

Popular Traditions, Carnival, Dance

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Folklore and Carnival

An Interpretative Approach

A hypothesis that frequently resurfaces in specialist literature concerns the 'democratic', popular, and carnivalesque origins of the *commedia dell'arte*. At the end of the nineteenth century, literary critic Lorenzo Stoppato identified in his essays a continuity between the *commedia dell'arte* and a hypothetical medieval tradition of 'implicit' theatre. This theory is poly-genetically connected to the expression *narodnyi balagan*, 'theatre booth of the people', which was coined by Konstantin Miklaševskij in the twentieth century to describe the *commedia dell'arte*: According to Miklaševskij, the *commedia dell'arte* was characterised by a 'theatrical instinct' that eludes any historical classification, being instead socially determined by its relationship with the lower classes (Miklaševskij 1981). The strong affinity between Stoppato's and Miklaševskij's theories, despite the geographical, cultural and political distance between them, is particularly evident in the title that Stoppato gave to his 1887 collection of essays, *La commedia popolare in Italia (The Popular Comedy in Italy)*. He focuses on the qualitative aspect of the *commedia*, that is, on its popularity, rather than on its historical circumstances, arguing in effect for an anachronistic overlapping of different theatrical traditions. In Stoppato's view, secular drama had organically developed since Plautus's times, characterised by the constant presence of the same stock characters. The professional *commedia dell'arte* brought this ancient tradition to unparalleled perfection (Stoppato 1887: 7–8). Furthermore, Stoppato believed that both Plautus and the *comici* of the *commedia dell'arte* considered their art to be a kind of festive antagonism to the austerity of the authorities, and that they derived their means of expression from the anarchic confusion of the carnival.

This critique lent itself to interventions by disciplines related to anthropology and comparative studies in literature, society and history. Starting with the analysis of expressive techniques that were still alive in the Italian countryside of that period (such as the extemporary versifications of the Tuscan *Bruscelli*), scholars in these disciplines aimed to prove the existence of an extremely long-lasting popular theatre, which was improvisational in nature and aimed for a carnivalesque reversal of values. Paolo Toschi, for example, drew on these disciplines as he made his argument for the carnivalesque nature of Italian theatre, particularly the forms of theatre related to the *commedia*. This was in response to Alessandro D'Ancona's account of the origins of Italian comedy in his *Origini del teatro italiano* (*Origins of Italian Theatre*), which Toschi believed was too focused on lending a false air of dignity to the *commedia*: 'Our comic theatre, and in particular the *commedia dell'arte*, directly inherits from the Carnival the licentiousness, coarseness and obscenity that too often characterise it' (Toschi 1955: 117).

In the first years of the twentieth century, almost contemporarily with Miklaševskij's theories and their practical implementation by Vsevolod Meyerhold, Winifred Smith formulated a theory to explain how such approaches risked losing sight of their declared purpose, by focussing solely on popular myth and legend. Smith argued that the specificity of the *commedia dell'arte* was *also* historical and warned her readers against too nonchalantly combining data from distinct and distant time periods, a practice that she believed would make a consistent analysis impossible (Smith 1912: 21). In Italy, Smith's voice went unheard partly for linguistic reasons and partly because of the growing success of Benedetto Croce's aesthetics, which suggested that one should analyse artistic expression without lingering too much on factual and historical variations. Subsequently, the direct examination of written documents – that is, the research method privileged by D'Ancona in the history of theatre mentioned earlier – went out of fashion among theatre historians.

We know that the experience of the *foire* (fairground entertainment) played a major role in Meyerhold's reinterpretation of the *commedia dell'arte* (Meyerhold 2009: 356). However, looking even further back, the critical juxtaposition of the *foire* and the Italian *commedia* probably happened earlier, in the nineteenth century, when the subjects and the stock characters of early eighteenth-century Parisian *foire* were reinterpreted by the *opéra-comique* and the *opéra-bouffon*. Arlequin, Pantalon, Scaramouche and other such stock characters were transported from the texts written by Lesage, Orneval and Fuzelier to Planard's and Duport's

