranco di Bosio in 1948 (Sartori, 2015:143). He subsequently invited Sartori, the then Professor of Sculpture to his classes where his students were busy making their own version of Copeau's Noble Mask, and "with great respect and some compassion" (ibid: 144) Sartori noted the masks were Neutral only in name and announced he would take over the mask making. Later Lecoq brought Sartori to the attention of Giorgio Strehler and since then Sartori masks have been associated with the Piccolo Theatre of Milan's canonical production of *Arlecchino, Servant of Two Masters*. Lecoq took Sartori masks with him when founded his school in Paris, and Mazzone-Clementi took a set of Sartori masks with him when he went to America. The intense focus on developing Commedia through corporal acting or *mime dramatique* (ibid: 143) post-war is arguably different from the reinvention of Copeau, because of the specialist artistic expertise introduced by Amleto Sartori. The design and finish of the Sartori masks arguably presented both actor and audience member with the ideal Comedic vehicle for the genre.

⁴ Available in English as Sands, M. (1915), *The History of the Harlequinade*. London: Benjamin Blom.

Section 2: Founders

2.1 The Founders, Introduction

Of the practitioners involved in the reconstruction of Commedia dell'Arte in the twentieth century, pre-eminent are four individuals: Jacques Lecoq, Giorgio Strehler, Carlo Mazzone-Clementi, and Giovanni Poli. The work of Lecoq and Strehler is well documented, but it is only recently that the significance of Mazzone-Clementi in the US (Towsen, 2011: Internet and Schirle, 2015: 386–395) and Poli's work as a director and theorist have been recognised (Filacanapa, 2013 & 2015). Each one developed their own dramaturgic position, creating an evolving artistic platform that has been adapted and nurtured by their pupils and their descendants. Each created their own praxis and, validated by international artistic and commercial success, brought the genre out of Italy into the eyes of an international community. Through artistic and pedagogic variance, their competing and complementary dramaturgic approaches gave both a richness to the developing form and an element of confusion. To deal with this epistemological confusion, Dr Giulia Filacanapa (2015) coined the neologism Neo-Commedia and I gratefully follow her lead in this. A problem facing Commedia from its post-war genesis to date has been one of precise definition: all these practitioners stated clearly that what they were producing was not Commedia dell'Arte, but still the label stuck. The questions I pose here are, firstly, what did these practitioners think they were creating, and, secondly, how did this influence their dramaturgical practice.

The purposes, which fuelled these four practitioners' explorations, differed and, although Strehler's production seems initially canonical, it does not contain all the possibilities offered by these early explorations. Strehler and Lecoq considered Commedia to be only a small part of their overall practice. Lecoq, though initially a director, became primarily a movement trainer whose life work was to develop an actor's movement skills and capabilities. Strehler was a theatre director responsible for the whole repertory of the

Piccolo Theatre of Milan, of which *The Servant of Two Masters*, as well as other Goldoni plays, was but one element. Mazzone-Clementi was both an actor and a trainer, and part of Lecoq's first performance company, whilst Giovanni Poli was a theatre director who concentrated mainly on re-imagining the figure of the Zanni and developing a training regime to bring him to life. Each one's overall purpose guided their approach, and it is from their artistic differences that the genre developed its dramaturgic divergences.

One aspect of the contradictory dynamics emerging in the field was summed up by Dario Fo who, when asked about Giorgio Strehler's famous production of *Arlecchino, Servant of Two Masters*, replied as follows:

The objection I most commonly hear advanced about this work is that it has little of the savour of improvisation, but rather that it goes like clockwork, like a comic mechanism with pre-programmed timing, or alternately that it has too much precision and too little liberty of imagination (Fo, 1997: 27).

Firstly, Fo's interlocutor assumes that that this production, being related to Commedia dell'Arte, ought to contain improvisation. Secondly, historical Commedia dell'Arte may indeed have contained elements of performed improvisation, but Goldoni wrote his play at a historical juncture when improvisation was losing its appeal, and so comes down through history as a complete script, *ergo* there is no reason to include improvisation. The play, however, existed at the historical cusp where the artistic value of improvised comedy was contested, and Goldoni saw as his mission to remove the worst excesses of improvised dialogue. By replacing the ephemeral art of the improviser with repeatable dialogue, Goldoni left behind a recipe for the potent brew that had been the Commedia dell'Arte. Giorgio Strehler, in collaboration with others, including Dario Fo and Jacques Lecoq, managed to reassemble the ingredients Goldoni left behind and in doing so provided a performance and training blueprint for the future. Strehler's mediation between the historicity of the text, his own purpose, and the sensibilities of a contemporary audience produced one of the longest running plays ever (1946 to current).

Fo's questioner was asking about a historical skill not present in the contemporary production and, whilst Strehler's production was certainly not purposed towards improvisation, it did possess many other elements associated with historical Commedia dell'Arte. His aim was to create an impression for the audience of what Commedia dell'Arte might have been like, whilst simultaneously providing high quality theatrical entertainment for the post-war Italian public. The ideological position he was operating from was that of celebrating Italy's cultural diversity after the rule of Fascism. This was not a simple task: Joseph Farrell notes "as late as 1945, the critic Silvio D'Amico had to resist the view that the director was a creature of fascism, and should be jettisoned with the regime."⁵ The Piccolo Theatre of Milan, though a *Teatro Stabile*⁶ (building-based repertory theatre) and municipally funded, side-stepped D'Amico's position by fixing their theatre's goal as public service with a social and moral function, accessible to all. The Piccolo was to be "an art theatre for everyone" and that "theatre is a public service like the subway"⁷. These practitioners did not aim in any way to recreate historical Commedia but were concerned with adapting or translating it for contemporary audiences, in the context of wider cultural activity. This quartet were not revivers of a dying form, they were re-creators of a long-dead form, reinvigorating contemporary theatre with paradigms from the past, repurposed for the twentieth century and beyond.

⁵ In his book *La regia teatrale* (Theatre Directing; Roma, Belardetti, 1947) quoted in Farrell, Joseph, Chapter 24 "Actors, Authors and Directors"; 269–277 in Farrell and Puppa 2006.

⁶ The Piccolo Theatre of Milan was a *Teatro Stabile*, labelled as such to distinguish it from the more prevalent type of more ad-hoc travelling theatre (*Teatro Viaggiante*) that flourished in Italy before the rise of Fascism.

⁷ Article in *Avanti*, 25 April 1946, quoted by Carlo Dilonardo, *Paolo Grassi: il valore civile del teatro*, (Roma, Arduino Sacco, 2009), p.18. Quoted in Farrell, Joseph: Chapter 24 "Actors, Authors and Directors" (269–277) in Farrell and Puppa 2006.

2.2 Conceptual Links: *Stabile* and *Viaggiante*

Before the Second World War, a considerable part of Italian theatre was composed of itinerant troupes, known as *Viaggiante*, whose repertoire was largely self-composed, privileging the skills of the actors over canonical literature and characterised by the presentation of locally flavoured dramas at short notice. The family troupe to which Franca Rame, Dario Fo's life and artistic partner, belonged was of this type. Fabio Mangolini (2015, Interview, Appendix A: 140) also describes how members of his own extended family, in a similar troupe, sourced local material for a show to be performed that evening. The Commedia troupe known as the Family Carrara, now settled in Vicenza, used to travel with their own theatre (Titino Carrara, 2015: Internet) These can be seen as vestigial examples of a previous more 'Italian' way of doing theatre.

The *Viaggiante*, however, were largely apolitical. As performers who made a living from interacting with local communities, it is hard to imagine widespread political critical feedback being universally enjoyed by the audiences⁸. For a theatre company ingratiating oneself within a local community as entertainers can be seen, employing Gramscian terminology, as being akin to 'folkloric' activities; supporting the existing hegemony through political inaction, and the agency of consensual control. *Teatro Viaggiante*, therefore, does not usually examine or interrogate a locality in any ideological way, merely referencing significant features, according to the dictates of entertainment, pleasure and financial gain, and tacitly supporting the agents of hegemony.

The founders of the Piccolo Theatre of Milan, Paolo Grassi and Giorgio Strehler, were certainly opposed to the hegemonic power embodied in the recently deceased fascist regime yet operated out of a centralised *Teatro Stabile* to fulfil their goals. They moved

⁸ A position contemporaneously supported by my experience with the former company the Fabulous Old Spot Theatre Company: repeat bookings were determined by how well we had entertained an audience, not how far we had politically challenged them.

towards a style of theatre that the peripatetic *Viaggiante* was not equipped to create: engaging and popular theatre with excellent production values. Strehler took the outward form of *Commedia dell'Arte* and gave it a high art treatment (Mangolini, 2015, Interview, Appendix A: 138) imposing a director's vision on this popular actor-centric style.

Paradoxically, many people inspired by this production, are also those who seek to restore the actor's primacy. Strehler, by taking the best example of popular theatre from Italy's past, and emphasising the social and economic power of its historical class divisions, in comic form and on the public stage, was putting both the old way of making theatre and the old social order under public scrutiny. Although *The Servant of Two Masters* emerged from the *Stabile* system, the genre it helped give birth to is contemporaneously largely interpreted through the *Viaggianti* ethos.

2.3 Giorgio Strehler (1921–1997) and *Arlecchino Il Servatore di due Padroni* (*Harlequin, A Servant of Two Masters*)

The preeminent Italian director of his time....and ensured that the vision of the director was primary, replacing the traditional dominance of the actor in Italy (Farrell, 2010).

Neo-Commedia emerged as a set of practices in the cultural avant-garde after the Second World War, in an axis that largely existed between the Piccolo Theatre of Milan, and the University of Padua, then housing Jacques Lecoq and Amleto Sartori, its resident professor of sculpture. Mussolini's death freed Italy from the centralising ethos of fascism, allowing the separate regions of Italy to, once again, express their culture on a local level rather than a national one. It is within this context that Grassi and Strehler stated that they wanted to create "an art theatre for everyone" (*New York Times* obit. interview in Gussow, 1997).

The first Neo-Commedia performance of recognised global significance was Strehler's production of Carlo Goldoni's *Arlecchino Il Servatore di due Padroni* (*Harlequin, The Servant of Two Masters*) which first appeared in repertoire in 1947 (Malia, 2013: x). Strehler's production, with several subsequent major re-workings by himself⁹ and one posthumously by Feruccio Soleri¹⁰, is still in the Piccolo Theatre's repertoire¹¹.

The Servant of Two Masters is a comedy from the days of the Venetian Republic, with a plot full of misunderstandings, a range of dialects present on stage, confusion and an eventual happy ending. It was composed at a time when improv was still regarded as a

⁹ John Rudlin states that there were five major and one minor re-working of the production between 1947 and 1977; a list which does not include a 40th anniversary production in 1987 or subsequent later modifications instigated by Feruccio Soleri (Rudlin, 2004: 192). Gabrielle Houle, in 2013, updates this information and states, working from the Piccolo archives, that ten different productions of Carlo Goldoni's *Servant of Two Masters* were completed at the Piccolo Teatro of Milan (Houle, 2013: xi).

¹⁰ Feruccio Soleri, aged 87 in 2016, still performs as Arlecchino, alternating the titular role with the current interpreter, Enrico Bonavera.

¹¹ It ran between the 6th of May to the 27th May 2017 in the Paolo Grassi auditorium at the Piccolo Theatre

necessary skill for an Italian actor, though was falling into disrepute. Goldoni initially wrote a Commedia dell'Arte scenario to perform, for his actors, and in the words of Paolo Grassi:

This Goldoni play has an interesting singularity: it is both the crowning and the demise of Commedia dell'Arte. Goldoni originally wrote only a scenario in the traditional Commedia fashion. One day, in Pisa, he attended a performance and was extremely unhappy with it: the improvisations of the actors seemed to fall flat etc. Returning home, he wrote out the entire text. The *Servant of Two Masters* is thus a written Commedia play-which is itself a paradox: (Grassi & Strehler, 1959, quoted in Rudlin, 1994: 191–192)¹²

As a historical document, the play-text is highly significant, containing coded clues as to a historical dramaturgic method. Despite the best efforts of various English translators who have added many verbal gags¹³, the original dialogue is free of word play, and focuses entirely on the actions of each character, reacting to the dramatic situation in which they find themselves. Goldoni was writing dialogue for actors to whom a primary performance skill was reacting to the changing dramatic situation 'in the moment', and so did not require verbal 'gags'. Their 'method' was to create the comedy from their roles' dramatic situation. The play itself is remarkable in that, structurally, after the characters and their needs are introduced to the audience, every subsequent scene contains at least one, if not two, major reversals and changes of viewpoint and fortune for each character. The play's dramatic success is entirely dependent on the actors' ability to exploit all these situations to the full.

Strehler proved the ideal director to bring this piece to the stage, possessing great tenacity and a personal aesthetic that positioned the director, in this case himself, as an interpreter and not a creator. He saw his role as attempting to understand the play in its

¹² Original source: Paolo Grassi and Giorgio Strehler in *Théâtre Populaire*, No. 33, 1959, 25–26.

¹³ Such as Lee Hall's version *A Servant of Two Masters*, first performed by the Royal Shakespeare Company 15/12/1999, The Other Place, Stratford on Avon.

entirety and turn it into a vehicle to engage an audience. A 1997 interview for the New York Times makes this clear.

Explaining his theatrical role, he said that as an interpretive artist, he is “an instrument who creates upon the creativity of others...there are two categories of artists: the artists of absolute creation and those who create upon the creation of others. As interpreters, we are instruments. Our job is to understand what these great absolute artists have created and to communicate that to a public. The greatest director of ‘Don Giovanni’ will never be the equal of Mozart.” (*New York Times* obit. interview in Gussow, 1997)

It was this desire to interpret that constantly led him, amidst all his other productions, back to this one play, to “balance the light comic energy...with the social issues in the play he wanted to emphasize” (Malia, 2013: 35). In Strehler’s words, from the same 1995 *New York Times* Interview, “the musical, the rhythmic part of the play is fundamental.” (*New York Times* obit. interview in Gussow, 1997) He repeats this, also in a 1995 interview, but relates it to part of a set of skills that should be obligatory for a theatre director: “I think it is crucial that a director know music, and have a truly musical sensibility” (Strehler, 1996, in Delgado and Heritage, 1996: 264). Balancing rhythms inherent within a performed text is a significant dramaturgic feature.

The iterations of this show from 1956 and 1963 indicate how Strehler’s process of continual refining contributed to emergent aesthetics within Neo-Commedia. With the first Arlecchino/Truffaldino (Marcello Moretti) in the title role, an energetic and deliberately paced aesthetic was established. With the subsequent involvement of Amleto Sartori, the leather stage masks came into being, and became an integral part of the Neo-Commedia performance aesthetic. The creative team at the Piccolo developed a fixed pattern of movements and gestures that defined each character. Exercises were specifically developed to accommodate performing with masks, developed by Dario Fo, Jacques Lecoq and (Decroux Mime trained) Marisa Flach (Malia, 2013: 32), with Strehler being the overall

arbiter. Within the evolution of Neo-Commedia this production acted as both a blueprint and a catalyst for future development.

With Jacques Lecoq, Dario Fo and Marisa Flach, Strehler spent long nights working the mask to see how the neck and chin should be interposed, how the head should be inclined, and how the voice, intonation, speech rhythms might emerge. (Rudlin, 1994: 192)

For those who were in the production, as leads or understudies, and for those who learned each Mask's *Gestus* at the Piccolo's attached theatre school, the production and its constituent elements became artistic currency abroad, and in Italy. The overall rhythm of the performance, and of each character within it, proved attractive teaching and workshop material. Both Feruccio Soleri and Carlo Boso teach Commedia through recreating, within their workshops, Strehler's opening *mise-en-scene* of *The Servant of Two Masters*.

Direct contact with Bertolt Brecht¹⁴ led Strehler to a conceptual evolution. Instead of presenting to the audience a period comedy, complete with ornate proscenium arch (the 1947 and 1952 runs), the set itself now took centre stage and the actors appeared to the audience first in role as actors, before taking their places in the comedy. Carlo Boso borrowed this approach, firstly, in his work with TAG Teatro di Venezia and, subsequently, with other companies. The original pacing and commitment to comedy were kept intact, but the audience saw both the comedy, and how it was done, and (by extension) the cultural and historical context of the play. He further developed the *lazzi* and comic business, "introducing a completely improvised play-within-a-play" (Malia, 2013: xi), whilst successfully maintaining the integrity of the original text. Through the Brechtian convention of letting the audience see the actors take on the roles and then perform the complexities of this highly virtuoso play, Strehler was presenting the audience with both the spectacle of the drama itself and the spectacle of actors making theatre.

¹⁴ Strehler and Brecht met and corresponded in the mid-1950s, discussing Strehler's first staging of Brecht's work at the Piccolo: *The Three Penny Opera*, in 1956 (Malia, 2013: x).

Donald McManus (2003) makes the point that the *Verfremdungseffekt*, usually associated with creating a political or questioning attitude to a performed text, may have been interpreted in a different way by Strehler.

The major stylistic element that Strehler adopted from Brecht was an emphasis on theater as narrative and meta-theater, Meta-theater in Strehler's dramaturgy is less an "alienation" device with a didactic political motive, than an aesthetic foundation. All of his productions have had a meta-theatrical frame and in most cases referred clearly to a theatrical past (McManus, 2003: 91)

McManus also notes that although all the actors in the play in the 1987 version have in fact two roles, one in the meta-theatrical frame, and one in the play itself, the actor playing Arlecchino never removed his mask (ibid: 96). McManus interprets this as Strehler placing the iconic role, as a clown for all ages and places, existing within the play and also outside it, closer to the audience. It is worth noting that the continual wearing of the mask can also be interpreted as a device to indicate that Arlecchino cannot escape being a servant either in the play or out of it; a position either complementary or oppositional to McManus' interpretation.

Dramaturgically, however, it is the deliberate creation of both the play-within-a-play, and the unique continuity of one role in both dramatic realms, that is significant. On one level Strehler's direction and recreation of the Commedia elements gave this production its longevity and greatness, but it is the simultaneous presentation of a meta-theatrical frame as an integral part of a wider performance frame that enables the comedy to assume a greater potential relevance. The presence of a masked Arlecchino in both worlds disrupts easy judgements from the audience as to what is real or true in the play, and in a 1955 television version, with Moretti in the title role, the mask stays on as

Arlecchino is chased offstage and delivers the epilogue from up a ladder in the studio rigging.¹⁵

By the 1970s Strehler's productions, became more and more reflective of the tumultuous politics then engulfing Italy, and Strehler pushed Goldoni's text as far as it could go in terms of reflecting the contemporary world. By the fifth version of *The Servant of Two Masters*, in 1977, the set design had evolved to include both the set of the performed comedy and the travelling actors' wheeled cart. By the sixth version, in 1987 (the 'farewell edition'), the stage set had disappeared completely, to be replaced by stage servants in period costume, indicating doorways and walls by solely by their physical presence. Always Strehler stayed faithful to the play-within-a-play, changing the frame to reflect current politics. The 1987 version seemed to retreat from this but still gently asked the audience whether the social inequalities present within *The Servant of Two Masters* are to be laughed at, or whether they are still with us.

Strehler's production of *The Servant of Two Masters* is fundamental to the study of Neo-Commedia. Wherever this production toured in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, an interest in Commedia dell'Arte followed. People-of-theatre in the audience were inspired to learn more, and often mistakenly saw this production as authentic Commedia dell'Arte, rather than a recreated artistic construct. With trainers prepared to offer instruction in this form, derived from Lecoq and his associates at Padua, Paris and beyond, as well as Piccolo alumni such as Boso, a renaissance within Commedia dell'Arte training soon followed.

The difficulties with this production are in the ways that it has been interpreted. As a piece of theatre, it is superb, but as a model of authentic Commedia dell'Arte it is

¹⁵ This occurs in a shot-for-television version of the Piccolo Theatre's stage production in 1955 (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CgFh1ucMQTE>, last accessed 23/01/2017). A remediated *Verfremdungseffekt* is also present as the programme also includes staged footage of the actors putting on their makeup and preparing for performance (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C1ltGSs6OGU>, last accessed 23/01/2017).

problematic. It presents a theatrical illusion of what Commedia dell'Arte might have been. Each comic gag and coup de theatre that delights an audience in the show results not from spontaneous invention by the actors, but by the cumulative effect of a rigidly choreographed and highly disciplined rehearsal process. How Truffaldino/Harlequin moves, walks and reacts, as taught now, is not the end-result of an unbroken European theatre tradition, but of the work of Marcello Moretti, and his successor Feruccio Soleri. However, what these original actors recreated 70 years ago has now itself become a new tradition. The Neo-Commedia movement, however, has more roots than just the Piccolo, as I will discuss later.

Strehler proved that he could develop a contemporary aesthetic for Commedia dell'Arte and make it relevant to the world surrounding him. He gave us the masks, the forms of the main characters and a rigorous yet mechanistic way of performing, dependent on technical virtuosity. He also gave us a meta-theatrical frame, so we could both enjoy the comedy, and become aware of what we were watching.

2.4 Carlo Mazzone-Clementi (1920–2000)

*Commedia dell'Arte is dead: Long live Commedia dell'Arte
&
Commedia, after all, is not a theatrical form; it's a way of life
(Mazzone-Clementi, 1974: 64)*

Carlo Mazzone-Clementi “single-handedly brought commedia to the United States, starting in 1958” (Towsen, 2011: Internet). Born in Padua within a stone’s throw of the birthplace of Angelo Beolco (Il Ruzante), he was regarded as being both a genius and a madman. He arrived in 1958 in New York, but eventually settled down in Blue Lake, Northern California, a town of only 1,200.

Clementi’s working relationships with the artists who reinvented Commedia in the wake of the Second World War (Strehler, Marcel Marceau, Dario Fo, Lecoq, and Marcello Moretti) place him, both by association and by his talent as an actor, very firmly within their ranks. He has also been linked with Giovanni Poli, with whom he worked on occasion as a movement director (Bell, 2010: 156). From 1948 to 1951 Clementi worked as Lecoq’s assistant with a company called the Paduan Players, originally formed by Gianfranco di Bosio, which was based at the University of Padua and for whom Amleto Sartori created masks. In 1951 Eric Bentley came to Padua and directed the company in Brecht’s *The Exception and the Rule*, introducing Clementi to Brecht and, by implication, Commedia’s political potential.

Under Bentley’s patronage he came to America in 1958, and ran a programme of Commedia and mime classes, using a set of Sartori masks. In 1960 he was ‘discovered’ by Theodore Hoffman and appointed as Assistant Professor of Movement at what is now Carnegie Mellon University. He also found time to tour his solo show about Commedia dell’Arte, and run a mime studio in New York, teaching a threefold system involving Delsarte, Decroux and Lecoq. In 1968, frustrated by East Coast American actors’ obsession with method acting, he moved to the West Coast. After damaging his knees warming up for

the US premier of Sean O'Casey's *Cock-a-Doodle-Andy*¹⁶ at Carnegie Hall, he decided not to risk surgery and concentrate instead on teaching.

On the West Coast he worked with, amongst others, the San Francisco Mime Troupe, who used Commedia within the context of promoting political activism in the Bay area. Trained and inspired by Mazzone-Clementi, they produced several updated productions of Moliere, as well as an anti-war version of Goldoni's *Amant Militaire* (Davis, 1975: 31).

In 1971 he founded, in Berkeley, a company he called Dell'Arte to act as an umbrella for his freelance teaching. Inspired by Copeau, he also began teaching a summer school amidst the Californian redwood forests. In 1974 Clementi and his partner, Jane Hill, a graduate of Carnegie Mellon had an article, "Commedia and the Actor" published in *The Drama Review* (Mazzone-Clementi, 1974)¹⁷ in a special issue concerned with popular entertainments. Here Jane Hill and he set out their blueprint for a living physical theatre.

They were the first in America to articulate visionary ideals for a movement-based actor training system based in the tradition of Commedia dell'Arte and illuminated its value to the work of the American actor. (Schirle in Chaffee and Crick, 2015: 393)

This article is both visionary and erudite, looking forward into the future of US theatre, and backward into the history of the Commedia dell'Arte. It reads as a manifesto or challenge; combining the metaphysical approach espoused by Jean-Louis Barrault, the movement skills of Marceau and Lecoq, and his own sense of an actor's individually informed intuition. Hill and Clementi packed a dense and highly informed training regime, and their philosophy

¹⁶ One of the playwright's own favourite plays, though it never received the critical acclaim to which the author thought it deserved. The play is conceived as an attack on religion and a defence of liberty, set within an isolated rural community, and concerns the effects that a magical black rooster (played by Clementi) has on the morals and behaviour of this community. Seen as an attack on Catholicism, it was banned in the UK after its premier in Newcastle-upon-Tyne in 1949, and subsequently also banned in both Ireland and the US.

¹⁷ Mazzone-Clementi, Carlo. "Commedia and the Actor" *The Drama Review: TDR*, vol. 18, no. 1, 1974, pp. 59–64. www.jstor.org/stable/1144862.

behind Commedia into five pages. What emerges from this document is a clear impression that, although many accounts of Clementi's teaching focus on his intuition and impulsive nature, supporting it was a formidable pedagogy and firm purpose: the exploration of mime, movement and corporeal expression. Mazzone-Clementi was above everything else a lover and practitioner of Commedia and in this short article he covers movement and mask training, how a troupe relates to an audience and the methodology behind his movement analysis.

Action must always precede analysis. The first step predetermines the ones to follow.... Self-awareness in space and time equals presence. (Self-consciousness leads to immobility and is the enemy of presence). From presence, one can develop the ability to represent (Mazzone-Clementi, 1974: 61)

The Dell'Arte School of Mime and Comedy opened in 1975 in Blue Lake, Northern California, with seventeen students. In 1976 Joan Schirle, currently its principal, joined the teaching staff. In 1976 the Dell'Arte Players were also born, as a way of putting the training into practice, but partly as a reaction to the school's financial crisis. In 1984 Clementi became restless and with a Lecoq trained ex-Dell'Arte student called Ole Brekke, founded a second school, in Denmark, named the Commedia School. By 1994, however, he had returned to Northern California and was once again involved with Dell'Arte. Both schools are still active in 2018, and Dell'Arte, California, offers a full MFA training programme with over 1,000 alumni. Its programme is part Commedia, part Clown and part physical acting. The school produces touring productions and has been creating community shows and events for over 40 years.

Assessing the full effect of theatre artists working on the fringes of mainstream theatre is problematical due to the haphazard nature of the documentation available but Clementi's legacy can be measured by analysing the two extant training organisations he founded, both adhering to his working methods. Included later within this thesis is material drawn from interviews with Ronlin Foreman and Joan Schirle, the former and current

principals of Dell'Arte respectively, and Ole Brekke, the principal of the Commedia School in Copenhagen, which help build up a picture of his artistic legacy and continuing influence on Neo-Commedia's dramaturgy and aesthetics.

Mazzone-Clementi, and both his schools, embraced the contemporary. He loved Commedia, but his training was all about the 'now'. Commedia could only happen if one embraced the philosophy of "all of a sudden" or "anything goes" (Mazzone-Clementi 1974: 64). Each show was a unique event, relying on open channels of direct communication with the audience:

Between the actor, his partner, and the audience there is always a bond. The *aparte* (aside) is a continuous channel between actor and audience. A mutual response must happen for commedia to "take off." Performing the same play before different audiences is always a totally unique experience (ibid.).

Commedia was for him about the immediately relevant. The Dell'Arte school may have been founded on Copeau-like ideals, as a rural artistic retreat, but it does not hold itself apart from its surrounding community and current concerns. Joan Schirle talked about how the company's political stance evolved in relation to local attitudes to ecology, conservation and sustainable local employment (Windsor Commedia Conference 2013). The tools they employ to engage an audience in these issues were those practised and passed on by Mazzone-Clementi.

Clementi was dedicated to sport as a way of training for theatre, both for keeping fit, but also as an activity with many parallels to his brand of spontaneous improvised Commedia. Ole Brekke noted his comments that, within improvisation, the best way to "to serve and save the situation? You go to the empty space. It's like football" (Appendix A, Brekke: 314). He immediately followed this assertion with "Carlo would train a lot playing football" (ibid.). The similarities between sport and theatre were clearly always to the forefront of his mind:

[he] used to talk about the Harlem Globetrotters...Their basketball games were based on a rhythm and a shared understanding of what you were doing, and you are there to be entertaining; playing for the pleasure of the audience. All of that is contained within that word ensemble (Appendix A, Brekke: 384).

What, ultimately, was the point towards which Clementi was taking his students and collaborators? Ole Brekke describes the curriculum of the Copenhagen school as being based on Lecoq, but through the filter of Mazzone-Clementi, with Commedia as the culmination of the two-year pedagogic curriculum. Joan Schirle sums it up as follows:

He believed in the unique genius of each person. His teaching was not by formula or system; it was about helping you to unleash your own creative genius as a performer. But ... being around Carlo was the real education. -- to be ready for anything, to be spontaneous, unpredictable, economical, patient and available (Schirle in Doran, Obituary, 2000: Internet).

For Clementi, Commedia aesthetics were rooted in the present, and its dramaturgy based firmly on a rigorous understanding of how to maximise the expressiveness of one's body. Its paradigmatic manifestation being able to intuitively improvise in the moment to play with and for an audience. His Commedia was about our appetites and the here and now, expressed physically and not psychologically.

2.5 Jacques Lecoq (1921–1999)

A theatre school [...] should have a visionary aspect, developing new languages of the stage and thus assisting in the renewal of theatre itself (Lecoq, 2001: 162).

Jacques Lecoq is arguably the most influential teacher of dramatic movement within Western theatre in the twentieth century and, being a student and colleague of Jean Dasté (1904–1994) and Jacques Copeau's (1879–1949) former pupil and son-in-law, part of a theatrical dynasty.

After working as a physical therapist during the Second World War, and then with the Comédiens de Grenoble with Jean Dasté, he was invited to be one of the founder teachers for the Piccolo Theatre of Milan's school. After working there, and at the University of Padua in the 1950s (with Eric Bentley and Carlo Mazzone-Clementi in the Paduan Players), he left Italy and in 1956 founded his school in Paris¹⁸ where he taught and refined his highly influential pedagogy. His pedagogy is not concerned with the psychology of performance but with its quality of movement, and the relationship of the actor's body with space and the audience.

He taught through experimentation, and through two key concepts: play (*le jeu*) and openness. One of the key tools he employed to encourage both openness and experimentation involved masks, and he saw his role as not to create shows himself, but to provoke and train others so to do. Lecoq's initial interest in movement came from sport and gymnastics, and although Mark Evans (2012: 163) states categorically that he is the only notable twentieth century Western theatre trainer so to do, this interest was certainly shared by Mazzone-Clementi.

¹⁸ Still running after his death, located at 57 Rue du Faubourg, Saint-Denis, 75010 Paris, France.

Lecoq's own early explorations were concerned with the geometry and expressivity of the moving body. Whilst attending the Bagatelle College for physical education, he became aware of other ways of examining and conceptualising the sporting body.

at Bagatelle...he met Jean-Marie Conty, [who] had developed, through his friendship with Antonin Artaud and Jean-Louis Barrault, an interest in the link between sport and theatre. Artaud (1970, p. 88) had written that 'An actor is like a physical athlete... The actor is at heart an athlete'; he believed that the movements of the boxer, the sprinter and high jumper shared a similar anatomical basis with the movements of the emotions, and that the relationship between the athlete and actor was based on a shared experience of action and breath. These personal associations and connections had a lasting impact on Lecoq (Evans, 2012: 165)

This relationship is key to understanding Lecoq's pedagogy: he both sought for and succeeded in creating a working method whereby an actor was made aware of their own movement potential, as a dynamic and geometric element of the *mise-en-scene*, and then was enabled to direct and employ this awareness with the actor's own sense of physically embodied creativity. This latter he called play or *le jeu*.

The aim of *le jeu*, with an ensemble, is to reach a state of *complicité*; this being a state of unspoken and conscious agreement and ludic support between the onstage performers, extending into the audience. This relationship between theatre, play and sport was the foundation which led to his two-year school curriculum.¹⁹ This principle is also fundamental to the Dell'Arte school's teaching, and manifests as a training technique they call 'triangulation' (Schirle, 2016, Appendix A: 402), which is similar to Keith Johnstone's 'Circle of Expectation' as described by John Broadbent (2015, Appendix A: 123):

You have to give your partner what he or she wants on stage, if you do that you are giving the audience what they want: it is called the circle of expectation (ibid.)

¹⁹ There is a third year, which focuses on Lecoq's pedagogy, but entrance to it is by invitation only and not through audition.

The use of various styles of Mask,²⁰ stimulated by his work with Jean Dasté and Amleto Sartori, became integrated into his system as tools to explore generic modes of embodied movement. His work with Commedia Masks is only one element within this pedagogy and occupies the crossover between the world of human emotion and passion, and the world of the devil and its associated mischief. This relationship is laid out clearly in *Bouffoneries* (ed. Pezin, 1984) and, to précis this aspect of Lecoq's pedagogy, the world of Clown represents human naiveté and innocence; Melodrama, the world of human passion and emotions; Commedia dell'Arte the crossover between emotion, passion and the devil; whilst Bouffon represents the world as the devil sees it, with tragedy at the far end of the spectrum of human experience encompassing man's relationship with God.

Lecoq was an enthusiast of the Commedia dell'Arte but was also highly critical about its application and performance.

Commedia has nothing to do with those little Italian troupes who export precious entertainment. It's about misery, a world where life's a luxury ... If you're thinking about Commedia, forget about Italy (Interview, Hiley:1988, quoted by Frost and Yarrow, 1990:61-2)

And...

Sadly, over the course of time, a so-called "Italian" style of performance, which is nothing but clichés... The very name *commedia* began to irk me. For these reasons I have been led to turn the problem inside out, to discover what lies beneath, that is to say, LA COMEDIE HUMAINE (the human comedy). From this point on, using a much broader field of reference, we have discovered our creative freedom (Lecoq, 2001: 108).

For Lecoq, therefore, Commedia dell'Arte's strength (reflected in his teaching method) is in representing the essence of the human condition, through a stylised performance several steps away from naturalistic representation. He aimed to give his

²⁰ Red nose, character mask, larval mask, expressive mask, tragic mask, neutral mask and Commedia mask.

students the tools to portray the poetic or metaphysical reality of existence, and through expressing the fundamental human condition, by way of Commedia, one engages with a contemporary audience in parables and metaphors, not in imitation of the contemporary. Commedia, for Lecoq, could only ever be concerned with the fundamental dilemmas of survival. The Commedia Mask, within his pedagogy, could be simultaneously comic and tragic, but always energised by the need to survive. His Masks come alive through playing to extremes the dilemmas we (the human race) all face, and the audience engage with them through the lens of these apparently ancient types. Lecoq referred to this as the poetics of survival. His warning not to contemporise the roles is to be noted, but is not a blanket ban, and is congruent with Carlo Boso's approach to Commedia-as-parable. He is concerned that the performer or student does not copy outward forms but reinvents the whole context, as can be demonstrated currently in the work of Dutch Theatre Company Hotel Courage. Giovanni Fusetti, developing the idea of the parable, positions the ancient Masks as being representative of modern types (Fusetti, 2016: 146).

Despite almost universal praise of his pedagogy, he is not without his critics. In *The Tricks of the Trade*, Dario Fo criticises Lecoq for attempting to create a movement system free of ideology (Fo, 1991: 148). He contends that Lecoq's attempts to create an ideology free system of movement, creates an easily identifiable localised style which is certainly not the universal style of movement Lecoq was aiming for. He further criticises Lecoq for not developing students' vocal skills to match their physical skills but, more importantly from a dramaturgic point of view, he criticises Lecoq for not developing the actor's sense of an outside audience, ethically and culturally. He compares a Lecoq student with a kabuki performer, noting that in Lecoq:

Nobody bothers to explain to the pupils exactly why they ought to choose one particular gesture than another, and the consequence is the absence of a specific style (ibid: 149)

But in the kabuki actor an ideological presupposition stands at the root of the whole [kabuki] story, and this choice conditions the manner of styling the gestures, the synthesis, the rhythms and the cadences (ibid: 149).

Fo's concern, as an actor-creator and lifelong Marxist, was that Lecoq was not leading his students towards the cultural and political implications of theatre and, instead, offering them an artistic void free of political ramifications. Fo's comments, however, are placed under a subheading entitled "an exceptional master with whom I disagree", so the disagreement seems to be born out of mutual respect. They had worked together under Giorgio Strehler, helping set up the Piccolo Theatre of Milan (Evans & Kemp, 2016: 3), and Lecoq and Fo collaborated on several of Fo's early satiric reviews (ibid: 9).

Considering the following quote, Fo's accusation that Lecoq was attempting to create an ideology free form of movement may even be seen as Fo being overly polite to his old colleague. Lecoq positions Commedia as a form which only exists when the servants' performed desperation becomes manifest in a world where revolution or social change is not possible.

The Commedia dell'Arte rests on the passions of men pushed to the limit. It shows the absurdity of our behaviour. It has nothing to do with elegant entertainment, but it expresses the urgency of living, closer to survival than to life, the latter already a luxury. Planted in the misery of the people, in their naiveté as well as their intelligence, Commedia dell'Arte reflects the hierarchy of a stable society, without the possibility that the valet will revolt against his master. (Lecoq, quoted by Ole Brekke: Internet)²¹

As a teaching tool this model of Commedia is entirely effective: demanding high levels of engagement, play and creative problem solving from its students to maintain performed extremity, supposing an imagined world where survival is fuelled by the passion simply to survive, but from which there is never any escape. Proposing this as a political

²¹ <http://commediaschool.com/> Accessed 18/09/2018.

position, however, is problematic and regarding it as anything other than a teaching aid is provocative. Although there is an ideological position expressed within this statement, it is only present to elicit an extreme reaction from the student. Lecoq's purpose with Commedia is for the student to fully explore their movement potential, and to that end he crafts statements to support this. Dario Fo's praxis is entirely dialectical in nature and consequently opposed to any statements supporting the inability of a society to change or be changed. Ole Brekke (see Section 3.5.i), a student of both Lecoq and Mazzone-Clementi, however, has developed a synthesis: Commedia is primarily fuelled by passion, but also purposed as a societal critique. Lecoq was determined to create a new actor-centred theatre with the fully expressive actor-creator at its core.

Lecoq's aim was to give students the tools to create their own theatre and he fully expected his students to find their cultural contexts within which to place them. Dario Fo notes their disagreement and reports Lecoq saying:

In my school I offer the pupils the entire repertoire needed for physical and gestural expression. It is then up to each individual to apply it as he sees fit.

To which he [Fo] replies:

No, it is a grave mistake to separate technique from its ideological, moral and dramatic context (Fo, 1991: 148).

There are, therefore, ongoing complications in assessing Lecoq's contribution to the dramaturgy of Neo-Commedia. Individual actors, trained in Lecoq's pedagogy, can certainly perform Commedia as one genre amongst many, but it is those who focus on Commedia primarily who are of interest here and through them we can assess the dramaturgic affect that Lecoq has within Neo-Commedia. In subsequent sections this thesis explores, in the company of other pedagogies, how Lecoq's work was used and adapted. In this study, Ole Brekke and Antonio Fava will be considered, as third year Lecoq graduates. The work of Hotel Courage can also be considered as working with Lecoq pedagogy, as the

company-training regime is philosophically very similar. In a previous theatre company (Teatro Punto) artistic director Katrien van Beurden worked extensively with Lecoq graduate (and current teacher at the Lecoq School) Carlos Garcia Estevez. The Los Angeles based Actors' Gang can also be considered as deriving some of their praxis from Lecoq, as they were taught Commedia by French actor Georges Bigot, a long-term member of Lecoq Alumnus Arianne Mnouchkine's company. If Lecoq offered, as a teaching provocation, an ideology free space to explore movement, it is of great interest how practitioners react to this within specific cultural contexts.

2.6 Giovanni Poli (1917–1979)

Giovanni Poli was a theatre director and teacher who, independent of the Piccolo–University of Padua axis, also made a significant contribution to Neo-Commedia in Italy. He started his theatrical career in Venice immediately after the Second World War in a Venetian group called ARCO, whose aim was to re-invigorate and discuss Italian, but especially Venetian, theatre (Filacanapa, 2015: 71). The group discussed Craig, Appia, Tairov and Stanislavski, and focussed on combatting what they saw as the complacent and elitist attitude of the theatre going public.

Although this group was not artistically successful, from its elements of Poli's own aesthetic aims emerged: "He was fascinated by the possibility of combining several languages in a higher synthesis that only the theatre could offer" (*trans.* Crick, Filacanapa, 2015: 72). He became interested, through working on *Antigone*, in the scenographic representations required to portray the relationships between ancient texts and their modern meaning. These two elements became an integral part of his praxis, and his later experiments in Neo-Commedia combined both linguistic and dialect experiments, as well as a synthesis of movement and voice. Underpinning the outwardly comic in Poli's work, however, is always something darker: the relationship between a higher morality and personal survival. His aesthetic principles, now fully formed, were recorded in the preface to *La Commedia degli Zanni* in 1960. If we add to this Dr Filacanapa's assertion that for Poli "Art must be distinguished from chaos by an ordained plan" (*trans.* Crick, Filacanapa, 2015: 99), and his commitment to a director as the guiding influence on a production, then it becomes possible to see Craig's uber-marionette as part of his working method. In the introduction to the *La Commedia degli Zanni* he, unsurprisingly therefore, distances himself from historically derived improvisation as a performance method.

With a student acting company from the University of Venice called Ca'Foscari in 1960 he was awarded the best director prize at the Festival des Théâtres des Nations in Paris, and also the Italian IDI award for work toured extensively abroad. With other productions, Poli's student company performed at many prestigious foreign arts festivals between 1958 and 1970, throughout Europe and also in Argentina, Turkey, Brazil, Algeria, Morocco, Egypt and Ethiopia.

The Ca'Foscari were also supported by Adolfo Zajotti, the new artistic director of the Venice Biennale, whose aim was to promote Venetian culture abroad. The combination of academic interest and semi-professional actors, created by Poli, was seen to be both possible and successful in the commercial theatre, and was noted as such by contemporary academic commentators (Filacanapa, 2015: 132, 133). He responded to the perceived threat of television to theatre (seen as a state-supported nationwide movement, as opposed to a regionally-based and locally-supported concern), by explicitly positioning his theatre as a local event, and by developing a performance style simultaneously popular in conception and opposed to televisual realism and naturalism. With *Commedia* as a focal point, by way of Goldoni, he began to develop his conception of total or pure theatre. In 1953 he was hailed by the critic Silvio D'Amico as the "leader of the Italian avant-garde" (Filacanapa, 2015: 179). In 1954 he presented a short piece of Neo-*Commedia* work-in-progress at the University of Parma Arts Festival which, according to a Belgian commentator, evoked in him "the mythical image of the Italian comedians of yesterday" (ibid: 181). In 1969 he founded the Teatro Avogaria, Venice, in 2018 still functioning as a part-time professional producing house and accommodating a two-year adult drama training programme, which posthumously still bears his name.

He was fascinated by the *Commedia dell'Arte* as a popular historical form and approached its performance and recreation accordingly.

The true theatre is the old one. Each moment of theatrical renewal has never been anything but a return to its sources.... To take the essential elements and adapt them to the demands of the modern stage. It is a matter of inspiration... not of imitation (Giovanni Poli, *Le vrai théâtre, C'est l'ancien*, in «Presse», Paris, 3 avril 1966) (Filacanapa, 2014: 379).

Précising Poli's own introduction to the published script of his play *La Commedia degli Zanni*, as follows, gives us a very clear idea of his aesthetic approach: what interests him about Commedia dell'Arte is how it can be reinvented with a style and purpose which is relevant to contemporary theatre and to a contemporary audience. To him this was of prime importance, as he took the position that theatre has no relevance unless its concerns are relevant to the audience.

Secondly, he describes his own Commedia practice as a plastic expressive art that sits on top of a Stanislavskian approach to character. He describes this iteration of method acting as a way of understanding the culture a character may live in, but as Commedia, according to Poli's formulation and conception, is a completely non-naturalistic form that owes little to naturalistic expressive gesture, combining the two leads to emotionally charged, highly stylised movement. This combination provides tools for the actor to both understand their motivation and present a non-naturalistic attractive plastic movement sequence to engage the audience.

