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Diasporic Transgressions of Commedia dell'arte

Abstract: Ever since its “birth certificate” on February 25, 1545, Commedia dell’arte’s substantial resources of itineracy, improvisation, subversion, extraterritoriality, extemporaneity, laughter, and joy have unceasingly unveiled their essential mutability and ambiguity, prompting UNESCO’s depiction of commedia as an “invisible and intangible cultural asset”. The present study attempts to disclose the diasporic transgressions of Commedia dell’arte by considering four basic dimensions: the formal, the tropological, the topological, and the temporal, respectively. This approach further examines how and to what extent the diasporic transgressions of Commedia dell’arte can be elucidated by considering the afore-mentioned categories of explanation. Ultimately, the itinerant and improvisational character of Commedia dell’arte is explanatory for the mutations and developments within the four dimensions themselves.

Keywords: Commedia dell’arte; Diasporic Transgressions; Theatrical Formalism; Cultural Tropes; Tropological and Temporal Transgressions.

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DOI: 10.24193/cechinox.2023.45.02

Prolegomenon to the Concept of Diasporic Commedia

Postulating the diasporic nature of commedia dell’arte is tantamount to seizing the complex mutations and transgressions that not only prompted its emergence, but also precipitated further developments stemming from its intrinsic traits as a theatrical genre. In the mid-16th century, the transformation of theatre practices had mirrored profound societal, political, and cultural changes. The emergent bourgeoisie, the new status of women in society, the more and more laic understanding of political relations and processes had set the premises of new cultural needs and habits. In fact, in the process of transition from late medieval Christianity towards Renaissance humanism, commedia dell’arte had turned into the by-product of a “politically and culturally fragmented nation”.¹ Marking the very crisis of theatre in the 16th century in Italy, commedia dell’arte had astutely introduced the mentalities of the post-Renaissance age into the new theatrical ethos by the overall reconsideration of morality, professionalization of theatre practices and actors, employment of women-actors, commercialism, reassessment of the body in theatre, and – last but not least

– bypassing clerical censorship. Characteristic for the overall subversion of classical Greek and Roman dramatic approaches to theatre and, more specifically, for the decline of *commedia erudita*, *commedia dell'arte* embraced the performative, the vivid, hap-hazardous and stylistic promiscuity as expressions of lower classes' cultural expectations, in the form of “carnivalized culture of the marketplace”.² Through the dislocation of theatre on streets, *piazzas*, and market squares, and through the abandonment of linear narratives to embrace performance texts, *commedia dell'arte* had achieved a genuine aesthetic overturn. The ethos of the new *commedia* as “total theatre”³ attempted to supplant the role of the spectator and the spectatorship relation with the actors, to adapt and respond to fresh conjunctures, to be multi-expressive, and to endorse the actional and the behavioural, rather than the psychological.

Accordingly, the extemporaneous and itinerant nature of *commedia dell'arte* had become the prerequisite of its evolving diasporic traits. Moreover, both as a cultural ethos and a theatrical genre, *commedia dell'arte* would have not survived apart from its far-reaching diasporic traits regarding the theatrical form, its most common tropes, and spatial and temporal contextualisation. More recent denominations of *commedia dell'arte* as “implicit theatre” (Lorenzo Stoppato) or “theatrical instinct” (Konstantin Miklasevskij)⁴ are relevant and explanatory not only for the intermittent decentralization of canonical theatre, but also for the transformative and innovative potentialities of *commedia dell'arte* from mid-16th century onwards. The 18th-century theoretical and programmatic confrontation between the ‘two Carlos’ (Goldoni

and Gozzi) had already recognized the impact of *commedia dell'arte* upon the development of theatre and opened the path for further explorations. Apart from more recent appropriations by the political and ideological theatre, mostly as ephemeral social criticism, *commedia dell'arte* has essentially remained versatile, performative, and ever-changing. The plural intersections of *commedia dell'arte* with street theatre, court entertainment, carnival events, popular farces and even *commedia erudita* have rendered the genre to the aesthetic preferences of folk culture. Improvisation, laughter, its stock characters, and masks still remain signature marks of *commedia dell'arte* as distinct – but never extinct – cultural tropes. Certain similarities to and distinctions from *commedia dell'arte* and mime, pantomime, circus clowning, vaudeville, burlesque comedies, acrobatics, street dance and farces have further refined its vocabulary and recognizable traits. The admixture of the jocular, the trivial, the vulgar and the ineffable have shaped *commedia dell'arte* in both its form and content,⁵ and ultimately divided advocates from detractors regarding the substantive artistic value(s) of the *commedia*. The 20th-century theoretical debates on the functions and meanings of theatre – in Stanislavsky, Artaud, Brecht, Bakhtin, and others – and the appraisals of continuators⁶ still fuel both theoretical reconsiderations and practical experimentation. More recent contemporary reassessments insist on the significance of practical research, according to which reinterpretations in the fields of artisan theatre, experiential mask, accidental narrative, and stage resonance should prevail.⁷

It is in the very nature of *commedia dell'arte* to be permanently on the move

– and hence diasporic –, utterly actional and performative, adaptive to temporal and topological circumstances, continuously questioning the form and content of theatrical expressions and interpretations. The present reflection aims to identify the diasporic/moving essence of *commedia dell'arte* in its formal/theatrical, tropological, topological, and temporal occurrences and conventions. A coda to this investigation is added in order to argue for the ultimate versatility of *commedia dell'arte* as a popular culture movement and for the witty responsiveness of its present instantiations to the cultural trends of entertainment, commercialism, and consumerism.