play *Le Mannequin de Bergame*, 1832, to Scribe and Duveyrier's *Polichinelle*, 1839, and to Luigi Ricci's *Une Aventure de Scaramouche*, 1841. These works rekindled the original polemic flame with particular regard to the Second Empire and its dissipation, as exemplified by Jacques Offenbach's *Le Financier et le savetier*, 1856 (cf. Teulon-Lardic 2008). This kind of theatre, distant enough from the classicist tradition to seem spontaneous and straightforward in both structure and content, was considered by George Sand (1860) to be a paradigm of ancient theatre suspended in time. She rediscovered the tradition of the *Comédie Italienne* of the Renaissance and seventeenth century and in her preface to the two volumes of *Masques et Bouffons* sought support for her theory that ancient forms of theatre such as the Greek Phallophorias or the Latin Atellan farces were not, in fact, irregular occurrences. Sand identified a lineage and historical continuity – discontinuous in its manifestations, but uninterrupted in time – that ended precisely with the commedia dell'arte and its improvisation technique (Sand 1860: vi).

As to the theatrical genre per se, Sand contended that the *commedia* was able, for the first and only time, to stage characters that were not fictitious but real, with a much greater anthropological significance and a much broader historical presence: from the crudely painted faces of the first performers in antiquity to the stages of the present-day Opéra-comique (Sand 1860: vii). These *caractères réels* and the need to crystallise them into a primary set of categories were the foundation out of which the stock characters of the commedia dell'arte grew. According to this school of thought, their origins or the exact moment at which they first appeared on stage were insignificant compared to their importance as representatives of universal categories of mankind.

Mask, Carnival, Comedy: Line or Circle?

George Sand and her son Maurice, who shared her interest in Italian Renaissance and Baroque *commedia*, are both to be credited with highlighting the fact that the masks and stock characters behind them are the true distinctive traits of the commedia dell'arte. Behind a mask – any kind of mask – there is an actor. The title of Maurice Sand's work *Masques et bouffons* perfectly summarises this duality. Each mask/character has a chapter dedicated to it, in which a dual analysis is undertaken: first of the universal element, i.e. the mask, and then of the contingent element – the *bouffon*, i.e. the actor, the person who is wearing the mask at a particular time. This relationship between the concrete and the transcendent, where

the transcendent is by definition meta-historical, is characterised by the author as functional rather than being bound to the origins of a specific character. Sand thus reinforces the theory first proposed by Luigi Riccoboni (1730: vol. I, ch. II), which can be seen as an attempt to uncover the noble origins of his trade: The stock characters of ancient comedy have slowly but continually been transformed into their corresponding characters in the Italian *commedia*. Old *Pappus* became Pantalone, the shrewd *sanniones* became the *zanni* in a process of simple phonetic adaptation, and subsequently were given their individual names – Harlequin, Mezzetino and Trivellino. However, Sand had no way of documenting the intermediate phases of this tradition; as a result, when he attempted to investigate the birth of the stock characters of the *commedia dell'arte*, he was faced with the conceptually ambiguous territory of its carnivalesque side, with its disguises and the ritual inversion that they implied. This process, which took place at the beginning of the twentieth century, was facilitated by the insights that historians were gaining at the time into specific mediaeval *kermesses* (fairs) and their popular roots. The spirits of fertility, remnants of paganism in their vulgar larvae and integral parts of events such as the *festi stultorum* (licentious excursions made by groups of young people during the *kalendae januariae* and for the distorted liturgy of the *festum asini*), were identified as the 'prehistory of the Zanni' and regarded as precursors of the masked dramaturgy which is typical of the *commedia dell'arte*.

The arguments supporting these hypotheses are of great significance, starting with Lucia Lazzarini's etymological approach (1982: 467–71) to the emblematic characters of the *Zanni*. The name most probably derives from Diana/Johanna, who used to oversee the Sabbath and, through her, from Janus, protector of passages and gateways and responsible for the annual renewal of crops. As theorised by Driesen (1904), it is now believed that the character of Harlequin, too, is derived, like the *Zanni*, from ancient mythological figures. Tracing it back via a complex process of adaptation that took place primarily in the late sixteenth century, one arrives at Herla, an eerie spectre who was thought to lead his ghostly family across the whole of Europe, haunting its nights.

It is true that the *Zanni*, when it comes to comedy, shares some of the characteristics of the *Zane/Dianus/Janus* of folklore, such as a penchant for devilish tricks or gluttony (with regard to both sex and food), which is reminiscent of the opulence of mediaeval rites. It is also true that Tristano Martinelli's Harlequin by all accounts embodied on stage the uncontrollable dynamism that is a traditional mark of the Devil in his carnivalesque rendition. That said, this kind of folkloric analysis does leave a number of

questions unanswered, such as: To what extent was the transition of the demonic archetype from ritual to stage deliberate? And implicitly, why? Uncoupled from its context, the original model loses its ritualistic value to the point that it becomes completely distorted.