We are looking for a 'pure theater' in which the actor is the one and only artifice of theatrical expression... which does not need anything else than the human body, which dynamically draws itself in space.
(G. Poli, *Il Teatro della Commedia dell'Arte a l'Avogaria*, Venezia, Ed. Avogaria, 1979).²²

Poli based both the plastic forms and the movements of his characters on those suggested by the engraver Jacques Callot in *Lo Bello della Sfessania*, a collection of etchings

²² This quotation was taken from a presentation on Giovanni Poli by Dr Giulia Filacanapa at a Commedia dell'Arte conference in Windsor, Canada, February 2013. On request I was sent a copy of the paper.

originally published in 1621. Poli intuited that Callot's engravings were not frozen moments of live performance, in the manner of a contemporary photographic action shot, but an artistic impression suggesting the general flavour, gestural range and overall idea of what was happening on stage. The range of masked characters, illustrated or imaginatively portrayed by Callot, offered a wide index of possibilities, which Poli made good use of.

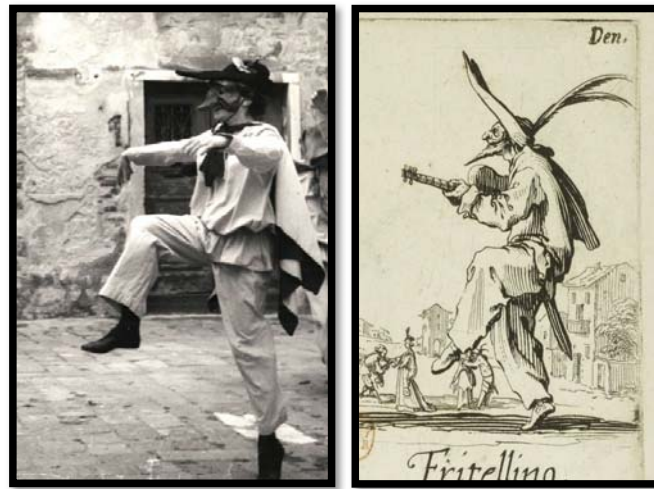


Figure 2.6 : Commedia degli Zanni, Giovanni Poli 1958 (photo, left) and Jacques Callot, I balli di sfessania, 1621–1622 (engraving, right). (Filacanapa, 2013; images used by permission of Dr Guilia Filacanapa).

Although it has been generally accepted that the characters within Callot's *Lo Balli di Sfessania* were Commedia dell'Arte figures, in 1977 Donald Posner proposed that the figures instead represent a dance called the *moresca* (or by its Maltese name *sfessania* in Naples) which represented the battles between the Moors and the Christians. He makes a convincing case that the Commedia attribution is made through cumulative error on behalf of successive commentators.

Where does this leave Poli's experiments? Poli may have based his figures on a misreading of historical iconography, but because live performance was his goal, which he oversaw as a director, this error can be seen as unfortunate but not completely

invalidating. Poli's actualisation of the plastic forms of Neo-Commedia may have had fictive origins, but they still produced viable and energetic contemporary theatre. What is relevant is that, prior to the Posner article, these etchings were generally accepted as being of Commedia figures. Seeing them animated on stage is, ergo, to perceive them as Commedia-derived actors. Poli created the plastic form of the *Zanni*, and used it in his production of *La Commedia degli Zanni*, and Andrea Calmo's *Rhodiana*. This figure engaged an audience, became identified as part of the Commedia canon, and had its elements incorporated into others' performance praxis. Carlo Boso, who in 1965 was directed by Poli in Giovan Battista Andreini's *Venetiana*, has been identified by at least two Commedia commentators (Mangolini and Filacanapa) as having adopted both Poli's Commedia chorus and the Mask of Zanni into his own praxis. This is supported by Cottis: "Carlo... took the style and the chorus from Poli, the precision from Strehler and set out to rediscover a total theatre. A theatre bodily engaged with the audience. We knew we were pioneers." (Cottis in Chaffee and Crick, 2015: 422, quoting Nelly Quette, one of Boso's collaborative team) and a paper presented by Giulia Filacanapa at a Commedia dell'Arte conference in Windsor, Ontario in February 2013 entitled "Giovanni Poli's approach to training; the missing link between Carlo Boso and Giorgio Strehler".

His performance aesthetic, however, does not originate with movement. Poli states that it comes from the rhythm of the spoken word, and that the word, although it cannot be written be down on a musical clef has all the qualities of music.

To sustain the strength of a particular gesture the voice had to be articulated through melodic lines rather than trapped or captured in physical reality, regulating itself in a tempo that is different from the tempo of usual conversation in life, and possessing a capability of eliciting impulses such as dance and acrobatics that the historical and figurative documents bring to light (Introduction to *La Fame degli Zanni*, trans. Francesca Bernardi and Olly Crick, Poli, 1973: 13).

The body, in a style of movement derived from Callot, is to move in harmony with the voice, creating an organic ballet-like movement²³ with the spoken word acting as the impulse. A performance is created from intersecting and contrasting the psychophysical and the vocal rhythms. It has a resemblance to rough ballet.

Like all in the first wave of Neo-Commedia artists, he never claimed that what he did was Commedia dell'Arte, but something that derived from it. In the introduction to *La Commedia degli Zanni* he is careful about how he positions his claims.

The Commedia degli Zanni, rather than being a real Commedia dell'Arte (as there is no real improvisation), is constructed according to a particular way of understanding the sixteenth century 'theatre of masks', which is relived and reinvented according to the demands of renewing the modern stage (Poli, 1973: 13).

Following the research of Italian scholar Vito Pandolfi, in *La Commedia degli Zanni* Poli introduces the Masks sequentially, theorising (or perhaps philosophising) that all the Commedia Masks are in fact Zannis. The performance can be seen partly as a Commedia history lesson and is similar in structure to an earlier Ca'Foscari show he created: *la Storie di Arlecchino* which was a performed history of Goldoni's use of that Mask, consisting of scenes drawn from Goldoni's plays, with three extended lazzi sequences and a prologue and epilogue written by Poli. This same sequential structure was adopted by Carlo Boso in 1982 for a show he co-devised and directed for French company Les Scalzacani, called *la Vie et Mort d'Arlequin* (The Life and Death of Harlequin) in which Zanni is born, is transformed into an early primitive Harlequin, who then matures into the Goldoni's independent servant, Truffaldino. Boso's workshops contain this triple approach to the role

²³ The following video links are from an Italian television programme called *Sapere*, made in 1957 to which Commedia scholar Vito Pandolfi was adviser, giving an indication of the aesthetic Poli created. The programme is divided into four clips: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LaB0DEvVYOU>; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cMqnfVI7P-g>; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WvBvwQ-GPfo>; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lem-VFs4dHM>.

of Arlecchino which mirrors the threefold development portrayed by Poli, who described the differences between the three as follows:

From a first Arlecchino, all instinct, nature, hunger, almost animal like in his desires; a porter, a carrier of coal, stupid, disorientated, which we imagine is typical of the bergamasks from the mountains descending into Venice in search of work, we arrive at another, more evolved Arlecchino that reminds us of a less intensive labour and a higher income. The mask in its third phase becomes gentler maybe with the same more money for less labour function because that puts him in contact with a certain social stratum that is quite elevated, and he falls in love (Poli, 1985: 7–8).

Whilst Strehler and Mazzone-Clementi both regarded the leather mask as indispensable to working in Commedia, it is Poli who writes about its unique properties, and its employment in Neo-Commedia.

The mask... is without doubt the most important known within the presumptions of the scenic poetics of this... theatrical phenomena. The mask helps the theatre escape from any equivocation of the truth, and furthermore from any prejudices [opinions] that subordinate the concept of beauty and perfection, by not reproducing them in a realistic physical sense. (Introduction to *La Fame degli Zanni*, trans. Francesca Bernardi and Olly Crick, Poli, 1973: 12).

When employed by Poli a Commedia Mask is a tool which creates an organic and plastic unity of expressivity in the actor, enforcing a stylised and emotionally informed gestural range. To make a mask work the actor has to incorporate its dynamics into their body language. These gestures, by their nature being far removed from naturalism or realism, imbue them with the qualities of a living symbol, which then allows metaphysical concepts to be explored. By creating a situation where the audience sees the masked actor as somehow different from them, yet enduring and enjoying qualitatively similar emotions, they are drawn into simultaneously identifying with and being detached from the onstage action: a place where both emotion and intellect are concurrently engaged.

In substance, the mask allows a re-acquisition of expression and a tie to the time and spaces utilised to project it [its emotional image] into the absolute [objective reality] and extrapolates the mask's character, its moral symbolism, and its social humanity according to a psychological classification from which the type is derived (ibid.)

The key phrase here is “tie to the time and space utilised to project it”. A fully activated mask has the quality of anchoring itself in the same time-scale as the audience, creating a perceptual and analogous binary with the passage of time portrayed in the dramatic fiction of the performance. The mask encourages us to believe in a fiction, whilst constantly reminding us that is a fiction, creating performance out of both strands. This is one of the uncanny properties of a mask, and Poli was astute enough to recognise this and incorporate it into his dramaturgy.

Poli also proposed, within his productions, that the predominant human emotion was hunger, whether for food, possessions, attention or love. This theme emerges in many subsequent practitioners. Surviving aspects of his practice appear in the work of Carlo Boso and those trained by him.²⁴

²⁴ In a typical Carlo Boso workshop, he demonstrates the historical characters of the Commedia, starting with the trio of Magnifico, Zanni and Courtesan whose movement and character descriptors derive from Poli, and then he teaches the full Goldonian set, which clearly derives from Strehler and the Piccolo. In his own shows, such as *Il Falso Magnifico* (1986) he uses masks from both sources.

2.7 The Legacy of Four

Strehler's extensive mining of *Il Servatore di due Padroni* led to the commissioning and design of the first masks from Amleto Sartori, and the creation of a visually distinctive Gestus for each of the masks within the play. Subsequent exploration of the interaction between the newly discovered masked performance methodology and Goldoni's script further provided a template for the future development of the genre in Carlo Boso's practice. It was under Strehler's direction that virtuosic displays of acting skill associated with Commedia dell'Arte performance were first created. Strehler's aim was to explore, through Goldoni's text, the relationship between the past and the present and for the Commedia dramaturge the value of this production is in how its structural elements, closely allied to historical Commedia, can be applied within theatre now. The constituent elements of this production: rhythm and tempo, masked performance, comic Gestus, alienation and historicity, lazzi, virtuoso performance and the mythical spirit of carnivalesque and republican Venice, are all themes taken up and explored by other practitioners, as discussed in Sections 4,5 and 6.

Jacques Lecoq's influence on Neo-Commedia was primarily that of a trainer, despite being both a teacher and a director in his early career, employing (and then influencing) Carlo Mazzone-Clementi. He collaborated with the Sartori studio and the Piccolo Theatre in developing the plastic and gestural range of the roles with *Il Servatore di due Padroni*, so echoes of his influence exist in that production as well. On founding his school in Paris, Lecoq positioned Commedia dell'Arte as a distinct performance genre within, and subsidiary to, his holistic pedagogical system. Within his system the area that Commedia covers is between Melodrama, the realm of pure emotion and sentimentality, and that of Bouffon, the realm of satire and society's excluded. Lecoq defined Commedia dell'Arte as *La Comedie Humaine* (Lecoq, 2001: 108), and stated that its aim was to "shed

light on human nature through its comedy, made up of the deceptions and compromises which are indispensable to the survival of the characters” (ibid: 116–117). Lecoq’s pedagogy challenges students to embody the level of need and passion required simply to survive. Lecoq sees Commedia, as a genre that embodies and symbolises ‘the poetics of survival’, as shown through the human body. This phrase is used by many Commedia trainers²⁵ as shorthand for the range of aesthetically positioned gestures embodying corporal desperation present within the genre. Lecoq’s vision of Commedia is that its social positions are immutable, and that the genre should not be politically repurposed: its strength is in showing an audience what people have to do to survive, and to change the system. Lecoq’s influence can be observed both through the effect of his corporeal training, and through practitioners independently interrogating his position on Commedia.

Poli had a similar approach to Strehler, in that he became fascinated by how a recovered version of Commedia could be made to speak to contemporary audiences. The material success of Poli’s global excursions, though less well documented than the Piccolo’s, have certainly also led to an increasing interest in the genre. He too turned to Goldoni for inspiration, but rather than take Strehler’s approach, he was drawn specifically to explore the evolution of Arlecchino through all of Goldoni’s plays. Within the introduction of the 1973 printed text of *La Commedia degli Zanni*, there is a clear and concise exposition of his priorities: that an actor’s voice, and not their body, ‘leads’ their gesture; that for an actor a Stanislavskian approach to the cultural and social given circumstances of each Commedia role is vital, and that the non-realistic and poetic gestural range of each Mask was dependant on an understanding and assimilation of the former; that he was fascinated “by the possibility of combining several languages in a higher

²⁵ Antonio Fava (2015) in the title of his book *The Comic Mask in the Commedia dell’Arte: Actor Training, Improvisation and the Poetics of Survival*; Giovanni Fusetti, writing of Lecoq in *The Routledge Companion to Jacques Lecoq* (2015) calls it the “poetry of survival” (ibid: 142); and Carlos Estevez, now a student at the Lecoq school uses the phrase to describe his global theatre project (<http://www.manifestopoetico.com/poetics-of-survival-1/>) Accessed 18/09/2018.

synthesis that only the theatre could offer” (*trans.* Crick, Filacanapa, 2015: 72) and a conviction that Commedia’s subject was always the conflict between a higher morality and personal survival. If we look at this last attribute not as an abstract quality, but as a concrete form expressed on stage in a synthesis of voice and movement, then it becomes clear how closely allied to Lecoq’s phrase ‘the poetics of survival’ it is.

Carlo Mazzone-Clementi’s contribution to the genre is that of an enthusiast and proselytiser, supported by a deep immersion in practical and theoretical pedagogy. He faced the issue of spontaneity head on, pedagogically insisting on a “mutual response” (Mazzone-Clementi 1974: 64) between actor and audience as a key element of Neo-Commedia. He celebrated the existential reality of each separate performance of a given show as being a unique event and looked to expand upon it, encouraging ‘*al improvviso*’ as both a performance skill and an attitude to life.

The dramaturgic and aesthetic themes identified in this section are those created by and recorded from the genre’s founders. None were attempting a historical recreation of Commedia dell’Arte, as all were purposed towards a visually and culturally attuned and recognisable performance style that interpreted or translated the historical form for contemporary audiences. The specificity of their enquiry, and their individual cultural references, gave each explorer’s practice its distinctive qualities, ranging from theoretical approaches and positioning, to training methods and identifiable performance practice. It is within these three areas of theory, training and performance that dramaturgic practice and Neo-Commedia aesthetics lie and can be identified. For a dramaturge these approaches may be approached independently or, else, by creating one’s own synthesis. How these evolved in the hands of those directly trained or inspired by them is the subject matter of Section 4, whilst contemporary living teachers still in direct contact with the teachings of the founders (with the addition of the late Dario Fo) are considered in Section 3.

Section 3: Second Generation

3.1 The Second Generation, Introduction

This section explores the praxes of Dario Fo, Carlo Boso, Antonio Fava, as well as Ronlin Foreman, Ole Brekke and Joan Schirle. Dario Fo excepted, these artists are direct students of the founders of Neo-Commedia and currently practice as performers, theoreticians and teachers. Significant to contemporary Neo-Commedia dramaturgy and aesthetics are the processes whereby the founders' dramaturgy and inherited teleology manifests itself within this group's signature practice, as evolution, adaptation, consolidation or stagnation. These practitioners currently have their own students, whose further interpretations and deconstructions of Neo-Commedia will be discussed thematically in Sections 4 and 5.

Dario Fo worked at the Piccolo at the same time as Giorgio Strehler and was taught how to move by Jacques Lecoq. Carlo Boso studied at the Piccolo school, understudied for *// Salvatore di due Padroni* and was directed by Giovanni Poli. Schirle, Foreman and Brekke all trained under Mazzone-Clementi, and the latter two also attended the Lecoq School. Antonio Fava trained under Lecoq and worked as an actor under Dario Fo. These various combinations, and the hybrid praxes of their pupils, enable the identification and exploration of the dramaturgical range constituting contemporary Neo-Commedia practice.

3.2 Dario Fo (1926–2016)

As far as I am concerned, Commedia has never died, I have always found the old girl in excellent health, boozing, carousing, making love and having a whale of a time with appetites undiminished (Fo, 1991: 88).

Chronologically, Dario Fo sits with the founders of Neo-Commedia but is placed in this category because his relationship with the genre is indirect. His interest in popular theatre lead him to explore a role that predated historical Commedia dell'Arte but embodied many of its performance practices. Fo became fascinated with the possibilities of the Medieval jester, or *Giullare*, whom he presented as an anti-hegemonic voice of the people. Fo's theatrical world is a cousin to that of Neo-Commedia's. There are enough similarities and differences between the two worlds to illuminate dramaturgic commonalities.

Dario Fo was arguably the best-known Italian theatre practitioner outside Italy during his lifetime, both for his exuberant performances and for his left-wing politics. He was a continual and outspoken critic of both the State and other left-wing organisations.

Dario Fo – in great part due to the influence of the Italian Marxist scholar Antonio Gramsci (1891–1937) is a champion of folk and popular culture. He is convinced that all forms of art originated in popular culture... "Official culture," the culture of those in power appropriated many aspects of folk culture, and claimed them as their own (Fo 1993) (Scuderi, 2015, in Chaffee and Crick).

Within his work, for example, his performance *Mistero Buffo* (to be discussed later), Fo takes as a blueprint the Medieval mystery cycle and co-opts its historical and religious themes towards contemporary satiric and political intent. Fo believes the original mystery plays were manifestations of popular art (in Gramsci's sense), that had been subsequently colonised and repurposed to function as agents of hegemonic power. It was his task to reclaim them on behalf of popular culture.

Fo's relationship with Neo-Commedia is complex. He never claimed to be a Commedia performer, though occupying similar performative and stylistic ground: he shared the joyful exuberance of physical expression and virtuosity in performance necessary for Commedia and created comedy based on comically engaging an audience with contemporary concerns embedded in updated archaic theatre forms. He was also at the Piccolo Theatre in Milan whilst the first versions of *Il Servatore di due Padroni* were being rehearsed. It was here he first met Jacques Lecoq. In 1983, he wrote and performed *Harlequin*, playing the title role, which opens with an extended monologue (five pages of script) by Fo describing the history of Commedia dell'Arte. This extended monologue is similar in dramatic function to the extended introductions to each section of his *Mistero Buffo*, introducing and instructing the audience, albeit presented by a mischievous Fo-as-Harlequin, in how to watch the subsequent performance. Fo also performed various solo Commedia lazzi, two out of three which are identified in Mel Gordon's 1983 book *Lazzi*.

Fo performs the 'lazzo of eating oneself' (Gordon, 1983: 23) (Fo, 1991: 43); 'the lazzo of eating a fly' (ibid.) (Fo, 1991: 44)²⁶ and the 'lazzo of the cat-skin' (no historical attribution found) (Fo, 1991: 49). The first two are jokes about starvation, historically performed by Zanni roles and create ironic comedy out of the Zannis precarious and oppressed position in society. The third lazzo demonstrates that Fo was not always entirely focussed on the political implications of his performance and enjoyed creating laughter out of outrageous situations for its own sake.²⁷

²⁶ Also included in Giovanni Poli's *La Commedia degli Zanni* between 1.58 and 2.12 at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cMqnfVI7P-g>.

²⁷ The lazzo of the cat-skin goes as follows: Harlequin takes delivery of a bottle of aphrodisiac on behalf of his master, Pantalone, and thinking it is wine appropriates a swig. Through mime, his penis grows to half a metre in length. To hide it he steals a cat-skin that happens to be drying on a washing line and wraps his comically huge phallus in it. Some village girls appear, want to pet the cat, do so, and then depart. His penis grows even bigger. In panic, he steals some baby clothes from the washing lines and disguises his penis as a baby. The village girls return and coo and cluck over the baby before going away again.

What links these three lazzi stylistically is that they are performed as fixed routines inside a larger encompassing dramatic structure. Fo, talking directly to an audience, offers them the information required to appreciate or understand the piece they are about to witness and Fo appears to control both the performed piece (in this case the lazzi) and how the audience react to it. Part of his dramatic technique, and accordingly his performance aesthetic, is to set the scene for the audience through direct address and storytelling, and then to perform the piece he has just introduced relying on his verbal and mimetic skills instead of scenery, lighting, props or even other actors.

This technique of introducing yourself, the scene you are about to perform and then performing it is also a characteristic feature of Annie Ryan's version of Commedia dell'Arte (Ryan, 2016, Appendix A; 316–320), within her production *Dublin by Lamplight*²⁸. Although she arrived at this dramaturgic element of Neo-Commedia differently, the end-result is similar. The need for a complicated and enacted backstory is negated, as all the required information for the ensuing scene is placed in the observers' imaginations by the storytelling introduction. It implicates and involves the audience in the performance, inviting them to see with their minds' eyes as well as their real eyes. This approach is one of the elements that make the apparently empty trestle stage employed by Neo-Commedia performers so effective. Fo himself refers to this meta-theatrical framing as being within the province of the prologue. Although he offers no citable evidence he claims the practice of history as his justification.

Theatre has always had prologues, even when they are not declared as such. There is an old tradition of theatre in Italy, which had prologues which were really masterpieces. In fact, the rest of the play has often been lost, and the prologues have

²⁸ The play was originally produced by The Corn Exchange Theatre in Dublin, for which Annie Ryan is the artistic director. The published play is credited to the playwright Michael West (West, 2005), though the script was developed in conjunction with Annie Ryan and the performance company and embodies the story theatre technique of each actor being their own narrator. Annie Ryan provided the form, and Michael West provided the words, so it would be fairer to say that the performance was created to some extent collaboratively.

remained in their own right. There is, for example, the famous prologue: “Ah se io potessi diventare invisibile” (“Ah, If I could only become invisible”). The situation is already presented in it... in that one sentence it already gives you the situation. The actor comes on and explains all the things he could do if he was invisible.... very often the whole situation is given, precisely in order to give pleasure to the spectator, to allow the spectator to enjoy the bravura of the actor.... our foreknowledge increases the value, gives more room to the presentation of the situation (Fo and Rame, 1983: 22).

Although Fo displayed great knowledge of Commedia’s history and its Masks, and was a virtuoso performer, he claimed he was a *Giullare*, and not Commedia dell’Arte performer, and used that to link this practice to Gramsci’s idea of popular culture. He was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1997, because he “emulates the jesters of the Middle Ages in scourging authority and upholding the dignity of the downtrodden” (Fo, 1997: Internet). Fabio Mangolini, on seeing Dario Fo perform *Mistero Buffo* on Italian television when he was twelve was sufficiently impressed to remember the event and reported back later “He was using words and techniques that were allied to Commedia” (Appendix A, 2015: 136).

After his work at the *Piccolo* was complete Fo’s company *I Dritti* created two satirical revues, *Il Dito nell’Occhio* (Finger in the Eye) in 1953 and *Sani de Legari* (Fit to be Tied) in 1954, in which Jacques Lecoq coached him, fine tuning his comic physicality; teaching him how to be deliberately funny with his long arms and legs (Pastorino, 2016 in Evans and Kemp: 88). In doing so Lecoq taught a man, who learned the arts of verbal dexterity storytelling from a very young age, how to act out that which he could previously only describe. Fo understood that each story he had heard had a point. In his Nobel Prize acceptance speech, he says:

on Lago Maggiore where I was born and raised.... there were the old storytellers.... who taught me and other children the craftsmanship, the art, of spinning fantastic yarns. We would listen to them, bursting with laughter - laughter that would stick

in our throats as the tragic allusion that surmounted each sarcasm would dawn on us (Fo, 1997: Internet).

Furthermore, in relation to these childhood storytellers he states, in a memoir of his childhood:

Only much later, when I had acquired considerable experience of the stage, did I realise that story-telling had been the mechanism which had encouraged me to express myself in epic-popular form (Fo, 2005: 64)

With Lecoq's precise instruction and physical pedagogy behind him, Fo the writer and story teller transformed into Fo the comedian, jester and *Giullare* and from it came his signature solo piece *Mistero Buffo*, providing Fo with a dramatic parallel Medieval universe to pursue his themes of dignity and oppression. Joseph Farrell characterises Fo's artistic mission as being "a relentless search for models from the past with which he can identify 'with a style' based not on any avant-garde, but on the approaches and techniques practiced by performers of centuries past" (Farrell, 1989: 315). Farrell's description could equally be applied to Neo-Commedia.

It was with *Mistero Buffo* that Fo's creative progress touched the heights of genius. These stories and parables were powered by Fo's mimicry and linked together by his erudite patter, which left audiences in fits of laughter as he drew parallels between the past and the present (Lane, 2016: Internet).

The patter mentioned refers to the direct address employed by Fo in his solo shows, which created both a theatrical frame for the dramatic elements of the show, and an avenue of comment and reflection upon the dramatic meaning. These 'side-tracks' were not included in the UK printed edition, but the bogus historical references that Fo used to ironically legitimise his performances were. In the Methuen printed edition these (Fo, 1992: 1–122) are presented in an unclear form and typeset in a manner that suggests they are historically accurate" (Fo, 1992: 1), which they are not. This textual presentation entirely misses the point of Fo's extended digressions. How and why Fo makes mischief with the

audiences' perceptions of history, is explored in depth by commentator Antonio Scuderi in *Dario Fo: Framing, Festival, and the Folkloric Imagination* (2011). It is certainly an integral part of his dramaturgic method, though more apparent when performing solo.

This form of extended *aparte* (improvised aside or prologue) was for Fo part of the intended meaning of the performance. For Fo the *aparte* is a direct line of communication to the audience, which taken in conjunction with the formal scripted text, combine to create the intended meaning of the performance. It is the same device as the prologue described earlier.

The intention is to disorientate the audience who have turned up to see a play or listen to a story...instead I wrong-foot them and start babbling about a recent, contemporary event.... everything can be used to break down the fourth wall (Fo, 2005: 76).

Fo's dramaturgy was nearly always inclusive of a contemporary context, delivered through a meta-theatrical semi-improvised prologue. Playing the Guillare allowed Fo to provide the audience with a viewpoint from which to observe the performance. By playing both the role of the prologue and all the roles within performance it framed, he became a one-man *Verfremdungseffekt*, directing the audience towards both current politics and their implicit ideologies.

Fo was also a master of the Commedia dell'Arte technique of Grammelot: purposed vocal gibberish. Dario Fo mentions it as a vital element of Commedia within his Nobel Prize acceptance speech (Fo, 1997: Internet) and Rudlin, whilst believing that Fo might indeed have reinvented an old tradition (Rudlin in Chaffee and Crick, 2015: 157) also notes a possible genealogy of its usage from the Parisian *foires* (and hence by implication from the Italian Commedia players themselves), via Jacques Copeau to Jean Dasté, and from Dasté to Fo, via Lecoq (ibid: 160). What Dario Fo added, as a unique contribution, was the development and performance of nationally oriented versions of Grammelot. He

identifies and recombines distinctive sounds of a specific language and then, fuelled by a mimetically enacted story line, proceeds to make perfect sense. Fo describes it as follows:

Grammelot indicates the onomatopoeic flow of a speech, articulated without rhyme or reason, but capable of transmitting, with the aid of particular gestures, rhythms and sounds, an entire, rounded speech (Fo, 1991: 56).

Scott McGehee, the principal and founder of the Commedia Accademia school in Arezzo, regards familiarity with Grammelot as a vital part of performing Commedia dell'Arte. He has identified how best to teach it in class and ensures each of his students creates a nationally inflected Grammelot performance (McGehee, 2015, Appendix A: 44–45). It is now a fixed element within the curriculum at Commedia Accademia (<https://www.dellarte.it>).

Fo also had a good understanding of dramatic structure and wrote three notable highly politicised farces: *An Accidental Death of an Anarchist*; *Can't Pay, Won't Pay* and *Trumpets and Raspberries*.²⁹ These three were successful in Italy, and when translated into English, also met with commercial and critical success. These were technically well constructed farces with overt political intent, creating comedy out of recognisable recent political events and scandals. Dramaturgically, all three follow the structural model of farce or comedy, but instead of basing the plot upon love, they are based upon political expediency and acts of popular defiance. In *Trumpets and Raspberries* Fo also manages to include the traditional comedy device of identical twins.³⁰ However, instead of long separated birth twins, Fo creates a situation where a mistakenly carried out piece of facial reconstructive surgery results in the Boss and one of his workers ending up identical. In terms of the comic structure, Fo's replacement of love with political defiance as a plot

²⁹ *Accidental Death of an Anarchist*: Italian premier 1970; UK premier 1980 at Wyndhams Theatre. *Can't Pay, Won't Pay*: Italian premier 1974; UK premier 1984. *Trumpets and Raspberries*: Italian premier in 1981; UK premier 1984.

³⁰ From Plautus' *Menaechmi*, Flaminio Scala's *The Two Captains*, Shakespeare's *Comedy of Errors* and Goldoni's *Venetian Twins*.

device is highly effective.³¹ The element of risk or loss associated with the comic portrayal is focussed by Fo on political risk and loss to those victimised by society.³²

It is not possible to assess the artistic achievement, political engagement and success brought to theatre by Dario Fo within this thesis, but specific dramaturgic strands, relating to purpose and performance can be identified as central to his aesthetic. Fo, as a solo performer, represents the virtuoso mime and storyteller, able to create meta-theatrical mischief out of meaning as he switched between prologue, aside, comic set piece and dramatic presentation, all within a politically purposed historicised Brechtian frame. As a playwright, he reinvented and popularised the genre of political farce and spread it round the world. He had respect for the history and techniques of theatre, but none for those in authority who ruled, as he saw it, with greed and corruption. "Fo is [was] an actor-author, the representative, central figure of Italian theatre history, but he is also the *Guillare*, the Medieval entertainer or jester who mocked the occupants of palaces, both temporal and spiritual" (Farrell and Puppa, 2006: 359). He was also able, as perhaps the most difficult thing of all, to consistently create laughter out of suffering and oppression. The re-colonisation of popular theatre forms is one of Fo's indirect contributions to the field of Neo-Commedia. Popular carnival entertainment was certainly one of the formative ingredients of what became the historical genre of Commedia.

³¹ I adopted this working method as one of the three major models of Neo-Commedia, and employed its structures to create a piece, *Frack Off* (Crick, 2016: Appendix E) to interrogate it as a repeatable working model.

³² In Fo's words, from the introduction to *Can't Pay, Won't Pay*: "As in old Neapolitan and Venetian farces... here the starting point, the fundamental impetus, is hunger. The initial, instinctive solution in which everyone takes care of himself in resolving the atavistic problem of appetite develops into a need to work collectively, to get organized and fight together... to live in a world... where there is justice for all" (Mitchell, 1984: 73–74).

3.3 Carlo Boso (1946–)

To make theatre for the present with the angels and devils of the past (Carlo Boso in Simioni, 1983: 36)

Carlo Boso offers possibly the most coherent and complete picture of Neo-Commedia dramaturgy: taking the Goldonian model of a three-act structure as his overarching dramatic form, the pragmatism of a two-person scenic unit from Flaminio Scala³³ and finally that of a socially and culturally positioned actor, engaged with the concerns of a contemporary audience. This manifests through his work as both director and teacher, the study of which through participation, observation and academic research leads me to conclude that Boso largely succeeds in presenting a holistic system to the world.

Carlo Boso absorbed information crucial to his praxis from the Piccolo Theatre of Milan, Feruccio Soleri, Peppino De Filippo³⁴ and Giovanni Poli. From the Piccolo, he learned the rigid comic structure of Goldoni's play, which he later applied to his own productions; from Soleri he learned that endless repetition gives you the muscle memory³⁵ of a Commedia Mask and the ability to embody it at a moment's notice; and from di Filippo he learned the power of improvisation. The following extract is taken from Faustino Sesso's collection of open-ended interviews with contemporary Italian Neo-Commedia practitioners: *Voci, Volti, Voli*.³⁶

In the first show where I played with him we were given a script, and, there were blank pages on which there was written, "here is what the Capitano should do", which was Peppino. You learned all

³³ A position fully explored in Tim Fitzpatrick's 1995 book *The Relationship of Oral and Literate Performance Processes in the Commedia dell'Arte: Beyond the Improvisation/Memorisation Divide*. Through extensive interrogation of Scala's scenarios, he makes a strong case, pragmatically and theoretically, for the existence of a historical Commedia improvisation methodology, based on performative dyads.

³⁴ The playwright Eduardo di Filippo's brother, and a virtuoso actor and comic in the *Viaggenti* tradition.

³⁵ The memory of being Soleri's move-perfect understudy for the role of Arlecchino at the Piccolo for over seven years allowed him to, at 15 minutes notice, step into the role and perform the whole show in public in a TAG Teatro version of the same show at the Venice Carnival in 1992 (Cottis in Chaffee and Crick, 2015: 424).

³⁶ Voices, Faces, Flights.

your cues but did not know what Peppino would do. He said that he thought quickly and had never said the same thing each night! One night, he tells me in the wings, “At the end of my monologue I’ll get them all [the audience] to stand up and applaud me”. And then, from sitting he got them up, brought the entire audience on-side, onto his patch of ground, he makes a final tirade from fear and rises up, and with him the whole audience does so too: ovation achieved (Sesso, 2015: 170–171, *trans.* Crick).

This experience allowed him to mediate between the rigidity created by form and repetition, associated with Soleri and the Piccolo, and giving his actors the opportunity to improvise within a storyline. From Poli he learned the movements of the Zanni (not present in the Piccolo’s *Servant of Two Masters*) and the use of a chorus. Combined, all these elements became his personal working method and dramaturgic synthesis.

Whilst a second-year student at the Piccolo he auditioned for Giovanni Poli’s production of Giovan Baptista Andreini’s *La Veneziana* at the Venice Biennale.

And with him I discovered the world of the Commedia dell’Arte. A universe. In these beautiful three months, I lived under his teaching: a complete teaching mind was operating since Giovanni was always present to demonstrate the postures of all the masks of Commedia dell’Arte. And I found myself at the Theatre Biennale, to debut at La Fenice Theatre [in Venice], with *La Veneziana* ... for all 10 shows I was Harlequin (Sesso, 2015: 165, *trans.* Crick).

By 1967 he was part of the Piccolo Theatre acting company, understudying Soleri’s Arlecchino in *Il Servatore di due Padroni*, whilst playing the role of the Porter. He also played Pantalone for seven years, to Feruccio Soleri’s Arlecchino in an internationally touring three-hander, with Graciela Galvani as Columbina, promoted by the Piccolo, called *Arlecchino, l’amore e la fame*.

His experience with di Filippo taught him that, in the hands of a virtuoso, improvisation was still alive in the theatre. On one side was Strehler, ensconced in a *Teatro Stabile*, working to create a formally constructed theatrical revolution, bringing high art theatre to the people. On the other side of the divide were virtuoso actors and actor-

managers, still demonstrating that the traditional Italian theatrical values of bravura, spontaneity and *al improvviso* were alive and well. Boso's practice involves a partial synthesis of these two diametrically opposed methods.

From my own experience and from the testimony of others (John Broadbent and Peter Jordan, two English actors who worked with Boso in TAG Teatro di Venezia) it is clear that Boso values individual creativity in his actors. In both his workshop and professional productions, he starts by asking his actors to present improvisations based on themes fundamental to his approach to Commedia: fear, having a bad thing happen to you, and heroism. From several cycles of these improvisations Boso builds up a picture of an actor's capabilities and their own artistic inclinations: he looks for what roles an actor chooses, and how they imaginatively and creatively embody this role. These provide him with the raw materials of performance, and he deliberately casts his actors in roles where their individuality can be deployed to the greatest effect. Carlo Boso never uses stock scenarios within his workshop, always creating performances from scratch, tailored to the performers' strengths.

His first event was in 1978 where he ran a fortnight-long open workshop at the Campo san Polo in Venice and first worked with his long-term collaborator, mask-maker Stefano di Perocco. He was then invited to run a similar workshop both in the Gardens of the Palais-Royale in Paris and at the Avignon Festival, both in 1982 (Filacanapa, 2015: 57). By 1983 he had broken his ties with the Piccolo and was invited to work with the Venetian based company, TAG Teatro di Venezia. This was where he first assembled an unchanging team of theatrical specialists, who also worked with him on his large-scale international workshops. These workshops have been held throughout Europe and it is within this total exposure to the many aspects of Commedia (mask-making, period dance, acrobatics, stage combat, corporeal mime and public performance) that several companies have formed, and Boso's marque companies have sought their performers. In the 1980s TAG, along with

Les Scalzacani who were based in France, became the main vehicles of Boso's dramaturgic experiments and successes. *Il Falso Magnifico* (1983), *Il Re Cervo* (1984), *Scaramuccia* (1987) and *La Pazzia d'Isabella* (1989) all toured internationally to public acclaim. His association with this company stopped in 1992 with the less successful production of *la Zingara*.

A public Carlo Boso workshop falls into two conceptual halves: in the first half he teaches Masks and character movements, and observes his actors improvising; in the second half he casts, writes and directs shows for actors or students, demonstrating a deeply intuitive ability to cast according to a performer's strengths, both pushing them into new areas as well as type-casting. Boso's dramaturgic know-how allows him to concretise an actor's potential in terms of positioning their character within an individually tailored storyline. Although this may appear as generic to all devised theatre, rather than Commedia, it must be emphasised that Boso is fashioning shows from how actors react to his Commedia provocations: a combination of commitment, sense of humour, voice and physicality. From my own experience of his workshops (1987, Cardiff Laboratory; 1988, ditto; 1989, Islington Arts Laboratory) it was this latter skill that made him stand out. Within two or three days, often working simultaneously with several groups with up to twelve in each (full Goldoni-period Commedia casts), he is able to take a group of actors and create a Commedia play tuned precisely to their dramatic strengths.

Boso's ability to repeat this process with a high degree of success could be ascribed to a deep immersion and knowledge of what Louise Clubb terms 'theatregrams' (1989: 1–26):³⁷ the generic and interchangeable scenic units integral to the historical development of

³⁷ The neologism 'theatregram' was coined by Italian renaissance scholar, Louise Clubb in 1989 in *Italian Drama in Shakespeare's Time* as a portmanteau word to define the array of stock scenes, stock characters, relationships, and plot devices that were the building blocks of the *Commedia Erudita* and the early Commedia dell'Arte. It has been subsequently been used regularly by Commedia dell'Arte scholars such as Natalie Crohn Schmitt, Rosalind Kerr, Rob Henke and M.A. Katritzky.

comedy, including Commedia dell'Arte. Through the rhetorical principle of *imitatio* (ibid: 5), public speakers in the Renaissance, and by extension actors and playwrights, were encouraged to use pre-existing artistic formats and templates to create their art. In a very similar process Boso's embodied knowledge of 'how' the Masks behave, gained from work at the Piccolo and with Poli, and of what stimuli propel these Masks into entertaining dramatic situations, gained from his study of the Scala and Casamarciano scenario collections, give him an unparalleled repertoire of theatregram-derived events to match with particular actors. This becomes, I suggest, a process of dramaturgic triangulation where, as part of the scenario creation process, Boso balances the demands of the Mask he has chosen for an actor, the stock event or theatregram he has placed the Mask in to bring out its dramatic strengths, and the particular dramatic strengths of that actor.

In 1986, the late Ninian Kinnier-Wilson³⁸ and I spent time analysing all the Boso Commedia shows we had seen, or been in, reasoning there had to be a method to how he constructed them. What we concluded then was that Boso was employing a neo-classical, three-act comic structure and populating it with Commedia Masks performed by each workshop's participants. What impresses is his ability to keep track of twelve individual story lines simultaneously, and compose, within the pressure of a workshop, performances that take into account the strengths and weaknesses of the actors involved. This three-act neo-classical structure employed by Boso, expressed as a dramaturgic tool, is described in detail in Rudlin and Crick (2001: 189–198). To this may now be added the following, which further takes into account the dynamics of performing Commedia out of doors.

Boso called this the mechanics of a street Commedia show and was adamant that it should not be longer than an hour.³⁹

³⁸ Mask maker, Commedia actor and founder of the Unfortunati (Rudlin and Crick, 2001: 56–67).

³⁹ Notes taken from a lecture demonstration by Carlo Boso at a Commedia dell'Arte conference, Windsor Ontario, in February 2013.

- 1) Each CDA [Commedia dell'Arte] scene (of two protagonists, maybe with supporting chorus, as required) lasts no more than 2 minutes.
- 2) 30 scenes in a show.
- 3) To maintain public interest (in outdoor CDA) there must be three "incidents" or lazzi per scene.
- 4) An incident can be a "lazzo", a monologue, a dialogue (or *contrasti*) or an orchestrated or orchestral (ensemble) event. These incidents are distinct from, though may arise from, the dramatic travel.
- 5) A scene shape for an individual Mask (the practice of which can be adopted as a classroom exercise) therefore, goes as follows: Enters scene/Incident/Dramatic travel/Incident/Dramatic travel/Incident/Exits scene.
- 6) NB for the above; each subdivision of dramatic travel has a separate emotional level.
- 7) NB for the above, each incident is a physical or visceral event creating fear on stage.
- 8) The same is true of each section of "dramatic travel". Fear creates tension and suspense. If we break it, without destroying the overall dramatic situation, we create the possibility of laughter.
- 9) Anna Cottis' gloss on 7; "something bad has to happen to each Mask several times a scene, so we can either identify with this "bad" or be glad that it is happening to someone else; a win-win situation for a clever actor" (Workshop, Clapham, London, Feb 2014).

This dramaturgic tool, experientially developed from Boso's own practice, is essentially durational: he indicates the overall length of a performance piece, how long each dramatic scene should be, and when lazzi should be employed. This creates a show of thirty scenes of two minutes each in length, containing three elements of dramatic travel and three lazzi. Each individual unit, whether dramatic travel or lazzi, is roughly twenty seconds long. Boso relies on the virtuosity of the actor-creator to be able to manage so many shifts. The shift between dramatic action and 'incidents' or lazzi also indicates that Boso includes aspects of polymodality in performance, using the strengths of each separate audience relationship to add depth and interest to the overall performance.

Commedia pedagogue Anna Cottis defines Boso's political aims as follows:

a promoter of a popular theatre [that is] aimed to be an integral part of democratic discourse... theatre is a forum for a debate through story and character about how we should live together as a society. He sees Commedia dell'Arte as representing all social groups and the conflicts between them, and the commedia actor as serving the public's need to see these conflicts played out and resolved convincingly... (Cottis in Chaffee and Crick, 2015: 419)

Boso is not successful in achieving this in all his productions, and it is more profitable to regard this statement as both a platonic ideal and a dramaturgic guiding principle. Boso possesses the wide palate of skills required to conceive, devise and direct Commedia, albeit with the occasional failure (*la Zingara*), but in the main his shows are technically competent, very funny, show great variety in subject matter and are received well by their intended publics. From observing audience reactions to his shows (London, Cardiff, Paris and Venice), in the main, they successfully entertain both arts festivalgoers and peripatetic street audiences, though not always in the matter of perceived political engagement.

His belief that the Commedia Mask set represents all social groups within society is fundamental to his aim of giving contemporary purpose to the genre. It is Brechtian historicisation in a very pure and comic form: the audience are invited to laugh and enjoy the misdemeanours a whole range of social and economic classes, all safely removed by the performed historical distance from their own lives. Boso trained actor Didi Hopkins supports this position and opines that the historically positioned Commedia has the most potential to be political (Hopkins, 2016, Appendix A: 234–235). Commedia as theorised by Boso is an avenue, albeit in comic or tragi-comic form, through which inter-class conflict can be expressed. He does not see his comedies as revolutionary, but as comically-oriented critical discourse and is ambivalent about involvement with direct political action. In 2003, when all the participants in the Festival d'Avignon were sacked by the director Bernard Faivre d'Arcier, the Commedia companies involved still chose to perform in the great procession and in the scheduled 'Night of Commedia', which they financed by passing

round the hat. However, Gerrit Heiter, a graduate from Boso's AIDAS⁴⁰ school, is critical about Boso and his company's level of political engagement in her 2008 M.Phil. thesis.

In the year of the strike 2003 nothing was to be seen of Commedia's so-called political explosiveness. They had a presence, but they did nothing to demonstrate their opposition by using the weapons they had, a rough stage in a public space and a few actors. It was obvious that for most of them the aesthetic of commedia represented a clever marketing argument rather than a genuine political and artistic credo" (Heiter, 2008: 55, *trans.* Joyce Crick).⁴¹

There is a separation in Boso's praxis between direct action and his theoretical framework for a politicised Commedia.

The emphasis on 'fear' as an underpinning agency for every scenic unit is another unique contribution Boso has made to Neo-Commedia dramaturgy. Placing fear within the dramatic transaction of each scene creates tension, which then leads to a sense of suspense within the audience as to how the fear is to be resolved. Boso states that, within Commedia, that laughter may occur when the fear and danger is made safe. What this fear is, is explored within improvisations. A good fear creates good dramatic material by staging an event that the audience can viscerally react to and intellectually relate to. The fears may affect all the Masks on stage equally, but some may be specific to each social class within the Mask set (see Section V). Within Boso's methodology lies a clear path in engaging, within the comic Commedia framework, with a contemporary audience's fears. This can be

⁴⁰ The Académie Internationale des Arts Du Spectacle, co-founded by Boso and his partner Danuta Zarazik in 2005, has a curriculum composed of "what Boso considers essential in actor training: a thorough grounding in theatre techniques such as singing, mime, dance and stage-fighting, a large amount of experience in front of an audience and classes from international teachers" (Cottis, 2015: 423).

⁴¹ *Hatten die Kompanien der Commedia dell'arte im Jahr zuvor noch den großen Umzug und die Nacht der Commedia dell'arte organisiert, so war im Streikjahr 2003 nichts von der sogenannten politischen Brisanz der Commedia dell'arte zu bemerken. Sie waren präsent, aber haben nichts unternommen, um mit ihren Waffen, das heißt den Bretterbühnen auf einem öffentlichen Platz und ein paar Schauspielern, ihren Widerstand auszuspielen. Offenbar stellt die Ästhetik der Commedia dell'arte für die meisten doch eher ein kluges Verkaufsargument dar als den ein echtes politisches und künstlerisches Bekenntnis.*

purposed as a performative avenue for both the politics and the poetics of survival. A collateral benefit of working in this manner, is that when presented with non-devised material an actor learns to identify fear within a scene, and hence the point of visceral contact between the drama and the audience.

The conscious use of fear as a building block of Commedia furthermore creates a position when the staging of Commedia cannot be solely about delivering comedy to an audience. For Boso's formulation to work, equal stage time needs to be given to generating fear and thus creating the context for laughter by the fear being made safe, as well as laughter itself. This, dramaturgically, leads to a performance medium composed of contrasting events, those that create the fear and those that release it. Both elements must have equal value; and the strength of the comedy lies in the strength of the release from the fear, which in turn lies in the strength (and audience comprehension) of the fear. These mutually dependent and opposite forces are but one element composing the principle of *contraste* within Commedia and lead towards the idea that Commedia may aesthetically have generic and stylistic similarities with the contested genre of Tragicomedy, and potentially share a parallel and cognate dramaturgy.

Within his training regimes, Boso passes on both acting and dramaturgic praxis. He also leaves you with a sense that Commedia could matter, and by further exploring the issue of social engagement for oneself through his methods, it can sometimes be made to matter.

For Boso, the actor should have a certain autonomy:
understanding the social situation of the character and what the audience expects and needs (Cottis in Chaffee and Crick, 2015: 422).

On a personal note, watching him construct scenarios in training workshops, was not only an inspiring act of creative bravura, but took the act of 'playwriting' entirely away from the sphere of literary activity and placed it very firmly within a living and vital

tradition of physically embodied ensemble theatre: “When the audience come in, we try and make them 10 years younger, so we can make them 10 years wiser” (Carlo Boso)⁴².

Boso’s role, defined by Giulia Filacanapa (2015), is that of a new capocomico: a highly skilled individual who takes responsibility, through many channels, for the creation and performance of a show.

⁴² Taken from from my own notes on a lecture demonstration by Carlo Boso at the 2013 (February) Commedia dell’Arte Conference at the University of Windsor, Ontario, Canada.

3.4 Antonio Fava (1949–)

Commedia does not need to be reborn. Whoever does Commedia today is carrying on a continuing tradition, and as such I proceed along the double track of fidelity and innovation (Fava, 2007: xviii).

Fava was born in Calabria in Southern Italy, and though he moved to Reggio Emilia in the North when very young, he sees the south of Italy as where his artistic interpretation of Commedia dell'Arte originates (Rudlin, 2015: 427). Fava considers himself to be born into the tradition of the Commedia dell'Arte, as his father

worked the villages in the countryside around Crotona in the mask and costume of Puricinedda (a local Pulcinella), playing a guitar which, he also beat for rhythm, enlivening local festivals with lazzi, songs, serenades, comic sketches, and outrageous comic-epic tales with cynical tragic undertones. (Fava, 2007: xvii).

His performance training, however, did not come from his father or immediate family, as in the manner of the Andreini, Carrara or Rame families, but from music college and from the Lecoq School. It is certainly relevant to regard Fava's pedagogy as that of a person who is inspired by what he sees as a living tradition, but whose training is entirely twentieth century. He positions himself as part of an unbroken tradition of Pulcinellas and his contribution to the development of Neo-Commedia is the focussed application of twentieth century methodologies to the genre.

Trained both as a musician and performer, he worked in 1968 with the Fo/Rame Nueva Scena Company for a year, before leaving to pursue conservatoire training as a flautist. His musical training continued until 1973, when he reconnected with theatre and by 1980, returning to Reggio Emilia, had completed the full three years at the Lecoq School in Paris (Rudlin, 2015). In 1985, he and his partner Dina Buccino opened, The International School for the Comic Actor⁴³ in Reggio Emilia. This school is running successfully today, with well-attended courses on mask-making, Commedia dell'Arte, and has branched out into

⁴³ http://www.commediabyfava.it/stage_inglese.htm

masked Medieval theatre. Fava is a Commedia polymath in that he is an actor, a musician, a teacher, a director and a skilful mask-maker. John Rudlin, who in his *Commedia dell'Arte: An Actor's Handbook* (Rudlin, 1994) bases much of his physical descriptions of the masks on Fava's teaching, refers to Antonio Fava as a Renaissance man.

Seeing theatre, and Commedia within it, as a business, he presents his view of Commedia to the world, and is a highly effective publicist. He indicates that he is heir to an unbroken tradition of Commedia dell'Arte, without stating the claim directly. He identifies strongly with the role of Pulcinella, performs it extremely well, and makes the claim that this southern Mask is the only one possessing an unbroken tradition from the Renaissance to the present day. When asked to contribute a chapter on Pulcinella to the *Routledge Companion to Commedia dell'Arte* it came in titled thus (his capitals):

OFFICIAL RECOGNITION OF PULCINELLA

The one who saved Commedia from extinction by securing its continuity to the present day
(Fava, 2015: 108)

As presented by Fava, this assertion is good marketing. It touches the heart of the romantically inclined theatre practitioner or student, maybe in the US of Italian descent, who would like to believe in an Italian Maestro, heir to a surviving tradition, passing on its secrets. He is, of course, a third year Lecoq alumnus, and Lecoq's movement typologies are clearly present within his teaching.

As shown in Section I, the idea of a fixed tradition is a highly problematic: the academic study of Commedia dell'Arte indicates that the genre continually evolved, for both artistic and financial reasons. The danger for students is a perception that the paradigm is entirely fixed. To place an idea in students' minds of an unbroken tradition or paradigm, that they are now part of it, is unhelpful. It becomes tempting, or perhaps just too easy, to think that what one is being taught is a performance tool with intrinsic and absolute value, and not simply part of a performance toolkit with relative and relational values to both culture and the audience. This can lead to assertions that Commedia is

'done' in just one way, and if not done in that way, is either not Commedia or is being done wrongly.

However, if Fava claims that he is "proceeding along the track of fidelity" (Fava, 2007: xviii) then the question must be asked, fidelity to what? There is undoubtedly a history of Pulcinella as a historical genius presiding over Naples since the seventeenth century, but he does not present evidence for an unbroken performance tradition containing all the structural elements of Commedia. It all becomes a matter, therefore, of how one interprets and reassembles the historical fragments that do survive, and the purpose that lies behind that the reinterpretation. Fava's purpose, as stated in his book (2007), may seem many and varied and perhaps the polemical flavour of some passages within it offer at least a partial answer.

In the introduction to his book he makes the assertion "Giorgio Strehler's famous production of Carlo Goldoni's *Servant of Two Masters* did not launch the rebirth of Commedia, for which it is often given the credit" (Fava, 2007: xvii). Having made that assertion, the reader might have expected a critical discussion of how the work of Jacques Copeau, via Jean Dasté, and Lecoq was the foundation stone, or that Giovanni Poli's work with *Ca' Foscari* deserves equal prominence. On the contrary, instead of offering any support at all for the statement Fava goes off on a tangent in a discussion as to why Strehler renamed the lead role Arlecchino, instead of Truffaldino, claiming that the name is a "frenchification" (sic) (ibid.), and by implication a colonisation, of all the genuine Italian Zanni names. His apparent rejection of the name Arlecchino, and his proselytising for Pulcinella, leads me to the conclusion that Fava, perhaps unwittingly, adheres to the continued emphasis put by most Italians on their regionality, rather than nationality. It is precisely this tendency towards regional exceptionalism (to be discussed in Section V) that led to the development of local character types, which became a distinguishing feature of

the Commedia dell'Arte. This may, in some small way, be part of the Italian Commedia tradition that Fava is being faithful to.

His case, in print, for the superiority for Pulcinella, both over 'Northern Commedia' and over the other Masks, is based upon principles that are, in fact, attributes integral to all Commedia Masks. In describing Pulcinella's passage through romanticism to now, Fava describes him as "Horribly ugly on the outside and indescribably beautiful within" (ibid: 112) and devotes some time to positioning him as the lowest of the low within Neapolitan families (ibid: 112). If these specific positions, emotionally and societally, are seen in generically dramaturgic terms they indicate that he embodies the *contraste* principle which is a key aesthetic feature of all Commedia Masks, and that in terms of social status Pulcinella is a Zanni. Fava states as much himself, describing the Masks' origins as a reaction against aspects of Northern Italian Commedia.

Pulcinella appears by this name towards the end of the sixteenth century. He had already existed, in a very similar form, under the name of Pascariello, created by Neapolitan companies in order to replace the Bergamask Zanni, who was incomprehensible and unpleasant for the Northern audiences (ibid: 112).

The differences in dialect between all Italian regions, especially before the homogenising effect of broadcast media, cannot be underestimated. Pulcinella is certainly an embodiment of locality and is presented as the presiding genius or patron [anti]Saint of Naples, (see Section 6), and Fava positions Pulcinella as a representative voice of the southern 'people' against a northern hegemony (ibid: 111). Within the North of Italy are the artistic centres where Neo-Commedia was created: Padua, Milan and Venice. They too are attacked.

The great Neapolitan tradition [of Pulcinella is], ignored and confined to a sort of "cultural backwater", where it no means belongs! It was overtaken and given a beating by the concept of a "rediscovered" Commedia, a strategy employing the "walking dead", a sort of "theatrical Frankenstein" (ibid: 112).

Once Fava's own position on the rivalry between the North and the South of Italy becomes apparent, it becomes easier to disentangle it from his dramaturgy. He does, however, give us a wider political context and justification for Commedia: "Commedia represents a powerful counterbalance to the hegemony of the great European authors and stands in equal dignity with Shakespeare, Lope de Vega and Moliere" (Fava, 2007: xv), and its subject matter is "money, sex, possession, hunger, war, sickness, fear, and death" (ibid.). In defining the subject matter of Neo-Commedia, he appears in accord with Carlo Boso. Fava's list of suitable material can generate the kind of onstage fear that Boso states creates a shared bond between performer and audience.

Fava generally himself performs solo, or with a one other actor, and takes the role of Pulcinella, and plays to the strengths of Fava's interpretation of the Mask. Several involve Pulcinella meeting a character called Fosca⁴⁴, (Death), and from whom Pulcinella eventually and cunningly escapes. Here there are similarities both with Dario Fo's sketch *Mazzone the Fool*, in *Mistero Buffo* and Christina Coltelli's Arlecchino show. The dramatic shape of these three is more of an extended sketch or picaresque adventure, rather than a three-act neo-classical comedy. This poses the question as to whether the Neo-Commedia aesthetic contains both a multi-actor, three-act comedy model, as well as existing as solo shows or double acts.

To answer it a further question needs to be asked: Can one Mask do the work of many, when a proposed function of the many (following Levi-Strauss derived anthropological analysis in Section 6.6) is to collectively represent all of society. With Fava's

⁴⁴ It is unclear whether Fava has invented this role, but the character of Death is a staple of Medieval morality plays. This is Fava's description, which occurs below Plate 5 in his 2007 book: "We are not superstitious, but adhering momentarily to the maniacal superstitions of Pulcinella, Zezza, Pascariello, Colafronio and Coviello [southern Commedia roles] in our comedies we call this character, whose identity is obvious, Fosca. In all comic traditions, from the very beginning, there is a moment where the comic hero, the anti-hero par excellence, comes face to face with her. And the comic hero always gets away. The character is almost always female and always a fully fleshed character. On occasion, it may be a distinguished, important looking gentleman."

performance of Pulcinella; the Mask is certainly multifaceted, capable of direct address and conversation with an audience, as well as being anything from a domestic layabout to the Emperor Nero himself (Fava, 2007: Plate 3). Much in the way that the body of critical literature on clowning and fooling assigns the quality of liminality to a dramatic clown, the same quality can be applied to Fava's portrayal of Pulcinella. Liminality here is not the interstitial zone of the cultural anthropologist, but a working dramaturgic method (Crick, 2017): Pulcinella, as a role, can exist within a wide spectrum of dramatic immersion, from being within the drama, to talking to the audience, and going further as he enters the fantastic world of the supernatural and symbolic.

The mask of Pulcinella, as performed by Fava, is capable of playing any role in society or any relationship with an audience, presenting in masked form a role similar to a traditional Clown or Fool. This separates his dramaturgy from the formulation where each Mask occupies a single class-based position. The strength of this Mask is, once again, rooted in the struggle for and the poetics of survival: Pulcinella will do, act, or say anything to survive.

Dutch scholar Robert Erenstein (1990: 7, 12) makes the historical distinction between troupes led by a single *Buffone*, and those who were collectively organised, and though actors might move between troupes organised on these lines, the division was based on financial rewards. Taking Erenstein's definition, Fava is more of a *Buffone* than a member of a collective, and his ability to operate successfully financially supports this. Some of his pronouncements may be seen in this light: defining his Commedia as a distinct brand that is infinitely superior to other products.

Fava is in accord with Carlo Boso, as they both position performed fear as fundamental to Commedia. Whilst Boso presents his formulation as a method to be

employed by actors, Fava describes the operation of 'fear' within a generic context of theatre (Rudlin and Crick, 2001: 191).⁴⁵

Comedy literally shatters fear, releasing collective joy expressed in raucous, liberating, communal laughter...the laughing spectator is relieved. He is saved (Fava, 2007: 5).

Fava positions Commedia as "total theatre" (ibid.) with the following characteristics:

1. The audience is an active, responsive partner (ibid: xiv);
2. Due to the agency of the Mask, Commedia "expresses the present as it moves" (ibid: xiii);
3. It is beyond psychological and is "multi-expressive" (ibid: xiii);
4. A mask does not express an individual but an aspect of "collective behaviour" (ibid: xv).

These I would position as accepted Commedia commonalities, but they are definitions of what Commedia's overall aesthetic is, or might be seen as, rather than a dramaturgic method.

He also makes the following claim, dismissing both Stanislavski and Brecht in one sentence.

Anyone who practices Commedia dell'Arte as we do, with passion and conviction, knows that the two principal interpretive models that have driven twentieth-century performance – that is, losing oneself in the character and its opposite, the so-called alienation effect-have no application to Commedia (ibid: xv)

Giovanni Poli, however, advocated Stanislavski's method as a significant element in an actor's preparation for Commedia: culturally positioning a role's material circumstances as a springboard for the stylistic interpretation. This process is described in greater detail in the preface of *La Commedia degli Zanni* (Poli, 1973). Carlo Boso, similarly, insists each actor

⁴⁵ In several workshops I have attended, Boso sets his students the following task: create fear on stage and by doing this you will create suspense and tension. Then break that tension and you will create the possibility of laughter in the audience.

understands the how, why and what of a scene through this rehearsal technique of repeated third person narration and Marcello Moretti, the original Arlecchino in Strehler's *Il Servatore di due Padroni*, used method acting to develop the original movement schema for the role. This positioning does represent a clear split between Commedia dell'Arte dramaturgies, with the primacy of Lecoq's corporality on one side, and various syntheses on the other. There is certainly an interesting border-zone existing between method derived performance styles, and a Lecoq-derived purity of physicality.

Fava has created or reinvented Commedia Masks, stating they come from the under-represented southern tradition of Commedia, such as Capitano Scarabombardone, Coviello and Meosquasqua. Employing these roles as alternatives to northern models demonstrates a continuation of the reinvention process that started with the *Piccolo* and *Il Servatore di due Padroni*. Some of Fava's students take his reinventions as dogmatic, and as a result a very interesting flame war occurred within the online Yahoo Commedia discussion group (Yahoo Groups, 2012: Internet). It started when one contributor stated that Fava only represented one of many points of view, which appeared to be taken as a red-rag to at least one student of Fava's. I concluded that Fava's student had had a wonderful learning experience but had also not been directed towards other sources of information.

Fava's desire to expand the boundaries of Commedia dell'Arte, and reinvent, have led him to create female Masks: female Zannis he calls *Zagna* (2007: Plates 4 and 5) and a Mask for a Columbina like servant called *Ricciolina* (ibid: Plate 12). Fava does not discuss why he does this, but the issue of gender bias and mask use must have arisen from practice. His solution was to create masked variations of traditional female roles. Within the teaching process, creating a range of female Commedia masks would certainly dispel any accusations of sexism within both his teaching and the genre. A major issue in contemporising Commedia dell'Arte is its patriarchal power structure and how this is

reflected in the gendered use of masks, both on stage and within a class. If the aim is to engage with an audience, and not offend or repel, it is entirely necessary to rectify this imbalance, as will be discussed later in this thesis. However, later I will argue that one of the fundamental potential strengths of Commedia is not just its Masks, but the relationship on stage between the Masks and the unmasked roles. In creating Masks for the female roles, he is to be lauded for combatting generic gendered mask use, notwithstanding the limitations involved in not questioning the positions of economic strength of the traditional Masks themselves.

Fava also defines four fixed areas which, together with an elective fifth, he claims structurally underpin and define the whole genre. These potentially constitute an overall dramaturgic or aesthetic frame, as well as indicating other areas where digression and evolution occur. Within Sections 4 and 5 additional structural elements employed by current practitioners are discussed. Fava's four fixed areas and his elective fifth are:

1. Fixed types [stock characters] (and the system derived from them)
2. The mask (the object, the principle, and the uses of the term)
3. Improvisation (an expressive comic principle, a method of construction, a training method)⁴⁶
4. Multilingualism (and its derivatives: multislant [sic] and multiculturalism)
5. (Elective only) *the aesthetic of anachronism* (Fava, 2007: 35, 125)

It is unclear, however, whether he is presenting this structure as his version of Neo-Commedia, or of historical Commedia as well. It is, however, a useful reference point when further examining the structural defining elements of the genre.

Antonio Fava is a fine teacher and a highly skilled mask-maker, with an international reputation. That he is a skilled publicist should not detract from his achievements in developing his school, creating and popularising a range of female Masks, and focussing the force of his Lecoq-derived pedagogy on the genre of Commedia. He

⁴⁶ Improvisation as an aid to a greater understanding of 'character' within a story is further detailed in Frost and Yarrow (1990: 35).

teaches southern Commedia characters which, except for Pulcinella, are every bit as reconstructed and reinvented as the Goldonian Masks of The Piccolo Theatre in Milan. His strength as a performer and creator is directed towards interpreting the role of Pulcinella, and he seems to embody that Mask's quarrelsome attitude and combative nature. His strengths in dramaturgy do not seem to extend towards larger plays. I opine that the impression he presents as heir to the tradition of Commedia is misleading at best and hinders for some an understanding of what they might be learning from him. It is certainly epistemological equivocation, but in this he may perhaps be forgiven, for what actor or theatre company does not present themselves, for fun and profit, to an audience with joyful and excessive hyperbole?

3.5 The Schools of Mazzone-Clementi

Both Boso and Fava set up their own training establishments to propagate their practices, and Mazzone-Clementi was no exception, setting up two schools, both of which have current and successful independent existence.⁴⁷ I interviewed two current and one former principal from his schools: the Dell'Arte International School of Physical Theatre in California and the Commedia School in Denmark. Each of these practitioners has developed their own praxis within the field of Commedia, and is involved in other cognate areas of physical theatre and the relationship with these other fields according to Lecoq's typology.

This section marks a methodological shift from scholarly engagement, as in the previous sections, into direct contact with practitioners, and an adoption of the Commedia card and interview method, as detailed Section 1.4. To recapitulate briefly, each practitioner interviewed was offered a set of cards, with specific generic qualities on them, and asked to rank them in order of relevance to their own practice and explain why they did so. In addition to this, practitioners were allowed to discard cards they thought irrelevant to their practice, and also create their own cards where they felt necessary. Their explanations relating to priorities and inclusion or exclusion were recorded and transcribed as data (Appendix A), and this includes the ranked card sets from each practitioner. A list of the original card set employed and which practitioner added what card is included in Appendix C. This methodology created an individual data set for each practitioner, which is employed in case studies as standalone data sets, but also can be referenced against other comparable data sets. This approach is developed in the following section, onwards into Section 4, and also in Sections 5.5, 5.6 and 5.7.

⁴⁷ All the founders of Neo-Commedia and several from the second wave also founded schools. The Piccolo Theatre of Milan has its own associated school, Giovanni Poli set up the Avogaria school in Venice, and Lecoq set up his own school in Paris. Dario Fo is the exception here: whilst running occasional master-classes from his artistic base at Alcatraz, he set up no full-time surviving training establishment or regime.

3.5.i *Ole Brekke and the Commedia School*

To serve your partner and to serve the situation (Brekke, 2016, Appendix A: 306).

A graduate of an elite US Naval college, Brekke states he turned away from the military after service in Vietnam and, after seeing a female actor perform a drag version of General Westmoreland in an anti-Vietnam San Francisco Mime Troupe show in the 1960s, decided to change careers (Brekke, 2017: Appendix A, 299). This led him, first, to retrain as a dancer and then to study at the Dell'Arte school in Blue Lake, the Lecoq School in Paris (at the same time as Antonio Fava) and finally to found The Commedia School with Carlo Mazzone-Clementi in 1978.

The school runs a two-year training programme, grounded in the pedagogical methods of Carlo Mazzone-Clementi and Jacques Lecoq, with Commedia dell'Arte as the finale of their two-year study: the genre being positioned to incorporate all the skills developed within that training period. With Feldenkrais technique as corporeal foundation, Lecoq's pedagogy is respected but heavily influenced by Mazzone-Clementi, aiming towards performance itself, rather than training the body for performance, and Brekke makes justifiable claims about high levels of employment in his alumni. (ibid: 293). The school website describes Commedia as a dead form with direct relevance to today's performers.⁴⁸ Brekke positions Commedia's unique strength, and the key to its dramaturgy, as its ability to portray human passions. Commedia, therefore, needs to be performed at the level at which the actor engages with the physical expression of passion.

what we are dealing with here are the passions, and passions are
the essence of human nature.... and with commedia it is the full

⁴⁸ The school website states: "Although the Commedia dell'Arte, the Italian comedy, is today a dead form, the study is important historically because it is a modern source of our western performing arts. The important aspect in the actor's development is the level of play demanded. Someone once described commedia as circus with a plot (Oreglia: 1968), and indeed commedia is at its best when the level of energy is at circus level. The students are obliged to push their own abilities to the level of the fantastic discovering another dimension of themselves in the process" (Commedia School, 2017: <http://commediaschool.com/>).

range of human passions: on one side love, and on the other vanity, vainglory, and deranged emotions... the full range of human emotions is here. (Brekke, 2016, Appendix A: 300)

The embodiment of passion is something that Brekke derives from Lecoq. Passion is not just the subject matter of a Commedia scene, but the force that an actor uses to activate their physical creativity and to power a Mask on stage. Other teachers I have experienced refer to the force that drives or activates a Commedia Mask as an obsession, almost to the point of portraying pathological disorder. Passion is a more generous term than 'obsession' and, when applied to all the different social classes within a Commedia 'set' (see Section V) and positioned as a potential generic quality within Neo-Commedia shows the Mask's hopes in a positive way. The ultimate difference between the two is one of purpose: showing a person obsessed by something is, in the main, to present them to the audience as an object of ridicule, whilst showing passion is a presentation of humanity. Ideologically positioned as a satire, Commedia could be purposed to ridicule its characters, but politically positioned as an exploration of humanity's struggles within a hierarchical system. Audiences need to see characters propelled by hope. Structurally a Mask's extreme longing and hope creates one side of the dramatic *contraste*, to which the opposite is hope's destruction and passion's nemesis. On a metaphysical level longing and passion, rather than obsession, are not only markers of common humanity, but also part of Brekke's personal approach to the purpose of the school. Laughter, and the common bonds of shared laughter, are reminders of our common humanity, in direct opposition to the inhumanity engendered by armed conflict (Brekke, 2016, Interview, Appendix A: 305). Brekke believes that circus is also connected to Commedia and includes it as a part of his overall dramaturgy. Commedia occupies the midpoint in a performance continuum between a dramatically illusionary mode (associated with theatre) and a performance mode expressed in real time and real events (associated with circus acts). Brekke states that Commedia is like "circus with a plot" (Brekke, 2016, Interview, Appendix A: 310). As

such, it is able to occupy for the audience a place where both illusion and reality can be presented as part of its performance.

Another key element of Brekke's approach to Neo-Commedia comes directly from Mazzone-Clementi: that of *al improvviso*, or the ability to create something of interest spontaneously to an audience on stage, through improvisation or sudden off-the-cuff intuition or inspiration:

when they get to the Commedia.... it gets to the foundation of Carlo. The foundation of Carlo is *improvviso*... How to find spontaneity *improvviso*... that's the basis of all of his work... so that is the basis from which we develop the rest of the styles... the quality of '*all of a sudden make something out of nothing*' (ibid: 295).

Brekke very strongly believes that this ability is one a student needs before they can effectively study Commedia. It may appear in different guises: quick wittedness, direct interaction with an audience, ability to adapt to interruptions or off-the-cuff changes in the performance. In the school, Commedia is the final subject to be studied, and ranked as the hardest and most rewarding. Within Brekke's scheme, a student must have a certain level of skill in specific disciplines before they can approach Commedia. A category of skills was introduced during my interview with him (ibid., Appendix A: 5/7/2016), that we agreed to call '*Commedia pre-school*'. This list of skills, named on the interview cards,⁴⁹ indicates the complexity and range of skills Brekke believes are fundamental to Neo-Commedia study and performance (Rank 9 in his 'Why I train' ranking):

Be able to improvise
To have the skills to create Lazzi: song, dance, acrobatics, etc.
To be able to work collectively

⁴⁹ The full set of interview cards, including the original set and which artist added which cards and when, is included as Appendix C, and the interview card priority rankings created by Ole Brekke, together with a full transcript of the interview, are to be found in Appendix A as 'All Interviews' pages 290–314. Within the latter the ranking of his answers to "Why I train and perform in Commedia dell'Arte", including the reference to '*Commedia pre-school*', lies between pages 281 and 283.

To already be an independent theatre maker, responsible for their own text, shows etc.
To be able to experiment and fail in rehearsal
To be able to make theatre that is entertaining without the need for Broadway gimmicks
To be able to share our unique characters, travelling and performing within a global culture
To be able to be funny on stage
To already be able to make theatre that is entertaining
(Brekke, 2016, Interview, Appendix A: 292–293)

Brekke assigns a defined skill level and range of abilities to the performance of the genre. With Lecoq the skill level is implied, and with Strehler the interest is on directing already proficient actors. In defining what Neo-Commedia is, Ole Brekke succeeds in articulating both a fully realised training regime, and a dynamic and defensible position on the style of theatre resulting from this training. Within his praxis exist both a defined purpose for the genre and an understanding of the required skill set and the level of virtuosity. Unlike Lecoq, his Commedia is firmly placed both within the creation and fulfilment of performance and set within a developmental approach to his students' creativity. Like Boso, he succeeds in creating both the generic training and the end-result.

Brekke does not shy away from the genre's political implications. At the start of my investigations I included a card (see card methodology in Section 1.4) that indicated Commedia, mirroring the world, explored everyone's follies and castigated them equally, reading "To make theatre that reflects contemporary issues *without* judgement". Brekke altered this to "To make theatre that reflects contemporary issues *with* judgement" (Brekke, 2016, Appendix A: 292). He also believes his practice, whilst engaging his students with the mechanics of physical comedy, is more concerned with helping students "create a situation where they can discover the purpose of comedy and its social impact...its social relevance (Brekke, 2016, Appendix A: 294 & 292). He is clearly keen for his students to be able to engage, through performance, with the cultural politics of the world they live in.

The school still teaches the historical roles of the Commedia dell'Arte, albeit with the performativity of the Mask foregrounded, and appears to negotiate the gender imbalance between the roles very well, given contemporary sexual politics. In terms of the purpose of his school, he states:

we have a strong emphasis on roles of women in commedia...commedia as the place where women first appeared on stage and oftentimes there are more women than men in the training, so it is important that they play the lead roles in commedia as well and find the female archetypes that correspond with the archetypes expressed by the masks (Brekke, 2016, Appendix A: 287).

Brekke suggests another dramaturgic process, which, though created from necessity, is nevertheless an excellent way of making a comically framed judgement on the patriarchal bias within the genre and within society.

when women play the male masks as men it gives another insight into the follies and hypocrisies of men, which often times is very very funny and sometimes threatening and provoking as well ...political and/or Political depending on your emphasis...gender-bending "the rules" is very important (Brekke, 2016, Appendix A: 297).

In an email, following on from the interview, he added:

One additional, and very important, reason for teaching commedia is simply the sheer joy of doing it. The teachers love it. The students enjoy it immensely. And the public, all ages, enjoy the outrageous level of play of those human passions they recognize so well. And, as already said, we can make a living doing something so enjoyable (Brekke, 2016, Appendix A: email).

Brekke's curation of his school clearly inherits the methods and inspiration of his co-founder and is underpinned by a belief that laughter and comedy, correctly applied, is an agency of shared humanity. It is this belief, together with a visceral love of theatre that frames both Brekke's dramaturgic and political position for Neo-Commedia. It is an inclusive and interrogatory position, which nevertheless also manages, within the context of the whole school, to create financially stable career pathways for many of its alumni. It is

his clear understanding of the alliance between form and purpose, within both training and performance, that gives his iteration of Neo-Commedia a wholeness and clear direction.

3.5.ii Ronlin Foreman and the Dell'Arte School

The engagement with Commedia offers a simplification of theatre that proposes an essential relation between the theatre and the people. Here is one of the perplexing things: I do not advocate commedia, because I have never been around it being done when I have sensed that it had anything to do with a vital theatre (Foreman, 2016, Appendix A: 418).

Here Foreman sums up one of the dilemmas within Neo-Commedia: historical antecedents offer the potential for a highly engaging form of popular theatre, and yet its current manifestations have by and large not met this expectation. His interest in Commedia is in its potential, rather than in its actuality, and, as he purposes it, as a form that has the specific potential to examine and represent the metaphysics of the human condition.

Ronlin Foreman served as Dell'Arte's Director from 2011–2015, having joined the full-time faculty of Dell'Arte in 2003 as Director of Training, cementing a 20-year association. His main interest is clowning, rather than Commedia, but his contribution to the pedagogy of the Dell'Arte school, and the way he employs Commedia as a teaching tool there makes his contribution relevant to this study. For him Commedia is toolbox or portmanteau framework and provides an opportunity for “an exploration of the rules of status within society” (Foreman 2016, Appendix A: 411). Rather than attempting to create an intelligent theatre maker (nomenclature defined by one of my Commedia cards), he determines that he would rather help form a “responsive theatre maker” (ibid: 396).

Intelligence to me is not a good term for an actor... as there is both cerebral and physical intelligence. To make them more responsive is my aim. In terms of a curriculum that involves training a modern actor through Commedia dell'Arte, this is a fairly major aspect for me... that the performer be available to respond on several major fronts... to their partner, to the developing circumstances, to the stage design [space], the audience (ibid: 413).

This legacy from Mazzone-Clementi occurs in both Joan Schirle and Ole Brekke's practice. All three refer within their pedagogies to developing responsivity in a Commedia actor, specifically through three channels: to one's stage partner, to the dramatic situation and to the audience. Joan Schirle refers to this as triangulation (Schirle, 2016, Appendix A: 402). As a dramaturgic practice, it encourages both a direct and a reflexive relationship with an audience.

Foreman does not believe Commedia is a political tool, instead believing that its strength is in capturing the metaphysical dilemmas of the human condition. He added two significant new cards to the spread, and a third that came out of a conversation relating directly to his purpose.

1. To explore the metaphysics of transformation and sublimation – I am not concerned with creating a contemporary form of Commedia, but in theatre that emphasises essential humanity (Foreman 2016, Appendix A: 415)
2. Playing out the human condition (ibid: 414)
3. Engaging with Commedia elicits conversations about the metaphysical (ibid: 415).

This is a position, which he sums up as follows:

I have come to a place where I do not see the development of theatre as an agent of discussion for anything else other than the development of how our life unfolds as human beings... so I resist theatre as a tool for anything, as apart from a pure form or poetic realm. People can do that, I have no problem with that, but in terms of my practice, [Commedia exists] in the same way as poetry is a means of bringing out the metaphysics of life (ibid: 400).

Foreman positions his Commedia praxis as allowing students to immerse themselves into the human experience, and, paradoxically within a highly stratified social performance model, approaching Commedia on an existential level. In this, he is certainly closer to Lecoq than to Dario Fo.

His experience in teaching Commedia globally argues against Commedia being a universally accepted form. In a project in Egypt, originally set up to create cross-cultural dialogue by the El Nadia Jesuit College (ibid: 406), he was asked to teach Commedia dell'Arte to a group of Egyptian student teachers.

When we worked with the masks and began to bring out a sense of the archetype there was an issue of consensual agreement about what was being brought up with the students. The students were almost all offended that the work appeared to be a series of caricatures and put-downs. This... brought up issues of the Muslim culture... How they perceive the Elder in the community, how they perceive the mother of a family... The students were very easy about it all, but they were very resistant to the concept of archetype. And then of course the whole thing with sexual play was an issue... If you take love and sexual play out of commedia you are not left with very much... Instead of a range of theatrical characters of figures that are actually moved by passions. The characters are seen as clowney, jumping up and down and not as examples of the highest peaks of Western humanism (ibid: 405–6).

His observations are not concerned with how an Egyptian audience receives Commedia, but how a group of Muslim student teachers reacted to being required to embody the cultural positions incorporated within Commedia. They were not comfortable with many of its cultural preconceptions, which are taken for granted by a Western theatre going public. This workshop, however, appeared to further focus Foreman's interest in Commedia as an exploratory and interrogative teaching tool.

My interest in this, in Commedia Dell'Arte is this. It is in the application of archetypes. I think in a school for street theatre it is very useful to study archetypes and their application, here there were some cultural hindrances... the barriers to understanding [Western] archetypes was in the culture (ibid: 406).

I have inserted the square-bracketed 'Western' in the above, as it became clear in a later unrecorded conversation on this same topic, that Foreman was not saying the students did not understand the concept of archetypes, but that the manifestation of

archetypal characters within the confines of the Commedia dell'Arte, as a representation of Western cultural values, was a hindrance to the overall aims of the project. This realisation creates a useful critical tool for examining Neo-Commedia, asking how far its performative processes become opaque to other cultural groupings, as they are essentially culturally derived.

He takes a similar position to Lecoq on Commedia, in that he does not see the work of Commedia as political or as an aid to political awareness, but to create a theatrical vehicle for the expression of extremity, and distances himself from politicised Neo-Commedia and strays quite possibly into the realm of entertainment as defined by Adorno.

The engagement with Commedia offers a simplification of theatre that proposes an essential relation between the theatre and the people. I dislike the use of Commedia put to political purposes... when it seems that the whole point of it was that it was not developed to provide a voice for the people against authority. It bastardises what I see as a joyful playful medium... which is moved by its theatrical themes of status, of archetypes: [and] moving the theatre back down to an essential frame (Foreman, 2016, Appendix A: 417-8).

He is not at all concerned with the purposes of ancient Commedia, but is totally immersed in the contemporary performative element, searching, like Poli and Lecoq, for a form of poetic expression that relates directly to the humanity within the audience, undiluted by political purpose or vicarious historical rationale.

3.5.iii *Joan Schirle and the Dell'Arte School*

Like my great inspiration, Isabella Andreini, I have played both women and men. (Schirle in Chaffee and Crick, 2015: 257)

Joan Schirle is not comparing herself to Isabella Andreini, but to the position she found herself in whilst forging a career in performance: a skilled theatre practitioner working largely in a world where the art and the craft of comedy, historical and contemporary, had been defined by men.⁵⁰ To achieve the position and degree of success she has, she concludes, simply had to work harder. She documents this without sentimentality, and there is a dimension to her comedic work that actively searches for inclusive and gender-neutral training and performance methods.

She is the Current Principal of the Dell'Arte school of physical theatre and runs international physical-theatre classes including a regular month-long mask and physical-theatre training session in Bali. She is happy to have the school curriculum described as Lecoq "having been pounced on by Mazzone-Clementi" (Schirle, 2016, Appendix A: 391). She is an actor, writer, deviser, trainer, director and a long-standing teacher of the Alexander technique. Her passage into the world of Commedia dell'Arte was inspired by, in 1975, meeting Carlo-Mazzone-Clementi (ibid: 375):

It wasn't that I saw Carlo perform Commedia: It was him. He embodied it, he was a force. (ibid: 393)

Between Mazzone-Clementi's guidance and her own performance and literature-led praxis, a new synthesis emerged, framed also by her experience as a woman.

My personal quest for at least 20 years was to read everything I could get my hands on, talk to everybody I could at the time, and then there wasn't a lot of translated stuff, and I still feel inferior in the world of commedia, because I don't speak Italian. I will go to my grave with that one but also being compassionate to myself about it. I have so many books of Carlo's that I just can't read. I

⁵⁰ This position is further expanded in her chapter "Women on Stage, and in the Wings" (457–463) in *The Routledge Companion to Commedia dell'Arte*, Routledge, 2015, edited by Chaffee and Crick.

have learnt a lot about the performance of commedia just by reading (ibid.).

One keynote to her interview was a detachment from what she terms “academic” approaches to Commedia. She was resistant to framing her own thoughts with other people’s words and referred several times to a quotation from Evaristo Gheradi (1663–1700), a famous Italian Harlequin: *Castigat Redendo Mores “in laughter there is the castigation of the follies of the world”* (ibid. 355). Schirle identifies four themes that attract her to Commedia:

1. It is an ensemble form
2. It has a political dimension
3. It is a challenging form to perform well
4. It allows exploration of the role and position of women in its history.

The ensemble is both a core belief based on personal politics and a working method. An ensemble here is both an expression of a particular view of the term community and one that denotes purposed collective endeavour.

[Commedia is] an ensemble form... so, I am less interested in the personal fulfilment of the student or the actor... it is less about what I want or how I should be fulfilled as an individual actor but how I am fulfilled within a community, within an ensemble full stop. This is why I continue to practice Commedia. (Schirle, 2016, Appendix A: 371)

and

Carlo Mazzone-Clementi used to talk about the Harlem Globetrotters... Their basketball games were based on a rhythm and a shared understanding of what you were doing, and you are there to be entertaining; playing for the pleasure of the audience. All of that is contained within that word ensemble. (Schirle, 2016, Appendix A: 384)

Recognising that working creatively in an ensemble takes a particular skillset, Schirle added a card to the ‘ideal qualities’ card set stating that an ideal Commedia actor

should be “capable of making and keeping ensemble agreements” (ibid: 381). She finesses this statement with “to be able to reach artistic consensus with others within a definite time frame” (ibid: 381). She construes the whole business of creating and performing theatre, especially Commedia, as a cooperative enterprise and this extends to the practical tasks associated with touring. That an actor should “be able to complete off-stage tasks” and “be able to do non-performance tasks” are also included (ibid.). As part of the interview I suggested to Schirle that the ensemble is a place where “Commedia Dell’Arte can become implicitly political. It states that we are creating an artistic endeavour without leaders and working as a co-operative group” (ibid: 392). This, though in another’s words, was deemed acceptable.

After considering the purpose behind her praxis, Schirle added the card “to make theatre that is engaging” (ibid.) Engagement implies, within both a Commedia and a comic context, that theatre should have relevance to an audience, and be both entertaining and educational. She also altered the card that stated, “to make theatre that reflects contemporary issues with judgement”, introduced by Ole Brekke, to “make theatre that reflects contemporary issues with a point of view” (ibid: 355). Her implied position is that the genre (and performed skill) of comedy may attract and entertain, but in a similar way to Dario Fo, this skill may (and ought to) be put to an explicit political or ideological motive.

Many years ago, I wrote that we often present to our audience things we know that they are not going to agree with, but we try and dazzle them with our footwork and make them interested enough in what we are doing, so they hear what we are trying to say and maybe take it home and think about it. The laughter they enjoy certainly opens them up to new ideas (ibid: 369).

The Dell’Arte Players, of which Schirle is a leading member, has a history of involving itself in issues local to Humboldt County where the school is based. However, she notes that these issues, and their position relative to local politics, evolved over time. At the 2013 Windsor Commedia conference Schirle detailed how their positioned changed in

relation to the local logging industry (ibid: 369). Although this type of socially engaged and comic performance is only one aspect of Schirle's work, it does help her define her conception of a modern Commedia actor: an ensemble member within a company dedicated to both localised contemporary relevance and the highest possible performance standards.

Schirle is also fascinated by the skill required to perform Commedia. If an actor cannot engage totally on stage within the performance, it all dies.

Part of the reason why I do it and like it is that there are no private moments, so if the actor is not present on stage, there is no performance. You can say it that... the performance is 50% actor 50% audience (Schirle, 2016, Appendix A: 376–377).

To perform Commedia an actor must be skilled; must display virtuosity at what they do, a theme agreed with but also modified by Ronlin Foreman to "be a virtuoso" (Foreman, 2016, Appendix: 413). The craft of Commedia acting appears to be one that both presents and embodies the dramatic journey but can, in the moment, vary that presentation, depending on the immediate demands of how one's coequal stage partner and the audience are reacting.

I would see an actor in the same terms as a musical virtuoso, someone who's practised, so not only are they capable of playing difficult passages, but [that] they are capable of interpreting the music in a way that makes me hear it differently. This is why I, as an actor, love commedia. It is one of the most difficult and challenging, yet rewarding, styles of theatre that I have ever performed in (Schirle, 2016, Appendix A: 400).

When presented with the card "To learn of the history and the roles of women in commedia and culture", her reaction was as follows:

That is a personal goal, not necessarily shared but since I have a big input into Dell'Arte, with the school and the players, it is important (ibid: 378).

The theme concerning the role of women in Commedia became more developed as she responded to the card “to develop their critical faculties” in relation to Commedia.

I do ask people to be critical about some things, but I have put my objections to uncritical thinking down in my writings. I object to the way the Servettas are always type cast as flirty or near nymphomaniacs.⁵¹ This is to do with critical thinking because the students have not looked at what roles of work were available for women during the period of origin of Commedia Dell’Arte.

And yes, we know that the actresses came from the class of courtesans or *cortigiani*, but that is historical context. Critical thought needs to look at what are the available equivalents now; and then if we are still using our 17th century aesthetic now, how we then reflect modernity through that frame. (Schirle, 2016, Appendix A: 374–375)

The last comment explicitly identifies an issue as to how to approach developing relevant female archetypes. She is scathing about the role of the unrecognised female partner within the history of Neo-Commedia and cites Suzanne Bing (Jacques Copeau), Franca Rame (Dario Fo) and Jane Hill (Carlo Mazzone-Clementi) as examples (Schirle in Chaffee and Crick, 2015: 459). The female-led company, Hotel Courage, deals with gender bias, relating to the power and use of masks, in a different way. Katrien van Beurden and Giulia Filacanapa of Hotel Courage note the following: not only is the historical form a cultural product of a male dominated society, but the historical design of the masks is biased towards perceived male character traits (Hotel Courage, 2015, Appendix A: 218).

⁵¹ Her particular bugbear being “Hearing workshop leaders say that women of the Commedia dell’Arte, especially the servants, were all flirty, sassy-- near nymphos, really--who would tumble into the sack at a wink. Some shoulder-shaking, a little hip twirling, and there’s your character! As in life, sex is one of the incessant drivers of Commedia action, but not the only one, and it comes in many colours. The game of attraction, flirtation, seduction, fulfilment, jealousy, and frustration gives poetry and musicality to the form, not to mention that ‘feigned ardours’ have been employed by women for centuries. The shadings of class, economic status, and place give truth to the human comedy beyond just style, the *contrasto* coming through a range of types and motivations, from splendid bawds to incurable romantics, upstairs and down” (Schirle in Chaffee and Crick, 2015: 458).