Harlequin, Bertoldo, Zanni: From Prototypes to Characters

Even though the origins of other stock characters remained unclear, it was possible to learn about the exact moment at which the comic stock character of Harlequin was born. We know from this that its undoubtedly folkloric roots did not contribute in a very significant way to the creation of the *theatrical* archetype. Ferrone's monograph describes how, towards the end of the seventeenth century, Tristano Martinelli, the first actor to play the part of Harlequin, created the character from pre-existing materials in a very deliberate fashion. Rather than arbitrarily appropriating folkloric elements, he carefully judged the circumstances and situations in which he performed. Martinelli was Italian and knew that performing on the Parisian stages meant competing for attention with a large cast of well-known set characters based on long-lasting festive traditions. If the audience liked archetypes such as *Gros Guillaume* or *Gautier-Garguille*, corpulent theatrical embodiments of the gluttonous king of carnival, he would have to create a similar character, based on similar premises. *Hellequin*, the French archetype of Harlequin, thus developed from a vivacious and nimble aerial demon into a symbol of unruliness, even a representative of hell, and from there into a grotesque tradition of popular *diableries* (Driesen 1904: 58–66; Ferrone 2006: 74–6). In some of the oldest texts there is already a tendency to characterise *Hellequin*'s appearance as excessively artificial and tending towards disguise. In one of the best known sources, the fourteenth-century *Roman de Fauvel* (Långfors 1914: vv. 747–58), he leads a noisy *charivari* whose members wear monstrous costumes. What is more, he is characterised by unnaturally large ears, unsettling gigantism and a bushy beard. Other sources give an indication of how early versions of his name gravitate towards the semantic fields of *fatuitas* and *scurrilitas* (stupidity and buffoonery) (Avalle 1989: 54–5; Driesen 1904: 129). In a nutshell, *Hellequin* was already a buffoon, a stock character, before appearing on stage as Harlequin. All that was needed to fulfil his theatrical potential was someone like Martinelli.

In addition to his adaptation of the traditional figure of *Hellequin*, Martinelli derived other distinctive traits of his new character from the medieval *Herlequin*, most notably a particular garment called the *Hurepiaus*.

It was mentioned as early as the thirteenth century in Adam de la Halle's *Jeu de la feuillée*. Nothing is known about the appearance of the *hurepiaux* to date; in fact, it is never mentioned outside of the tales of the army of the damned led by either Hellequin himself or similar otherworldly figures. Most likely it was either a hood used to hide the unsettling demonic appearance of the wearer, or, conversely, a sort of integral mask used to enhance it (Ueltschi 2008: 111). What is significant about this enigmatic garment is that its demonic component intertwines with onomastic elements that call to mind the rural world of peasants – to which the Harlequin of comedy, a manual labourer (porter) who spoke the rowdy dialect of Bergamo, certainly belonged. The name is made up of two parts, the first of which (*hure*) is related to fear, specifically its effect of making one's hair stand on end (see *hurer* in the *Französisches Etymologisches Wörterbuch*, s.v. **Hura*: 'faire dresser les cheveux sur la tête à qn.'). In Old French, the word was also used to designate the hair of peasants, described as bushy and shaggy just like animal hair (Barillari 2000: 28–9 and n. 36). The old *Hellequin* was clearly affected by the derogatory stereotype of the *rusticus*, which was widespread during the Middle Ages and the Renaissance; this reminds us that such stereotypes implied associations to both the world of beasts and demons, and always offensively so. Domenico Merlini's work on satirical depictions of peasants has become a classic and is still useful today. In it, the author analyses an entire repertoire of symbols of evil and darkness that correspond to the typical stigmas of the living conditions of peasants (Merlini 1894: 153–4, 179–86). According to such legends, the inhabitants of rural areas belong to the lineage of Cain, took an active part in the crucifixion of Christ (Lovarini 1965: 64–5), and are wicked and cunning by nature. Their destiny is to go back to where they came from, so that they will be able to say about themselves: 'Il di del gran deslubio/a' saron di maliti dal lò zanco' (On the day of the Deluge, we will stand among the cursed, on the left hand of the Father) (Lovarini 1965: 74–5). Moral traits are seen to be imprinted on their exterior form as a sort of interchangeable *facies* whose appearance resembles that of fallen angels: A peasant's face is dark, burned by the sun and dirty because of the work in the fields; and similarly dark is the face of the Devil. He has the large belly of a glutton and thin, goat-like legs, reminiscent of familiar demonic iconographies. Even his beard is shaped 'like a beak', according to the physiognomics of the *rusticus* described in Giulio Cesare Croce's *Bertoldo* – that is to say, at a time in which the commedia dell'arte was beginning to flourish.