Schirle is not precious about adapting Commedia (its form and its associated performance skills) to other genres if the purpose of the show required demands it. Here, perhaps, the structural form of the neo-classical comedy gets superseded by a more contemporary form.

To use a Moliere quote, *I will take my good where I find it*, and use whatever it is at the moment. I just wrote the show that our company did it covers a lot of these bases you have been suggesting, social impact etc., but it is a detective story, which is something that American audiences understand: the whole detective genre... but the whole physical style and even some of the characters in it [have] the physicality of the performance [and so] are all what I would call the Commedia Dell'Arte (ibid: 367–368).

Her use of a framing genre that is more familiar to an audience mirrors an independent experiment carried out with my company, the Fabulous Old Spot Theatre Company: we brought the Commedia Mask set into a rural Gloucestershire of 1946, with a Sam Spade genre detective brought in to wrap up a mystery.⁵² The detective and film noir genre worked well, with there being an equivalent distinctive physical Gestus for that social period.

Schirle also notes that Commedia is a good vehicle for teaching students comic pedagogy: structures of comedy, or to be exact the comic play, and how each individual element contributes to the whole:

Commedia Dell'Arte is a very good way of introducing students to the old and ancient forms of comedy... the structures of the situations; things like that...To me one of the advantages of teaching commedia is [that] it does open people up to the forms and structures of comedy in a way that is most accessible from my experience (ibid: 363).

⁵² *The Curse of Elverado*, 2005, the Fabulous Old Spot Theatre Company, www.oldspottheatre.org.uk (Accessed 21/08/2017).

This mirrors my teaching experience. As the Masks of Commedia are very much known quantities with fixed attributes, the process of explaining how the characteristic patterns within each of the separate acts develop, and how this is fed by the individual entrances and exits of each Mask within a comedy, can be presented as an open-ended formula which can be learned. Part of the students' experience is learning, through Commedia, how this structure operates, and then being able to apply it within their own practice. As a teaching tool, the three-part pattern of set-up, confusion and resolution is also an integral part of Fava and Boso's pedagogy.

Of overall interest within the interview was the number of cards she rejected, in relation to the number she added herself. Out of twenty-nine attributes indicating potential ideal qualities of a Commedia actor, distributed over ten ranks, sixteen were defined or redefined by her.⁵³ This shows that she rejected sixteen out of the original twenty-nine and created a similar number that expressed her approach in a clearer manner. This reflects a theatre artist who, whilst being inspired by Mazzone-Clementi as a performer, also followed his dictum to find out what Commedia could be now. Her defining features are that she believes in the idea of an ensemble, and that Commedia works best

⁵³ New 'ideal quality' cards introduced by Joan Schirle are as follows.

Rank	New JS attribute:
1	to be quick witted in performance
2	to be spontaneous
2	sense of musicality
4	to have the attributes of a shaman... as a bridge to the unseen
4	to be able to complete off-stage tasks
5	to be fearless
5	to be able to step in and out of the action
5	to be able to do non-performance tasks
6	to love being in front of an audience
6	to have at least one 'natural' Zanni with full animal intelligence
7	to be able to reach artistic consensus with others within a definite time frame
7	to know when to make an entrance and when to make an exit
7	to be capable of making and keeping ensemble rules
7	to be a citizen of the world
8	to have an actorly instinct
8	to be able to triangulate: actor, audience and partner (ibid: 381–382).

when engaging an audience. As the only woman interviewed amongst the first and second generations of Neo-Commedia practitioners, I believe it is significant that she focusses on Commedia as a cooperative endeavour, firmly aimed at bringing relevant shows to a community, to amuse, engage and “dazzle with footwork”.

3.6 Conclusions

How do these practitioners contribute to the dramaturgy and aesthetics of Neo-Commedia? Dario Fo's contribution to Neo-Commedia is that of leading by example, from the front, in a related and completely invented field of performance. He recolonised, from the left, the Medieval genre of the Mystery Plays and Sacred Drama to present what a genuinely popular theatre might have been like, had it not been historically incorporated into the hegemony of church and state. He also created several highly successful contemporary farces, blending his comic talents and virtuoso performance skills with the world of contemporary politics. In terms of dramaturgic pedagogy, he presents us with tools to reinvent old theatre forms through a modern 'popular' sensibility, and a way to fuse contemporary political events and farce. In terms of performance skill, he popularised and spread the practice of Grammelot. Fo extends his dramaturgy into the realm of meta-theatre, championing and practicing the *aparte* or 'aside', a semi-improvised but highly purposed form of direct audience address. For Fo, the aside's purpose was integral to his political and performance praxis: it allowed him to talk to the audience and describe to them what he was about to perform for them. For Fo the performer, this gave him a chance to sense the audience's mood, and as a political activist it gave him the chance to incorporate any material that might guide the audience's comprehension of his forthcoming performance.

For Fo the human condition is best understood through a Marxist lens, which puts him into a contrary position to that of Dell'Arte teacher Ronlin Foreman, who believes that the possibilities provided by the extreme nature of the genre, lead more towards a metaphysical exploration of humanity. His colleague at dell'Arte, Joan Schirle, however, also puts politics to the fore within her practice, and though aware of the historical path of Commedia dell'Arte, foregrounds present purpose over historical accuracy. She advocates

the ensemble as the fundamental unit of Neo-Commedia, a political dimension to its performance, which has individual challenges for each actor, and (as a personal goal) is a focus from which to explore the role and position of women in its history. Lecoq-influenced Antonio Fava, on the other hand, proposes a structural and historically based definition: fixed types, masks, improvisation and multilingualism, with an 'elective' element of anachronism. He does not eschew political engagement, and indeed has performed as part of the Fo-Rame company but appears more concerned with reviving the fortunes of Pulcinella and the southern style of Commedia. For Fava, this is a necessary counterbalance to the Piccolo Theatre of Milan and the Venice dwelling Harlequins of the north. This puts him as an agent within the long-standing tradition of Italian inter-regional rivalry, rather than any wider political allegiance. Carlo Boso, whilst being criticised for not practicing what he preaches as regards political content, can be seen as a midpoint between Fo's ideological stance and Commedia as pure entertainment. He sees Commedia as an ideal vehicle to discuss, through Brechtian distancing, the issues besetting contemporary society, much in the way (as he sees it) as comedy functioned in ancient Athens. Together with TAG actor Laura Bauta he co-created a 'new' masked female Commedia type, the Witch, to address both the gender balance within a historically positioned Mask set, and to balance The Doctor's male logic with feminine intuition. The position inherited by several of Boso's pupils (John Broadbent and Didi Hopkins) is that the mirror of society encapsulated by the hierarchy of stock characters is an ideal delivery mechanism for presenting multiple points of view and a wide range of political positions. This structure is ideal for demonstrating the workings and inter-reactions of a social system, albeit framed through comedy. This is potentially its greatest performative strength and an attribute unique to Neo-Commedia. A Commedia performance, extrapolating from Boso's position, is a snapshot of the workings of a hierarchical society. The following chart expresses the spectrum of purpose at this stage of the evolution of Neo-Commedia.

Table 3.6: The spectrum of purpose at this stage of the evolution of Neo-Commedia.

Commedia Dramaturgy: Purpose					
1 Entertainment	2 Engagement			3 Activism	4 Metaphysics
Pleasure	Politics			Ideology	To express the human condition
	Geographically local issues	Societal interrogation	Inter-regional rivalry	Denouncing the overall corruption of the existing political system, and of specific people within it	Passion
Normative or helpless	Questioning			Spur to Change	The poetics of survival

All parties agree that Masks are an integral part of Neo-Commedia, as is improvisation. The latter however has multiple definitions and purposes, from Fo's performance-based *aparte* to a threefold division stated by Fava, but also practised by Boso. Fava defines improvisation as having as its first stage an exploratory phase, associated with training, a secondary phase associated with trialling and organising performance materials and a third phase, that of improvising in performance. It is, however, only Fo who directly ascribes political purpose to improvisation. So far, then, within the evolution of Neo-Commedia, the tension between purpose, expressed as a commitment to political debate or ideology, and form is apparent. How these dramaturgic paths are employed or further evolved will now be the matter of the following section.

4 Third Generation

4.1 The Third Generation, Introduction

The practitioners discussed in the previous two sections defined the formative processes and initial spread of Neo-Commedia, creating the dramaturgic and aesthetic positions intrinsic to the genre. The individual positions stated within each interview (Appendix A) indicate the genre's breadth of practice and purpose and indicate how it has developed from its origins. From here the thrust of the investigation concerns itself with how the students and descendants of the founders and the second-wave practitioners position their own dramaturgic practice. In 1970, thirty-five years after the genre came into being, Antonio Fava, a second-generation practitioner, defined the genre as having four recognisable elements, together with an elective fifth.

- 1 Fixed types [stock characters] (and the system derived from them)
- 2 The mask (the object, the principle, and the uses of the term)
- 3 Improvisation (an expressive comic principle, a method of construction, a training method)
- 4 Multilingualism (and its derivatives: multislant [sic]; multiculturalism)
- 5 (Elective only) *the aesthetic of anachronism* (Fava, 2007: 35, 125)

The data I gathered expands upon Fava's initial definition and introduces new elements, listed below:

- 6 Intrinsic political engagement
- 7 An identification with Peter Brook's 'Rough Theatre'
- 8 Grammelot: regarded as important but featuring more in omission
- 9 The performance ensemble, a fundamental element
- 10 Commedia as tragedy without catharsis

An overview of this data has led me to re-evaluate the dramaturgic strengths of the Masks (Sections 5 and 6) and leads me to suggest that political discourse is an intrinsic part of Commedia and is inherent to the genre's performative polymodality.

My approach in this section is thematic, and where the work of one practitioner stands out from the rest, either by deviance from a general consensus or as a unique piece of

cognate praxis, it will be dealt with as a brief case study.⁵⁴ The practitioners I have interviewed all privilege Commedia as their main area of practice or interest, and so it is through an evolving set of their collective definitions, and through my own research, that a dramaturgic and aesthetic position for Neo-Commedia will be sought. Practitioners whose practice, ideas and ideologies survive under public scrutiny are, in the main, represented in my sample.

A factor linking the practitioners' interest is their attraction to the external features of the genre. Out of the sample of twenty persons interviewed, thirteen listed "significant event", and eight listed "significant person" within their top three reasons for why they teach or practice Commedia dell'Arte. Although this only represents just over 50% of those interviewed, given the wide range of divergence in the other priorities, this must be considered a significant factor. I place myself within this category, noting that seeing TAG Teatro di Venezia in 1983 turned my curiosity in the genre into an enthusiastic commitment.

The data gathered shows disparity between the different interviewees' priorities, as demonstrated in each interviewee's card spread. Ronlin Foreman and Joan Schirle, for example, whilst both cooperating extensively as trainers at the Dell'Arte school, have diametrically opposed views of the purpose of Commedia: the former focussing on the metaphysics of human existence, and the latter on local politics. As they both worked in the same school it can be concluded that the genre and form of Neo-Commedia is robust enough to encompass both these extremes of purpose. Activity within contemporary practice may be best expressed or understood not as a single set of practices, but as an ontological toolkit, containing a range of dramaturgic and dramatic praxes, the different combinations of which all lead to different outcomes.

⁵⁴ I am integrating the data gathered from Ole Brekke, Ronlin Foreman and Joan Schirle within this section as well (in addition to including them in Section 3) as they are all still active practitioners.

The praxial range developed by Neo-Commedia's founders and first generation created a platform for future development: the following section expresses a range of findings derived from my indicative sample covering a range of positions taken on political engagement, rough theatre, Grammelot and the ensemble.

4.2 Positioning Political Engagement Within Neo-Commedia

Politics, within theatre, is distinct from ideology in that politics is a performed discourse between positions, whilst ideology is a performed promotion of one ideology over another. The dramatic subject matter of both, however, exists within contestations of ownership and access to resources. Joe Kelleher, writing on the relationship between theatre and politics (2009: 3), quotes Stefan Collini, to offer this useful definition of politics; “The important, inescapable and difficult attempt to determine relations of power in a given space” (2004: 67). Within this thesis the ‘given space’ is purposed to mean the performed dramatic world of Neo-Commedia, placed within the web of generic and cultural meaning radiating from and impacting upon performance.

My data indicated there is no single position on political, or ideological, praxis so the first stage of analysis was to present the interviewee’s position on a spectrum. Of the twenty positions on this spectrum, by the end of the interview process, only four had been initially suggested by me, and sixteen came from the interviewees.

The following list shows the spectrum of stated levels of political engagement within those interviewed. The most politically engaged occur at the top, the least at the bottom. (Initials in brackets indicate which practitioner added the card. OC indicates the card is from the original set.)⁵⁵

1. To promote internationalism within a troupe (JR)/To be a citizen in the world (JS)
2. To renew and revive Commedia dell’Arte to denounce or show modern society: to become aware, through joy and theatre, of their buried critical faculties in a ‘real’ context (MP)

⁵⁵ Key: OB, Ole Brekke; OC, Olly Crick; RF, Ronlin Foreman; DH, Didi Hopkins; DS, Dory Sibley; MP, Mario Pirovano; SMCg, Scott McGehee; JR, John Rudlin; JFR, John Finbarr Ryan; JS, Joan Schirle; PT, Pete Talbot; KVB, Katrien Van Beurden.

3. Commedia is a tool to invite the audience to reflect on human nature, and who are the arseholes and who are the disempowered (PT)/To learn of the roles of women in culture and history within Commedia (DS)
4. To teach them the purpose of satire (JFR)
5. To make theatre that reflects contemporary issue with judgement (OB)
6. "In laughter, there is castigation of the follies of the world" (Gherardi via JS)
7. To make theatre that reflects contemporary issues, with a point of view (JS)
8. To create a situation where they can discover the social impact of comedy (OB)
9. To make theatre that is engaging (JS)
10. Commedia is an exploration of the rules of status within society (RF)/Commedia is a formalisation of the Rules of Life's Game (DH)
11. To create a social awareness [in the audience] for the stories we tell, sourced from all around the world (KVB)
12. To make theatre that reflects contemporary society or issues (OC)
13. To make them [the students] socially and politically aware (OC)
14. To develop their [the students] critical faculties (OB)
15. Utilising/Modifying classic forms of theatre to engage modern audiences and reveal social structures (SMcG)
16. To make theatre that is open for debate, through a theatrical performative dialectic (DH)
17. To make theatre that reflects contemporary issues without judgement (JB)
18. Commedia is a tool to invite the audience on reflect on human nature (KVB)
19. To make them [the students] work collectively (OC)
20. To make them [the student] an independent theatre artist, responsible for their own text, shows, etc. (OC)

The above spectrum represents the breadth of political application within Neo-Commedia, but not the incidence of each value. Within the context of training, Dory Sibley added the following card “To learn of the roles of women in culture and history within Commedia”. Her company, Tut’Zanni, also focusses its practice towards staging sexual and gendered parity (Sibley, 2015, Appendix A: 77–78). Neo-Commedia, as a sub-genre of theatre, here reflects concerns around the ownership and performance of historical and contemporary patriarchal culture.

The case for women’s historical submergence within emplotted action is laid out by, amongst others, Kathleen Gough (2013). Using both Derrida and Judith Butler as critical sources, she interrogates the mechanisms whereby this submergence occurs at the points in theatre when “the limits of representation and representability are exposed” (Butler, 2000: 2).

if Derrida’s *Spectres of Marx* provides Derrida and us with some ‘real’ and ‘theatricalized’ ghosts that prove unwieldy and unworldly, Butler alerts us to the ways that female-gendered spectres compound this conundrum exponentially (Gough, 2008: 115).

Examining the lives of the early Gelosi actors Vincenza Armani, Isabella Andreini and Vittoria Pisimi through this lens, I have no doubt will prove fruitful for a future researcher. To paraphrase Gough (ibid.), they are, in effect spectres. To invoke Derrida [they are] part of the “haunting [that] belongs to the structure of every hegemony” (Derrida, 1994: 37).

Taking Brecht’s definition of the practice of dramaturgy as being “in practical terms,” (Sigal, 2016: 15) Sibley and company rejected the gendered Renaissance mask set, and recreated a new set, based on perceptions of where power lies now and how to achieve gender parity in casting. In addition to advocating for the vital role of women within Commedia dell’Arte theatre history, she places great significance on

contemporaneously re-gendering the historical Masks, such as a male Columbina/Servetta and a female Pantalone or Dottore (Sibley, 2015, Appendix A: 80).

What we are trying to show it is that is not about men and women anymore, but it is about the power-relations, about mankind's lack of fellow feeling ...not being responsible for the upkeep of one's fellow man (Sibley, 2015, Appendix A: 80).

The theatrical mechanism through which this occurs is, in Dory Sibley's words "the dark humour that people today find very funny" (ibid.) and she notes a situation they created:

when a [female] Zanni role is fired from her job, because the [female] Dottore thinks she is canoodling with her son and the end result being that she gets fired and dumped out on the street, with no food or money, accused of sexually harassing her employer's son (ibid.).

No one added to the card set any direct abjuration of historical or contemporary patriarchy within Neo-Commedia. There were, however, sexual politics expressed within the card set "Ideal qualities of a Commedia actor" which could easily be added to this larger political spectrum:

To be un-prejudiced, non-racist and non-sexist (PT)

Non-sexist (OC)

Politically aware (OC)

Within the card set of "Ideal qualities of a Commedia actor", only seven out of twenty practitioners prioritised "un-prejudiced, non-racist and non-sexist" within their top third. Of the category "socially and politically aware", if we add the three additional practitioners who are not in both categories, we still end up with only nine people out of twenty prioritising a degree of cognate political awareness in their actors. This is surprising within an artistic community. However, there are two possible explanations. The first being that amongst the

Commedia community there is an awareness that good dramatic material is generally about overcoming bad things (prejudice, racism and sexism) so there is a level of ambivalence within these areas. The second is that as a director or capocomico with one's own purpose for a show, the quality and skill of your performers may be more important than their personal politics. Joan Schirle also notes that, within her work at ensemble-based Dell'Arte, people who are prejudiced, racist or sexist do not gravitate towards them.

We don't make this a major point in our audition process, but if someone who comes to our school begins to show these traits, we do have a quiet word, but we don't tend to attract these kind of people (Schirle, 2016, Appendix A: 403).

The focus of Sibley's critique is aimed at Commedia's intrinsic Renaissance power structure embodied within the rigid social and economic hierarchy of its stock characters. Commedia's hierarchy, reaching from ruler to immigrant, functions as a constructed mirror to a hermetic model of society. It is not the existence of the social hierarchy within Neo-Commedia, *per se*, that has ideological or political connotations within performance, but how practitioners employ this hierarchy within this ostensibly comic medium.

Carlo Boso states that the main aim of laughter is to "make the danger safe". When this formula is employed to dramatise the economic position of Commedia's Zannis, a comic societal critique, most likely left-leaning, becomes entirely possible. However, if achieving laughter becomes one's prime objective, the economic consequences of being a Zanni are ignored or made too safe, then any critique of social class becomes irrelevant. If there is too little laughter, however, the comedy dies, the audience is reminded too much of real life and the performance fails as entertainment. If the focus is entirely on creating laughter, the performance moves into Adorno's sense of political helplessness, but certainly would entertain. Boso, as noted previously, believes the genre functions best as a dramatic and historicised parable. Making the parable's references more obvious allows the genre to move

into satire. Both Dario Fo and Adriano Lurissevich believe comedy is a good vehicle for political satire: Dario Fo with his repurposed mystery plays and comic presentations of topical political issues⁵⁶ and Lurissevich with his Neo-Commedia performance, ridiculing the corruption involved in building Venice's flood defences⁵⁷ (Appendix A, Lurissevich, 2015: 83).

Within the data set gathered, it is possible to conclude that although the tools to deliver political or ideological critique are present, predominantly through the mechanism of the intrinsically hierarchical mask set, it is the purpose of the creators that sets the agenda. The structures of Neo-Commedia are able to portray a wide spectrum of political engagement.

⁵⁶ *Accidental Death of an Anarchist*: (1970 Italian premier) had as its subject matter the death in police custody of anarchist Guiseppi Pinelli; *Can't Pay, Won't Pay*: (1974 Italian premier) concerned itself with a house-wife led civil disobedience campaign against increases in staple food costs, and *Trumpets and Raspberries* (1981 Italian premier) combined public hatred of Gianni Agnelli, then head of FIAT Industries with a plot involving politically motivated kidnap and mistaken identities.

⁵⁷ *The Heritage of Pantalone, or Venice saved by the Flood*, 2007, written and directed by Adriano Lurissevitch.

4.3 Rough Theatre

Rough theatre, a term first coined by Peter Brook (1968: 78), as an aesthetic applicable to Neo-Commedia was introduced to the data set, again by Dory Sibley, whilst searching for a definition that positioned Neo-Commedia in opposition to New York's Broadway and London's West End. She came up with: "To make theatre without the need for West End/Broadway Gimmicks" (Sibley, 2015, Appendix A: 62–64). Responses to this card in subsequent interviews indicate that although she was being unspecific about the differences between Broadway and Commedia gimmicks and resources, her statement acted as a provocation to her peers.

Of the sixteen interviews carried out after the card was introduced, five listed this card within their top third of priorities; six listed it within their middle priorities; one created a whole new low-end category for it (see below) which still emphasised its value, and three people rejected the card entirely. Given the wide divergence within other categories, it can be concluded that the practice of creating entertaining and rough theatre through poor means (a conflation of the various developments this category went through), without the need for Broadway gimmicks has significance within the practice of Neo-Commedia. The use of 'poor' within this section does not refer to Grotowski's 'Poor Theatre', but as an extension or conflation of the meaning of rough theatre.

The question of resources seems significant. Pete Talbot offered a stylistic response using the example of the helicopter used in *Miss Saigon*, and questioned which was more theatrical, a mime helicopter or a real helicopter (Talbot, 2016, Appendix A: 176), whilst Joan Schirle stated that she did not want to position herself merely in opposition to another theatre form (Schirle, 2016, Appendix A: 389), and that being able to work with Broadway budgets would be nice. Tony Kishawi expressed envy at the size of Broadway audiences compared to his (Kishawi, 2016, Appendix A: 248), but when offered,

theoretically, a huge array of “technical lights and technical effects” (ibid.) he replied, “I cannot think of a show in those terms: we put shows on in front of a free-standing curtain, which is our canvas” (ibid.). In saying this he stated his artistic position as one who preferred to be working in front of a single curtain, indicating his adherence to the ethos of rough theatre.

Adriano Lurressevitch (2015, Appendix A: 89), Fabio Mangolini and Guilia Filacanapa, all referencing Giovanni Poli, indicate that rough theatre is a key element of their Neo-Commedia aesthetic. UK-based Ophaboom Theatre⁵⁸ state that it was a key phrase that resonated with the company’s founders. Ole Brekke concurs, and in his practice as a Commedia trainer states that the ability “To make theatre that is entertaining without the need for Broadway gimmicks”, is a prerequisite for any of his students studying Commedia. From Sibley’s original card he created a sub-category he called “Commedia pre-school” (Brekke, Appendix A: 2016: 292 & 296).

To further understand the concept in relation to Neo-Commedia it is worth examining Brook’s own words for examples of convergence and divergence.

It is always the popular theatre that saves the day. Through the ages it has taken many forms, and there is only one factor that they all have in common—a roughness. Salt, sweat, noise, smell: the theatre that’s not in a theatre, the theatre on carts, on wagons, on trestles, audiences standing, drinking, sitting round tables, audiences joining in, answering back: theatre in back rooms, upstairs rooms, barns; the one-night stands, the torn sheet pinned up across the hall, the battered screen to conceal the quick changes—that one generic term, *theatre*, covers all this... (Brook, 1968: 78)

This certainly does appear to describe how Commedia is seen by many. Peter Brook was a highly successful theatre and film director before he wrote this book. The trestle stage, unadorned but by a backdrop, is still a key signifier for a Neo-Commedia production.

⁵⁸ Conversation with Geof Beale, founder of Ophaboom, at a Feruccio Soleri celebration at the Italian Cultural Centre, London, October 2015.

Giorgio Strehler, supported by greater resources than most, still applied the aesthetic of a bare trestle stage or unadorned platform. In the 1956 and 1977 versions of *Arlecchino, Servatore di due Padroni* he placed a bare wooden Commedia stage as the central design element of the production. By his 'farewell' version of the production in 1987 Strehler had eschewed all the surrounding design elements and just focussed on the play itself. David L. Hirst, to describe the effect, quotes Italian critic Ugo Rofani:

Strehler has proceeded here by subtraction, eliminating just about all the stage signs and entrusting any definition of setting to the utterances of an old-style prompter; the space is furnished with only three screens, two small tables and candelabra... Everything hangs on the rhythm Strehler has enriched the intrigues and effectively 'anthologized' the comic effects accumulated in forty years of research (Hirst, 1993: 49).

The inclusion of meta-theatrical business and direct address still demonstrated Strehler's commitment not to rough theatre itself, but to staging an idealised and move perfect performance of the genre. Fabio Mangolini, however, points out that the highly ornate designs of Strehler's previous productions placed it in the category of Broadway theatre that Dory Sibley was reacting against (Mangolini, 2016, Appendix A: 138).

Strehler did not see it that way. In his "Schegge di Memoria", published in 1987 (cited in Hirst, 1993) he wrote "Our Theatre [the Piccolo] was from the start a poor theatre and it has remained a poor theatre" (ibid.), characterising him as a director of great skill. He showed his audience the energy and vigour of popular theatre and then presented it within a context of the highest possible production values. Strehler's skill was to present a fully realised illusion of the historical rough ethos of Commedia dell'Arte.

Neo-Commedia is always a visual spectacle, and the unrealistic and virtuosic nature of the actor's movements are structured to activate a reader or audience members' visual interest, and by extension their imagination. This act of imaginative co-creation is intrinsic to the performance of Neo-Commedia. The stylised poetical movement, sought by

Giovanni Poli, and also present in Moretti's first masked Arlecchino, not only created the visual spectacle, engaging each audience member as an independent aesthetic event, but also lead the audience into the Mask's visually cued codes, creating both a purely aesthetic and a visceral engagement on behalf of the viewer.

An analysis of Neo-Commedia's signs, appropriating Paul Bouissac's semiotic analysis of circus in *Circus as Multimodal Discourse* (2012), indicates that the matrix of plastic movement, deriving from the essentially unrealistic mask, sits at the centre of all Commedia. It becomes Commedia's very own alienation device: disrupting the reader's view of the human face and making them continually assess the inhabitant of the mask's actions. This disrupted view becomes even more pronounced when a mask wearer is juxtaposed with an unmasked actor. Why, asks the spectator is one masked and one unmasked? This is simultaneously an immediate and reactive response by the reader and audience member, and a dramaturgic question of great importance. The agency of this pairing is examined in more detail late in Section 4 and 5, and dramaturgically functions as both a conflict and a harmonisation between the fictional dramatic world of the unmasked actor, and the visceral and real-time audience contact from the masked actor. This multimodal signifier, created with the minimum of resources, places Neo-Commedia, and its associated generic set of masks, very firmly within the field of Brook's Rough Theatre.

Fabio Mangolini further states:

What the application of "rough/poor" theatre does in relation to Neo-Commedia is to "eschew scenery and realism for characters, energy, rhythm, relevance, (and nowadays Brechtian historicization) and stylization" (Mangolini, 2014, Appendix A: 148).

Commedia dell'Arte, and by extension Neo-Commedia, is the rough performance form that communicates through as many channels and modes as possible. Part of the audiences' engagement with the genre is intrinsic to each mode, but part of the pleasure is in the shift between modes of viewing. These modes include being taken out of the stylised

imaginative world, such as when a particular skill (acrobatic chase, dance or song) is performed taking our spectatorship out of the co-operatively imaginative, into something akin to being at the circus.

The popular theatre, freed of unity of style, actually speaks a very sophisticated and stylish language: a popular audience usually has no difficulty in accepting inconsistencies of accent and dress, or in darting between mime and dialogue, realism and suggestion (Brook, 1968: 80).

The 'rough' aesthetic does not portray a realistic or naturalistic illusion but offers a complicit game of make-believe between player and audience in which we all agree that "this cockpit holds the vasty fields of France" (ibid.). Peter Brook states that rough theatre is always popular theatre, and Commedia dell'Arte's case for inclusion within the category could simply be that it darts "between mime and dialogue, realism and suggestion" (ibid.). Neither rough theatre nor Commedia are polite forms. They are both responsive to live audiences and encourage both an appreciative response to the dramatic elements, and a visceral response to the survival antics of the Masks.

The intrinsic simplicity of the rough aesthetic is in how these levels of reality and modes of perception are directed towards theatrical comedy. As a theatrical genre, phenomenologically, Commedia dell'Arte seems to function best with just a trestle stage platform, a simple backdrop, masks, a few props and skilful actors. On this stage, the actors bring us into a performance where our minds are engaged with a dramatic story, and our bellies with sight gags and skilled movement. There is no scenery or context other than what they conjure in our minds: what the performers strive for is "imagination with ingenuity" (Knight, 2015, Appendix A: 104). Neo-Commedia strives to be rough theatre, performed with skill.

Although Dory Sibley's opening statement was certainly imprecise, its validity within this thesis was in provoking more accurate formulations from subsequent interviewees. The consequent debate on the position of Neo-Commedia was certainly

inspired by her and there is a general acceptance of Peter Brook's rough theatre as an effective working definition: "There is a sense we are part of a counterculture" (Knight, 2015, Appendix A: 105).

4.4 Grammelot and the Performance of Language (alt. Grommelot/Grumelot)

Definition: A term used to define comically framed and dramatically purposed verbal gibberish. Its use is not obligatory (Fava, 2007: 178) within Commedia, but can be employed in a wide range of dramatic situations when a Mask needs to pretend to be able to speak a foreign language. In some contemporary Commedia training regimes Grammelot can be demanded in rehearsal to negate some actors' tendency towards purely verbal exposition, and to foreground their physical and sonic dramatic expressivity. (Crick 2017)

Grammelot is widely theorised as a distinctive feature of Neo-Commedia's aural makeup, but from the interviewees' responses it appears to be more a discrete characteristic, and certainly not universally applied. However, the practice, or idea, of Grammelot may best be understood within the context of the performance of language within Commedia dell'Arte and Neo-Commedia.

Of the card set "Ideal qualities of a Commedia actor" only three interviewees put Grammelot in their top third of skill priorities, four put it in the middle rank, eight put it in their lowest third and five people omitted it altogether. Intense interest in it was only expressed by a few. In the cognate skills category of "ability to speak several languages" only one person put it in their top third, three choose the middle category, ten put it at their lowest priority and six people omitted the skill entirely. Language skills, even comically made up ones, do not seem central to a generally accepted contemporary practice. This is a curiosity, as the dialect differences, significant use of different languages (notably by Isabella Andreini in the *Pazzia d'Isabella* in 1589)⁵⁹ and travelling nature of the genre, not to mention the geographical signifier 'Spanish Captain' within Commedia dell'Arte, all position the historical form as one that intrinsically operated on a multi-lingual platform.

Of the founders and first generation who expressed opinions on language Antonio Fava denotes multilingualism as one of the four defining features of Commedia dell'Arte

⁵⁹ MacNeil, Anne (1995). "The Divine Madness of Isabella Andreini". *Journal of the Royal Musical Association*. 120: 195–215.

(Fava, 2007: 35, 125); Carlo Boso directed the TAG Teatro di Venezia show (1983) *Il falso magnifico* which was performed in Italian, Spanish, French and a little English; the printed play-text of Giovanni Poli's *la Fame degli Zanni* (1973) contained a five-page glossary of Venetian dialect terms used, presumably for the benefit of non-Venetian Italians; and Dario Fo performed his reconstructed version of *Grammelot*. Lecoq's school was always multinational, so although he was primarily a trainer, it is not a great stretch of the imagination to position him on the side of multi-lingual performance, along with his students Ole Brekke and Ronlin Foreman. Carlo Mazzone-Clementi spoke French, Italian and English and certainly performed in the latter two, whilst Strehler's *Arlecchino, Servatore di due Padroni* made use of performative Northern Italian dialects. With the leaders in the field all employing some element of multi-lingual, or at least multi-dialect, performance one would expect more uptake from the third generation.

John Rudlin added a card relating to multilingualism "to promote internationalism within a troupe" (Rudlin, 2016, Appendix A: 194), arguing that "an exciting Commedia troupe would combine people of several different nationalities" (Rudlin, 2016, Appendix A: 194). As with Joan Schirle's adoption of Isabella Andreini's phrase 'citizen in the world' (Schirle 2016, Appendix A: 401) as part of her praxis, Rudlin positions his internationalism as a cooperative venture, above and beyond nationalist tensions. His card appeared half-way through the interview process, so the theme it expressed was only offered to the ten subsequent interviewees. Out of this ten only one ranked it in their top third, two ranked it in their mid-range priorities and one in their bottom range. Five discarded the card as not being of their practice at all. Contemporary practice, therefore, appears to be equally divided between those who see the application of multilingualism as relevant, and those who do not, despite the examples set by the founders and their immediate successors.

A possible reason for this issue is that performers today are used to performing in their own country and in their own language. Populations are larger now, and there are

potentially larger audiences, so transnational touring is less common. Grammelot, as a historical theatrical necessity, may simply be redundant in today's world. When the English company, *Unfortunati*, of which I was then a member, performed in Holland in 1986 and 1987, enough Dutch people spoke sufficient English to follow the plot, which, together with a few key words learned in Dutch, allowed the comedy to be both understood and enjoyed. English functions as a Western lingua franca, and consequently English-speaking companies tend to adapt less. This is a pity. The formative Neo-Commedia show TAG Teatro di Venezia I experienced in Paris in 1983 was performed in French, Spanish and Italian. The impact of the distinctive rhythms, intonations and cadences of three languages working together was extraordinary and, in my position as a practitioner, opened up an area of performance that was entirely novel to me then, linguistically and aurally. This theme will be developed further in Section 5.

I propose that originally Grammelot may have functioned as a catchall description for widely differing dialects spoken within Italy that one did not understand. The historical antipathy between the various regions in Italy, which still exists even now, is reflected in the stubbornness with which these regions cling onto their regional dialects. Giarenzo Clivio, whilst making the case that historical differences between the dialects spoken in Italy were extreme (1989: 210), states that even today:

it is a fact that a play in Piedmontese or Milanese would be totally unintelligible south of the Spezia-Rimini line, just as Neapolitan or Calabrian would not be understood north of it (ibid.).

This leads us onto the supposition that, before broadcast media, the variations between dialects were even greater. This presents a practical and artistic problem for itinerant comedians: how to make themselves understood in different regions. The problem for the historical peripatetic performers was not just to communicate a story, but to entertain, amuse and engage. The gestural range and plastic expressivity of the Commedia dell'Arte actors, partly employed to solve the language barrier, is generally

accepted as canonical. It may be a highly pragmatic way of creating trans-lingual theatre but is born out of very specific performance contexts. Being misunderstood on stage, for example is not always a negative event, and is indeed a key ingredient in comic misunderstandings.

One key to making comedy work under these conditions is that only certain significant events need to be verbally understood by an audience to follow the overall story arc. Not everything in a multi-lingual show needs to be precisely verbally understood. My experience with *Unfortunati* in Holland was that once certain crux points in a comedy had been communicated, by the most effective means at our disposal (generally learning a few key words in Dutch), an audience was quite content to follow the ensuing story through the emotional tenor of voice and an actor's plastic expressivity. These clearly communicated crux points act as fixed reference points for the audience's comprehension, and if these points keep occurring when required, an audience can follow the plot. When TAG Teatro de Venezia and Les Scalazacani Commedia companies (Italian and French based respectively, and both directed by Carlo Bosso) performed at the Brighton Festival in 1985, they adopted the same strategies, learning key phrases in English for crux plot moments. Perhaps a wider-ranging definition of *Grammelot* might be that it is any language, gibberish or not, that audience does not speak or understand, yet can derive comically purposed meaning from, through the emotional tenor of the voice, and from supporting gestures.

With a troupe composed of roles, purporting to originate from areas of Italy speaking mutually incomprehensible dialects, as long as one of the dialects is understood by the audience the crux plot points can be communicated, and the rest of the action understood through intention-rich sound and gesture. In this context, *Grammelot* can be seen as a key identifier for *Commedia dell'Arte*. The implications for Neo-*Commedia*, in terms of Fava's proposed multilingualism, with rare exceptions, such as TAG and *Ophaboom*, have hardly been explored. Historically, therefore, it is possible to infer that

not only was linguistic and dialect variety intrinsic to the form, but that this sonic landscape was matched by a performed gestural range occurring simultaneously and expressing the same emotional tenor as each actor's vocal utterances. With the actor's vocal utterances and stylised body language expressing the same thing, the comprehensibility of a scene is maintained. It is only at crux points in a plot that a literal comprehension of the actor's words is required.

Dario Fo offers another, probably autodidactic, theory for Grammelot performance in Chapter 2 of *The Tricks of the Trade*. He defines Grammelot as a performance act combining the flow of well-chosen and purposed sounds with mimetic gestures, which, when combined, very strongly suggest what is occurring within the scene (Fo, 1991: 56). For Fo, the sounds are both the rhythm and the sound of language but are combined in performance with vocally produced sound effects, to aid comprehension of the mime he is carrying out. Fo's description of his Grammelot as very much a solo activity, though in balance between purposed vocalised onomatopoeia and indicative gesture, neatly parallels the hypothesised historical performance method described previously. Fo, Ophaboom, Unfortunati, TAG and Scalzacani all operate in a field where a crucial aspect of performance is placed in the combination of an emotional and non-literal tone of a voice and physical gesture. Grammelot can be defined as a visual and tonal practice.

There are two other useful additions to the discussion here, based upon the performance of the company Commedia Ophaboom (1991–2012) and the teaching of Scott McGehee. Ophaboom, a UK-based company working in Europe, define their attempts at communicating, as possessing a twofold function: as narrative and as humour. Within the category of humour, they recognised three distinct areas:

1. Performed lack of fluency in another language is comic.
2. This lack of fluency in another language leads, by necessity, to an exploration of sound and a masked actor's physical expressivity. This, they claim, liberates the

vocal sounds uttered into areas of exploration not allowed by one's native language. A lack of facility in another language leads to the 'desperation' of attempting to be understood. This increases the performative currency of the mask.

3. Being seen to try hard and be polite in attempting the language of the country where they are, the mistakes made and the effort put in to carry out something they have so little chance at succeeding at, is all purposed towards laughter (adapted from Beale and Gayton, 1998: 174–178).

The Ophaboom approach to language is not based on inventing, pretending or pastiching a language, but developed at the crossover between their real desperation and a performed desperation, to communicate with a non-English-speaking audience. Within this need to communicate to survive and entertain on stage, language itself, aided by the disinhibiting effects of wearing a mask, becomes altered and expanded. The need to please an audience by attempting to speak their language continually backfires, due to this alteration and expansion, and a comic hybrid is created (ibid: 178). It is not the Grammelot of Dario Fo, but is entirely comically directed, and its gibberish is entirely emotionally and dramatically purposed: every sound and attempt at communication is driven by a need to communicate.

Scott McGehee, founder of the Commedia Accademia school in Arezzo, Tuscany, consciously created a method of teaching Grammelot, after the manner of Dario Fo and in part derived from Dario Fo's forays into creating the sound and rhythm of a named language without actually speaking the language.

you have to pick a language, say Russian.... and listen to the Russian speakers, and then get [your note] books out... and memorise these actual words. To start with everyone has to memorise ten words. The second thing you have to do is choose the words that have the principal phonemes of the language you are studying... make sure you have real words that have the phonemes in them. [Third] you take a bunch of English words and

transpose them into the Russian words.... You then have a repertoire of ten English words that you have Russified, and ten actual Russian words. And then [in an improvisation] you have to mix and match. And then you can open up and explore different sounds (McGehee, 2015, Appendix A: 45).

His own praxis, within the field of Neo-Commedia, appears to be in developing its aural qualities and passing this onto students. He concludes “the sound element, in theatre generally, in my opinion is totally underestimated” (ibid: 45). Marvin Carlson (2009) in discussing language within the theatre gives a whole chapter over to “language at play”, and Grammelot certainly possesses the lightness of touch and the ludic quality to which he refers.

A more socially significant quality associated with language is that of indicating regionality and class. Carlson, quoting ethnographer J. Stephen Lansing’s work in Balinese Topeng, records the presence of three different language groupings within it, directly associated with three main character groupings within it: gods and aristocrats; prime ministers and councillors; and, finally, peasants and clowns. He quotes Lansing in full to say, “High Balinese is courtly language; Middle Balinese is formal speech between equals; Low Balinese, the vernacular of the villages” (Carlson, 2009: 26). In other words, each performed social class has a language or dialect associated with it that makes it immediately aurally recognisable. If we take this construct as a parallel or analogy to Commedia dell’Arte then any Grammelot spoken should also be developed enough to include aural signifiers indicating specific social class. Class, especially in England, is still an important component of humour and comedy, and one of its key indicators is accent. With Grammelot the joke is always how close it is to actual communication or a recognisable language without actually being that language.

Below is a summation and typology of the ways an ‘other’s’ language or Grammelot, predicated on the communication of meaning in a scene as a performed

enactment of a communication problem or dramatic crux, may be employed. It is compiled from the various practices included in this section.

1. Physical action and Grammelot together, following the vocal-mimetic pairing as suggested by Dario Fo.
2. Attempts to speak the language of the audience, to be polite and tell the story, are only partially successful and are rendered comic through performed desperation.
3. A mediator and an unknown language speaker play a scene in which the scene's verbal meaning or dramatic crux points are communicated to the audience through the mediation of one actor whose language the audience understands. A secondary level of meaning is generated by both actors' positions in the scene, and also, by their reactions to each other and their relative positions and situations within the scene. This two-person-two-languages scene has many variations:
 - a. The 'other' speaks a real foreign language or dialect. Clivio lists the following languages as having been identified in *Commedia dell'Arte* scenarios: Venetian, Neapolitan, Tuscan, Latin, Spanish, French, German, Greek and Hebrew (Clivio, 1989: 209). To this list we should add the dialects of Bologna and Bergamo;
 - b. The other and the mediator understand each other perfectly (multi-lingual performance);
 - c. The other is not understood by the mediator and/or the other does not understand the mediator;
 - d. The other is in disguise, does understand the mediator, but pretends not to and pretends to speak a foreign language (Grammelot);
 - e. The other does not understand the mediator and speaks back to him in a Grammelot version of the mediator's language;

- f. The mediator does not understand the other and attempts to speak their language and performs a Grammelot version of what they have just heard, imitating the sounds and gestures of the other.

Despite an equal split between Neo-Commedia practitioners who do not include Grammelot and those who do, its application or position as a tool for communication remains significant. Grammelot is a relevant element within and amongst the performed struggles to communicate within the multi-lingual world of Commedia. Grammelot is perhaps best described as the performed pretence at facility with a language, from which derive a range of communication and language-based comic situations. That it exists at all as performance tool indicates the need to dramatically communicate when the spoken language of the performer is not the same as that of audience. Dario Fo, Ophaboom and Scott McGehee both offer methodologies for its creation and performance. Despite being a key identifier of the genre, its practice is not a priority amongst contemporary performers. It is to be hoped that it can be kept alive. Grammelot is a performance skill in its own right and a visual and tonal practice, wholly congruent with Neo-Commedia's aesthetics and dramaturgies.

4.5 The Ensemble

and that they find in association the best arms for the struggle for life
(Kropotkin, 1955: 362)

Commedia dell'Arte and the word 'troupe' are never far apart. Although names of individual actors survive, it is the idea of a troupe, and what it contains, that appears to be stronger. What of this has been inherited within Neo-Commedia, and how does it manifest itself?

Responding to 'Why I teach or train Commedia dell'Arte', nineteen out of twenty interviewees included the aim "to train them [the student/actor] to work collectively". Seven people put the category in their top third, eight in the middle rank and four in their bottom category. There was only one non-completion. This question was worded in such a way that it referred to the training aspect of the interviewee's practice, rather than their performance. This indicates a general acceptance within my data set that training students and actors in Commedia and learning to work as an ensemble are practically synonymous.

Interviewees were asked to rank their preferred qualities of a Commedia actor "a good ensemble performer" polled as follows: eight out of a smaller sample of seventeen⁶⁰ ranked the attribute in their top third, and nine out of twenty ranked the attribute within their mid-priorities. No one ranked it in the lowest, which indicated that there is a universal acceptance within the sample that ensemble performance is highly relevant. The 'quality of an actor' card, introduced from the beginning, saying "a good understanding of collective decision making" also had universal acceptance. This card questions the organisational behaviour of an actor within the creative and production processes. Taken together they both suggest a supportive performance ethos, mirrored in the processes required to create

⁶⁰ Due to the pressures of time upon three interviewees, they decided they would rather focus on one question in more depth. These three interviewees were Malcolm Knight (influenced by Carlo Boso), Pete Talbot (influenced by Antonio Fava) and Annie Ryan (see the Corn Exchange case study in Section 5.6 for training influences).

the show, which includes dramaturgic elements. Eight people put it in their top third, three within their middle rank and five in the lowest rank. There was only one interviewee who did not include it, instead replacing it with new specific and pragmatic elements. The troupe or ensemble is included by all those interviewed, as an accepted dramaturgic performance aesthetic, and as a vital ingredient of any training regime. The troupe, or ensemble, can therefore be considered as a cornerstone of Neo-Commedia practice, clearly traceable, through the pedagogical and performance practices of the founders, back to what is known about the historical form.

Joan Schirle, of Mazzone-Clementi's Dell'Arte school, added two categories to the "ideal qualities" card set. Her additions were that the actor should be, firstly, "capable of making and keeping ensemble rules" and, secondly, "able to reach artistic consensus within a given time frame". These indicate the presence of a creative ensemble working method within Neo-Commedia performance, rather than it solely being a generic structural feature. Ensemble creation and performance is the ethos of the Dell'Arte school, where both Joan Schirle and Ronlin Foreman have and had, respectively, a significant impact on promoting it as a working practice. The three-year flagship MFA programme in physical theatre at Dell'Arte is subtitled the 'Advanced Ensemble Programme' and its Commedia-derived elements represent a continuous line of development from Mazzone-Clementi to the present day.

Both card-sets indicate that the position of 'ensemble' and 'collective decision making' are universally accepted within the praxis of those interviewed and must be considered as a feature of Neo-Commedia culture. The fundamental unit of Neo-Commedia, therefore, is not the individual actor, but the troupe or ensemble, and it is within this encompassing frame that the other significant elements exist. Within the inherited idea of a troupe exists the reality of embodied collective agency, and within that a concept of mutual support. It has business elements, political or ideological elements,

family elements and, by comparison with aspects from the cognate field of clown theory, a range of questions that have both aesthetic and dramaturgical implications.

The performance ethos, praxis and mutual dependence of performers within a self-identified ensemble performing group, within the wider world of theatre, is well documented elsewhere, notably in John Britton's "Encountering Ensemble" (2013). Britton's inclusion of Commedia dell'Arte as a historical form, or Neo-Commedia as a contemporary form is only made in passing, and through other avenues, for example that which led from the work of Copeau and Bing to that of Jacques Lecoq (ibid:111-125). The material within this section is therefore complementary and in addition to Britton's: His contributors refer to the genre simply as one element within the Lecoq training pedagogy (ibid: 390,397,400,402), and there is but one reference to Commedia ensemble practice in Northern California (ibid: 209), by which the contributor, I assume, alludes to the significant practice emanating from The Dell'Arte School of Physical Theatre, with its focus on Ensemble Theatre. Ensemble practice and associated behavioural traits is a highly significant identifier within Neo-Commedia and a cornerstone of its historical practice. Within this section I offer an overview of identified elements of Neo-Commedia ensemble practice.

4.5. i *Ensemble: The Business of Commedia*

The first contract that exists, indicating a hard-edged nose for business, was signed in “1545... on the day of Mercury, 25th of the month of February in Padua, in the quarter of St Leonard, in the house of my solicitor” (Richards and Richards, 1990: 45).

It was signed by Ser. Maphio (sic) and six other named actors and details the legal requirements and mutual duties the group owed one another. The full text (ibid: 45–46) (translated) indicates that these included both financial and behavioural concerns. All performers had to stay the distance of the contract or lose all rights to any shared remuneration, ensuring no actor would jump ship mid-tour. It can also be seen as an early blueprint for a collectivised enterprise: all properties were held in common, all would be equally cared for out of the common purse if illness occurred, and at the end of the agreed period over which the contract lasted “the money in the box shall be divided equally” (ibid: 46). The contract also expressly forbade the playing of cards between members and would ensure that all did get paid equally at the conclusion, so no money worries or resentments could build up between the actors. It also positions within a legal framework the fact that this seven-strong company had agreed or ‘elected’ Ser. Maphio as their leader, presumably recognising talent and inclination in that direction.

The role, here legally defined, that Ser. Maphio adopted later became known as the capocomico or head comic. It is significant that within this contract he is not assigned any additional money for these duties. This indicates a sense of equality within the company, a specialisation of roles within it and that these functional differentiations were not reflected financially.

In this sense the ensemble nature of a theatrical performance, rather than one predicated on a star system, is formalised within a legal document. This is also reflected in the construction of the scenarios used for performance: the Scala Commedia dell’Arte

scenarios indicate roughly the same number of scenes in all the scenarios assigned to each Mask, indicating a potential equality in time spent on stage between all the Masks/actors. The scenarios were constructed around collective endeavour and collective reward, and although stars emerged at the higher end of the artistic spectrum, the business model indicated by Ser. Maphio's contract supported all members equally. If one performer appealed to a particular audience, then all members would benefit.

Common sense might indicate that a troupe of actors getting on well together is more likely to produce good theatre, not to mention enjoy life together more. The positive attitude required, however, is legally framed as aiding the company's overarching purpose: financial profit through performance of comedies.

together they have concluded and determined that in order that such a company shall survive in fraternal love until the above-mentioned time [date of when the contract expired] without an hatred, rancour, and dissolution, to make and observe with love, as is customary among good and faithful companions, all the articles written hereunder which they promise to observe and abide by without cavil, under penalty and loss of the money written hereunder (Richards and Richards, 1990: 45).

Whether one can legislate for a utopian state of artistic cooperation is certainly a moot point, but this initial contract appears to have functioned as it was intended. Four years later Ser. Maphio signed up for a six-year contract with a new troupe composed of roughly the same performers.

4.5.ii *Ensemble: Politics*

It is in the ardent revolutionist to whom the joys of art, of science, even of family life, seem bitter, so long as they cannot be shared by all, and who works despite misery and persecution for the regeneration of the world. (Kropotkin, 2005)

A collective-organised troupe, making decisions communally and sharing resources, as in the model of Ser. Maphio, is also a political position, acting as an oppositional alternative to both the traditional hierarchies of theatre, and by extension, to all controlling hierarchical hegemonies. John Broadbent (Broadbent, 2015, Appendix A: 125) sees the Neo-Commedia-related ensemble theatre as very important as an alternative to what he terms the “Agent or the West End” (ibid: 119). He emphasises the troupe as a key ingredient within Commedia.

Commedia... when it reached its zenith was peripatetic and didn't even recognize itself as a form, but what they were doing was assembling together a series of tools... the historic tools of how everyone has to present theatre... but also the tool of the troupe, which was one of the key things which we have to teach to students or to modern groups going forward relating to this idea of how you operate if you don't want to follow the Agent or the West End (ibid.).

Making all decisions collectively is time consuming, however, and does not always serve the purpose of the art being created.

In the US 'collectives' has the specific meaning of a group of people gather together and bind themselves together for a common cause. Dell'Arte started out as a collective in 1978. It is a terrible and cumbersome way of making decisions, especially if everybody has to be involved in every single decision that is made. It was based on the model of the San Francisco mime troupe who started out as a commedia company and who also were a collective (Schirle, 2016 Appendix A: 383).

The ethos of a collective means that the reasons behind potential future actions are all discussed, before any such endeavour commences. This brings a collective member,

in this case a Commedia actor, into a wider engagement with their purpose, whether artistic, political or a combination of the two. Despite organisational issues, this allows us to include here, within the discussion of ensemble, Brecht's insistence that he work with informed actors: those who were aware of the currents and flows within the society around them. Peter Brook sums Brecht's position as follows:

There were and still are many actors who pride themselves on knowing nothing about politics and who treat the theatre as an ivory tower. For Brecht, such an actor is not worthy of his place in adult company: an actor in a community that supports a theatre must be as much involved in the outside world as in his own craft (Brook, 1968: 92).

An ensemble composed of such actors, therefore, has the potential to negotiate its position through changing contexts, and then reflect this in performance. It commits, through the medium of Neo-Commedia, to present theatre that will engage an audience.

Conversations that developed around the card from the "practice" set "to make an intelligent actor", although later being finessed as "to be a responsive actor" (Appendix C : 11), were always related to an actor developing sufficient intelligence to both understand for themselves how to perform Commedia, and how to conceive their role as a Commedia actor in relation to society. Out the sample of eleven who were presented with the quality of generosity, seven⁶¹ put it in their top third, and the rest ignored it. This quality was picked up by all those who had been in contact with Carlo Mazzone-Clementi, and relates to what Joan Schirle calls triangulation, which was, as Mazzone-Clementi defined it, the quality of being able to work, not for yourself, but for the scene and your partner.

The political ideas contained within 'troupe' and 'ensemble' support a position that, as a paradigm, a member of a Neo-Commedia ensemble is a socially and politically aware individual, who develops their art in relation to its position and purpose within

⁶¹ This card was chosen by Ole Brekke, Joan Schirle, Ronlin Foreman (influenced by Mazzone-Clementi), Tony Kishawi and Corinna di Niro (influenced by Antonio Fava) and Didi Hopkins (influenced by Carlo Boso).

society. Malcolm Knight states that the dissemination of anti-hegemonic counter-information is a priority within Neo-Commedia. The countercultural aspect exists because Commedia is its own author and, to engage an audience, makes up its own relevant stories that can be politically or ideologically driven. It can present multi-level alternative narratives to both how mainstream theatre should be done and highly mediated mainstream entertainment hegemony. Knight's response to "To make them work together collectively" is the epitome of artistically expressed Marxism, and his use of the words 'brothers and sisters' as a unifying principle, rather than profit, differentiates him from Ser. Maphio and company.

All theatre has to have collective presence... and Commedia brings something special because of the family of commedia performers... people eat together, often sleep together, love together... it's a way... "the way of commedia".... once you can raise the business of collective responsibility; once you have information going out there which is not just for a narrow coterie; once you can raise the question of the collective, then you can raise a question which goes along with that, that all men and women are brothers and sisters... then you have a cutting edge against the power elites and against the state machine, and the globalised consumerism that is permeating the media, education and commerce at every level (Knight, 2015, Appendix A: 104).

Neo-Commedia certainly has intrinsic dramaturgic qualities which allow this, so the question for the practitioner is whether they chose to go this way. Dory Sibley, for example, accepts that performing and working with Neo-Commedia, for her, is essentially a countercultural artistic activity (Sibley, 2015, Appendix A: 61).

4.5.iii *Ensemble: Family*

In the Piccolo Theatre of Milan's second and third versions of *Arlecchino, Servatore di due Padroni*, within the stage world Strehler created around the central play, he included two separate travelling theatrical families. Strehler saw the family aspect of the *Viaggianti* as a necessary ingredient within the stage world he was constructing. Earlier in Commedia history, Isabella Canali (1562–1604) married the Gelosi actor Francesco Andreini (1548–1624) and then became Isabella Andreini, Prima Donna of the Gelosi. One of their sons, Giambattista (1576–1654), carried on the troupe after his mother's death and his father's retirement from the stage and achieved success in Paris before Louis XIII. Dario Fo said that he realised how Commedia was made by observing his work and life partner Franca Rame's family, an itinerant troupe of puppeteers, create a new show from an idea on a scrap of paper (Fo, 1991: 10–11). GianGiacomo Colli cites his father as introducing him to Commedia dell'Arte (Colli, 2016, Appendix A: 52) and Fabio Mangolini, born into an acting family, recalls being informed he was taken, as a baby, with his uncle and father to learn about the town they were performing in that day.

My mum and dad were actors, and they came from an acting troupe who fled to Argentina during the war (Mussolini was cracking down on itinerants such as actors and gypsies)... but I met one of my Uncles later who said that all the day of one show, when I was a baby, him and my Dad spent the whole day before a show at the Barbershop... finding out all that happened in the town so they could include it in the show... We are talking the beginning of the twentieth century (Mangolini, 2016, Appendix A: 140).

The travelling theatre troupe, national and international exponents of Neo-Commedia, The Famiglia Carrara settled in Vicenza in 1965 and, from their family's oral history, appeared to epitomise the life of a travelling theatre company-cum-extended family.

The proximity a travelling troupe exists in from day to day creates a very high degree of knowledge that each person has of each other. Taking this sensitivity onto the stage would certainly enhance the actors' ability to support each other in performance. When all artistic and family ingredients ran harmoniously, the performances must have run very smoothly, and of course vice versa. One would assume that the necessity of earning a living and maintaining a good professional reputation would mitigate the latter. However, the possibility of performed discord amongst the cast is also a well-recognised meta-theatrical comedy event. Strehler created a performed rivalry between the two theatrical families developed within the 1956 and 1963 versions of *Il Servatore di due Padroni*, and Domenico Bruni's *Servetta* prologue (translated in full by Julie Goell in Chaffee and Crick, 2015: 94) is both a masterpiece of meta-theatrical presentation of role and self, as well as a comic presentation of discord amongst the performers.

4.5.iv Ensemble: Performance

A genre that survives with no scenery, only a platform stage, and eschews realism and naturalism for gesture, rhythm and an element of improvisation-in-performance needs to function as a mutually supportive organism. It needs to be looking out, not just for the audience's reaction, but for how one's stage partner is reacting. Implicit within the conception of a 'troupe' is the reality of a performance form based on mutual support. Within Carlo Mazzone-Clementi's training regime was a relationship Joan Schirle called 'triangulation' (Schirle, 2016, Appendix A: 402). It is now fundamental to all teaching at the Dell'Arte school. Ole Brekke, also of the Mazzone-Clementi 'school', talks of this principle with a slightly different emphasis, and also includes the term 'triangulation' within his card set. Didi Hopkins, from her Boso-influenced autodidactic praxis introduced "To be able to perform in 3 dimensions". John Finbarr Ryan, another student of Mazzone-Clementi's, recognised its similarity to Mazzone-Clementi's methodology and included it within his card set.

Triangulation is both a pragmatic performance methodology and a philosophy in action: each actor works for the scene and their partner. An actor puts their energy not into making themselves look good on stage, but into playing for the scene and into making their partner look good in the eyes of the audience. This achieves a performative symbiosis, with each actor feeding suggestions that play to the other's strengths. By making each actor responsible in the moment for the other's actor's performance, it creates the situation where, to maintain the scenic rhythm, tempo or intention both can intervene at any point to help each other and the scene.

John Broadbent also notes that this quality of triangulation, with a slight change of emphasis, is considered vital by Keith Johnstone. In an improvisation workshop Broadbent attended he quotes Johnstone as saying:

You have to give your partner what he or she wants on stage... if you do that you are giving the audience what they want: it is called *the circle of expectation* (Broadbent, 2015, Appendix A: 123).

Although Johnstone's Improvisatory performances are a separate genre, improvisation-in-performance is a relevant and cognate skill. Both Johnstone and Mazzone-Clementi emphasise playing for your partner, and not yourself, implying that that if you play for your partner, they will play for you. Within the context of performing as an ensemble, each actor, whilst also possessing the requisite virtuoso skills to perform solos, prologues, bravura or monologues, is looking to see how they can help their stage partner entertain an audience in the best way. It is within the context of triangulation that the actorly quality of 'generosity' can best be understood.

4.5.v *Ensemble: The Capocomico*⁶²

The “cumbersome” (Schirle, 2016 Appendix A: 383) nature of decision making as part of show making within an ensemble, is, according to Broadbent (Boso trained), greatly alleviated by employing a guiding force, embodied in Neo-Commedia in the role of capocomico (literally ‘head comic’), citing Carlo Boso as a paradigm. Commedia, as is all theatre to a greater or lesser extent, is predicated on pleasing an audience and Broadbent positions Boso’s role as guiding an actor to look within the “circle of expectation” and “playing for the audience or scene” as the area where one will find what pleases an audience. It is both an existential *al improvviso* skill and a conscious skill employed in a considered way within the devising process. Finding the subject area that a Neo-Commedia actor can improvise within, to please an audience, is the fundamental skill and role of the capocomico.

The Capocomico knows where the actors are at, what the audience wants and what the actors want, and what their skill base is...It is fitting those things together so that when they go out they have a subject they can play to, but Boso’s real strength is understanding that and knowing what the Audience wants. He tries to get, through “the circle of expectation” “movement between the ears” of the audience (ibid: 120).

‘Movement between the ears’ is a favourite workshop phrase used by Carlo Boso. It means that the audience is not a passive voyeur of a performance, but rather that they become mentally engaged by it as well. There is a degree of thought engendered within them by the subject matter, and this is also what Broadbent means by ‘please’. For an audience to be ‘pleased’ they need to be both viscerally excited and mentally engaged. Guilia Filacanapa, also referring to Carlo Boso (Filacanapa, 2015), names both him and Leo de Berardinis (1940–2008) as exemplum Neo-Commedia capocomicos and supports

⁶² The Capocomico is also referred to as the *Concertatore* (Frost and Yarrow, 1990:8) whose dramaturgic function was to “control the framework within which the accors improvised” (ibid).

Broadbent's statement that Boso requires his Neo-Commedia actors to be reactive to the now of performance and the now of events.

For him [Boso], this relationship with the audience is "The most difficult element to understand by young actors", seeking above all to teach them that, "Schools of theatre are only creating replicas of Moliere or Shakespeare, interpreters of the past, while the art of the comedy demands that one directly interprets the will of the public" The actor, in his practice, must be a "total" actor, ready to enter and resonate at all time with the public, beyond the written text (Filacanapa,2015, translation Crick).

This formulation of the role of a capocomico continues contemporaneously as the role that Ser. Maphio was historically elected to fulfil. A capocomico, whose particular skill is an overall grasp of all dramaturgic elements, can be positioned as the link between the troupe and the audience. If the primary skill of an ensemble actor within Neo-Commedia is to embody triangulation, it is the capocomico who has the skills to take the responsibility for collating the actor's skills and the audience's needs, and out of them creating a scenario. The capocomico is not a director in an absolute sense, though may take on that role, but instead is an instigator, catalyst and pathfinder, creating the overall shape of the performance, but leaving the individual actors' skills to fill out the details in rehearsal and in the now of performance. She or he is the *primus inter pares* within a troupe.

4.5.vi *Ensemble: Clown Theory*

The bulk of critical literature concerning Clown or Fool Theory concerns itself with solo clowns, and its identifiers of comedy, mischief and satire exist as descriptions of the overall agency of 'clown'. How then do we approach the idea of a comically purposed ensemble and is the agency of the Fool within Neo-Commedia singular or plural? This is not a question of defining what fooling is, but a dramaturgic question; asking us to differentiate between fooling position characteristics of the whole ensemble and those located in a specific individual, or individuals, within that ensemble.

Dario Fo's *The Accidental Death of an Anarchist* is a political fool show, with the agency of the Fool being singular. The Fool here acts as a reflective mirror to society: telling lies to all and sundry so the audience can see how foolish they are in believing such a fool as the Madman. Fo's role is pivotal to the overall action, privileged above a supporting cast, yet by his actions showing up their idiocies as well. Although it appears that the focus of the activity of fooling is within one role, the function is to bring others to the appearance of foolishness. The supporting cast are passively brought down and exposed to satire, ridicule and chaos by the activities of the Fool.

This singularity enables social class to be foregrounded, within Neo-Commedia especially that from which the Fool originates. As fixed types are gendered embodiments of social class, deciding who takes the lead role in orchestrating the chaos into which the others are dragged is of great significance. Arlecchino, a working-class chancer in Goldoni's *The Servant of Two Masters*, demonstrates the ingenuity of the truly desperate and oppressed, talking his way into two jobs and, though nearly causing a double suicide, becomes both an agent of chaos and a means to reaching a happy end. A situation is presented in which that the lowest rank in society has the capacity to upset and cause confusion amongst the social classes above him. This may be politics in action; however, it is not necessarily an ideological position. In this play the inequities of class are

unquestioned, only the emotional and marital states of each class's representative. In the finale, the social order is re-established and, Arlecchino is further assimilated into an unchanging social order through marriage to Smeraldina. This brings the historical Commedia dell'Arte Fool within the remit of Theodore Adorno's position on popular entertainment: that entertainment predicated on emotional transactions, the portrayal of sensation and aimed solely towards an audience's pleasure induces a passivity akin to political helplessness. Millie Taylor, writing on Musical Theatre, provides a helpful gloss on Adorno's formulation:

In this argument, amusement goods are designed to achieve sensation and consequently they insulate the recipient from social awareness. The possibility of resistance is destroyed, and pleasure becomes a form of helplessness (Taylor, 2012: 8).

Within Commedia dell'Arte the Fool may challenge individuals within the system but is unable to challenge the system itself. Members of its hierarchy may be made to look foolish, but they still keep their position.

To create ideologically-based socially subversive comedy through Neo-Commedia, either one allows the fixed roles to change, which may move one out of the genre of Commedia, or else privilege the manifestation of ideological interrogation through performing the class-based relationships between the fixed roles. The role of the solo Fool in Commedia dell'Arte, whether called Zanni, Arlecchino or Brighella is pitted, for reasons of survival, against the rest of society, and the Fool's reward is to simply to survive, and be assimilated or re-assimilated into that society, always as a servant. Alternate to this model is the idea of collective fooling embodied within the ensemble, possessing collective agency, distributing the comedy, mischief and satire, implying that some aspect of the Fool is present in each Mask. If all the Masks are active Fools, fuelled by necessity and the poetics of survival, rather than being a collective of feeds or foils, then this presents an insight into why a Commedia performance has the potential to be very intense. As the

definitive feature of each Mask is a gendered and regionally located social class (Section 6), then each mask has at least three areas of dramaturgic fooling: by gender, by region and by class. Each Mask's field of operation is, furthermore, twofold within this: building up their own position and taking down that of others. Each Mask, therefore, if operating as an active Fool has the dramaturgic possibility to both build up and undermine their social role, their gendered position or their region of origin.

The implications of this collective hypothesis strongly indicate that Neo-Commedia is, in its purest form, a non-ideological, and yet highly politicised, performance genre in which all social classes enact the passions of survival.

With 'ensemble' being a universally accepted formal quality amongst all those interviewed, fooling, within Neo-Commedia, offers more dramatic possibilities as a collective enterprise, bringing the audience what they have not got: laughter, adventure, chaos and an inverted vision of the world, in other words, carnival. A Commedia ensemble is, as a collective performance entity, the performance of the spirit of carnival. Dario Fo, as the Maniac, was a one-man carnivalesque attack on rigid social structures and hypocrisy; Neo-Commedia performs the carnival itself, showing the hypocrisies and passions of every social class.

The collective fooling hypothesis with Neo-Commedia, seen in conjunction with my later claims as to intrinsic multimodal and meta-theatrical agency, creates a complex dramaturgic field. However, there are two key differences. The unchanging nature of the Commedia Masks obstructs the emergence of a 'new order of things', despite offering perspective on each class, and, secondly, Neo-Commedia performance is not the communal carnival itself. It is the performance of carnival for an audience. Politics exists and is performed in Neo-Commedia, amidst the interactions between classes to which Masks belong, and in their ludic relationship with the audience.

My proposal that the whole genre of Commedia is a multimodal performance construct is further examined within the next section's examination of the genre's use of masks. What I aim to demonstrate is that the performance of masked roles is received in a fundamentally different way from that of the unmasked roles. Unpacking the agency of the inanimate mask, when worn by a live actor, leads to a deeper dramaturgic understanding of what the precisely is the function of a performed Commedia Mask. It becomes necessary to once again change methodologies and engage with a variety of disciplines, such as neuroscience, distributed cognition, the Uncanny Valley and cultural studies, to tease out the auratic differences that separate a performed Mask and an unmasked actor. In doing so, I hope to shed further light on the dramaturgic and aesthetic complexities of the genre.

5 Masks in Neo-Commedia

The mask that the actor wore on their face for the Commedia dell'Arte is without doubt the most important element around the knowledge of the presumptions of the scenic poetics of this scenic phenomena or theatrical phenomena (Giovanni Poli, 1973: 12).

5.1 Masked and Unmasked; Scenarios and the Wider Field

A mask in Neo-Commedia is an artistically purposed face covering, which is integrated into the costume, social status and Gestus of the role. It covers the top half of the face, from the mouth upwards, leaving the lower jaw free to speak. For a Commedia mask, the preferred manufacturing material is vegetable tanned cowhide, though papier-mâché and various plastics can also be used.

A mask has psychophysical implications for the wearer, learned from a dedicated training process. Whilst employing a mask the performer adheres to a range of plastic and imaginative constraints, which serve to simultaneously narrow and intensify their emotional range. It contains within its plastic form geographical, behavioural, elemental, class and anthropomorphic elements, and these, when they are mobilised on stage by the wearer in a variety of combinations, define the role's range through a stylised and non-naturalistic representation of character. These elements bring into play complex relationships between presentation and reception, so any discussion of a mask within Commedia cannot solely be concerned with its use and needs to extend into both a mask's purpose and its symbolic and cultural reception. Furthermore, a mask contains agency both as a sign and as a cultural icon.

Fabio Mangolini's assertion (Appendix A: 141) that a Commedia mask, as a semiotic definition, is an open sign is relevant. The strength of a Commedia mask as a sign is twofold. It strives to make a universal statement about a fixed role within society, which is its first layer of impact on an audience (dramaturgically similar to Gestus) and, secondly, it

becomes culturally mediated into the experience of an audience. The 'open' aspect is highly significant as it helps us distinguish the purpose, design and use of a Commedia mask, within mask typologies, from a character mask, to which we might assign the value of a 'closed' sign. Dramaturgically a Commedia mask's function is to show how a representative of one position in society struggles, strives and survives, whilst a character mask is designed to show a single personality type, and its plastic form only allows movement and physical expression along these lines. Embodiment in a Commedia mask is class based, and not personality related, and hence a far wider and more open variety of movements and story arcs are possible. I would also attach the quality of 'passion' (Lecoq, Brekke, Clementi) to a Commedia mask rather than 'obsession' (Fava), as the quality of passion opens up more possibilities. Whether the masks are an open or closed sign, masks contain the potential to employ their plastic form as a medium of concentrated communicative power, combining both primal areas of the nervous system and the conscious mind to elicit response.

Within the seventeen interviewees who commented on the category "ideal quality of a Commedia actor", all included "good mask technique" within their choice, indicating universal acceptance. Twelve people included the quality within their top third, four chose a medium priority and only one, me, chose the lowest category. This would appear to indicate that two thirds of practitioners, itself a very significant statistic, regard facility in mask performance as vital to the genre.⁶³

⁶³ Due to external circumstances, as previously mentioned, I was unable to poll the "Qualities within an actor" card set on three people: Malcolm Knight, Pete Talbot and Annie Ryan. Malcolm Knight is the artistic director of the Scottish Mask and Puppet centre, so it may be a safe assumption that he prioritises good mask technique. As neither Annie Ryan nor Pete Talbot employ masks within their praxis and rejected the training related card "So they can perform in masks effectively" it may be safe to assume they would reject the card here. This would still give only two out of the twenty not including masks, which would indicate that 90% of those interviewed still do.

Commedia dell'Arte is distinguished by its use of masks, and all the original re-inventors of the genre employed them, so perhaps one could assume that masks are still a universal feature of Neo-Commedia. This, however, is not the case, as both Pete Talbot's Rude Mechanical Theatre Company (UK) and Annie Ryan's Corn Exchange Company (Republic of Ireland) eschew the traditional half mask, and yet make a convincing case for being part of the genre, as will be discussed later in the section. There are also related issues with masked theatre's reception in countries that do not have an indigenous masked theatre tradition, as I note in my discussion of the Fabulous Old Spot Theatre Company in Section 6.4.

Although there is a marked bias in both practitioner and pedagogue towards privileging its masked performance, the historical stage was not occupied by masks alone but by masked and unmasked performers simultaneously. Commedia dell'Arte performance was, therefore, composed of three mask-defined elements: scenes where masked performers are present, scenes where masks are not present and scenes that contain both masks and unmasked roles. As both iterations of the genre, Commedia dell'Arte and Neo-Commedia, employ this mixed method performance style, it is only by examining its implications that we can begin to assemble a wider understanding of its relevance to dramaturgy. Commedia dell'Arte and Neo-Commedia should not be seen as genres of masked theatre, but as genres where masked and unmasked roles co-exist.

Taking Flaminio Scala's Commedia dell'Arte Scenario, *The Mirror* (Andrews, 2008: 88–95), as an example (published 1611), of a cast of ten major roles, five are masked (Pantalone, Arlecchino, Pedrolino, Dr. Graziano and Capitano Spavento) and five unmasked (Flavio, Fabrizio disguised as Isabella, Laura, Flaminia and Orazio). Of the fifty-one scenic divisions into which Andrews divides the scenario, there are seventeen scenes performed exclusively by masked roles, eleven by unmasked roles and twenty-three by both masked and unmasked roles. In an example from the Casamarciano Codex, *The Jealous Lover*,

(Cotticelli et al. 2001: 42–44), containing Neapolitan scenarios performed between 1650 and 1700, of a cast of ten, four are masked (Giangurgulo, Coviello, Pascariello and Pulcinella) and six unmasked (Luzio, Vittoria, Fiametta, Angela, Brunetta and Flaminio). Of the four-four scenic divisions, seven are performed by masks alone, seven by unmasked roles and thirty by both masked and unmasked roles. In the Correr scenario collection, published in the 1670s but, according Ludovico Zorzi⁶⁴ and Alberti Carmelo, may date from sixty years earlier (quoted in Jaffe-Berg, 2016: 55–56), the scenario *Quattro Finto Spiritati* (*four fictional flaws*) (Carmelo, 1996: 42–45) has nine main roles, four of which are masked (Magnifico, Coviello, Mescalino and Capitano) and five unmasked (Flaminia, Argentina, Carellino, Virginio and Rosalba). Carmelo’s edition divides the scenarios into three acts, of approximately forty-one separate scenes. Of these nine are performed by masked roles, nine by unmasked roles and twenty-four by both masked and unmasked roles. Commedia dell’Arte, therefore, has a greater number of scenes containing both masked and unmasked roles. It is clear, therefore, that this positioning is intrinsic to any aesthetic position or dramaturgic principle.

Within Neo-Commedia, however, the numerical balance between masks and unmasked roles alters according to the practitioner and indicates several areas of deviation or evolution from the original genre. The statistical incidence of masked roles, unmasked roles and both together in performance, is harder to pin down overall, due to the fluid nature of both contemporary record-keeping and the ephemeral nature of performance. However, some useful conclusions can still be drawn.

Giorgio Strehler’s versions of *Arlecchino, Servatore di due Padroni* has the same role breakdown as Goldoni’s original. There are four masked roles (Arlecchino, Brighella, Pantalone, Il Dottore), five major unmasked roles (Florindo, Beatrice, Silvio, Clarice,

⁶⁴ In “La raccolta degli scenari italiani della Commedia dell’Arte” in *Alle origini del teatro moderno: la Commedia dell’Arte. Atti del Convegno*. Pontedera, 1976.

Smeraldina) and three minor unmasked roles (two waiters and one porter). In the 1958 translation Edward J Dent (ed. Bentley, 1992: 79–170) divides Goldoni's text into three acts, containing ten scenes in total. Within these ten scenes there is, on first examination, a mix of both masked and unmasked roles in each scene. These divisions are decided by location rather than by dramatic action, and there are still individual scenic sub-units within them composed of masked scenes and unmasked scenes. Act 2 Scene 1 contains an extended lovers' quarrel between the unmasked Clarice and Silvio, with an intervention by the unmasked Smeraldina; Act 2 Scene 2 has the masked Arlecchino and Brighella plan a feast for Pantalone and the disguised Beatrice, and in Act 3 Scene 3 the masked Pantalone and The Doctor are both so angry with each other they refuse to listen to each other's explanations. This broadly follows the mix of masked and unmasked roles, for obvious reasons, in the historical genre.

Jacques Lecoq and Dario Fo remain outside this analysis, as Lecoq's pedagogy was concerned less with performance than with the mask as a training tool for an actor, and Dario Fo, although performing Commedia occasionally, existed as a performer in a cognate genre. Information on Carlo Mazzone-Clementi's practice is hard to pin down, as in the classroom he used masks in the manner of Lecoq, and anecdotally used a mix of masks and unmasked roles within his shows. Giovanni Poli's signature production, *La Commedia Degli Zanni* of which selected scenes were broadcast (Poli, 1957: Internet) has a cast of six masked roles (one Pantalone and five choric Zannis) and two unmasked female roles (Isabella and Columbina). This indicates a mix of both masked and unmasked roles, but with a bias towards a greater number of masked roles. Antonio Fava demonstrates a similar bias, within the section on canovacchios in his training DVD (Fava, DVD 2, 2006: 1.26.40 onwards). He offers us three unmasked roles (his Columbina is masked): a pair of lovers and an older female role he calls *la Signorina*. To this he adds a masked Pantalone, a Dottore, a Capitano and a choric gang of, never less than two but occasionally as many as

five, Zannis. From observation there are only very brief moments when the unmasked roles are on stage alone, as a feature of Fava's dramaturgy appears to be an omnipresent chorus of Zannis debunking the 'higher' emotions of the unmasked roles. Within two of Carlo Boso's signature productions with TAG Teatro di Venezia, *Il Falso Magnifico* (1983) and *la Pazzia di Isabella* (1986) the masked and unmasked roles are more balanced, with the former containing a bias towards masks, and the latter not. In the former there are five unmasked roles (the Spanish Princess, the Prince of Tyre, Roderigo, Lelio and Francheschina) and six masked (The Magnifico, Pantalone, Capitano Spavento, Pedrolino, Zanni and The Witch). In the latter there are five masked roles (Pantalone, Capitano Spavento, Codega, Francatrippa and Arlecchino) and five unmasked roles (Orazio, Isabella, Flavio, Flaminia and Franceschina). Boso appears to be sticking more to the historical role balance offered by Flaminio Scala and Carlo Goldoni. This balance is dramaturgically very significant and is developed further within this thesis as it relates to the use of the performative modalities associated with masked and unmasked roles. In Katrien van Beurden's company Hotel Courage, all the actors wear masks in performance, and both Annie Ryan and Pete Talbot's companies, whilst eschewing masks for culturally more attuned white-face, have their entire casts' faces so adorned. These last three demonstrate artist-led evolution of the historical model, and, in their application of mask praxis, offer dramaturgic innovation within the genre.

I propose that, in keeping with the ad hoc principle of *contraste*, an audience receives the performance of masked roles and unmasked roles differently. This chapter analyses specific mechanisms by which an active mask communicates to an audience and offers it as a new dramaturgic tool and generic aesthetic position. My proposition is that in both iterations of Commedia a masked actor's performance is received by an audience through separate or different channels from that of an unmasked actor, supporting my overall argument that Commedia is a polymodal and self-critiquing comic form. This

formulation applies to the four originators and their students, as well as to Antonio Fava, Carlo Boso and their students, with the exceptions of Katrien van Beurden, Annie Ryan and Pete Talbot. Within the latter three, included here as case studies, the relationship between the masked and unmasked roles, as a dramaturgic fundamental, has been replaced with concerns relating to communication and the surrounding culture.

The greater part of Neo-Commedia, I propose, should not be understood as a purely masked theatre form, but a performance mechanism whose dramaturgic force is created through three elements: playing to the independent performative strengths of the masked roles, the independent performative strengths of the unmasked roles, and the performative strengths of the interaction between the first two categories. I will demonstrate later, however, that unmasked roles and masked roles serve different and complementary dramatic functions which, when juxtaposed, contribute significantly to meaning, and the potential range of meanings, within a performance.

There are other significant issues, when discussing contemporary mask dramaturgy within Neo-Commedia. As the practice of filling missing historical dramaturgies with contemporary techniques is intrinsic to Neo-Commedia, it follows that there are several competing mask training and performance regimes in play that need to be noted in relation to dramaturgic application. Although some of these regimes co-exist within specific performers' practice, I have identified distinctive streams emanating from the following: Strehler's original experiments in *The Servant of Two Masters*; Poli's fusion of method acting and stylisation; Lecoq's focus on the mask and corporality; as well as UK-based adaptations of Keith Johnstone's trance mask, including John Wright (Wright, 2006). John Finbarr Ryan, as an example, both indicates his own position, whilst simultaneously analysing other approaches. He identifies a clear difference between acting 'behind the mask' and 'playing the mask', stating here his preference is with the latter. As will become apparent later this is not merely a semantic difference.

I find what happens with a lot of people who are playing commedia masks; they are not playing the mask, they are playing the character behind the Mask.... they are acting behind the Mask: playing a character with a mask on their face (J.F. Ryan, 2016, Appendix A: 343)

Within the genre, a mask can be activated by an actor in several ways, as indicated previously, which makes dramaturgic analysis based on the variety of psychophysical methodologies employed highly complex. This difference in employment may be understood by focussing on a Mask's relationship with a script or text.

1. A Mask may be purposed to speak a pre-existing canonical text (Strehler).
2. A Mask may have a fixed script written for it, to emphasise the strengths of its performative qualities (Poli).
3. A Mask may have a spoken script or performance text deriving entirely from, but performatively subsidiary to, a Mask's corporality (Lecoq).
4. A Mask's performance may be rooted in a Mask's ability to improvise its scenes verbally and physically (Johnstone/Wright).
5. A Mask may perform a script capable of incorporating *al improvviso* moments of significance (Mazzone-Clementi).
6. A Mask may develop its verbal text from a heightened sense of play (Lecoq/Wright/Gaulier).

In some cases, within the context of a Commedia scenario, the purpose of a Mask may be seen in how each performance methodology employed relates to the narrative unit a Mask is engaged in, but again not in all cases, as another significant function of the Mask is, I propose, as a commentator on the narrative path of others. A Mask may arrive on stage, propelled by one of several methodologies, and must therefore perform and engage an audience through the agency of that methodology, but its reception by an audience is not related to the performance methodology, but resides in the Mask's ability to communicate. I suggest that all these methodologies ultimately share the same aim, which

is to bring a Mask to life on in front of the audience's eyes, as a not-quite-human, comically charged, impulsive and liminoid being. As it stands next to an unmasked role, the audience cannot help but compare them.

There is currently no body of literature dealing with this relational phenomenon co-existing in both Commedia dell'Arte and Neo-Commedia. The available literature concerns itself solely with masks: Malcom Knight writes about masks praxis (2004); Keith Johnstone promotes trance mask in his book *Impro* (1987); Michaeli Bottini writes about encounters with his Harlequin Mask (Bottiini, 2015: 55–61); Sally Cook about the relationship between audience mask reception (2012); John Wright about mask and play (2017) and John Rudlin, largely describing Antonio Fava's work, offers descriptions of the Masks themselves and not on how or why they affect an audience (Rudlin, 1994). The dramaturgic implications of juxtaposing two different performance modalities are highly significant to both the genre's aesthetic definition and potential political position.

Whilst for a director, acting coach or actor, knowledge of how to activate a Mask is vital, for the dramaturge, understanding the overall effect of the masked/unmasked relationship on an audience is key as is the sense of how best to turn this understanding into a working method. It is more productive, therefore, to focus not on how an actor performs Neo-Commedia, but how an audience sees and receives them. What follows in this chapter aims to create a discourse on the cultural reception of Masks with Neo-Commedia, both in their own right and also in relation to the unmasked roles. Starting from the position that all those interviewed included 'good mask technique' within their praxis, my examination of how masks are received by an audience, as distinct from how masked actors train or are trained, includes examinations of distributed cognition, neuroscience, the 'Uncanny Valley', the relationship between mask and makeup, and the contested relationship between the Commedia mask and culture. This multi-disciplinary examination leads to a wider understanding of the potential channels of reception used by a Mask, and,

having done so, opens us to the further question of what modalities of reception an unmasked role operates through.

Frost and Yarrow (1990: 116-125) present a useful typology of theatrical mask, including a brief description of one of Lecoq's pedagogic tools for Commedia (ibid:118), but as their focus is primarily on a worn mask's ability to improvise, they do not cover its full spectrum of dramaturgic use within Neo-Commedia. They usefully note, however, a commonality between the level of concentration required to wear a mask (Ibid: 121) in both improvisatory theatre (in this case Keith Johnstone based impro) and that of Commedia teacher and Lecoq associate Lasaad Saide (ibid; 193) , whose mask training was characterised as " intense, physical and highly technical" and took the participant to a state that was "essentially" (Ibid;121) improvisatory. The conclusion that both forms of mask performance from a heightened state of consciousness complement Malafouris' (2013: 3) idea that, through the mechanism of distributed cognition, we think through the agency of objects. Indeed, it might be argued that to 'think' through objects outside our body, in this case masks, some degree of heightened or altered consciousness is prerequisite.

We must be clear, however, that in terms of dramaturgic application, Johnstone's mask work is similar in both training and performance, whilst Saide's is classroom work, preparing for performance. Part of the conundrum in defining what Neo-Commedia is, or its processes are, is that both Johnstonian and Lecoq mask methodologies have been included within different artist's praxis. Perhaps, in hypothecating an ideal praxial synthesis, within the dramaturgic aesthetic of Neo-Commedia, it is possible to suggest that both methodologies should be available to each actor, so as to be able to respond 'al improviso' to the live performance they are involved in. In order to define the reception of a mask by a viewer, as apart from how a wearer experiences them, I have adapted one of Cormac Power's three descriptive elements which combine to create a sense of presence on stage for an Actor (2008) which are "Fictional" (ibid: 15), "Literal" (Ibid: 87) and

“Auratic” (ibid: 47). When, as happens uniquely in a commedia performance event, an unmasked role appears next to a masked role, I refer to the masked role as having “Auratic Difference”.

5.2 Masks, Distributed Cognition and Agency

Enactive Phenomenology; Sharing and Where Do I End and the Mask Begins?

Recent research in philosophy of mind and cognitive science calls for a reappraisal of historical concepts of cognition due to the increasing evidence that cognition is distributed across brain, body and world (Anderson, Cairns, Sprevak &, Wheeler, 2015: Internet).

Jan Söffner, in an unpublished article (2015), initiates discourse into an alternate way of examining the auratic difference expressed by a fully embodied Commedia mask. In doing so he develops Peter Meineck's discussion of Ancient Greek theatre masks (2015: Internet) in relation to the developing field of distributed cognition, itself a synthesis of cognitive science (David Kirsh, 1995, 1996, 2010) and anthropology (Edwin Hutchins, 1995, 2005, 2008; Charles Goodwin, 1994, 2002, 2010), and explored in relation to material objects by Malafouris (2013). It is the properties of material objects, in relation to distributed cognition, that Meineck extracts from Malafouris' initial archaeological application and applies to both the reception and performance of theatre masks.

The extended mind theory is, according to Söffner, applicable to the practice of Neo-Commedia. Söffner cites actor Michaeli Bottini as following the principles of distributed cognition whilst performing the role of Arlecchino, in the Piccolo Theatre's *Arlecchino, Servant of Two Masters*. Bottini's dilemma as an actor (ibid. in Chaffee and Crick, 2015: 60–61) is whether to impose himself upon the will of the Mask, or to allow himself to follow the will of the Mask. Söffner sees this as being indicative of the third aspect of enactive phenomenology, which is transcorporeal extension.⁶⁵ Malafouris hypothesises that we, as humans, engage in thought and cognition through objects, and by

⁶⁵ The four strands of enactive phenomenology, as used by Söffner in his argument, are the perception of experienced events and actions as being (environmentally) embedded, (skilfully) embodied, (transcorporeally) extended and, most of all, enacted (2015).

extension, objects must therefore share possession of agency. In the case of the mask, the object and the human share agency. The argument goes as follows:

What is outside the head may not necessarily be outside the mind.... It would, I suggest, be more productive to explore the hypothesis that human intelligence “spreads out” beyond the skin into culture and the material world (Malafouris, 2013: 3).

He follows this by quoting Gregory Bateson (1973: 318) to discuss humanity’s use of objects with how they are employed in relation to self and being.

Consider a blind man with a stick. Where does the blind man’s self begin? At the tip of the stick? At the handle of the stick? Or at some point halfway up the stick? (Quoted by Malafouris, 2013: 4)

This same question can be asked of the self, analogously, in relation to a theatre mask, and therefore a Commedia mask. Where does the masked actor’s self begin? In the mask, in the actor or at a cognitive point between the mask and the actor? Malafouris takes a relational stance on ascribing agency between the self and the object and follows Carl Knappet’s formulation that agency does not exist either in humans or in objects, but in the use of objects by humans:

agency comes to be distributed across a network, inhering in the associations and relationships between entities, rather than in the entities themselves (Knappet, 2002: 100, Quoted by Malafouris, 2013).