From what has been said, it is now clear that the demonic connotation of the stock character of the Zanni has little to do with the survival of

popular cults; it can, instead, be read as a deliberate evocation of elements designed to make the character immediately recognisable. By revisiting the French *Hellequin*, Martinelli took advantage of a local code which had already established a correspondence between a demonic appearance and the condition of the plebs, more precisely that of peasants. A similar process probably took place in Italy with regard to the evolution of the Zanni, the purpose of which was to modernise the figure of the servant as encountered in Plautus' and Terence's comedies. It was therefore appropriate to utilise the archetype of the urbanised peasant who is at the service of the highest bidder, but also opportunistically prepared for all kinds of immoral or diabolical retractions of loyalty.

Evidence of the gradual evolution of the stock character can also be found in the non-professional theatre that flourished in the late sixteenth century in the academic context. Plays were being written that imitated the commedia dell'arte but that nevertheless retained a sense of independence. They are valuable because they help to explain a number of creative processes that were so deeply assimilated by the professional theatre companies that they have become too difficult to unpick.

The diabolical traits of the Zanni/rural servant were thus accepted in the context of professional and academic theatre because they corresponded to the archetype of the peasant. At the same time, however, the carnivalesque background that, according to Toschi's hypotheses, was concealed behind the masks of the various infernal spirits, added an important element of novelty.

Music, Dance, Song

Music and Comic Theatre: A Coupling not to be Taken for Granted

Hypothetically, further proof of the popular origins of the commedia dell'arte lies in the fact that music has an important presence on stage and is organically intertwined with the development of the action. Similarly, there is a marked preference for dance as a form of expression.

As regards the sung and instrumental interventions by actors within the performance, a distinction is necessary between music that was performed either between acts or at the end of the play – a common practice perfectly in line with the sixteenth-century and Renaissance tradition of the intermezzi – and other, less well documented, forms of scenic performance. The availability of, and demand for, actors who were also competent musicians can be traced back to the earliest documents relating to

Italian professional theatre: One of the signers of the contract regulating the fraternal company of comedians established in 1545 in Padua was a *lira da braccio* player (see Vianello 2005: 145). It is evident from such documents that musical skills were integral to the intermezzi, but that there were no expectations of framing them as specific objects of spectacle. The case of Francesco Gabrielli, whose stage name was Scapino and whose success as an actor came from the great number of instruments he played on stage, is the exception that proves the rule. As to the rest, it is important to note that pictures or engravings of the time showing *commedia* stock characters singing or playing instruments are not in fact showing them to be standing on the stage of a theatre, but rather on the wooden boards set up by street charlatans. The music that they played and sang thus served the purpose – as documented by the sources – of attracting audiences to sample the products offered by the charlatans. The book *Piazza universale di tutte le professioni del mondo* (lit. *The Universal Town Square of All the Professions in the World*) includes a chapter that describes precisely this category of performance: *De' formatori di spettacoli in genere, e de' ceretani o ciurmatori massime* ('Conventions of Performance Makers and Charlatans in General'). It should not be surprising that we find themes and characters of the *commedia dell'arte* so closely intertwined with the practice of playing and singing music in this context. The resulting spectacle, however, remains intangible and scarcely documented, particularly when compared to the well-defined identity of those performers that Tomaso Garzoni called the *istrioni* – the professional actors of the theatre (Garzoni 1996: 1195).

Here, a quick glance at the textual materials appears to show that instrumental and vocal music, as well as dances, were far from frequent on the stages of the *commedia dell'arte*. This was perhaps due to a concern for avoiding contamination between the status of the professional *comici*, who were continually in search of their own guiding principles, and that of the less privileged street performers.