A theatre mask, therefore, can be hypothesised to be an object that, when worn, possesses agency drawn from a cognitive network that exists between the object and its user. An actor extends their cognition to include the materiality of the mask, with all the information coded within it, and by doing so extends their field of cognition to include that information. The actor is thinking with an object that exists outside their skin. By doing this the actor carries out a parallel process, also associated with the performed Mask, especially through the methodologies espoused by John Wright and Keith Johnstone, that of social

disinhibition: the active mask creates permission for the wearer to behave in a manner not associated with their own habitual movement patterns.

That cognition can extend, or be extended, to areas outside the corporeal body brings into play the idea that the mask-object is part of a masked actor's cognitive process. Is this a recognition of the phenomena of "the power of the mask" in which the wearer voluntarily surrenders their hold on self, to perform according to the dictates of the mask, (see Bottini in Chaffee and Crick, 2015: 60–61) or does it indicate that the same integration of the mask is a conscious process? (See Estevez in Chaffee and Crick, 2015: 133–138.) Both approaches are valid within the frames of reference dictated by distributed cognition, and as such can be seen as variations within performance methodologies, rather than as different and separate approaches. In interrogating cognate approaches to analysing how the performance of a theatrical Mask might be experienced, he concludes his argument with defining a third way, described as a "shared body interaction" (Söffner: 2015).

Söffner's argument is that a mask's force (in his terms 'iconicity') is less about communicating through the mechanisms of display or concealment, but through "shared bodily interaction" leading to a sense of 'following': the actor follows the mask, and the audience follow the actor-mask dyad. Whilst perhaps struggling for a precise vocabulary to describe a form of audience reception that differs from 'acting', what he nevertheless approaches has parallels with a property associated with some schools of mask training: that a Mask is not able to act, it can only 'be' or 'play'. If we, as onlookers, are not watching 'acting', then what we are doing is being in the same space with something similarly alive to us, with that object being of interest to us. A Mask, when performed in this way, shares the same passage of time as the audience does. Intrinsic to a Mask, therefore, is its ability to be simultaneously within the audience's time frame and the flow of imaginative and dramatic time required by the story arc.

Through the design of a Commedia mask (and through the artisan skill of the mask-maker) a Mask is also a fixed point in a changing universe, indicating unequivocally its social class, its attitude to that class and also its attitude to the business of survival. There should be no doubt in the onlooker's mind as to the meaning of the Gestus of a mask, so consequently our gaze is not drawn to character development but to an imaginative sharing of this symbolic human being's progression through a performance. A well-made Mask, performed well, literally shares space with the onlooker, as well as presenting all the ingredients of a constructed social identity. Söffner's view is that the Mask's main avenue of communication is by that of sharing, 'with' an audience, rather than by foregrounding representational or presentational styles of acting which indicate performing 'for' an audience. From his hypothesis we can further infer that Masks operate from a different set of principles from that of the unmasked actors and are read in a different way.

In *The Stations of the Fool's* explanation of Performative Liminality (Crick: 2017), I describe four channels through which an audience reads a performer's mode of address (Personal, Intimate, Presentational and Representational) and their relationship with Robert Weimann's idea of the *Locus* and the *Platea* presented in *Shakespeare and the Popular Tradition of Theatre* (Weimann and Schwartz, 1978). The latter two relate to two specific areas of the stage, where, respectively, the comic characters who directly addressed the audience were situated, and where the dramatic roles which carried the story arc performed. Combining Performative Liminality with Locus and Platea creates a typology of audience-performer relationships through which an audience reads Commedia performance, applying to both unmasked and masked actors, and the performed 'sharing' of a Mask in a mask/unmasked show creates yet another modality of perception to a Commedia performance. In parallel with watching an unmasked actor perform through the levels of immersion from self into the dramatic fiction, we have the masked actor following

approximately the same trajectory. Söffner's positioning the performed Mask as sharing, rather than performing, adds to this sense of difference.

5.3 Masks and Neuroscience: Why Do We React Like That?

What are the processes that an 'alive' mask elicits in a member of audience? Dr Sally Cook makes a very good case that the intrinsic qualities of full masks, appropriately designed, have an effect on the human neurobiological system that is significantly different from that of unmasked theatre (Cook, 2012). Her work is based on the research of V. S. Ramachandran (2011), who directly links the field of aesthetics to the workings of the human nervous system. Cook's synthesis of her own full-mask practice,⁶⁶ framed within Ramachandran's findings, is directly relevant to an understanding of how the employment of masks within Neo-Commedia affects a viewer. Cook's thesis, however, significantly differs from Commedia in two aspects: firstly, in that it focuses on full masks rather than half masks and, secondly, in that she positions her full-mask praxis as pertaining to universality, as noted in her thesis abstract.

The research is framed by the concept of a universal theatrical language proposed by practitioners Peter Brook and Tadashi Suzuki, which has the potential to connect people 'at the deepest levels of their humanity' (Pavis, 1996: 6). Practical approaches adopted in the research are informed and supported by anthropological and human ethological claims of universality (Ekman, 1975; Brown, 1991; Eibl-Eibesfeldt; 2007 [1989]; Schmitt *et al.* 1997) (Cook, 2012: i).

Within Neo-Commedia the concepts of universality and trans-cultural communication are problematic, as one of its key identifying features is behaviour associated with social class. As Ronlin Foreman experienced (Appendix A, 2016: 419–420) the Commedia types, originating in Renaissance Northern Italy, did not translate easily to a group of contemporary Moslem students in Egypt. I suggest, however, that the reflexive relationship between Ramachandran's aesthetic principles and the phenomenological

⁶⁶In 1981 she co-founded the Trestle Theatre Company, which until 2004 was the UK's leading masked theatre company.

impact of theatre masks identified and explored by Cook is valid, and applicable to Neo-Commedia. The dramaturgic implications, therefore, are that meaning is created for an audience through two channels: the specific cultural context of a Commedia Masks, and the intrinsic qualities of the Mask as a whole. This latter relates to Cook's proposal that, through her application of Ramachandran's work, that masks have some degree of universal appeal. This presents the dramaturge with either a straight choice, or else a purposed blend of the two.

I will briefly summarise Cook's findings, explored in Chapter 7 of her thesis (159-190), in which she considers V. S. Ramachandran and William Hirstein's universal rules of art and how they apply to the processes of how an audience might view a mask. The main area concerned is a phenomenon called 'peak shift'. Cook explains it thus:

The peak shift effect is a well-known psychological phenomenon seen primarily as a 'principle in animal learning' (Holopainen, 2008: 44). Sara Shettleworth explains this effect as 'stimuli with more extreme values than those normally present evoke the most response' (2010: 186). Jussi Holopainen illustrates this with shape, and describes how if an animal 'is taught to discriminate a square from a rectangle, the animal's response to a rectangle which is longer and thinner than the original one is even stronger' (2008: 44-45). Of particular significance is the fact that the more exaggerated the ratio of the rectangle, the bigger the response will be and if this is a pleasurable response then, as Anthony Freeman suggests, the response to this rectangle will be deemed 'better' (2003: 215). Shettleworth also points out that this additive effect 'may mean that objects never found in nature are more effective than natural objects' (2010: 208). Ramachandran and Hirstein claim that the peak shift effect is one of the principles of how human aesthetic experience is constructed and argue that this might explain 'many aspects of art' (1999: 15) (Cook, 2012: 159-60).

In other words, humans are understood to experience a heightened animal pleasure response in respect of exaggerated representational shapes, which is greater than the response to the original object, and this may be the basis for constructing our aesthetic

experience. If a mask, whether full or half, is constructed according to these principles, having exaggerated and emphasised representational features, then is not peak shift likely to occur when it is viewed in full performance mode? By full performance mode I mean a state whereby the actor's body has fully adopted the physical stance or Gestus suggested by the mask, in a congruent and appropriate level of exaggeration. Although Cook's synthesis applies to full masks, there appears no reason why it should not apply to half masks as well. In Cook's words, again:

According to the peak shift effect if a mask maker has exaggerated the natural ratio of the animal or human features portrayed, those looking at the mask would experience increased stimulus of their reward mechanism and a heightened pleasing effect should result (ibid: 160).

This explains why a fully activated mask has the potential to affect an audience in a more intense, or at the very least a markedly different, way than an unmasked actor. If, as in many Commedia scenes, a masked actor is performing next to an unmasked actor, then theoretically, the audience's response, as expressed in terms of peak shift will be significantly different between the two performers. If this is so, then it provides a strand of evidence indicating the perceptual difference, through indicating a specific series of neurological mechanisms, between the masked and unmasked roles in Neo-Commedia.

Cook's statement above can be seen as a reductive and behaviourist statement on human meaning-making. Perhaps it would be true, if the peak-shift reaction was not mediated by other neurological events, thus creating a complex response pattern in each individual viewer. These peak-shift reactions occur in the lower cortical area of the brain, and whilst there is an object in the range of vision that the lower brain sees as representational it continues with its function, creating peak shift. This lower cortical action is then transmitted to our higher cognitive functions, still operating on a subconscious level. Our peak-shift reaction principle is mediated by our pre-existing knowledge that what we are seeing is a masked actor, and that this is not a primal threat. The functions of the lower

cortex do not stop operating whilst there is an object it cannot quite classify or recognise in front of it.

Seeing Ramachandran's findings as a dramaturge we can place the viewed object as a masked actor. Our response to it is generated by the performed virtuosic unity between the mask-object and the actor's body⁶⁷. The lower brain responds with peak shift and the upper brain mediates this process. The upper brain's activity does not stop the lower cortex's neuro-transmitters and so it continues for an onlooker whilst the masked actor is in view. In terms of the reward response, the situation is more direct: the audience member sees a stylised representation of a living thing and is neurologically rewarded. From this, one can extrapolate the following hypothesis: when a fully embodied Mask appears on stage, the continual interaction between the lower and higher cortices creates a very different order of response in an audience member than for an unmasked actor. There is neurologically-based fascination, on behalf of an audience member, in a fully activated mask, whether full or half.

If, as I suspect, it is within our higher cortical functions that images and memories of our own culture exist, then the reception of a Commedia mask (as well as other 'active' masks) operate as follows: Firstly, we have a subconscious reaction to the 'universal' elements of the mask, and this is subsumed into our cultural reception. Between these two processes we experience a mask. A mask from our own culture has an 'uncanny' life to it

⁶⁷ There exists one piece of phenomenological and observational evidence to support this hypothesis. When a fully active mask, embodied by an actor, appears 'alive' in front of the audience, the spectator experiences a level of engagement through the actor's skill at creating physical congruency between their body and the gestural plasticity demanded by the mask. When the actor, whilst still wearing the mask, either relaxes into their own habitual posture or else deviates from the gestural demands of the mask the viewers feel a palpable sense of disappointment. The mask is seen to 'die' in front of them, and the viewer moves from experiencing a fully embodied not-quite-human being to observing what is clearly a human being wearing a mask. This 'disappointment' on the part of the viewer, I attribute to the drop in the peak-shift response. As soon as a viewer perceives the mask wearer is human, the lower cortex ceases its peak-shift activity, and there is a lessening of the reward response. It is within this reduction that the viewer experiences disappointment. Dramaturgically this positions the relationship between the mask-object and its wearer as of prime importance.

yet seems familiar to us. A mask that is not part of our familiar acculturated world, still has its 'uncanny' life and is not familiar to us. This is an area where the 'uncanny' comes to the fore and the audience might feel apprehensive or even afraid. To an audience not familiar to Harlequin or Pantalone this might compromise their enjoyment of the performance, and therefore puts an onus on the performer to make the masked character less frightening. This is done, according to both Carlo Boso's and Antonio Fava's principles, by making the 'fear' (of the mask) safe, and the mechanism by which this is carried out is laughter. The fear generated by the mask object must be sabotaged, either by the mask itself, or by another stage actant. Comedy therefore is the natural antidote to the fear, acculturated or unacculturated, an 'active' mask generates. The flow in a Commedia show, then, is from fear to laughter, and from one extreme to another, giving rise to Carlo Boso's idea of 'contraste' as a principle behind Neo-Commedia. It also literally places the genre as tragi-comedy, with the performative presentation of each uncanny mask being a mediation between these two extremes: fear and laughter. The less familiar the audience is to the mask, the harder the actor has to work to create laughter.

Katrien van Beurden, in her work with her company 'Hotel Courage' (discussed in section 5.5) is aware that what her audience might know about Commedia will affect their understanding and reception of the performance. As a Dutch national with a self-confessed lack of knowledge of Commedia but a love of the masks, she makes a conscious artistic decision to strip the masks of their known meaning and allow the cultural context of the mask develop during the show as a shared process (Van Beurden, 2016, Appendix A: 206).

John Rudlin's assertion that one must perform an unmasked role as if one is also wearing mask applies, therefore, to creating a stylistic unity on stage between the Masks and unmasked roles, rather than through the mechanisms of delivering an audience's experience. The neurological reaction to masked performance delineates the difference between masked and unmasked reception. Placing masks as the prime mechanism for

neurologically reactive and instinctive reception places unmasked roles in the area that contrast with this. I suggest here that unmasked roles therefore deal with consciously constructed artistic and social roles. This places the unmasked roles as conscious representatives and carriers of their surrounding culture, capable of making dramatic propositions which then manifest as plot lines or story arcs. They become the representative of the conscious mind exploring the social and metaphysical aspects of humanity, through passion-inspired plot development.

In terms of a universal aesthetic within neo-Commedia, applying Cook's interpretation of Ramachandran's aesthetics gives us a basis to understand how an 'active' mask is received by an observer. This intrinsic quality, therefore, is always part of the received meaning of any performed mask and must be understood to be a significant element within its reception. As this relates to the working of the human brain, then a mask can be said to have an element of universality connected to this reception. However similar our brain structures may be our reactions are always mediated by our surrounding culture. It is between these two positions that any aesthetic position or dramaturgic practice must lie.

5.4 Entering the Uncanny Valley, Masked

Is there a continuum between how a masked actor communicates to an audience, and how the unmasked actor does so, or are they entirely separate modes of communication? An examination of the phenomenon of the Uncanny Valley, when applied to masks, offers a possible solution. The Uncanny Valley is a phrase first coined by Japanese roboticist Masahiro Mori in 1978 to describe an observation that:

the more humanlike his robots became, the more people were attracted to them, but only up to a point. If an android started to become too realistic and life like, suddenly people were repelled and felt a little disgusted. Mori called this emotional plunge the 'Uncanny Valley', referring to the dip in a diagram he plotted of anthropomorphic robots and our emotional reaction (Walker, 2009: 31).

His original diagram is as follows, with the "valley" being the area below the horizontal axis.

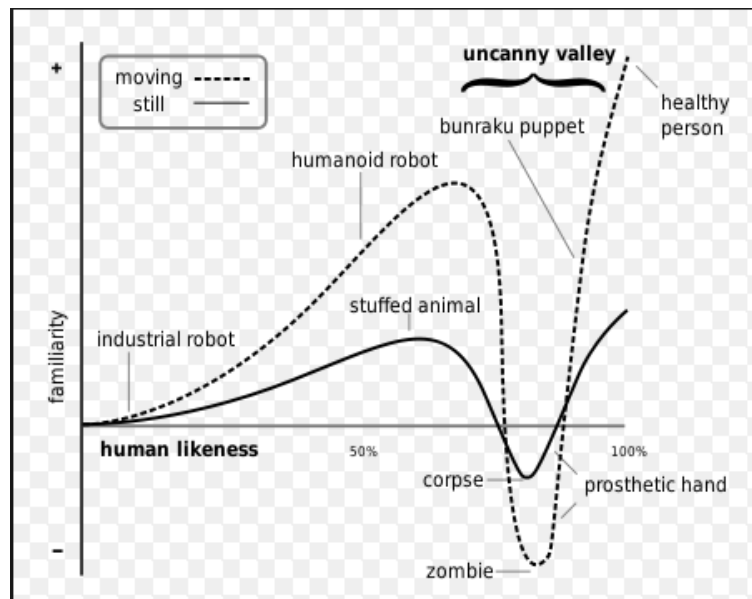


Figure 5.4 (i): Mori's diagram of anthropomorphic robots and our emotional reaction (Technium, 2012: Internet)

If we analogously apply this to a masked actor, including within our frame of reference the degree of stylisation inherent in the mask-design, then we can offer as a hypothesis that the more human a mask becomes the more it will seem attractive to an audience, up the point when it becomes too human and is therefore repellent. In terms of design, the Uncanny Valley can offer us a theoretical insight that a Commedia mask sits at a point of peak effectiveness, immediately before it ceases to be attractive to an audience. The valley, as described by Mori, is the area where an onlooker's visual relationship with the object, is one of being repelled and not attracted. The word 'repelled' here refers to an actual feeling of revulsion, rather than as a performed revulsion that exists within and adds to the efficacy of the dramatic frame.

The research here was carried out in the field of robotics, with the specific aim of finding the optimum level of humanoid attractiveness for robot designs. They were not researching dramatic interactions but foregrounded two specific characteristics useful to masks: likeability and trust. Epistemologically, we need to examine these two as features intrinsic to the performance medium, rather than individual or performed characteristics of a dramatic role. Researching degrees of empathy, Maya B. Mathur (Quantitative Sciences, Stanford University) and David B. Reichling (Oral and Maxillofacial Surgery, University of California) agree that:

Where an individual robot falls on that continuum, is becoming ever more important to pin down. Robot designers can then avoid the Uncanny Valley – if it indeed exists – so we can be comfortable with their creations (Mathur & Reichling, 2015: Internet).

The *New Scientist* magazine adapted Mori's original position with information derived from Mathur and Reichling to produce a diagram of the Uncanny Valley including a new position, that of the cartoon human character.

Losing empathy

When artificial creatures look like us, they enter the “uncanny valley”. This could be because we feel less empathy towards them, as this illustration shows

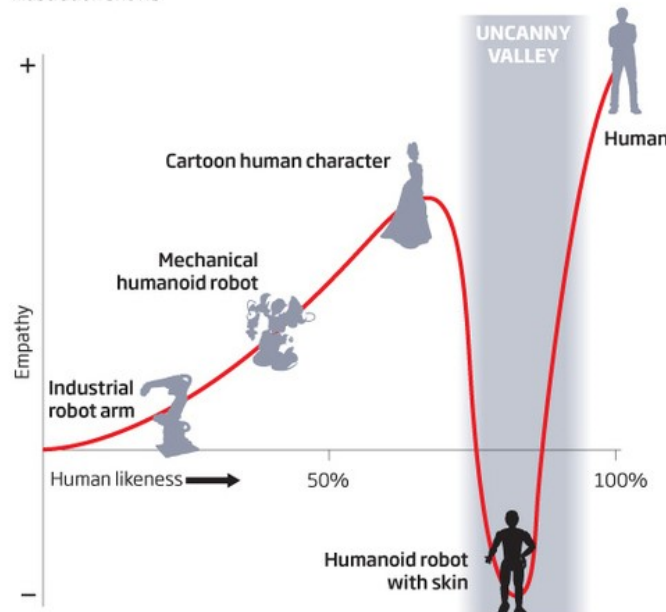


Figure 5.4 (ii): *New Scientist* adaptation of Mori’s Uncanny Valley diagram including the cartoon human character (Rutkin, *New Scientist*, 2015: Internet).

Whilst the original research was firmly aimed at making robots acceptable around humans, the phenomenon of the Uncanny Valley is explored more within the field of film and video-game purposed animation, suggestively analogous to the theatrical stylised representation of humanity that is masked Neo-Commedia. In terms of the Uncanny Valley, a mask has to be stylised and, though possessing the quality of performed life on stage, needs to stay at least several degrees removed in both concrete form and plastic design from the human face. Peter Plantec, author of *Virtual Humans*, is here writing about animated characters, but his argument informs thinking about masked actors.

Think of it this way: most animated characters are not trying to fool you. They are what they are, but when they start to look too human, they’re trying to fool you and your subconscious is wary of being fooled. The result is a nagging feeling just below consciousness that prevents clean suspension of disbelief.... For

now, consider such iconic characters as Robbie the Robot or Homer Simpson. With them there is no cognitive dissonance. We understand and accept them because there is no pretension (Plantec, 2007: Internet).

Although the term “clean suspension of disbelief” can be seen, in the context of Plantec’s argument, to be an outmoded way of describing performance reception, there needs to be some generosity in negotiating epistemological and disciplinary boundaries in developing an effective vocabulary. The terminology of one discipline may describe a similar process, expressed differently, in another. The phrase “nagging feeling just below consciousness” may also describe the lower cortex’s reaction to an object that it does not feel comfortable with. Both describe a position where the human subconscious alerts us to potential danger by raising our levels of attention. The Uncanny Valley exists because our evolved self-defence mechanisms see an object that simultaneously both looks like a human and not like a human as a potential threat.

An animated character exists on its own terms, and a masked character exists on the terms defined by the mask. It is not meant to be realistic, but to be believable and enjoyed by the audience. It has a stylised and non-naturalistic stage life, contrasting with its human neighbour, living on the opposite side of the Uncanny Valley. Animators are catching up with what the founding pedagogues of Neo-Commedia already knew: that something does not have to be realistic to be believable. Lecoq’s whole pedagogy is founded on stylistic gesture, not realism, as are Giovanni Poli’s definitions of the Zanni’s gesture range. Elspeth Tory, the animation designer for *The Assassin’s Creed* series of video games, says:

A character that’s *realistic* will seem to have ticked off a checklist of human characteristics, but a *believable* one will display nuances and subtleties that make them seem more unique and alive (quoted by Walker, 2009: 35).

With both masked and unmasked actors present within Neo-Commedia, the cumulative performative strengths of masked acting, analogous to an animated cartoon, together with that of the unmasked face, create a multitude of avenues of potential either side of the Uncanny Valley. There is no continuum of acting styles that spans the two sides of the valley, and this once again indicates the Commedia principle of *contraste* in action.

Commedia dell'Arte and Neo-Commedia can be positioned as theatrical styles that contain elements that, spanning the awkward gap, exist on both sides of the valley. Using the Uncanny Valley as an interrogative tool, it becomes clear that visually Masks exist on one side of the valley, and unmasked roles on the other. Therefore, any iteration of Commedia that employs both intrinsically encompasses within its field of meaning 'cartoon' reality and 'human' reality. In terms of this argument, the word 'cartoon' can be seen to occupy the same ground as 'grotesque'. As a cartoon emphasises certain human characteristics at the expense of others, the relationship between an unmasked role and masked one can be seen as one of instinct against logic or reason. Whilst this in itself is not a guarantee of comedy, it certainly provides a useful field of dramatic and attitudinal conflict.

5.5 Katrien Van Beurden and Hotel Courage: A Case Study

Repurposing Masks: Performance and Culture

Katrien van Beurden, of Amsterdam based Hotel Courage Theatre Company, introduced a new category, which defines the function of a mask within her practice: “To train the actors to tell their stories, through the embodiment of stories within a mask, to their own communities” (Appendix C, 2015: 8). Of the nine interviewed (including her) who had this card as an option, five people accepted it and four rejected it. Although this card had only just over a 50% acceptance, of greater significance is that Van Beurden created her own evolved mask praxis: making masks the focus for her actors’ stories, and then developing their masked acting to perform these stories. She is very eloquent about the innovations she has developed within her mask praxis, and whilst not exploring the relationship between masked and unmasked roles, the quality of her work gives it significance. Her approach is to strip away the historical and cultural meaning from the masks and, by emphasising their performative strengths, relocating their cultural agency. It is an important question to ask of all Neo-Commedia performance: how far the mask, or Mask (see Appendix D: Mask Set Societal Spectrums), is positioned as a purely performative object, and how far its historical and cultural coding is being employed.

Within her practice a mask provides a stylised geometric and elemental⁶⁸ vehicle, with which to show her actors’ embodied experience. Her concern as a theatre maker is that people should share that experience, or at least acknowledge it within the staged performance. She was very careful, within the interview, to place the value of these stories above the politics implicit within the situation the stories emerged from (Van Beurden,

⁶⁸ Elemental here in the sense that the mask has been designed containing particular concrete qualities purposed to stimulate physical reactions in the wearer associated with the qualities of earth, air, fire or water.

2015, Appendix A: 214). In relation to an extended sequence, performed by two Palestinian actors from Jenin, (Theatre Perdu in Amsterdam on 18 October 2015) which included a rocket attack by the Israeli Defence Force, she states:

The politics are a background to the story, and not the main reason to perform the story... what is important is that it happens to these people... I don't want a discussion afterwards about Israel and Palestine (ibid.).

This seems a problematic position to take considering the extreme nature of events, but Van Beurden insists that her theatre is not political, and that her praxis focuses on the performative qualities of the masks themselves. She is testing out the limits of what masks can do and taking a wide variety of nationalities and nationally embedded stories, is determined to put them in the 'present' of the audience. She notes in an internet broadcast "somehow a lot of our audience stand up and say things" (Van Beurden, 2017, Appendix A/Katrien van Beurden: 5), indicating the immediacy and involvement that her masked performance creates. Her connection to, and fascination with, masks is focussed on their performative ability to 'flip' (in Lecoq's terminology the *bascule*) between extreme emotional states, and she sees this as a place where "people can use the strength of their imagination to get the situation that they wish for" (ibid.). The stories told by her company originate from her performers, and not from historical Commedia dell'Arte scenarios or folkloric sources: A [Ghanaian] fisherman remembers his drowned younger brother, waking up in a fishing boat and playing with the flying fish; a woman [from Iran] enacts the story of her Grandmother's murdered lover; a young [Palestinian] refugee digs in the rubble for his missing toys, whilst another [also Palestinian] man visits a graveyard and, whilst telling his mother the news, remembers a battle with a chef and the liberation of a flock of chickens.⁶⁹

⁶⁹ Stories from the Hotel Courage performance at the Theatre Perdu in Amsterdam, 18 October 2015, as recorded by myself. For further information on the evolution of this particular section see Van Beurden 2017, Appendix A/KVB Utrecht: 5–6. (Filepath: Appendix A/katrien van Beurden.)

It is hard not to see these stories as having political implication, if not deliberate intent. Her praxial employment of a mask's ability to flip, to performatively foreground "the strength of their imagination to get the situation that they wish for" (ibid.) indicates an engagement with negative or oppressive elements in the societies that produced the stories. It is clear from the interview that Van Beurden's main interest is in the power of the Mask, and from her own experience, she employs it as agent of individual expression. However, the presentation of, for example, everyday life in the Palestinian refugee camp at Jenin by a group of its residents is potentially problematical. A commercial theatre company avoiding politics is, of course, understandable, but presenting both the aforementioned situation, as well as the portrayal of a Syrian honour killing, purely as entertainment brings up the potential issues of cultural appropriation.

Employing the performative strengths of the Commedia masks, she encourages her actors to tell the stories from where they come from, and as will be explored later in Section 5, it appears that the more a Mask becomes representative of a particular region and embodies its cultural geography, the greater its individual voice and dramatic strength becomes. If a Mask, repurposed to represent a specific culture, is performing to an audience of that same culture, through a mixed performance modality, including direct address, then it is hardly surprising that an audience feels it has to get involved (Van Beurden 2017, Appendix A/KVB Utrecht: 5). The situation she referred to in the Utrecht interview was an outdoor workshop performance at the Freedom Theatre in Jenin.

These performed acts of recollection and remembrance are framed within her talk in Utrecht under the title "Playful Taboo". Should we assume that, under the material circumstances of the lives of the actors who bring these stories to life, these acts are considered taboo? Van Beurden insists that her work is not political, but nevertheless she is drawn to work with actors from communities in extremis. David Wiles (1991: 131), though focussing on the Roman comedies of Menander, suggests that an intrinsic quality of masks

is to legitimise taboo behaviour.⁷⁰ If by ‘taboo’ he means that masked acting is the mechanism whereby anti-social, dissident or counter-hegemonic behaviour, comically framed, is presented to an audience, I would agree, and Van Beurden certainly draws this out of her performers. Poli may have expressed this within his praxis as the poetics of survival, set within a historical dramatic universe, and Van Beurden employs contemporary stories from politically disputed areas to do the same. Within the performance the performers’ own politically unheard, and impossible to resolve, needs and desires are presented, giving currency to Poli and Lecoq’s phrase ‘The poetics of survival’. Her praxis brings Neo-Commedia out of the realms of Brechtian historicisation and directly into the world of contemporary global politics. Van Beurden, however, constantly denies any political or ideological intent.

Van Beurden’s affinity with masks also lies in their ability to express emotional extremes (Van Beurden, 2015, Appendix A: 209 & 211), and states that their company mission is close to the following:

We are all human and we present them [our performed characters] in a constant state of surviving [actively within the struggle for survival] the poetry, the good, the bad and the madness (ibid: 204).

To repurpose a Commedia Mask to perform contemporary crises through performative poetics is a long journey. The performance I witnessed on 18 October 2015 was a highly creditable stage within that journey. Whilst publicly downplaying the political aspects of her work, she created a platform for a group of excluded artists, from a variety of globally contested areas, to tell their own stories. In respect of the Palestinian actors, the presentation of their normal lives within the occupied territories was a stand-out moment within the show. However, there are pitfalls in this approach.

⁷⁰ “The masks of Plautus, like those of the Atellan comedy and of the Commedia dell’Arte, had as their principal function to legitimate taboo behaviour” (Wiles, 1991: 131).

The past three years Theatre Hotel Courage travelled all over the world asking the question: “If the world would be a hotel, what would be your position in this hotel and what archetypical mask would you be...” The imaginary hotel is a metaphor for our globalized world in which everyone has its position. In which everyone strives for a better life (Hotel Courage, 2017: Internet).

The danger that the company’s work might appear to be creating exotic entertainment out of others’ crises is partially negated by their working method. The artists have a choice as to what stories they bring, and so there are fewer obvious issues of cultural appropriation, such as those Peter Brooke’s *Mahabharata*⁷¹ (1987–1988) was accused of. The company works as an ensemble, albeit under Van Beurden’s direction. The different nationalities within the company offer snapshots of local culture within a global framework, and as such can be proposed as a model of global cooperation and inclusivity. The multinational company, whilst being unable to explore any single national issue in perhaps as great a depth as might be desired, presents to the public the picture of multi-ethnic company members engaged in common endeavour.

The significance of her praxis within the genre of Neo-Commedia is that she does not take for granted the historical performative strengths of the masks and is exploring how their agency may be employed within a contemporary theatre world. She is a conservatoire trained actor, a former partner in Teatro Punto⁷², and has studied with Frans Straijaerds, (a Dutch follower of Grotowski) and also with Antonio Fava, of whom she says:

The difference between him and me was that I see the mask in space as a geometric and technical object, and it is not told [predefined] who the characters are...a mask is a geometric object with potential for life, not coming with baggage or a rational paper [historic or academic source] saying who this character is (Van Beurden, 2016, Appendix A: 208).

⁷¹ Rustom Bharucha, in *Theatre and the World* has a detailed critique of this approach, with reference to Brook’s expropriation of the *Mahabharata*.

⁷² The other half of Teatro Punto was Carlos Estevez, who now works as a teacher at the Lecoq school and works professionally as manifestopoetico, at www.manifestopoetico.com.

She has repurposed the masks; rejecting the formalised and reinvented physical shapes and movements from Strehler and Lecoq, and instead employing their geometry and potential to create new characters with new life. Within her praxis, the mask-object has the baggage of history stripped away and exists to have a new history embodied by its wearer, in this case autobiographical stories originating from her group of actors. Her actors are discouraged from seeing the masks in traditional terms, and when Seymah Smith, the Ghanaian actor, introduced his mask at the end of the show as Harlequin, Van Beurden reported that he was told never to do that again.

If you say “Arlecchino” the audience has no image, they have no idea of what or who you are talking about... It becomes a game of what people know then... and people know different things.... It is more useful to work through archetypes... what Arlecchino is, is already captured in the mask, so you don’t have to define it extra. Let the mask be alive... otherwise you are only messing with the audience’s head (Van Beurden, 2016, Appendix A: 206).

This statement brings into question whether Commedia masks need to be already familiar to an audience or not, also noting an issue related to audience reception of Commedia under conditions when that audience, or members of it, has a fixed perception of what Commedia is or ought to be. Van Beurden’s position is supported by Swedish Commedia teacher and mask-maker, Micke Klingvalle.

When we are playing Commedia dell’Arte we will run into a few problems. One is that one of the cornerstones in Commedia dell’Arte is the masks and the audience is supposed to know them, which is not always the case today. Modern Western audiences are seldom used to the play with masks and the energy and size that are demanded. (2016: Internet)

Malcolm Knight (Knight 2015, Appendix A: 108), looking at Commedia masks as an anthropologist, proposes the position that masks are representative of a tribe or a culture and that this element is intrinsic to how an audience reads them. Unfamiliarity, however, on behalf of an audience with the masks, or what they may represent, creates a problem for

the actor in communicating their intrinsic meaning. Van Beurden side-tracks, or ignores this issue, by asking the performer to impose their culturally embedded stories onto the masks they employ, taking as a starting point for her drama that there are no visually coded or recognisable cultural positions that can be taken for granted. She privileges the intrinsic performative strength of a mask over its historical cultural origins and encourages each actor to perform their autobiographical stories with it, thus bringing the audience into the world of the mask, rather than the audience and the mask already existing within the same cultural sphere.

A Commedia mask may originate as a fixed social position but should semiotically function as an open sign: one that is open to interpretation and possesses a multiplicity of potential meaning, rather than conveying only a single value. Within Neo-Commedia the historical Mask is relocated in time and place, so signification is inevitably renegotiated in performance. Most of the practitioners interviewed accept the historically derived performative strengths of the masks at face value and have not culturally interrogated them to such a degree as Van Beurden. Working with Den Durand and Sartori masks, she employs the information already encoded within their form to physically activate her actors' performances, but consciously renames them to keep an actor's creativity away from predefined images, and to remove any imaginative attachment to vestigial historical meaning. Her actors create their own dramatic contexts with masks. The Pantalone Mask is renamed simply 'The old man', Harlequin, 'the child' and The Capitano 'the man who says what he is not'. The plastic form of a well-designed Commedia mask, existing in the contemporary world, as an open sign, should allow this flexibility of use. They are not 'character' masks, aligned to one predefined personality, but are more flexible, and aligned to a combination of animal or element, role and social position, and 'the devil' or passionate need.

5.6 The Corn Exchange and The Rude Mechanicals: A Case Study

Masks or Makeup: Pragmatism in Performance and Cultural White-face

Annie Ryan, artistic director of The Corn Exchange Theatre in Dublin, and Pete Talbot, artistic director of The Rude Mechanicals Theatre Company (UK) both define their performance genre as Commedia dell'Arte but reject the use of masks within their praxis. Within their self-defined terms, they consider their work Commedia, and in support both have portfolios of significant professional practice. Consideration of their practice allows an interrogation of whether, despite an almost universal acceptance of masks by other practitioners as a defining feature of Commedia, this is indeed always the case. To do this we must examine the relationship between the overall purpose and the dramaturgic function of a Commedia mask, both in terms of practicality and an overall teleology.

Talbot's first apparent deviation from, or innovation within, accepted practice, is to postulate that there is a correlation or equivalence between the embodied Commedia Mask, or role, and his understanding of the term archetype: "masks are fundamentally archetypes and archetypes are the essence of certain kinds of people" (Talbot, 2015, Appendix A: 160). When performed, both a Mask and an archetype operate as types, part of whose receptive function is to be immediately recognisable by an audience. Talbot deviates from the Italianate idea of the *tippo fisso*, by describing its defining features as archetypal. Although he removes the mask-object from the stage, both 'mask' and 'archetype' appear to have near-identical dramatic functions. He states, "We want to tell stories, but unlike naturalism, we use archetypal characters because they get to the point, if you like, about human nature" (ibid.). Getting to the "point... about human nature" is most certainly a shared characteristic between Talbot's archetype and the Commedia Mask.

What point about human nature does Talbot make? Top of his ranking is the card, originally added by John Broadbent, “to show the masks [archetypes] with feet of clay and also with good in them” (ibid), and within the archetype he aims to show “the good and bad equally” (ibid: 156). This might even be the universal statement of intent that underpins all Commedia. This egalitarian position, however, is qualified by his certain knowledge that not all the archetypes are socially equal. In response to a card introduced by Mario Pirovano stating: “to renew and revive Commedia dell’Arte to denounce/show modern society...” (ibid./Appendix C: 9) he reacted as follows:

There is a difference between exposing, if you like, and denouncing. I don’t like the word denouncing, but Commedia has always been about exposing the difference between those in power and those who are disempowered. So, Commedia is a set of tools for taking a position on, and I can’t think of a better word, the arseholes. Commedia is about exposing arseholes.... making fun of them, laughing at them or inducing laughter. The point of the exercise is to get the audience to laugh at arseholes... and in the process of it take a moral position... an implied moral position. We are not denouncing, we are taking our own position on it... we are not saying we think they are arseholes, but we show them for what they are and let the audience decide (ibid: 160–161).

The position Talbot is taking, through the mechanism of his performances of archetypes, is to present the workings of power within a society, and how these workings are triggered by the embodied performance of ethical and moral good and bad. He does qualify this with “I don’t think it is the role of theatre to take up a political position, well at least not to preach, I think it is the role of theatre to reveal and reflect” (ibid: 157). As the two Rude Mechanical performances I saw (*Babbi Babbette* in 2015 and *MacByrd* in 2016) were both obviously comedies, in terms of his praxis, we can interchange the words ‘theatre’ and ‘comedy’. So far, other than the non-use of the masks, Talbot’s aesthetic concerns seem within the range of those practised within Neo-Commedia, as revealed to the researcher.

Within Talbot's dramaturgy there also sits an unarticulated, yet fully employed, application of the Commedia principle of *contraste*, and he places this within the relationship between comedy and tragedy. Talbot offers "the reason we do comedy... as opposed to tragedy, is because comedy allows you to approach tragedy through joy" (ibid: 157). He also offers as an additional dramaturgic tool, juxtaposing comic and tragic scenes, and uses as an example Lady MacBeth wringing her hands over the recent slaughter, immediately followed by the drunken porter. Using *Babbi Babette* (2015) as an example, he added:

In the play, you are going to see tonight [Babbi Babette] all the characters die... the audience laugh as the whole cast are blown to bits, but at the same time there is a sense of horror... and it is that ability that Commedia, and comedy in general has.... The idea is to touch the tragic, momentarily, without being consumed by it (ibid: 158).

Talbot's archetypes exist in a world where comedy and tragedy co-exist, but where the human condition is approached through laughter. Juxtaposing these two worlds is one of the dramaturgic applications of *contraste*. Again, this does not seem so very different from the norm in Neo-Commedia, as part of its remit will always be approaching the great problems and disasters in life, but with laughter in mind, rather than tears. Adriano Iuressevitch even goes as far as to say that "commedia is tragedy without catharsis" (Iuressevitch, Appendix A, 2015: 91). The relationship between comedy and tragedy, within the performance of Commedia dell'Arte, appears to be an emerging theme.

Talbot's practice foregrounds the presentation of archetypes within a critique of hierarchical society. Having an audience distracted from these stories, by a potentially imperfect performance of a culturally alien object (the mask) is not where he wishes his audience to be.

That is absolutely what I do not want an audience to be looking at, which is why we do not use Leather Masks... we do use white face, though.... Though, I love the masks... when I decided to work

in this part of the country, there is such a disconnect between the conservative club members of Rushlake Green and the world of Commedia Masks... I thought, is this just going to get in the way? So, I thought, what do they understand, and the closest things I could find was... they understand at least what white face is... It's from Circus, it's part of the English tradition (Talbot, Appendix A, 2015: 169).

Despite the work of the Trestle Theatre company, in the 1980s and 1990s, and currently Vamos Theatre, the mask in England is a culturally unfamiliar object, and as such hinders its primary function: aiding instant and immediate understanding, by the reader, of the roles' Gestus. Talbot jettisons the mask as a barrier to communication, replacing it with white-face makeup,⁷³ concluding that it is more culturally attuned to the English viewing public than a leather mask. He states that white-face has a similar function to a mask, which, in his dramaturgic process, exists as an alienating or visually disrupting reminder that what the audience is watching is always an actor in a play, acting.

I know there is a lot of wonderful things a mask can do, and be wonderfully expressive when done well, but I thought in the end to allow the muscles of the face to work under the white makeup, to allow the smile still, for example, to be able to operate ... that was better for my purposes... But what you gain [with white-face] is the essential function of the mask which is to make the category clear ... that the audience are not looking at real life people ...they are seeing actors putting on a performance, but in the same space as you (ibid: 164).

White-face makeup here is employed not as part of an illusion of reality, but as part of a presentation of unreality. Borrowing a phrase from Elspeth Tory, one of the designers of *Assassin's Creed*, it is designed to enhance the believability, and not the reality of the roles.

⁷³ In Antonio Fava's conception of Commedia dell'Arte, there is a white-face role (Pedrolino) he calls the *infarinata* (flour-faced), but it is one mask among many, and in Talbot's universe, all wear white.



Figure 5.6 (i): Rude Mechanical Theatre Company; white-face in action (source: Internet)

In the course of the interview, in defence of the use of the leather mask I mentioned Old Spot Theatre Company's practice of using masks to allow a cast of four to multi-role within a given performance. Talbot, referring to his practice says that The Rude Mechanicals do a similar thing, with white-face and a change of wig-hats (a feature not unique to The Rude Mechanicals, but one which they feature and use extensively), which the audience accept and go along with.

[Of the] 19 characters in the show [Babbi Babette, 2015], and 6 actors... the audience accept it because the character is the whole body... we do differentiate with wigs [and hats] as you will see. It's quite clearly – if you use the rational mind – the same person and yet seconds later the same actor plays a different role, looking through a window... it's a combination, of virtuosity, physicality, and changing wig-hats (ibid.).

The 'whole body', as Talbot describes it, serves the same function as comically purposed Gestus. Although our ways of describing and defining the same practice may differ, the use of some type of scenographic facial stylisation to act as a focus for physical

expression are observable as a constant within Neo-Commedia. Talbot employs white-face in the same dramaturgic way as others employ a mask, and towards the same ends: the telling of physically embodied stories. The difference, however, between plain white-face and a mask is that a mask contains concrete coding, specifically relating to social position, age, element, anthropomorphic identification and pre-socialised (Stefano Peroccos's 'The Devil') human behaviour.

These elements, however, can be included within white-face, as similar design elements can be concretised within makeup design. In order to fulfil an equivalent function to a Commedia mask, white-face must be decorated with a particular level of stylisation. The makeup design must be stylised to a degree that the wearer's movements, purposed to create a unity between face and body, become unrealistic, and when performed foreground for the audience its viscerality and believability over realism. Deriving a makeup style from Japanese kabuki was the path taken by the Corn Exchange Theatre, led by artistic director Annie Ryan, in their production of *Dublin by Lamplight*, first performed 1 November 2004, at the Project Theatre, Dublin. Its most recent revival was at the Abbey Theatre in Dublin in 2017, where I saw it on 26 March.

Of those interviewed, Ryan is the most commercially successful, and whilst having elements of her practice strongly identified with Commedia, she is currently ambivalent about this. Whilst at specific times in her career she embraced the label, she is now professionally sceptical about this connection. In her introduction to the 2005 edition of *Dublin by Lamplight* (West, 2005: i) she refers to Commedia three times in a half page introduction, but in the two-page introduction to the 2017 edition, sold as a programme for the Abbey Theatre run, (2017: v-vi), she avoids using the term completely. This is both indicative of her own ambivalence as to whether her practice is indeed Commedia dell'Arte, and due to the evolution of her own practice.

Ryan's practice did not originate from a European-derived school of Commedia but from a US-based synthesis of several cognate genres. In the 2005 publication she refers to her practice as "our own strange take on Commedia dell'Arte" (West, 2005: I), whilst the company she was part of for a time, Chicago based New Crime theatre company, is described as "the Commedia dell'Arte troupe in her native Chicago" (ibid: ii) which produced:

a certain kind of theatre: theatre that would work its actors like dogs but do anything for a cheap gag; theatre that would make its audience laugh and cry at the same time. It described a kind of wild irreverence within a strict and respected structure. It was the kernel of Commedia dell'Arte (ibid.).

This is not the historical Commedia dell'Arte, but an imaginative idea of what it might be, or might have been, which has then been brought to the stage through the purposed intentions of its performers. This may be one way to position Ryan's work, though she clearly makes a distinction between her perceptions of how 'Italians' might see Commedia and how she creates it.

I'm sure Italians would have a fit if they saw what I do, but I do think what I do is a sort of contemporary equivalent of what I think the heart of the thing is about (Ryan, Appendix A, 2016: 318).

She positions her praxis very clearly in relation to US theatre practice, however, and recognises the skillset required to attempt Commedia:

It is physical, rather than emotional in the psychological way that American method acting works... it demands expertise on so many different levels (ibid: 317)

What then, is the expertise that Ryan says is demanded of its performers and where did it originate within US theatre practice? To answer the where, and also to illuminate Ryan's own ambivalence to Commedia, it is best to quote her in full.

let me back up a bit, in the work that I do, I always give a disclaimer, and say that what I am doing is not really proper Commedia Dell'Arte. I've never trained in Italy. My origin is

basically [Ariane] Mnouchkine⁷⁴. Mnouchkine's actor, Georges Bigot⁷⁵ went to Los Angeles. Some people from the Actor's Gang⁷⁶ found him, and that style was taught in [the] Actor's Gang... some guys from [the] Actor's Gang went to Chicago and joined New Crime⁷⁷... I was part of New Crime, and then I brought that style⁷⁸ to Dublin, and made up my own kind of Commedia, embellished that, made it a bit better in my opinion, and then added this Piven⁷⁹ Theatre story-theatre to it (ibid: 316–317).

The European influence on Ryan is clear, as evidenced by the input of Georges Bigot in the evolution in the work of the Actors' Gang of 'the style', which she adapts in her own work; whilst present, it is but one element. Of significance is that her work represents a genuinely US-based praxis, created out of an imaginative conception of a contemporary equivalent of what the "heart of the thing is about" coupled with commercial theatrical imperatives. It is

⁷⁴ Ariane Mnouchkine (1939–), French Theatre director and founder, in 1964, of Théâtre du Soleil in Paris, which still continues, which she founded after graduating from the Lecoq school. In 1987, she was the first recipient of the Europe Theatre prize and has been a recipient of several other international awards, including the Goethe Medal in 2011 and the Ibsen award in 2009. Her work is concerned with breaking down the fourth wall, and as a generalisation she operates in non-conventional theatre spaces. Her praxis is detailed in Adrian Kemander's *Ariane Mnouchkine and the Théâtre du Soleil*, published in 1993 by the Cambridge University Press.

⁷⁵ Georges Bigot (1955–), award winning French actor, director and theatre pedagogue, member of the Théâtre du Soleil between 1981 and 1992, and performed in their touring Shakespearean Trilogy of *Richard II*, *Twelfth Night* and *Henry IV Part 1*. He worked with Tim Robbins' Actors' Gang first when *Richard II* played in Los Angeles, teaching then Commedia, and has kept up the association, working with the company as an occasional trainer and visiting director.

⁷⁶ The Actors' Gang is a Los Angeles-based theatre collective founded in 1981, currently fronted by Hollywood Actor Tim Robbins, also its artistic director. It has a strong theme of social engagement; running youth workshops and also a Commedia dell'Arte styled prison arts programme which has had a significant effect on lowering reoffending rates for its participants. It also runs large scale international touring shows, and a low-cost public Shakespeare in the Park programme. It also lays claim to an acting method called 'the style', synthesised from Commedia dell'Arte, masked theatre, US improv and emotional states. Actors who have been part of the ensemble at various times are Jack Black, John Cusack, Jeremy Piven, Helen Hunt and Kate Walsh. Several early members of the ensemble, significantly, also trained as part of the Piven family workshop.

⁷⁷ New Crimes, Chicago-based US Improv troupe with affiliations to the much larger Second City Company.

⁷⁸ Ryan refers here to 'the style', which is the predominant and highly distinctive acting style promoted and originally synthesised under the auspices of The Actors' Gang.

⁷⁹ Byrne Piven (1929–2002) and Joyce Piven founded a training programme for young people and adults in the 1970s in Evanston, Illinois (part of Chicago) which continues still under the name Piven Family Theatre. Its focus is on Viola Spolin-derived Story Theatre; being able to simultaneously narrate and exist within a theatrical situation of a student's own making, whilst maintaining a method-acting-derived emotional integrity: "our approach to acting brings together... theatre games, story theatre, Mime, and the Stanislavski method" (Joyce Piven, 2004: Internet). Actors Jeremy and Shira Piven are their children.

significant that despite the innovative theatrical pedagogy that informs Ryan's practice, still present is the historical shadow of Commedia dell'Arte. The combination of method acting, physical positioning, meta-theatrical framing, improvisation and (as will soon be discussed) a form of masked expression all combine to allow Ryan to make a claim to a performance methodology that is another recreation of the idea of Commedia. These preceding elements are also part of 'the style'. The following diagram indicates the convergence of influences that created Ryan's praxis.

It is useful to note that one of the original impulses behind Compass Theatre was that of creating improvised political theatre in the manner of Bertold Brecht (Frost and Yarrow, 1990:51). Paul Sills, one of Compass' founders and Viola Spolin's son, comments on the first planned Compass show *The Game of Hurt* as follows:

The original idea was to have a scenario which was – as we fondly imagined – the Commedia dell'Arte idea. We wrote a story out, usually eight to twelve scenes written out on a sheet of paper, and we'd follow through the scenes by rehearsing (quoted in Frost and Yarrow, 1990: 52).

The mythologised idea of Commedia dell'Arte appears here as a driving force, being translated into a contemporary form by the theatrical tools possessed by its interpreters: an individual artist becomes the negotiating point between a perceived potential contained within the idea of Commedia, and their existing skills. There is a distinct line of practice from Compass theatre to Ryan's own adaptation of 'the style'.

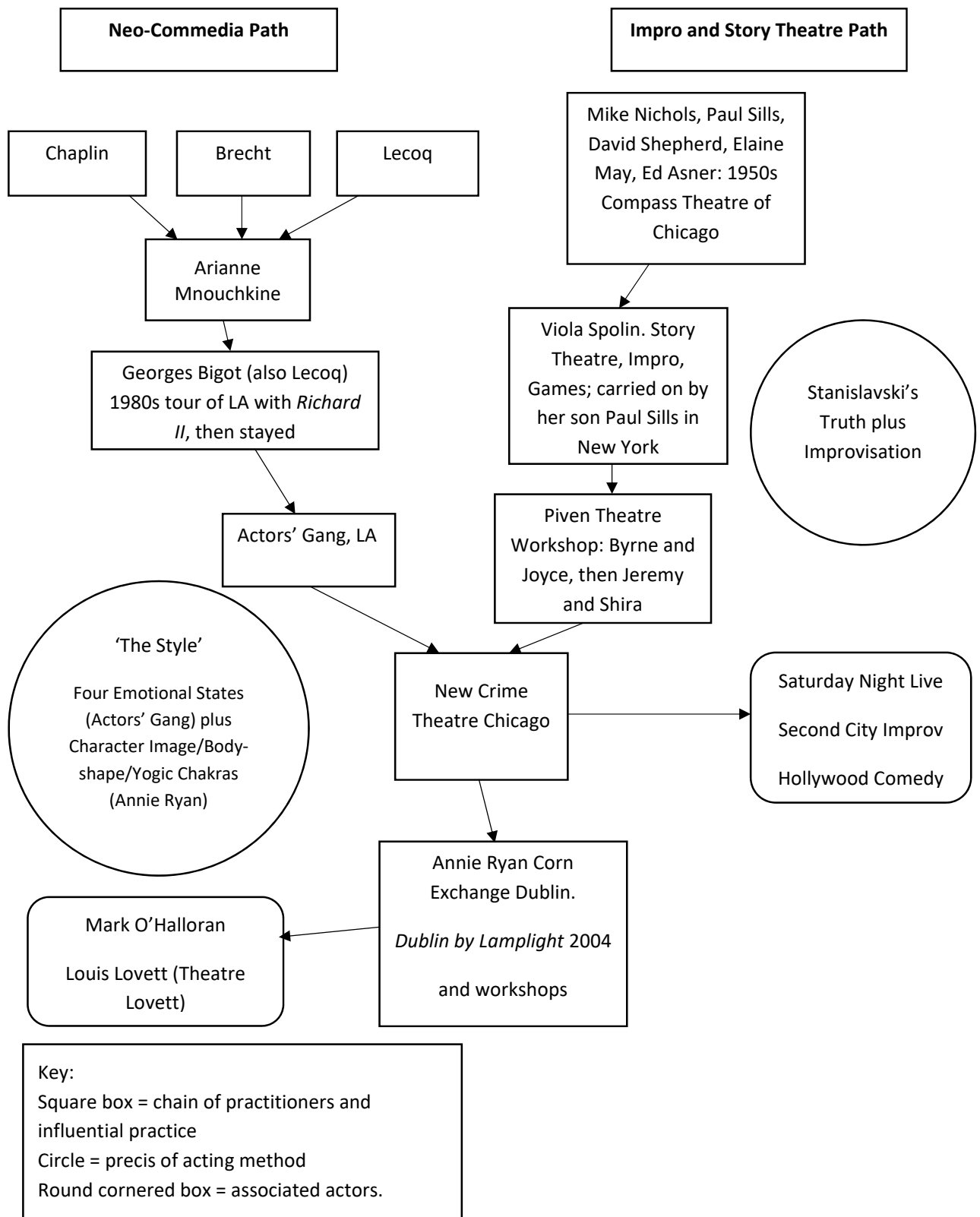


Figure 5.6 (ii): Diagram showing the convergence of influences that created Ryan's praxis.

Performance of 'the style' involves a separation of action and spoken word:

the way I see the style working is you find the emotional state and body shape, make a percussive gesture and then - boom - say the line. This is not normal theatre, but it is what story theatre does (Ryan, 2016, Appendix A: 320)

It is clear that in Ryan's practices she is following the path laid by other significant re-inventors: taking the myth of historical Commedia and inhabiting it with contemporary theatre skills and methods. Annie Ryan also notes that her style depends on instantaneous recognition of each role. Here she discusses actor training in workshops she runs, but also notes the tension between the Actors' Gang style and her evolving employment of it.

This is from the New Crime work: The key to finding an image is to know which character they are playing, and the really important thing is that we [the reader] have to know the moment they come out. I would argue that this, though a unique feature of commedia, doesn't make it different from method acting, or complements it. The audience needs to 'get' the type as soon as it appears, but we also have to get the emotional state it is in. 'The style' wants to take it into a really extreme place, but naturalism should be as strongly embodied as 'the style' (ibid: 311).

This statement further refines the idea of comic Gestus within Neo-Commedia, as a dramaturgic constant leading the audience to 'get' both the type and its emotional state. "Enter Pantalone, very happy" and the audience is immediately intrigued. The next thing that happens is we want to learn is why Pantalone is happy. Framed within what Keith Johnstone calls "the circle of expectation", the audience both wants and needs to know why Pantalone is happy. Within Stanislavskian terminology the 'image/Gestus' is the embodiment of physicalised given circumstances and intention. Ryan's critique of 'the style' is in its head-ward rush towards extremity in all its performed iterations, which often leads, according to her, towards incomprehensibility (ibid: 309). This tempered her approach to include an element of naturalism, deriving from her work with the Piven family workshop, and their method-based approach to the discovery of essential 'truth' in

performance for each actor. “The basis of the physical state work we are doing is coming from an analysis of the Stanislavski objectives” (ibid: 317). This approach mirrors Giovanni Poli’s statement that the stylisation and unrealistic presentation of Commedia movement, can only exist when supported by Stanislavskian method acting.

In her approach to the stock characters she introduces the idea of a hybrid (ibid: 311), with its main criterion being instant audience readability. Within her workshops she introduces the participants to the traditional types, and her hybrids. One of her new hybrids is, for example, the Diva.

The Diva is a hybrid, in that she is a little bit of a Pantalone, in that she looks as though she might have money (she doesn’t) and she is little bit of Columbina, whom in our version is more or less the Whore, and a little bit Dottore in that she is defined by work (ibid: 310).

And it is obvious that she has a clear picture of who the traditional types are now.

for us a doctor character can be anyone male or female who is utterly obsessed with the work they do. It could be any age any race any time any gender full stop, it just has to be someone who does not have the power but someone who is obsessed with what they do. I am looking at what is motivating that character from the inside (ibid: 317).

In terms of contemporising the historical types, she states that for her, re-gendering the roles, as a process, is an issue within her approach (ibid.). All she looks for is a truthful and stylised image that the actor can bring to life and that can be instantly ‘read’ by an audience. Her approach, though, is certainly tempered by her experience as a woman, working in the field of Commedia. In response to the card “to reflect on the roles of women in the historical past and contemporary society” she gave the following reply:

When I was in New Crime I came up with this character: a female scientist and I was told; No, the Dottore is not a woman. John Cusack said “No, a woman can’t play the doctor”. [For me] a woman can play absolutely anybody as long as the image works. If the image doesn’t work, it doesn’t work (ibid: 325).

Within her praxis, she positions the comprehension of a contemporary audience as the final (and only) arbiter of communicative success, rather than within a contemporary and historical patriarchy. An integral part of her acting process is finding the external manifestations, as represented by body shape, costume and, like *The Rude Mechanicals*, makeup. Once the actors have found these external indicators...

the commedia work becomes an analysis of the physical state of objectives... and we construct and explore those emotional states through building improvisations around them.... So they have very strong given circumstances... we... do a lot of work to make sure the image reads: and once they have the image and know who they are we can take them into really constructive improvisations.... Whatever is happening for your character today, let it be the best thing or the worst thing that could possibly be happening for them.... let all the choices that you are making be really extreme (ibid: 317).

This leads onto the process of choosing the best of these extreme improvisations, appropriately framed, to create the final performance. This is also in keeping with Antonio Fava's second formulation of improvisation (using it to create a performance). Although this may also be generic to other forms of devised theatre, this is still an identifiable mechanism and pattern that exists within Commedia's reinvention, by a variety of different practitioners.

Although Ryan ranked, within her own practice, themes reflecting political or social engagement, towards the lower end of her priorities,⁸⁰ the subject matter eventually chosen (in conjunction with the playwright Michael West) for the play *Dublin by Lamplight*

⁸⁰ Out of ten rankings, Rank 7 contained "Commedia is a tool to invite the audience to reflect on human nature, and who are the arseholes and who are the disempowered", and Rank 8 contained "To make theatre that reflects contemporary society or issues" and "To make them [the actor and their audience] socially and politically aware".

involved the birth of an Irish National Theatre, the visit of King George to Dublin, an attempt at regicide and the relationship between a Lady Gregory/Maud Gonne-like aristocratic patriot and her very W.B. Yeats-like protégé. Comically framed, this appears as a piece of Brechtian historical distancing, touching on very contemporary themes, such as the Irish historical and cultural relationship with England. These are themes with enough resonance to engage an audience, and the way they were delivered certainly entertained them. In addition to its first run, the play has had two revivals, the first in 2007 being an international tour, and the second in 2017 being a residency at the Abbey Theatre, where the play's events are set. Reviews were generally good, and most of them also made reference to Commedia dell'Arte:

What if the Abbey Theatre hadn't survived beyond its opening night? In this year of Irish cultural centenaries and celebrations, *The Corn Exchange* rewrites history and presents an alternative version of 1904, the year in which Joyce's *Ulysses* is set and the National Theatre was born.

Devised as an ensemble piece with director Annie Ryan, composer Conor Linehan and the company, Michael West's script brilliantly mixes fact and fiction, poetry and politics, creating a cracked mirror through which recognisable truths may be glimpsed.

With its staccato rhythms, and tension between control and revelation, Ryan's distinctive Commedia dell'Arte performance style is superbly matched in the first half to West's archly comic distortions.... the play roams widely and knowingly through the works of Wilde, Joyce, Yeats and O'Casey, while also including some real historical events. A playwright and his patrician muse - skewed versions of Yeats and Lady Gregory - attempt to stage a heroic play for the new "Irish national theatre of Ireland" with catastrophic results. This play-within-a-play is a gleeful pastiche of Yeats's mythological dramas, with O'Halloran perfectly pitched as a Wildean actor who can't tell the difference between revolutionary movements and theatrical performances.

(*The Guardian*, 5 November 2004: Helen Meany [rating it between four and a half and five out of five].)

But how does this lead up to Ryan's use of makeup as a mask alternative? All the information created in rehearsal; the physicalising of the given circumstances, gives us the image, and the makeup is the final touch, as a sign for the audience to read. Curiously enough, although the makeup design appears to be created for the main role each actor portrays, their physical acting in conjunction with their makeup, also works equally well with the minor characters they play. This could be an instance of makeup being employed as counter-mask.⁸¹



Figure 5.6 (iii): Examples of the exaggerated makeup employed by Annie Ryan's actors in *Dublin by Lamplight*, taken from advertising posters outside the Abbey Theatre, March 2017. They are of a far more detailed design than the Rude Mechanical Theatre-derived white-face.

The stylised makeup employed by the Actors' gang iteration of 'the style' is still employed by them now, though confined to their Prison Project Workshops (Actors' Gang, 2017: Internet).

⁸¹ Counter-mask is a description of the phenomena whereby a mask can be brought to life by its wearer not just by adopting the appropriate gestural range encoded within the mask's form, but also by adopting the opposite gestural range to the mask's form. By means of an actor adopting the counter to the mask the uncanny phenomena of a mask changing expression is achieved.



Figure 5.6 (iv): Photos from prison workshops by the Actors' Gang (2017: Internet).

Ryan's use of this level of makeup functions as would a mask-object. 'The style' has several fixed elements, which correspond with performance techniques associated with masks, and also with elements of Lecoq-derived physical style, as passed on by Georges Bigod. A mask works best when facing an audience, and within 'the style' an approximately similar state is referred to as 'having the food' ((Ryan, 2016, Appendix A: 311).

If you have the food, you have the audience's attention that's what we say. It is the same as having the focus, it is just a question of different terminologies (ibid.).

Jon Kellam, an Actors' Gang trained performer and student at Accademia Dell'Arte, noted that whichever actor has the food/focus has eye contact with the audience.

we learned this as "follow the food"... and the "food" is basically the focus, maintaining eye contact with the audience... when an actor has "the food" they have eye contact with the audience... they pass "the food" to another actor, which is basically passing the focus, and then this new actor has their eyes to the audience (Appendix A, 2017, Kellan: 2).

In terms of Lecoq terminology, this can also be referred to as "playing in major or minor", (Ryan, Appendix A, 2016: 322) though here the 'major' player is always in direct eye

contact with the audience. The need to pass the focus onstage, to move the audience's gaze from one significant item or action to the next, has resulted in Ryan developing a cinematic vocabulary to describe how to pass the food around.

We play with the idea of close up close up close up and then, and this is the work that I have been discovering in Dublin, then if the last person speaks or moves within a sequence of text, then everybody on stage can move. It goes close up ... Master shot or tracking shot. ... You can move the focus, in close-up, between actors and then when everybody moves in an instant you can move into a whole new space. The style operates very strongly in transforming the space not as an idea but in terms of a fixed reality within the audiences' mind... whoever has the food has the capacity to change the space. (ibid: 312–313).

One of the performance needs of comedy is to be able to move the audience's location around, and quickly if required, especially when 'the style' adopted eschews scenery for a plain backdrop. Directly reacting to the audience, if one has 'the food', brings the agency of 'prologue' or 'storyteller' into play, as well as that of dramatic action. The onstage actors are all narrating their own entrance into the dramatic action, so not only is Ryan playing to the dramatic strengths of her version of Commedia, but also to the ability of a storyteller or narrator to inform the audience of what or where the action is occurring. As there is no scenery to define the stage space, the audience works to assemble in their own mind the 'where'. The actor, operating in a non-naturalistic performance medium, can switch between performance modalities, in this case, between actor and narrator. A developing aesthetic definition of Commedia is that part of the performance experience is due to this multimodal performance construct, with the action split between different modes of audience address. Annie Ryan's style certainly fulfils this criterion.

Within both *The Rude Mechanicals* and *The Corn Exchange*, the function of the mask-object has been replaced with white-face, and operates, for the actor, in the same way a mask does: creating a readable (by the audience) comically-oriented gestic image that transmits social, narrative and emotional information to an audience in a matter of

seconds. Both these practitioners have created successful professional careers by evolving with the Commedia model and adapting it to suit their chosen audiences. Pete Talbot and the Mechanicals have their niche and are satisfied with full al fresco tours in the South of England. Annie Ryan is still evolving.⁸²

But I do think that the commedia style has a 1980s vibe that no longer does this [reflects contemporary society or issues]. If I went to Edinburgh and there was a Commedia Dell'Arte show.... I would not go. I think it had its time and I think it's usually important for training, but I don't know how to use it anymore as a director... It is to do with the aesthetic of it; any kind of mask or makeup is part of that aesthetic...

There is a movement over the past 10 years into a lot more post-dramatic work and technology, and the ability just to focus in on the face of someone, which some people would argue is the mask anyway. I am beginning to think why bother about the makeup or mask when you can see the face anyhow? It is still making all those transformations and it is still contemporary? All the things about commedia the masks, the Footlights, costumes don't seem to resonate like they used to in the 1980s.... I'm quite keen not to be in the club where commedia is (Ryan Appendix A, 2015: 324).

⁸² At the time of interview, she was directing Webster's *The White Devil*, invited by Emma Rice to put the show on in the Sam Wanamaker Theatre, part of the Globe Theatre Complex in London.

5.7 Masks Down Under: A Case Study

Italian Immigrants in Australia

Malcolm Knight argues that a mask is a manifestation of a culture and can also be used to reinforce or consolidate identity. Doppio Teatro,⁸³ performing in Adelaide in Australia in the 1980s and 1990s, worked both as a mainstream theatre company and within the expatriate immigrant Italian community. Corinna Di Niro, also performing in Adelaide very recently after their demise, notes the following:

They were foregrounding and performing this Neo-Commedia, and they were very entrenched in the local Italian community... and they performed in Italian as well... but when I started performing in 2005, I was told what I was doing was not commedia. It was always compared unfavourably with this Italian named company that were based effectively within the Italian community (Di Niro, 2016, Appendix A: 280).

Aside from professional rivalry between two companies, what might be the reason for this? It is possible that the Commedia performances of Teatro Doppio were seen by the local Italian community less as a performance to be appreciated simply as a performance, and more as a reminder of their own heritage and historical culture?

Within an Australian government-led programme of multi-cultural and community arts in the 1980s, Teatro Doppio's purpose, as defined by commentator Tony Mitchell, was as follows:

The idea behind Doppio Teatro is to underline the duality that exists here in Australia for many people who have two cultures within them - or rather, who have one culture of origin, plus their confrontation with the dominant culture, which is the common code we live by, the Anglo-Australian culture (Mitchell, 1992).

⁸³ Founded in 1983 by Teresa Crea and Christopher Bell, graduates in Italian and Theatre studies from Flinders University.

Maria Shevtsova identifies the company's work as negotiating the boundaries between the dominant Anglo-Australian culture, and a predominantly southern Italian immigrant population with a noted tendency to cultural stagnation and nostalgia, looking at "their difficulties of integrating into the Australian way of life without losing Italian cultural identity" (Shevtsova, 1993: 162). Part of the company's method involved exploring Italian performance traditions, especially Commedia dell'Arte (Mitchell, 1998: 133). It is interesting to note that the company called itself trilingual because they performed in English, Italian and an evolving Australian-Italian dialect the company called Emigrante (Mitchell, 1992: 71). The latter can be considered a recent iteration and a new formulation of Grammelot, as it is exclusively a language of performance.

A Commedia performance in the Italian language would function as a coded reminder of their geographically distant cultural origin, maybe achieving the status of a cultural icon. The performance would have been appreciated as both an example and a reminder of their own culture, and would have become, both aesthetically and culturally, a yardstick to judge any other subsequent Neo-Commedia performances by. I would suggest that these expatriate communities were privileging national historical memory as a prime avenue of receiving Teatro Doppio's performances.

This creates an issue when another iteration of Neo-Commedia appears, without the key identifying features embedded by Doppio Teatro's performances. Not performing in the style that this community came to regard as culturally authentic, and not in the language of the old country, would certainly appear wrong. Within such an artistic milieu, innovation is not encouraged as the prime avenue of the audience reception is concerned with an idealised and distant past, containing strong elements of nostalgia and vestigial patriotism. Its audience values a performance of this nature for a refusal to innovate. For the Italian immigrant community seeing a Doppio Commedia production was an act that affirmed their Italian ancestry. A contemporary take on Commedia, as performed by Di

Niro, would certainly work against the perception of Commedia being a fixed and comforting, yet geographically distant, cultural embodiment.

What Di Niro appears surprised by is the result of a deliberate programme of artistic support and cultural recognition for the Italian community. Her Commedia performance training was from Antonio Fava, who I note is a third year Lecoq alumnus. Dario Fo's critique of his old colleague Lecoq was that Lecoq thought of his movement system as being culture-neutral, whilst Fo's position was that all art, especially theatre, intrinsically manifests purpose, political engagement and cultural discourse. It is perhaps Di Niro's training in Commedia under Fava that positioned her, at that particular time, as an example of an artist whose practice foregrounded a learned style of Neo-Commedia, over a culturally negotiated, and therefore syncretic, one.

Van Beurden's comment relating to naming characters is also of relevance here: If one calls what one does Commedia dell'Arte, "It becomes a game of what people [the audience] know then... and people know different things" (Van Beurden, 2016, Appendix A: 206). Di Niro was unfortunately working against "what people know", and what their expectations were. In my own work with the Fabulous Old Spot Theatre Company, for example, we learned not to name our roles after their Italian counterparts or announce to the public that we performed Commedia dell'Arte. Once we had removed the culturally distancing effect of the Italian names and placed the Masks within a local context, the performative aspects operated without cultural or cognate preconceptions. Emphasising historical aspects, including traditional nomenclature, of Commedia dell'Arte within contemporary iterations of Neo-Commedia outside Italy, is therefore problematical. Dramaturgic analysis of a Mask allows us to see different layers of meaning and purpose within a wide definition of its employment, and to interrogate them independently. The artistic success enjoyed by Annie Ryan (Corn Exchange, Dublin) and Pete Talbot (Rude Mechanicals, Sussex) will indicate that such interrogation is vital.

Di Niro's PhD on Commedia focussed entirely on interrogating Antonio Fava's fourfold definition of Commedia with the aim of creating 'referentiality' (Fava 2004: 127; Di Niro, 2014: 3) with an audience, and whilst not disputing it, notes "it to be quite challenging to continuously research and experiment with ways to adhere to Fava's (2004) framework" (Di Niro, 2014: 159), though her thesis contains no frame of enquiry to examine the acculturation of Commedia. Without attempting to give the Masks a sense of present place, historical position or geography, the performance will have relied on an incomplete set of dramaturgic strengths. An uncritical acceptance of Commedia's 'universal' appeal (ibid: 158) again leads to a similar destination. Malcolm Knight's position that a mask, in the anthropological sense, is a representation of a culture, also sheds light on this problem: there are steps that could have been taken with the plastic form or mask nomenclature to find equivalent positions within a contemporary Australian culture. Accepting at face value that a mask from one culture will do the same work in another is problematic. Part of the solution to Di Niro's difficulties can be found in one of the two Australian Commedia self-help manuals that exist: *Commedia Oz* (2008), by Steven Gration and Nicky Peelgrane, contains lists of Australian contemporary equivalents to all the traditional Masks. The authors, working within secondary education, understood their pupils needed contemporary frames of reference to aid their understanding.

5.8 Makers and Coders

The information coded within the plastic form of a Commedia Mask is, according to Stefano Perocco⁸⁴ of the Sartori School, focussed on the role, the animal and the devil. Den Durnand's⁸⁵ masks, as used by Hotel Courage, tend to focus on an element (earth, air, fire, water) rather than animal, but still have the same aim: to show social class and power (the role), a way to move (animal or element) and an urge to mischief, anti-social or taboo behaviour (the devil). Within these guidelines the wearer can show a great range and variation in their performance. The frisson an audience member may feel when an 'alive' mask appears before them is due to a combination of the skill of the wearer to perform it, and the skill of the mask-maker to make it.

John Finbarr Ryan says that the one person he encountered who knew most about Commedia was Donato Sartori, a mask-maker and son of Amleto Sartori.

He was not a commedia teacher, he was a mask maker, but he knew more about commedia than anyone else I have ever met. (J. F. Ryan, 2016, Appendix A: 342)

This should not be surprising to us: if a mask-maker is creating an object that is to represent a finite set of highly specific qualities for an actor to perform with, he not only has to know what those qualities are, but how they can be manifested in plastic and physical form. This is a different and much deeper order of information that an actor requires, and a mask-maker has to code the matrix with the necessary information before an actor can use it. A mask-maker needs to understand the material characteristics and social history of the mask they are making. A director, trainer or actor merely needs to interpret what the mask-maker has created. John Finbarr Ryan is very clear about this:

When you have to make a Zanni mask or a Capitano mask, you have to know a lot about what that representation is. If [sic] you

⁸⁴ <http://www.lescreateursdemasques.fr/wp/membres/stefano-perocco-di-meduna/>

⁸⁵ <http://www.manifestopoetico.com/>

teach the commedia masks in a biographical form, explaining about the history of each character, that is enough for an actor in order to play the role, but that is not enough for a mask maker... what codes does this character have, what history does it have, what is the human side what is the animal side, what is the spiritual side, does he have a status, does he have an underworld, does he have an over-world? You have to know all these things and to be able to put them together, so you can concretise these ideas. If you do not have all this information you can probably make a caricature mask, but you certainly could not make an archetypal [Commedia] mask (J. F. Ryan, 2016, Appendix A: 342–343)

It is arguably the skill of its mask-makers that unlocked the survival of Neo-Commedia. J. F. Ryan is stating a somewhat forgotten truism that a mask is a created object and created for a particular purpose. Without the skill of its mask-makers to code the required characteristics within the mask-object Neo-Commedia would be very different genre. Annie Ryan and Talbot both see the value of the masks, but reacted against them for cultural and artistic reasons, and when Strehler experimented with painted masks in the first iterations of Goldoni's play, (Piccolo Teatro Archive, 2000: Internet) it was the start of a long exploration.

5.9 Conclusions: Mask Dramaturgy Unmasked

The works and perspectives analysed here suggest that Commedia masks are read through the following ten levels. Masked roles are, or can be purposed to be:

1. Read relationally to the unmasked roles and possessing separate agency, which, when combined, forms a holistic system designed to deliver comically purposed constructed meaning (5.1).
2. Read through a sense of 'sharing', rather than 'performing', in which the mask-object itself has shared agency with its wearer, leading to a sense of 'auratic difference' (5.2).
3. Triggers for an increased peak-shift neurological response, as explained by Cook/Ramachandran, creating a sense of heightened interest in the mask (5.3).
4. Read through mechanisms of believability and empathy, rather than realism (5.4).
5. Stripped of their historical and acculturated meaning and repurposed to embody contemporary stories (5.5).
6. A cultural barrier to the immediate communicability required by the comic medium (5.6).
7. Potentially replaceable by performers with culturally attuned stylised makeup (5.6).
8. An archetype performed within a social role, denoting a fixed position on a spectrum between emotional and economic control and vulnerability (5.6).
9. Culturally embedded through purposed national historical memory and recognition, operating as symbol of a culture or specific aspects of that culture (5.7, see also Section 6).
10. Sculptural facial coverings within which are coded social position and class, anthropomorphic or elemental characteristics, specific ways of moving and the urge

to mischief, pre-social or taboo behaviour, all of which are available to the wearer as mechanisms of performance (5.8).

The two significant areas of discourse identified in this section are, firstly, the cultural relevance and application of the information coded within a mask, which is then framed by the second area, which covers the mechanisms of how masks are read. What unfolds is a recognition that hitherto unrecognised processes within the genre now act as the theoretical underpinning to performance practices previously regarded as pragmatic or phenomenological. The 'uncanny' performed mask contains unique characteristics that differentiate its reception from that of an unmasked character. It also manifests as a culturally embedded fixed social type, engenders a higher than normal peak-shift response, is empathetic to the audience through cartoon-like believability and performs the mechanisms of sharing. It is this last characteristic that creates the platform for the meta-theatrical aspects of the genre.

Within a Neo-Commedia scenario, the performed Mask has a further existence as an agent of story or plot. It exists within the dramatic fiction of the story arc and is therefore present within the world of make-believe and 'magic if', and yet through the facilitation of 'sharing' also exists in the immediate world of the audience. Its ability to have simultaneous presence in both worlds is highly significant. This may, in future, also become a tool for examining the historical dramaturgy of Commedia dell'Arte. A Mask's capacity to move between and co-exist within these modes allows an event in one world to become mediated by the other: a fictional event manifesting the Mask's social and cultural position, from either end of the power spectrum, can be directly commented on or performed as a sharing with the audience. This has the effect of creating two separate modes of temporality within Neo-Commedia: The story arc and plot exists in fictional and dramatic time, whilst the mask shares the passage of time experienced by the audience. Amongst the characteristics attributed to Masks, commenting and mediating upon the actions of the

plot appears significant; as a consequence of this one can assign the agency of plot to the unmasked roles. It is within the performance modalities that distinguish an unmasked role and a masked servant, for example, that the politics and ideologies of inequality can be comically performed. This quality of the masked roles enables them to have an independent existence outside the time frame of the plot, and by extension allows them to exist in others, that Bakhtin called 'surplus' (Bakhtin & Holquist, 1981: 36, and quoted by McCaw, 2016: 45)⁸⁶.

This relationship between direct address and performed narrative creates a position whereby multimodal address is an intrinsic quality of Neo-Commedia. My typology of Performative Liminality (Crick: 2017) becomes applicable to the genre, as a way of identifying the dramaturgic strengths of each separate mode of audience address. The founders of Neo-Commedia, being geographically based in Italy, created performance in the knowledge that the masked roles were part of a shared cultural history (point 9 above). For them, the Commedia masks were cultural 'knowns', yet contemporaneously unexplored dramatically. Their explorations fulfil Knight's declaration that innovation happens within a tradition and Van Beurden's praxis also demonstrates that innovation can occur within a performative frame, as well as a cultural one. The end results, however, appear to focus round the conclusion that the Masks' performative strength originates from embodying specific localities, through deployment of the different modalities associated with the masked and unmasked roles.

⁸⁶ "Popular Masks – Maccus, Pulcinello, Harlequin, are able to assume any kind of destiny and can figure into any situation... but they cannot exhaust their possibilities by those situations alone; they always retain, in any situation and any destiny, a happy surplus of their own" (ibid.)

6 Fixed Types and Stock Roles

This section concentrates on the generic agency of Commedia Masks, rather than their individual characteristics, the focus of most attention in contemporary workshops in Neo-Commedia acting. This emphasis reflects a concern to address a gap in dramaturgically relevant information that can be extracted from Renaissance sources, and then rigorously adapted or translated for contemporary use. Thus, I focus on cultural purpose and dramaturgy which, ultimately, creates the story arc in which Masks find space and license to perform, and I confine descriptions of individual Masks to Appendix D in the societal spectrum diagrams. The embodied qualities within the fixed types is constructed from power relationships, position in the social order, geographical placement and social standing. Their performative employment of these qualities will always be therefore, at the very least, intrinsically political, but this quality can be repurposed by the artist to that of entertainment, ideology or metaphysics (see table3.6).

6.1 Commedia dell'Arte: The Masks as Embodied Locality

Within historical Commedia dell'Arte a key characteristic of the stock characters or Masks is their origin within geographically distinct areas. Whilst demonstrating distinctive individual identities, these can be classified into three categories: Vecchio (the Old Men), Innamorati (the Lovers) and the Zanni (the Servants), all with separate and distinctive dramatic functions, each category containing multiple occupants. In a category all of his own, however, stands the Mask of Il Capitano (the Captain), with a twofold dramatic function: representing both the societal outsider or invader, and the professional military. These classifications were used by the performers themselves as well as their audiences, from the time of the first troupes in the 1550s (Richards and Richards, 2011: 106), and have

generally been kept to and accepted by scholars from Kathleen Lea (1934, reprinted 1962) and Winifred Smith (1964) onwards.

The range of these categories, and also the variations within the categories, with which we can differentiate the Masks from each other are as follows:

- Social class and position in the social hierarchy;
- Individual attitude to life;
- Dress or costume;
- Whether the role is masked or unmasked;
- Language or dialect.

Each area of Northern Italy has a representative seated at the table in the 'set' of Commedia dell'Arte roles. This phenomenon is clearer to observe within the Northern Italian manifestation of Commedia, and although it also exists within the southern style the tendency there is for the Masks to originate within the immediate environment of Naples. Both northern and southern iterations also include Il Capitano, more often than not as the invading Spanish Miles Gloriosus.

Erith Jaffe-Berg draws attention to the presence of a wider range of nationalities as minor roles and plot devices within the drama, and convincingly demonstrates their function as being to present the Commedia performance within a contemporaneous web of trade routes to and through Northern Italy (Jaffe-Berg, 2016: 111–119). This recent addition to the canon of Commedia scholarship suggests a dramaturgy in which the Masks represent specific localities, but are now framed in a wider geopolitical context, that of the whole Mediterranean. The dramaturgic frame for Commedia dell'Arte is certainly not composed of merely local events. In terms of a contemporary iteration, this would translate as having a majority of roles representing the dominant culture and locality of the

audience, but also several roles representing a wider world: local concerns set within an expanded frame of reference.

The distinctive performed roles that developed within these categories survived for two hundred years within European theatre. Richards and Richards (2011: 106) note that by the 1560s a troupe typically contained:

a balance of masked and unmasked character types... two *vecchi*, or old men – Pantalone (also known as Magnifico), Gratiano [The Doctor].... Two *Zanni* or comic servants, Arlecchino, Brighella etc... Two pairs of lovers; a *Servetta* [Columbina], or servant maid, a Capitano, or Captain, and assorted walk-ons.

In Goldoni's *Il Servatore di due Padroni* (1746), with the exception of the Captain, the roles are all still present. By 1800 in England the second Zanni role had been taken over by Joey Grimaldi and renamed Clown (Stott, 2009: 224–225), performing with a Pantaloon, a Columbine (*Servetta* role) and a Harlequin.

Such was their dramatic strength that the roles were able to develop from being highly localised social and cultural manifestations of geographical difference, to possessing European-wide theatrical fame and notoriety.⁸⁷ It is impossible at this historical distance to state with certainty what the precise dramatic nature of this comically-embodied, socially-aware regionalism was, but here I will present a range of likely performative relationships and dramatic possibilities based on this regionalism.

A spectrum exists from a position where each Mask positively represents each region and its way of life, to that where the Mask is seen as an embodiment of all that is

⁸⁷ The same roles were recognizable on stage throughout this time frame. Role specific names such as Pantalone, Isabella, The Doctor, Columbina, Brighella and Harlequin were used from the time of the Gelosi troupe in the 1560s; in Marivaux's plays in France (1688–1763) and in many of Carlo Goldoni's plays in Venice (1707–1793); and were introduced into England in the 1730s, helping to bring into existence the British seasonal theatrical pantomime, a phenomena which is still thriving today.

ridiculous about that particular region. Further possibilities are opened up by the fact that dramaturgically it is possible to present both views simultaneously on stage: that a Mask standing up for his or her embodied region takes themselves very seriously but is seen as ridiculous and worthy of laughter or mockery by the other Masks or audience. Linguistic scholar Marvin Carlson, quoting from Jerry Blunt's introduction to his book on stage dialects affirms that: "A stage dialect is a normal dialect altered to the requirements of theatrical clarity and dramatic presentation" (Carlson, 2009: 11). He frames this comment within Roy Harris' definition of "integrational linguistics" as coined in his book *The Language Myth* (1982) précising it thus: "this approach stresses the improvisatory and indeterminate nature of every speech act" and follows it with a direct quote from Harris "language is continuously created by the interaction of individuals in specific communication situations" (Carlson, 2009: 2–3).

Applying these formulations to the context of regionally accented dramatic roles in Commedia dell'Arte, suggests that the language spoken by each Mask, therefore, was not the pure dialect of the region, but a performatively comic version. A conscious theatrical remodelling of the original's accent, rhythm and lexis, seems highly probably. A performer would alter the verbal delivery of a routine or slice of the overall story arc to suit each regional audience and do so even more when faced with comprehensibility issues caused by historically extreme variations within and between dialects. Given that a performer's skill base is likely to include the ability to respond to different levels of engagement and sympathy, depending on location, this variation in delivery can be seen as one part of the matrix that may have made up Commedia improvisation. As one method used to overcome this comprehensibility shortfall it is not surprising that Commedia also adopted a highly visual and gestural means of communication, in tandem with the regionally focused spoken voice. Dramaturgically these regional voices were being consciously altered in the moment of performance (being analogous to Harris' conception of a speech act) to cope

with, not only the existential second to second unfolding of a performance, but how they felt they would best entertain and respond to a variety of different regional audiences. I am suggesting here that this regionally embodied live performance process became an integral part of the developing model of professional comic theatre known as Commedia dell'Arte. From my own experience as a street-performer and Neo-Commedia actor, working both in England and abroad, the act of altering the delivery of a phrase, gesture or similar cluster of meaning to aid a particular audience's understanding of crux moments within a story arc, as a pre-planned or instinctive intervention, is necessary, and with experience becomes a skill. When this skilful deviation from a pre-planned script is primarily vocal it fulfils the criteria proposed by Blunt and Carlson.

Taking ridiculous positions very seriously is, arguably, one of the most effective performative agencies of good comedy, so assuming that the performers were trying to squeeze every audience pleasing performative possibility from the characteristics of their roles, it is not at all unreasonable to assume that the aural and tonal possibilities of each role, (expressed as regional dialect, accent, metre, pitch, tone and song) were also pushed towards comic and even grotesque extremes. If, in performance, one pushes the actor's voices to the same extremes as Giovanni Poli did with his actor's bodies⁸⁸ (Poli, 1957: Internet), then aesthetically we are moving towards extremes of vocal stylisation. It may be as one aspect of this stylisation that accents were parodied, and distinctive sounds emphasised for comic or dramatic effect, but that can never be conclusively proven. Poli's own sonic stylisations, within his Neo-Commedia practice, though tending towards the choric and the poetic (Poli, 1957: Internet), also made use of the wide variations in dialect

⁸⁸ Basing his experiments on the drawings by Jacques Callot in *Lo Balli di Sfessania* (Callot & Daniel, 1623, reprinted 1975: 104–127).

present within spoken Northern Italian⁸⁹. It certainly appears that regional accents, however purposed or theatrically manifested, are an integral part of the Commedia dell'Arte matrix. It should follow, therefore, that, when approaching an analysis or aesthetic definition of the dramaturgy of Neo-Commedia, a Mask's regional dialect, (and the implied meaning thereof in each geographically distinct audience) and its attendant functions should be considered of great importance.

What does exist in the period immediately before the golden age of Commedia, evidencing use of conscious dialect, literary and sonic experiments, are the monologues and plays of the Paduan playwright and comic performer Angelo Beolco (1494–1542), whose stage name was Il Ruzante.⁹⁰ Ruzante scholars Nancy Dersofi (1978), Linda Carroll (1990) and Ronnie Ferguson (1996) all agree that Beolco's use of stage dialects is skilful, deliberate and directly relates to both the purpose of each of his comedies and the geographical placing and social position of each role. This is, again, one of the key characteristics of Commedia dell'Arte. Beolco demonstrates written versions of peasant Paduan accents in *La Moschetta* and *Parlamento de Ruzante* (1530s); adds both Venetian and Bergamask to *Bilora* (1530s); and then refined Tuscan to *L'Anconitana* (contested date, 1522–1534). The vocabulary he employs is very rich in dialect, which makes finding contemporary cultural equivalents to the words he does employ, as well as adding their embodied geographical location and its relationship to power and social relationships, a major challenge for translators: Nancy Dersofi wrote a paper simply on the problems of translating his oaths and vulgar peasant colloquialisms (Dersofi, 1996: Internet). Even Ronnie Ferguson, (currently compiling a Renaissance Italian dialect dictionary) in his

⁸⁹ In the 1973 printed edition of his Neo-Commedia play *La Commedia Degli Zanni* pages 87–97 are a dialect glossary, considered necessary even for Italian readership. This features Spanish interpolations, as well as words specific to regional dialects from Bologna, Bergamo and Venice.

⁹⁰ Linda Carroll, of the University of Tulane, who has published many times on Angelo Beolco, consistently uses the single 'z' spelling for his name, though he is also referred to as Il Ruzzante. In the pursuit of uniformity, I adopt her choice of spelling.

translation of *Parlamento de Ruzante* evades the implicit issue of regional specificity and chooses to translate the text to a regionally non-specific general English vernacular (Ferguson, 1996: 66).