The iconography of the time often portrays stock characters as playing the lute (see for example the Recueil Fossard, or Dionisio Minaggio's *Feather Book*, now held at McGill University). Typical moments for musical interventions include scenes of courtship, where serenades beneath the balcony of a beloved appear to successfully portray common, everyday habits. In this case, however, connecting the praxis to its 'realistic function' (Pirrotta 1975: 97–144) seems reductive in that the characters who take part in these scenes are rarely the young lovers (who perform without masks), but rather the characters least likely to engage in such actions: Magnifico, Pantalone, the Doctor or the Zanni – all of them base stock characters who should be,

by definition, alien to the 'fine art' of music. Music thus takes on the purpose of conveying the inadequacy of the characters that perform it. The theorist Andrea Perrucci confirms this theory, suggesting that the songs in these performances help to create the typical caricatures of comic characters: 'Saranno anche ridicole le canzoni delle parti buffe in Scena, se saranno de' Zanni Bergamaschi, Napolitani' (Songs in the comical parts of a scene will be hilarious if sung by Zanni from Bergamo or Naples) (Perrucci 1961: 252, part II, rule XII).

Comedy and Dance

The *Balli di Sfessania*, a series of etchings in which Jacques Callot carries out a synthesis between the practices of dance and the stock characters of the commedia dell'arte (Posner 1977: 204–5), seem to establish a bond of necessity between dance and professional theatre. However, ballet had by the sixteenth century become a highly specialised art form in its own right, with expert masters and dedicated professional dancers. The danced parts of the *commedia*, once incorporated in a scene, were therefore usually considered to be a category of their own. It seems that whenever a choreographically gifted actor was available, the most common course of action was to exploit this particular talent, but only in the specific settings that were traditionally allowed to include dance numbers, rather than on a larger scale. This was, for example, the case for the pastoral genre (Pontremoli 1995: 34–6). If the famous actress Vittoria Piissimi really was the 'Vittoria comediante a modo di Sirena' (the siren-like Vittoria of the comedies) that the *Prologo* speaks of, and if she really was as gifted a dancer as she was an actress (Castagno 1994: 74; Taviani and Schino 1982: 338–9), it stands to reason that it was she who was chosen to perform in the *Precipitio di Fetonte* staged in Milan in 1594 by the Uniti and their company leader, Francesco Pilastrì. However, her opportunities to perform were most likely restricted to the pastorals between acts and the final, allegoric pantomime *Il pastor leggiadro*, which had been choreographed by Cesare Negri, a famous, extremely promising dancer and author of several dance-related treatises (D'Ancona 1891, vol. II: 514; Ferrari Barassi 1984: 214; Pontremoli 2005: 205–10).

This level of professionalism seems to rule out dance from the popular dimensions and manifestations of the commedia dell'arte. And yet, the popular attraction of dance, especially if uninhibited, remains an enduring theme in literature, not least since the character of Belcolore in the *Decameron* (VIII, 2), 'a jolly, buxom country wench' who knew how to

'lead up the haye and the round, when need was, with a fine handkerchief in her hand'. Sweat also drips from the foreheads of Folengo's sixteenth-century peasants as they engage in the same acrobatic dances (Folengo 1997: 217–21; 225–6; 327–9), paving the way for Giacomo Morello's *Ziralda*, a burlesque eulogy written in old Paduan dialect and printed in 1553, which describes the unexpected terpsichorean skills of Ziralda the farmer (La Rocca 1993). Thus, theatre had a fertile ground to draw from, making connections – as has already been mentioned – between the desire to dance and the archetypal vigour of its lowest characters.