It is precisely because regional dialects and idiolects are so rich and distinctive that Ruzante has consistently challenged translators. It is this issue which indicates further that a major aesthetic feature of Commedia dell'Arte, derived or learned from its predecessor Ruzante, is the strong divergence in spoken dialect between the Masks. Winifred Smith notes that Giambattista Andreini, the actor son of Isabella Andreini, "believed in the use of dialect as a method of characterization as well as for humorous appeal" (Smith, 1968: 103).

Ultimately the question of whether a Mask or role is held in comic contempt or esteem by the audience may be (or was) decided by the somewhat intangible factors of location and plot: that of which the audience is comprised, where (geographically) a particular performance occurs, and the role of the Mask within a particularly purposed plot line or story structure. Although there is, therefore, a high degree of overall fluidity in how an audience may react to this regional aspect of a Commedia Mask, what is clear is that they did react. Crohn Schmitt (2014: 47–51) notes the antipathy of the bourgeois roles (largely Venetian) in Flaminio Scala's scenarios (published on his retirement from the stage in 1611) to the servants, largely peasants from the Veneto or from the town of Bergamo. Scala's scenarios' dramatisation of the servant the underclass, according to Crohn Schmitt, is a world away from the cheeky successful servants of a more populist conception of Commedia: they are treated as the bourgeois audiences Scala was selling his book to would have treated their servants. The aural and tonal landscape of Commedia dell'Arte and, by forward extrapolation, of Neo-Commedia too, requires great dialect or lingual contrasts between the Masks. Consequently, I suggest strongly that whether the performance purposes a positive or a comically reductive model of each region, the performative accent

stays. It is an intrinsic part of the historical dramaturgy and needs to be considered as part of the Neo-Commedia frame.



Figure 6.1: The geographical proximity of the four significant areas in Northern Italy from where the Masks originated: The Lovers came from Turin, Pantalone from Venice, the Doctor from Bologna and the Zannis from Bergamo and the Po Valley, stretching from the Adriatic coast south of Venice inland as far as Turin.

6.2 Masks as Embodied Positions of Power

The relationship between Masks and an audience, in terms of performed class and power, elicits patterns of sympathetic identification with audience members of the same social class as the performed Masks. In addition, Masks invite potential patterns of antipathy or mistrust with audience members of a different class, acting as an extra layer of perception to the issues of regionality as discussed above. In dramaturgic terms, the Masks exist in a hierarchy or pecking order, with those higher up having ownership, influence or control over those lower down. This hierarchy is expressed in the chart below.

Table 6.2: The performative social hierarchy of the Masks, or roles, in Commedia dell'Arte.

Name of Role	Renaissance Social Class Represented
Magnifico	Professional Ruling Classes
First Actress, Isabella	Aristocracy
First Actor, Orazio	Aristocracy
Pantalone	Mercantile Bourgeoisie
Il Dottore	Academic Bourgeoisie
Second Actor, Silvio	Unmarried and dependent child of the Bourgeoisie
Second Actress, Clarice	Unmarried and dependent child of the Bourgeoisie
The Spanish Captain	Professional military or mercenary operating away from their country of origin
1 st Servant, Brighella	Professional servant from the working classes who has hit the glass ceiling, long-term resident in the city
Columbina	Working class servant, long-term resident in the city
2 nd Servant, Harlequin	Working class servant, recent arrival in the city
3 rd Zanni (named in text as "Zanni")	Recent immigrant, from rural working classes or abroad

The performative hierarchy of the Commedia dell'Arte not only reflected actual societal positions, but also the way actors positioned themselves in relation to the Northern Italian aristocracy: the relationship between the aristocracy and the early troupes being crucial to their continuing existence. Professional troupes, especially those with women as performers, were seen by the Italian church authorities as a threat to one's immortal soul. Their performances and living habits were said to encourage attitudes of lasciviousness and debauchery in audiences. Matt Cawson makes a case that Commedia dell'Arte as a form operated as a performative antithesis to the Catholic church's entrenched stance on anti-corporealism, which he describes as "the rejection of the body in favour of the mind or soul" (Cawson, 2013: 27). Commedia dell'Arte's emphasis on corporality, virtuosity in performance (Cawson, 2013: 26) and the presence of women on stage, together with its neo-classical underpinning, structurally, educationally and thematically, also made it a performative embodiment of humanism. It was positioned, therefore, as a vehicle that was seen not only as being in opposition to the church's stance on public morality, but also as an embodiment of humanistic challenge to the church's philosophy. Why did the church not take more action against actors? I suggest that the answer is because of aristocratic artistic patronage and its concomitant physical protection. Collections of letters between actors and patrons survive indicating the close relationship between the two groups. In 1968 Winfred Smith, almost as an afterthought to her 1964 study of Commedia dell'Arte, published an English language collection and commentary of correspondence she thought significant.

As this relationship between the aristocratic patrons and the Commedia troupes was of vital importance to the both the physical and financial survival of the troupes, it is a reasonable supposition to say that the Innamorati roles were held up to less comic ridicule than the Zanni or Vecchio roles might be. There are too many identifying signs that link these roles with the aristocracy, including an 'educated' Tuscan accent and costume, for

biting the hand that feeds to be considered a prudent business decision. These roles embodied both the social class and the educated accents of their patrons and became, with the Commedia dell'Arte frame, the chief embodiment of humanism's exploration of *virtu*.

6.3 Neo-Commedia Dramaturgy: Experiments, Developments and Conclusions Within Different Regions

The dramatic purpose of both the encoded regionality and social class within a Mask, allowed the role to be instantly recognised by an Italian audience the moment it stepped on stage. The question is what happens when one recreates the roles outside Italy in the twenty-first century. As I have argued, the historical Masks depended to a large extent upon an audience instantly and viscerally understanding each role. It is, therefore, unlikely that these Italian patterns and interconnectedness would travel well. An observer outside Northern Italy simply would not be in possession of the necessary cultural capital (Bourdieu: 1986⁹¹). What does the name *Pantalone di Bisognosi*, for example, conjure to a contemporary English audience member? A non-Italian should be able to grasp intellectually, from the material circumstances within a performance, hopefully, that he is a merchant, a Venetian and a less than caring parent, but would not understand or viscerally react to any of the implied local references and comically framed performed differences. For contemporary performance, therefore, a strategy is required to embed, adapt or adopt the Masks within a different regional and cultural ecosystem.

In updating or modifying these Renaissance types for performance today I am obliged to question what the key defining qualities of a Commedia Mask are. As the traditional names and their original cultural associations are simply not known or embodied in the UK, what shift or alteration in the paradigm is required to remove this unwelcome barrier to communication? Part of the underlying motivation behind my research is to see if Commedia can establish embedded cultural roots in areas other than Italy.

⁹¹ <https://www.marxists.org/reference/subject/philosophy/works/fr/bourdieu-forms-capital.htm>.

In suggesting solutions to the above, I will concentrate on the following: my practice with the Fabulous Old Spot Theatre Company (2004 to 2012) and its relationship to Gramsci's attitude to folklore; a discussion of Brecht's formulation of Gestus; the relationship between roles in the societal hierarchy both within the Renaissance and the present; and a comparison with Levi-Strauss' structuralist analysis of Haida mask. Between these approaches I aim to create a dramaturgic context for how one may understand, identify and then contemporise and employ the stock Masks of the Commedia. The contemporising is relevant to conceptualising both the entertainment model and the parable model of Neo-Commedia which I propose as dramaturgic paradigms.

6.4 Top-down Translocation and The Fabulous Old Spot Theatre Company: A Case Study

My starting point was that the Italianate names of the roles act as a barrier, not an aid, to communication with audiences in the UK, as they carry with them no web of embedded local and cultural associations. This negates one of the main strengths of Commedia: having at its disposal a range of instantly recognisable types. A solution to this conundrum was developed within my former company: the Gloucestershire-based Fabulous Old Spot Theatre Company (2004 to 2012). In 2004 Sue Colverd of The Cheltenham Everyman Theatre asked if I could create a Commedia show for the yearly Everyman's village hall tour. This introduced me to the world and practice of UK rural touring.

Rural touring, to précis the Arts Council of England (Midgley, 2006), has as its aim bringing high quality arts events to regions of the UK that are geographically distant from recognised centres of arts provision. This is managed by several regional bodies co-ordinated by the National Rural Touring Forum.⁹² Acts chosen, whether from dance, theatre or music, have to be able both to fit into the venues available, generally village halls and community centres, and provide high quality performances that are suitable for a wide spectrum of tastes, ages and experience of artistic events.⁹³ We were being asked to create a Commedia show to fulfil the above criteria, within the particular culture of Gloucestershire. As one of the theorised historical strengths of the Commedia dell'Arte was that it was adaptable enough to be successful with different audience demographics, it was a chance to test out how and why this could be possible.

⁹² <http://www.ruraltouring.org/>

⁹³ More information supporting ACE's focus on rural touring can be found in *A New Rural Agenda*, edited by Jane Midgely in 2006 published by the Institute of Public Policy research, and the 2004 report on Arts touring and rural communities entitled *Only Connect*, by Francois Matarosso and published by Comedia.

How we could adapt the Commedia frame specifically for Gloucestershire became the question. As Pantalone is the central figure and driving force within most historical scenarios (a moneyed parent with a high regard of his own social position), was there an equivalent role within a rural English landscape? Could the role's patriarchal agency and web of dependents and antagonists be relocated in Gloucestershire? It was understood, after discussions with the Everyman, that the specific nature of the commission was to keep to the historical look of Commedia, emphasise its comic strengths and focus on creating a style of theatre that had inclusive appeal.

What if Pantalone was no longer a merchant, but a rural landowner and farmer? The avarice and tight-fisted nature of the original fitted this new incarnation perfectly, as did his tendency to try and make money, or come out on top of every encounter with his social inferiors. In my dealings with local farmers they always saw themselves at the top of every local hierarchy, complained about constant poverty yet holidayed regularly in Florida whilst running the family car on red diesel.⁹⁴ This was certainly the right mix of social superiority and loose attitude to financial regulation. We hazarded a guess that our Mask might live in Berkeley Vale, a region of rich mixed agriculture. Immediately the role had a location, an accent and attitude developed. To this I added the surname Dallymore, a local name, and, thus equipped, the character was given the traditional mask of Pantalone to wear. The liberating physical and performative attributes associated with a mask in conjunction with the local detailing functioned as we had hoped. The Mask's accent, costume, employment and overall attitude gave us a pivotal figure around which to build our anglicised version of Neo-Commedia. The enabling consequences of this early decision

⁹⁴ Red diesel being the name for diesel fuel intended solely for agricultural machinery and carrying with it a large government subsidy. It is named after the dye put in it, intended to stop its use for non-agricultural vehicles. Fines are payable for its improper use; however most social vehicles operated by the immediate farming community tend to be run on red diesel and classified as for farm use. This information struck me as the kind of penny-pinching and technically illegal behaviour typical of the Pantalone mind-set.

impacted positively, along with other factors, on collected audience feedback (Old Spot Website, "reviews", 2012: Internet)



Figure 6.4: Actor Steven DeProost as Titus Dallymore in the Fabulous Old Spot Theatre's 2004 show, *Hot Crackling*.

For the actor, having these key pieces of information available on their own doorstep (age, social position, a local name, where he lived, how he spoke and what his predominant attitude was) freed them from the lengthy research process which would have been involved in a performance of a Renaissance Italian social type and allowed them to inhabit the character and improvise in rehearsal almost immediately. The people we were populating our shows with were all around us: we only had to go out of our rehearsal room and talk to local people. In rehearsal and in performance this allowed the Mask, and the actor behind it, to begin to improvise dialogue more easily and with dramatic purpose. The relocated role not only was instantly recognisable by an audience, but also the information required to create that role was easily accessible to an actor.

Now we had the main player in place, to whom, we asked, did he look up and on whom did he look down? With him as our starting point a web of other translocated Masks came into being very quickly, all with their own social position and geographical location

within Gloucestershire. The Zanni roles became agricultural labourers, reluctantly working for Farmer Dallymore, and Brighella (the First Zanni) became a local innkeeper, forever frustrated at not being able to outsmart his richer and slyer neighbour. The role of Second Female Lover, traditionally Pantalone's daughter, now achieved a more rustic flavour than her Tuscan ancestor. For the First Actor and First Actress, we created local aristocracy: The Duke of Berkeley (a real title) and the Duchess of Bibury (a fictitious title). The role of the Second Actor we called Jack, as we were in England, and in keeping with both a historicised and folkloric view of the past, he immediately became an orphan seeking his fortune.

I chose the term 'folkloric' here to convey attributes pertaining to a received Gloucestershire oral history and culture. Placing the Masks in a specific new location, the county the actors and I lived in, suddenly opened up a wealth of local attributes that, both in rehearsal and in performance, gradually attached themselves to the Masks. When journeys occurred within the drama, the Masks travelled between places that were familiar to our audiences. We avoided temporal anachronisms but were able to freely refer to and employ local places within the plays, which had the effect of making the audience believe that our stories may have occurred in the lanes and streets where they now lived. This created a palpable connection between performance and audience. Although we deliberately set our plays in a fictitious historical past, in the audience's minds we were clearly seen to be performing some embodiment of where they lived. A running gag inserted about the worst place in our dramatised and fictitious Gloucestershire to bring up a baby, for example, produced a wide range of cognate suggestions from the audience relating to contemporary and very real equivalents. Similarly, the line in one show "We don't mind strangers moving in; it stops us marrying our cousins" (a genuine welcome offered by a farmer when I moved into a small rural village) produced the odd side effect, during one rural tour, of being told *sotto voce* after shows by audience members, which other villages close-by did have married cousins.

Gramsci's position on folklore is useful here as a way of describing our then ideological position as a company. Gramsci defines the promotion of a folkloric culture⁹⁵ as one example of the working classes' failure to act against the cultural manifestation of hegemony, in that it maintains a status quo in terms of economic, social and power relationships, and is an idealisation of the past as distinct from being a challenge to the future. As a start-up company we were taking as few risks as possible and positioned ourselves first and foremost as bringers of family entertainment for all ages: "theatre from the merrie England that never was". After negotiating with many village hall bookers, and conversations with the Everyman theatre's publicity team, for our first tour we came to the conclusion that telling village hall bookers what we did was *Commedia dell'Arte* was "a marketing kiss of death".⁹⁶ My knowledge of *Commedia*, from a pedagogic point of view, was not the same as theirs. The bookers' understanding of the term ranged from Art-Deco Pierrot, to improvised comedy, to bawdy adult farce, to mime, to having no knowledge at all and being suspicious of the Italianate connotations of the term. Unless we were booking a show in to a drama department or school, as a business decision, it was clear we should never use the term.

Although our visual historical aesthetic created an initial impression of a costume drama, our comic style proved popular. An audience member, after a show, furnished us with a comment that seemed to sum up our aims: "you guys are like Shakespeare, but funny".⁹⁷ Most audience comments seemed to by-pass the historical associations, and focus on the entertainment (Old Spot Website, reviews, 2012: Internet).

⁹⁵ "The discovery that the relations between the social and natural orders are mediated by work, by man's theoretical and practical activity, creates the first elements of an intuition of the world, free from all magic and superstition" (Gramsci, 1992 [1971]: 34).

⁹⁶ Quotation from a company self-evaluation report, retrieved from the Arts Council of England under a Freedom of Information request on 03/10/2016.

⁹⁷ All audience comments, feedback forms and archival documents relating to The Fabulous Old Spot Theatre Company are in the company archive, stored at the author's house and are available on

Our first show, *Hot Crackling* (2004) was purposely written to include the stock memes, or theatregrams, of both Commedia dell'Arte and folkloric tradition. Jack, seeking his fortune, falls in love with Florence Dallymore, daughter of our translocated Pantalone. To prove himself a worthy son-in-law Jack has to fulfil an impossible task, slaying a wolf that is predated the local farms. Jack, against all odds, succeeds, but Farmer Dallymore tries to claim credit for the deed, but is found out and is forced to let Jack and Florence marry. *Hot Crackling* established an overall warm and positive response over its fourteen-show run, and we followed it with three other shows based on this Neo-Commedia framework: *Pirates of the River Severn* (2005/6), *A Gloucester Scaramouche* (2006/7) and *The King of Spain's Daughter* (2007/8). Within these shows we further refined and developed our Neo-Commedia practice and even, borrowing from soap operas, kept the roles of Florence and Jack as the central pairing in each show. All the shows toured under the umbrella of rural touring, and as vindication of the suitability of our deployment of the genre, the final company show had seventy performances, spread across sixty separate rural venues.⁹⁸

The Old Spot case study exposes a model of Neo-Commedia by means of which it is possible, in conjunction with the necessary performance skills, to transfer interconnected webs or matrices of regional and local cultural relationships to another geographical locale. The Masks, predicated also upon a stratified social hierarchy, are therefore not necessarily always confined to their points of geographic origin. This hierarchy and the Masks were able to make the move from Northern Italy to Gloucestershire because we transposed

request, otherwise the "reviews" page on the legacy company website gives an indication of our positive feedback.

⁹⁸ "This company is loved by its family audiences who flock to see them in their village halls and community centres." Quotation from the local authority arts officer supporting comment to an ACE grant application made by The Fabulous Old Spot Theatre Company, retrieved from the Arts Council of England under a Freedom of Information request on 03/10/2016.

them to specific geographical locations. Doing this gave us access to a web of perceived localised inter-relationships which the audience brought to bear on the comic action and we could later develop, but also the distinctive local dialects and characteristics which were a key feature of the positive reception of the historical Commedia dell'Arte. In part this process was made possible because I was living in Gloucestershire and immersed in the milieu of the county.

This first successful translocation was a top-down event, imposed by me as artistic director of a theatre company with a specific remit. I believe the Old Spot experiment was a success because we managed to keep the performative strengths of Commedia whilst successfully transposing its ecosystem into another geographical zone, thus retaining and activating its ability to reflect and perform locality. I believe this is a transferable model. However, to develop this translocation in an unfamiliar geographical area requires not a top-down imposition, but a locally nuanced interactive methodology. This latter approach falls largely outside the scope of this thesis but, simply put, asks a given community the question, when presented with a silent masked actor, 'Who is this mask in your community?' The following table shows indicates the Mask translocations made by the Fabulous Old Spot Theatre Company.

Table 6.4: The Mask translocations made by The Fabulous Old Spot Theatre Company.

Original Commedia dell'Arte Mask Name	Gloucestershire Name	Region of Origin (<i>'gl'</i> indicates a sub-region within Gloucestershire)	Local Attitude
Magnifico	Phillip 2nd of Spain	Leader of Spanish Invasion	Foreign King
	George 4th of England		Our King, but from London

		Legal father of Prince Rupert and illegal father of Florence Dallymore	and not from round here
Pantalone di Bisognosi	Titus Dallymore	Vale of Berekeley (gl)	Landowning farmer with a finger in all the local pies
Il Dottore	Ignatius O'Reilly	Cheltenham (gl) based lawyer or doctor	Outsider expert
First Actor/Orazio	His Highness, Rupert Prince of Wales Lord Cecil	London or Germany London	Foreign and outsider landowner who does not quite get Gloucester London-based agent of Governmental skulduggery
First Actress	Queen Florence	Cheltenham (gl)/London	Landowner and authority figure
2nd Actor	Jack Dallymore	Vale of Berkley (gl)	Local Rustic and naive optimist
2nd Actress	Florence	Small town girl: Gloucester, Cinderford or Tewkesbury (all gl)	Local Rustic and naive optimist
Il Capitano	Duke of Berkley Don Alvares	Berkley Castle (gl) Madrid	Unpleasant aristocratic landowner and landlord, with a chip on his shoulder. Badly disguised but efficient

			foreign undercover invader
Brighella	Ephraim Scatter Sgt Early	Severn-side (gl) bar owner and small-scale entrepreneur The British Army	Poacher, gossip, conduit of shady information. Always “knows someone who might, for the right price”. Brews cider Bodyguard and minder to the Prince of Wales. No nonsense outsider
Columbina	Mrs Clutterbuck	Forest of Dean, Sharpness, Cotswold Edge (all gl)	Local barmaid, shop worker
Zanni	Clutterbuck, Seth, Groggy, smiler	Forest of Dean, Sharpness, Cotswold Edge (all gl)	Smallholder, deckhand, manual and agricultural labourer
Harlequin	Puck	Forest of Dean (gl)	Mischievous woodsman and touchstone of local magic
The Witch	Mrs Hill	Forest of Dean (gl)	Peasant village herbalist and matriarch

Revisiting my practice in the light of Gramsci's Marxist attitude to folklore is instructive and helps define Neo-Commedia's relationship with portraying political processes and competition for economic resources. Folklore, for Gramsci, helps maintain an economic and social status quo with the controlling hegemony, placing the participant within cultural activities that do not lead to revolution, and distracting those at the bottom of the social pile from attempting to better their lot. Art, or in this case Neo-Commedia as a subset of all theatre not challenging the agency of the cultural hegemony, can only be seen as an agent of complacency and stasis. Our performances may have had a social impact within a rural context, acting as a focus to bring socially divided or physically separated communities together in one place (which we did), but there was no comically purposed interrogative ideological application. Our performative Kings and Queen were fallible humans who did not give up power one jot and maintained the status quo of the English class system.

To create a more socially interrogative approach within this genre, in addition to that of bringing high quality entertainment as an agent of social cohesion,⁹⁹ it would be necessary to include within one's artistic purpose an interrogation of the rural agencies of social control, as well as those that may oppose the hegemony. Within my developing theoretical framework for a dramaturgy of Neo-Commedia these anti-hegemonic threads can either be included as part of the dramatic arc in story form, or as a critique upon the hegemonic story arc through the deployment of Performative Liminality. Using the full arsenal of Neo-Commedia dramaturgic tools at our disposal, it makes sense to have the story arc represent and reflect the hegemonic culture of consent, whilst the various layers

⁹⁹ See Chapter 5 of *Only Connect: Arts Touring and Rural Communities*, titled "Community", by F. Matarosso, 2004 published jointly by the Arts Council of Great Britain and The Countryside Agency.

of Performative Liminality can represent and embody both opposition to the hegemony, and (more positively) perform an entertaining critique of the hegemony and the status quo.

Placing the Commedia Masks within a defined geographical zone, which my research demonstrates is possible, gives local incarnations of the Commedia fixed social types. These new avatars, as a consequence, now come to symbolise both the social class and attitudes of their historical antecedents, as well as the sense of both being owned by a community and representing it. Further research into the local wants and needs of these Masks will produce a locally relevant subject matter. This will result in a parochial comedy, reflecting class-based attitudes to pertinent local issues, which will have the potential to succeed in the fields of rural touring and all-age-range, inclusive entertainment.

To add to a further layer of hegemonic subversion, within the field of local culture, as absolutely distinct from centrally imposed hegemonic culture, would be to create, within the Neo-Commedia frame, a model of both socially engaged and entertaining local theatre. Local incarnations of the fixed Commedia types now have their own voices, speaking symbolically from within the community, to interrogate whatever issues may come their way. Part of the counter-hegemonic thrust of a politically and socially engaged Neo-Commedia performance might be simply to give all strata of society an equal time on stage and let an audience judge for themselves. Dramaturgically this will always foreground the function of the comically framed 'happy ending' finale, and the use of dramatic irony within this conclusion, as a comedy needs a happy ending. If solving all the social, emotional and economic issues within a play is simply not realistically feasible then a magical and fantastic, and hence heavily ironic, ending is required to satisfy the audience's need for resolution. The plot arc of *A Gloucester Scaramouche* (Old Spot Theatre, 2006) required that all the major characters die at each other's hands before being able to apologise or make restitution for wrongs done to each other in the course of the drama. It was indeed a

miracle that brought all the characters back to life, full health, mutual forgiveness and a greater awareness of their role in life. The Prince of Wales' dead father appears, says the sacred words on an amulet (with audience help) that 'happened' to be in his son's possession, and all is restored.

In the UK, folklore can be said to have at least two separately purposed definitions: the first being a historicist approach looking at extinct ritual, vestigial calendar customs, and often motivated by elements of nostalgia, and the second, a sociological approach looking at the social functions of these bygone calendar events, and their relationship to the structure, government and management of a past society. Neo-Commedia can encompass both these strands within the realm of dramatic fiction. It is within the former that performative elements of potentially countercultural events such as carnival and misrule may be placed, and in the latter hegemonic appropriation of these cultural events. Both are however ingredients within a dramaturgic frame whose dictates are different: to entertain rather than to provoke. Once again, the agency of purpose dictates the direction of a developing dramaturgic frame.

Historically the seasons of misrule within a calendar were permissive events, allowed by the prevailing hegemony as a societal safety valve, and only as a temporary, revolutionary act.¹⁰⁰ It may, however, be presented dramatically as such, within an entertainment frame. As the purposes of comedy often trump the agency of strict historical veracity,¹⁰¹ introducing fictional events presented as historical fact is a trick often used in

¹⁰⁰ This point concerning the demonstration of political power does not contradict Bakhtin's central thesis, within *Rabelais and His World*, in which he convincingly argues for a carnival and laughter-based peasant world view as part of an intrinsic late medieval mindset. The seasonal event of carnival merely released this mindset's possibilities into the world. The rest of the time it was kept dormant or contained through the power of the feudal hegemony.

¹⁰¹ I also refer you to the confusion incurred by Dario Fo's introductions (and footnotes in the printed editions) and verbal frames in *Mystero Buffo*. Antonio Scuderi says "There is an aspect of Fo's theatre that must be mentioned, but for which space does not permit extensive explication. He is rigorous in his research but will blatantly *re-present* history in order to give his performances more gravitas. In a sense, his whole career, along with its historical distortions, can be taken as one ongoing performance.

theatre and literature: folkloric events can be performed within a politically purposed story that can, explicitly, defy Gramsci's criticism. Certainly, this is a rich dramaturgic seam that lends itself very well to Neo-Commedia.

With this last point there should now be sufficient background for an analysis of how the various strands of carnival-derived comedy Fo draws from connect his theatre to the Commedia dell'Arte" (Scuderi, 2011: 35–52). To simplify, at various points in *Mystero Buffo*, Fo invents historical references to frame his performances. Although this can be misleading to those who want to believe they are true, they are simply part of his dramatic approach.

6.5 Commedia and Gestus

Whilst examining the physicality of each Mask, I became aware that there were similarities between the physically encoded information within the Commedia Masks, and Brecht's theorised formulation of what he termed the actor's Gestus. Gestus is usually described as an acting style involving a combination of physical gestures that reveal the social relations and causality of behaviour embodied in a role. Formulated under Brecht's historical materialist stance, the implication is that part of any role's function was to have the Gestus seen in its place within the capitalist hierarchy. For Brecht the attitude of the actor to the role was also part of the Gestus. Commentators, such as Elizabeth Wright (1989), maintain that, with Brecht, every emotional interaction between the actors should be presented to the audience as a set of social interactions, defined by their materialist position.

Of significance within both the academic study and the performance of Neo-Commedia is the effect 'gestic' acting has on an audience. When an actor, working within the gestic style or method of acting appears in front of an audience, their physical shape and embodied gesture should immediately inform the audience of their social class, their attitude to life, and the expectation of a particular and specific reaction to other, similarly gestically-oriented, characters. The immediacy of their comprehension by the onlooker allowed Brecht to focus, within his dramas, on the social, economic and political choices that people make. He used the immediacy implicit with gestic acting to remove extraneous 'character' acting and let the roles foreground their class, attitude and position in society. Exposition of context was not required as the audience could to 'see' all they needed to know about a character from the moment they appeared on stage. A conscious use of body language, physical control and accurate costuming are all ingredients of the Gestus.

Within Neo-Commedia precisely the same agencies are employed, with the addition of the mask-object (and its attendant performative traits), to portray a Commedia role. Within the performances of Commedia dell'Arte (and Neo-Commedia) the social position, attitude and emotional state of the role have to be immediately obvious to the audience, so that the comedy can start as soon as the drama starts. With Brecht the interaction between the classes, and the choices they make, is important; for Commedia the humour derived from this interaction is of greater importance. In both cases the same degree of physical embodiment in the actor is required. In Commedia the term for a role, embodying this matrix of information is called the Mask, whilst Brecht calls it Gestus (as defined in Brecht, 2015: 5–6). The aims may be different, though the performers' physical embodiment achieves a similar result: an immediate transfer of the complex matrix of social, political and attitudinal information from a performer to the perception of the audience, individually and collectively. American political activists the San Francisco Mime Troupe were well aware of both the ideological and comic use of gestic acting. R. G. Davis (of the San Francisco Mime Troupe) in a funeral oration to the late American actor, Sarah Archer, as transcribed by Joan Schirle, says of her that she was loved as a teacher for her:

ability to create a gestus... image/mime/memorable series of poses, demonstrations of thought and feeling... the total body image was enlarged and concentrated, specific, and memorable. That meticulous skill along with a clear voice (Schirle in Chaffee and Crick, 2015: 460).¹⁰²

Frost and Yarrow (1990:123) also note, within their remit of the improvising mask, the connection between Masked acting and Gestus, and state that its political implications are “part of the conception of [each] role, and not a gloss upon it” (ibid.). As technical terms,

¹⁰² Sarah Archer had run workshops at which Schirle and Davis were participants and performed with the Mime Troupe between 1959 and 1970, as well as running classes at the Dell'Arte school. Joan Schirle says of her: “From this great actress I learned how to enter and exit, what stories the feet tell; the historical contexts, how Commedia dell'Arte plays in contemporary work (Schirle in Chaffee and Crick, 2015, 460).”

therefore, 'Gestus' from Brecht and 'Mask' from Neo-Commedia cover similar ground, though one is purposed towards historical materialism, and the other towards humour.

6.6 The Commedia Mask Set: Levi-Strauss and What We May Learn from Structuralist Anthropology

This exploration will give an indication as to the complex nature of trying to itemise a population or 'set' of Commedia Masks at any one given moment in time.

Claude Levi-Strauss, in *The Way of the Masks* (UK publication and translation 1983), whilst examining the relationships between two specific West Coast Canadian First Nations' Masks (the Dzonukwa and the Swaihue), applied principles of structural anthropology to defining their cultural purpose. His methods and approach have been questioned; nevertheless, there is an aspect of them that may illuminate how we may define Neo-Commedia masks. He concluded that some of the baffling traits, including the plastic form, of these two specific Masks were simply because they had complementary agencies. The Masks had individual characteristics but, as one mask had something which the other lacked, and vice versa, the two Masks only made sense when viewed as complementary forces which together made a whole. The two represented a set whose paired function was to create dynamic balance between acquiring and giving material possessions within the Haida culture. The full agential power of these Masks could only be seen in terms of a fully operant social grouping.

This, at first sight, appears to be a useful tool for examining relationships between the Commedia dell'Arte Masks, a postulated Neo-Commedia equivalent and the culture within which they exist. From experience I would agree that both in Commedia dell'Arte and Neo-Commedia individual Masks possess embodied individual agency recognised by a contemporary audience, but that they possess far less performative power on their own, than as part of the whole ecosystem.

The Masks of the historical Commedia dell'Arte, however, were presented to an audience as striving towards, in a neo-platonic sense, an ideal form: mask, costume,

silhouette, vocal delivery, emotional and visceral attitude all working in harmony to create a precise representation of a contemporary societal type stripped of ambiguity. What can be hypothesised, however, is that both sets of Masks (Haida and Commedia) are in different ways, striving towards representing both a complete culture or society and its quotidian dynamics: one foregrounding a system of exchange and marriage with an element of performance, and the other foregrounding a performative comedy, concluding with exchange leading to a marriage. The same features appear in both, but with different emphases.

Levi-Strauss's understanding of the Haida system whereby a society reflects or represents itself through a grammar or system of mutually exclusive signifiers (masks in this case) can be directly applied to Commedia dell'Arte. What it would give us in Neo-Commedia is a mutually exclusive matrix of social types which when put together represents a particular formulation of a complete society. For Neo-Commedia we can say that as an overarching principle the whole set of masks, must both represent in some way a visually recognisable formulation of society, and that each Mask-mask actant has a performative agency that is exclusive to itself. Where there are two Masks within a particular social rung, the exclusiveness is maintained either by sexual difference (as in the *Innamorati*) or by profession (the *Vecchio*). Taking Levi-Strauss's point we could say that part of being *Pantalone* is that he is not the *Doctor*, or *Harlequin*, or *Brighella* or any of the other Masks. It is what a Mask is not, or does not contain, that is a crucial indicator of its strength.

Victor Turner (1969: 21–22) made the point that the static societal positions postulated by Levi-Strauss and other structural anthropologists, though potentially seen as old fashioned, still have great value when regarded as mobile: “we are to think of changing socio-symbolic fields rather than static structures” (ibid: 21). He develops this position to

state that cultural performance, in this case the Dzonukwa and the Swaihue, is not merely one-way traffic with the performers performing aspects of a social mirror but something more complex. Turner terms the relationship “reciprocal and reflexive – in the sense that the performance is often a critique, direct or veiled, of the social life it grows out of” (ibid: 22). If we look at Neo-Commedia within Turner’s parameters then certainly part of the function, dynamically expressed and within a comic frame, of the Mask set is to be a social critique, veiled or otherwise.

The stock roles of the Commedia can, therefore, be taken outside of Italy and, when naturalised within a new locality, keep their performative strengths intact. Their embodied regionality and social class gives both an audience and an actor a set of very accessible handles to grasp the role, allowing the onlooker to, within a comic framework, immediately comprehend the role’s Gestus. This immediacy of recognition is vital to the comic mechanism, as without it we are left with lengthy exposition to explain or give context to the characters’ or Masks’ subsequent actions. You can lose an audience simply by giving them too many facts when what they want is drama and laughter: far better for a distraught aristocrat to rush on crying, “my love has been kidnapped by bandits”, and to weep for a few seconds. We, as an audience, know where we are with that. Their future possible actions are predicated on action and extreme emotion. In performance, however, it takes all of the embodied regionality and class, as expressed within Gestus, to show these five or six seconds of stage time unambiguously. Both Gestus and Mask are agents of immediate information transfer. The roles also exist as a set, with both absolute position within a given society and an ecosystem of transactional relationships within that system. This symbolic and societally reflective set, by comically and performatively interrogating itself, provides a picture for the observers of the workings of a given society and their position in it. Commedia dell’Arte, through the rigours of professional survival, produced a set of stock roles with sufficient dramatic potential that they survived as potent and

theatrically popular forms from the 1560s to the 1800s. It is by analysis of historical performance through a dramaturgic lens that one can identify its key dramatic strengths and, subsequent to that, the experience of being a performer, trainer and academic researcher in the field, which allows one to search out and identify contemporary equivalents. Beyond that, as always, it is the virtuosity and experience of the actors employed that can turn good theory into excellent performance.

7 Epilogue

Anyone can open a door marked Commedia dell'Arte. But having opened it, how does one know what to choose? ... We must begin where we are. (Carlo Mazzone-Clementi, 2000: Internet)

The external identifiers belonging to historical Commedia dell'Arte have remained more or less constant within the initial period of twentieth century reinvention, but the aims and dramaturgic approaches to which they have been purposed vary extensively between each artist. It is possible to map trails of structural or ideological influence coming from specific trainers or artists but not possible to prove the existence of close groupings sharing the exactly the same aesthetic. There are strong indications, however, that there are differences in perception between Italian artists, and from those artists who do not have the genre embedded as a historical cultural memory. Pete Talbot, for example, rejected the use of masks in performance for precisely this reason. The rigid structures of Commedia dell'Arte, however, still present a set of performative open signs ideal for individual interpretation, and the consequent quality of being able to do so encourages the imposition of a wide range of individual artists' praxis.

Whether the artist is actor, director or capocomico, a three-way relationship between their received training, the audience for whom a created show is intended and the purpose of the creator are the defining factors of an artist's praxis. Their initial influence or significant teacher is less important than this threefold position. There are, of course, exceptions and, interestingly, they appear to come from either the high end of the genre or the low end. Ferruccio Soleri is notoriously protective of the precise choreography and mise-en-scene of the Piccolo's *Servant of Two Masters* and the position taken by a student of Antonio Fava in an online flame war (Yahoo Groups, 2012: Internet) indicates that they regarded him as the Maestro, rather than one Maestro amongst many. Such dogmatism or adherence to one strand, however, is rare.

A patriarchal bias, manifested within the historical mask set, still presents a problem when contemporary engagement or political or ideological praxis is involved. It is not surprising, therefore, to find that a range of significant contemporary innovations within the genre have been led by women: Dory Sibley, Joan Schirle, Annie Ryan, Katrien van Buerden (all interviewed) and Christina Coltelli (not interviewed). Whilst clearly fascinated by the genre, they have invested in challenging the deeper structure present within the Commedia Mask set, and not the genre itself. Not only does the traditional Masks' gender come under significant interrogation here, but also their geographical and social location. In Ryan's praxis, what is further interrogated is what constitutes a mask. Didi Hopkins stays more with a traditional model as practised by Carlo Boso and politicises her Commedia through Brechtian historicisation. In future praxes, using my three new dramaturgic tools of Mask set, embodied locality and comic Gestus, further analysis of the genre is possible, hopefully leading to further viable evolution within the genre. Neo-Commedia as a genre is still visually identified with the outward historical forms of the Commedia dell'Arte, although the purpose behind each contemporary artist varies according to their chosen position on a spectrum of entertainment-engagement-ideology.

It is clear that the mechanisms of Neo-Commedia delivery are generally separate from the performance's meaning. Whether this was intended by Strehler et al is debatable, as though Strehler's lifelong fascination with *Il Servatore di due Padroni* was due to his desire to create a bridge between Italy's past and future, and to help deliver this the team at the Piccolo Theatre in Milan created the bespoke masks, with their associated movement and costume. This in its turn then became the hard currency of teachers such as Carlo Boso. Strehler's productions of the text came from his intended interrogation of the present, through Goldoni's text. What audiences remember is masks, virtuoso performances and laughter. Carlo Boso's position on politicised Commedia has also received criticism (Heiter, 2008). There is a marked tendency, therefore, for any intended

meaning within a Neo-Commedia story arc to be submerged by the performativity of the medium, at least within Europe. The Mazzone-Clementi guided Commedia of The San Francisco Mime Troupe (Davis: 1975), referenced by Ole Brekke (Brekke, 2016, Appendix A: 299), seems to have fared better.

Overall what has developed is a group of practices that, when grouped together, are still named and recognised as Commedia dell'Arte, and are also increasingly called Neo-Commedia within academic discourse. These practices, deriving both from contemporary practice and historical recreation are all syncretic in nature and, as each artist's praxis is constructed from a menu of practices, the genre can also be called synthetic. The menu of ingredients has been incrementally expanded upon and refined, or degraded, since 1946.

The artists considered here all self-identify as Commedia dell'Arte practitioners, and whilst accepting that a definition based on statistical incidence, within each practice, of the items identified with the expanded set of characteristics (section) may lead to a reductive view of each artist's praxis, there is nevertheless an acceptance that the more characteristics present, the more 'commedia' it can be externally identified as.

To date there has been no holistic and academic analysis of the genre, and having initiated the process within this thesis, I am able to offer an initial overview. What has been accepted as phenomenologically common practice by the majority of its practitioners, notably the qualities of mask performance, is now available for greater analysis. A highly significant practice in the genre is a result of the stage being cohabited by both unmasked and masked roles. The different modes of performance with which masks and unmasked roles are received indicate that a characteristic feature of the genre is that the meaning of a performance is received by an audience through a range of channels and modes of reception. This indicates that meaning within Neo-Commedia performance is created by the juxtaposition of these channels, with the structural elements of character and story arc. The result being that each Mask comments on each other from a clearly defined position of

class, power and gender, through the mechanisms of several different modes of address. Neo-Commedia, therefore, at its most effective is a self-critiquing genre that operates through the modes of performed self, direct address, and both presentational and representational acting. As each role operates from a fixed position within a social hierarchy, the performance becomes a performed negotiation between representations of different classes. In other words, it represents politics in action. My formulations of comic Gestus and embodied locality add contexts of performance skills and local engagement, respectively.

This polymodality requires performers to be virtuosos, as the variety and specificity of each individual channel of communication possess specific strengths and dramaturgic implication. The performance is a collage of complimentary and competing relationships with an audience, all guided by the pressing need to instantly grab an audience's attention: firstly, through the enjoyment of the Masks and their interactions and, secondly, with the concerns of a dramatic story.

These fluctuating relationships are purposeful and not random occurrences, having evolved historically through the performance of class: the unmasked roles agentially control both the unfolding story arc, and hence the matter or content of the drama, and are also the possessors of servants and of independent means. Their stage lives are ignited, for audiences, by their class-based passions, whilst the servants, through the mechanisms of Performative Liminality react and cope with the demands of their social superiors within a spectrum spanning dramatically purposed time and the audience's or real time.

Expressed within Maslow's hierarchy of needs (1943), the unmasked roles aspire to the higher human values of self-actualisation, esteem and love, whilst the servants' passion focusses on security, food, water, warmth and rest. Applying Weinman's concept of Locus and Platea (Weimann and Schwartz, 1978) to Neo-Commedia focuses on action rather than geographic zones on the stage. Perception and judgement on any action or emotion with a

Commedia performance is commented on and reacted to, not merely within the action itself, but through a range of relational channels (described as Performative Liminality; Crick: 2017). Examining Domenico Bruni's (recorded as playing the role of Pedrolino in *I Gelosii* in 1611) collection of prologues and speeches (referenced by Henke & Nicholson, 2014: 246, and Julie Goell, 2015: 94) it becomes clear that meta-theatrical presentation of a range of performed selves was part of historical performed practice. The enjoyment of a Neo-Commedia performance is just as much in the process of switching between the channels we are offered to see the action through as in the action itself.

The more I researched contemporary practice, the more it appeared I was also being confronted with Commedia dell'Arte's contested performance history. Ways of examining present practice illuminate why the historical genre endured so long: a supportive tight-knit ensemble, the precise nature of improvisation and its relationship with rhetoric, the comic Gestus and embodied locality which, combined with a neuroscientific (Cook, Ramachandran) approach to masks that validated phenomenological practice, created a very complex picture of a range of effective performance forms.

The experiments with the Fabulous Old Spot Theatre Company (2004–2014), predicated on the theory that the range of activity within a Commedia show would have something to entertain the range of ages found in most community centres, demonstrates a social aspect. The company was successful in small-scale rural touring where we asked our audiences to, "at least once a year, take the time to walk to your village hall, to see a show, with your family, with your neighbours, with the folk who live in your village and sit down and enjoy some truly excellent live theatre" (www.oldspottheatre.org.uk).

Though the genre is considered currently unfashionable by Annie Ryan (Appendix A, 2016: 325) and indeed she is very "keen to be in the club where Commedia isn't" (ibid.) she recognises it as a valid training tool:

It is a great tool for learning and narrative... forces you into such a heightened place. There is no time to hang around. It forces everybody into a very urgent dramatic situation which is very useful there is no time to sit down and have a cup of tea. There is always an emergency (ibid.).

Commedia dell'Arte is also a core element of both the Dell'Arte (US) and Commedia (Denmark) schools and is the *raison d'être* of both Carlo Boso and Antonio Fava's schools. It might have been superseded by other theatre forms as the up and coming genre, but it still surfaces in other places. The genre has been part of the Ontario secondary drama school curriculum¹⁰³ (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010), focussing on cultural integration; is part of the Australian school drama system focussing on improvisation (Government of Western Australia, 2014: Internet) and has been taken into prisons in Los Angeles by Tim Robbins' the Actors' Gang as a successful tool to counter reoffending (Actors' Gang, 2017: Internet). The University of Warwick hosted in 2018 a symposium,¹⁰⁴ presented as the finale to a research period, comparing the aesthetics of Commedia masked performance with the aesthetics and reception of screen-based computer game avatars (Warwick University, 2018). Two pieces of multi-media performance were presented, one with live Greek tragedy masks and one with Commedia masks, both presented as integrated performance pieces. It still has the capacity to be seen as a tool box of open signs and to be adopted for many causes and purposes. It still has the capacity to inspire artists, and enough useable tools within it to be adopted and adapted.

Commedia still has relevance within the context of professional drama training, and also within researched and purposed performance, with its main remit being mixed or popular theatre audiences, rather than high art theatre. Its position in the ranks of popular theatre may indeed have been taken over by Musical Theatre, which operates from very

¹⁰³ <http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/curriculum/secondary/arts910curr2010.pdf>

¹⁰⁴ https://warwick.ac.uk/fac/arts/theatre_s/staff/prof_andy_lavender/mask_and_avatar/

similar dramaturgic principles and ingredients. Commedia's unique features also make it a useful research tool and, with a full synthesis of its dramaturgic strengths (both old and newly identified) performed by virtuoso actors, ensure it still has the potential to create entertainment encompassing both the visceral and the humane.

8 Bibliography

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