However, it is necessary to make a distinction between performed dance and evoked dance. The latter did play an important part in *commedia* performances on stage. What is more, many examples relating to popular dances and their characteristics all fall into the category of evoked dance. Francesco Andreini's descriptions of the dances in which the Capitano – a character he specialised in – took part, stress the exceptional physical prowess of the protagonist rather than giving details of the choreography that is supposedly being performed (Tessari 1981: 171). The character of Proserpina, Queen of the Underworld, also takes part in these evoked dances, and as a result their uncontrolled dynamism acquires a diabolical edge, which Andreini argues is directly borrowed from the sinister physical vigour of the peasants. This, arguably, is the real reason why the practice of evoking dance is so important: Describing the peasants, or *rustici*, in their graceless physicality is comical without necessarily requiring the actors' scenic presence as dancers. In Ruzante's *Betia* (1524–1527), Nale the farmer remembers his prowess as a dancer at the 'feste de Pavana' (celebrations of Pavana) (II, 278), his extremely high leaps (II, 325–8) and his competitiveness with the instrumentalists, without showing any actual proof of them on stage. (II, 336–8; Zorzi and Ruzante 1967: 256–8; see also Padoan 1982: 90–2). And since the discrepancy between words and actions is an effective source of comedy, those recounting their acrobatic dances are often on the verge of paralysis. In Ruzante's *Bilora* (scene IV) the elderly Andronico tries to prove that he is still physically fit enough to seduce Dina, declaring that he would still be able to 'balar quatro tempi del *Zogioso*, e farlo strapassao ancora, e anche la *Rosina*, e farla tuta in fioreti, che non sarave minga puoco!' (dance four measures of the *Gioioso*, and dance them again shuffled, and the *Rosina* too, all in sequences; it would be no small feat!) (Zorzi and Ruzante 1967: 563). Similarly, Andrea Calmo's plurilinguistic comedies that graced the stages of Venice in the mid-sixteenth century contained dance that was sometimes performed and sometimes merely evoked. As an example of the former case we may cite

the episode of the *Travaglia* (1556) in which old Collofonio, in love with young Lionora, boasts about his athletic prowess when he was young and ends up being taunted into dancing by his servants, who are farmers (Calmo 1996: II, 13/ 116–26). As an example of the latter category we may consider the *Saltuzza* (1551) and the character of old Melindo – somewhat past his prime – who claims he has in store for the woman he loves the same energies with which he used to dance the Rosina (Calmo 2006: I, 3/ 64–5).

Collofonio and Melindo are both wealthy merchants from Venice, speak Venetian and are thus precursors of the stock character of the Magnifico/Pantalone. Calmo's works were frequently reprinted until the end of the sixteenth century (*Saltuzza* for the last time in 1600 and *Travaglia* in 1601), and his remarkable characterisations of the 'old man' captured the attention of theatre professionals, making it possible to identify them as an important source for the guidelines that professional *comici* would later follow when creating new characters, also with regard to dance. The 'saltetti alla pantalonesca' (small leaps *à la* Pantalone) assigned to the Magnifico in the stage directions of the *Ferinda* (1622: III, 7) are most likely the same ones that were laboriously attempted by those models. And the same tradition is probably the source, albeit only orally evoked, of the weary Dottor Campanaccio's line in the eponymous comedy (1627): 'e' me slungava, e' me sbassava, e' me voltava, e' me storzeva, e' me snodava, e' saltava, e' ballava, e' magnava, e' cagava' (and I stretched, I ducked, I turned around, I twisted, I loosened up, I jumped, I danced, I ate, I shat) (Andreini 1627: 47).

Conclusion

Recent studies of the commedia dell'arte have highlighted a degree of awareness and creative maturity among the professional *comici* that seems incompatible with simple or naive representations of popular archetypes. Although the popular element is undeniably present in the commedia dell'arte, it manifests itself not in passive reproductions of fixed characters and forms, but rather in the careful selection of expressive tools designed to help with the characterisation of scenes and figures. This purpose, pursued by theatre professionals who aimed at creating works which could perfectly resonate with its audiences, has been identified by scholars as the most plausible reason for the assimilation of traditional, popular and folkloric elements and characters within the field of professional theatre. What in the past was interpreted as an unmistakable sign for the direct derivation of

the commedia dell'arte from the naive and subversive carnivalesque power of popular protest, now, in the light of recent studies, appears as a deliberate, refined and sophisticated collection of the most suitable elements for an immediate identification of characters, situations and circumstances. From the diabolic connotations of ancient masks the commedia dell'arte retains only those elements which are necessary to remind audiences of the implied association between the malice of demons and the shrewdness of the rustics. Dancing is not absorbed by the commedia dell'arte as a fundamental theatrical device, but rather as a means to define the behaviour and character traits of the protagonists in action. Another element which had long been considered an essential feature of the commedia dell'arte is music. We have argued here, however, that it was not used on stage as frequently as one might expect, as it was associated with generic and lower-level forms of performance such as street performers and acrobats. Music thus frequently had the function of emphasising the characters' grotesque qualities, highlighting their socially inadequate – and thus comic – actions. The use of folkloric elements such as masks, dance and music in the commedia dell'arte should be interpreted not as further proof of an original contact between theatre and the common people, but rather as a clever stratagem used by professional performers in order to attract audiences and maximise the popular impact of their art.

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