On the Moving Nature of the Formal/Theatrical in *Commedia dell'arte*

Formally, *commedia dell'arte* has stood for transgressing mainstream patterns of expression and representation. First and foremost, it rejected the dramatic form to opt for the more easy-going and performative stances of the theatrical understood in the broadest form. In its specific difference, *commedia dell'arte* undermined *commedia erudita* and the classical canon of the comedy to embrace the dissenting approach specific to *commedia mercenaria*. Until Carlo Gozzi's plea for absorbing the new expressive forms of comedy, the essentially dynamic nature of *commedia dell'arte* has ceaselessly inspired experimentation and innovation in the field of professional comedy. For instance, the term *marivaudage* denoted Pierre de Marivaux's turn from farcical to sentimental comedy under the undeniable impact of *commedia dell'arte*'s versatility. Never addicted

to cultural canons and theatre finesse, *commedia dell'arte* has always vacillated towards specific semiotics of cultural contexts and/or pragmatic reasoning.⁸ The ineffable character of *commedia dell'arte* has been the necessary – and often sufficient – condition of its successful (diasporic) dissemination throughout Europe since the late 16th century.

The theatrical formalism of *commedia dell'arte* is fully comprehensible within the fundamental traits of function and improvisation. Within a timespan of two centuries, from the golden age at the turn of the 17th century to the late 18th century, *commedia dell'arte* had been mostly apolitical, both for pragmatic reasons of pleasing patrons and for fearing censorship. The dictum 'form follows function' was introduced in the more professionalized context of refreshing the theatre of *commedia* in the twentieth century, along markedly ideological and political messages of neo-*commedia* as its main functions. Accordingly, iconoclasm, subversion and dissent should serve the functional purpose of comedy, both aesthetically and politically. Bertolt Brecht demanded that the neo-comedians should commit themselves to upright ideological agendas and inform the audiences about the social, economic, and political embodiments of characters through specific body language, physical acting, and accurate costuming.⁹ Probably the most vocal advocate of social criticism through *commedia dell'arte* was the notorious Italian playwright, theatre director and actor, Dario Fo. His farces with markedly political intent called for distinct forms of protest through cultural activism; at the 1997 Nobel Prize acceptance speech, Dario Fo appraised *commedia dell'arte* as

the most characteristic form of folk culture for the relief and joy of the downtrodden.¹⁰ Apart from the political and social activism in the footsteps of post-Marxist theories and commitments, *commedia dell'arte* in its pure theatrical expressions should be responsive to the satirical, parodical and entertainment habitudes of middle social classes.

The formal trait that has ultimately been consequential for the ever-changing and yet enduring diasporic character of *commedia dell'arte* resides in its inexhaustible power of improvisation. Incorporated into several conventions and varieties of comedy – i.e., *commedia a soggetto*, *commedia all'improvviso*, *commedia alla maschera* – the formal commitment to improvisation has always ignited the performative, the actional, the rhetorical skills and the negotiation inventiveness of the comedians. It is utterly improvisation that has made *commedia dell'arte* culturally attuned, dynamic, adaptive, and responsive to complex expectations, understanding patterns, and transactional means of meaningful exchanges with various audiences. At the interplay between writing and language, between design and performance, improvisation has remained the very instrument of cultural homology, connection and interaction between literacy and orality.¹¹

Skilled performers rather than profound writers, the comedians have rather embraced the performative contexts to the detriment of dramatic modalities, and improvisational inventiveness to the detriment of carefully following script requirements. Even if most leaders of itinerant troupes were both writers and performers, the intersections and splits between orality/language and script/text have always

devised the substance and limits of improvisation. There has always been a synthesis between research insisting on the exceptional oral culture of the improvising comedians,¹² and a certain view according to which improvisation should be deemed as “a way of writing, not of performing”.¹³ Through gestures, improvisation, and body techniques, one could grasp the meanings of a *commedia* without even understanding the language,¹⁴ and this goes the same with addressing the audience by using the culturally appropriate language in order to instil relevant significance. In most cases, the language of *commedia* has used vernacular and un-sophisticated terms, “neither too vulgar, nor crude” (Flaminio Scala), in order to meet the audiences’ familiarity; on the other hand, the use of language in *commedia* has appealed to the visual, the gestural, and the symbolic. The overall pragmatic approach to language usage in situational comedy can be rendered to speech acts theory:¹⁵ recurrent practices of the *commedia* have used on a large scale the improvisational potential of double acts (i.e., between two actors), or of the technique of triangulation (i.e., involving the most popular stock characters of *commedia dell'arte*, usually representing the lovers, the old men, and the servants). Theatrical formalism in *commedia dell'arte* has endorsed gestures over words, action over narration, practical experience over abstract concepts.¹⁶ Deriving rules from usage, and not usage from rules, the aesthetic form of *commedia dell'arte* has stood for the dynamic instead of fixed canons, for the transformative over the normative, and for the performative over the representational and the mimetic. Ultimately, improvisation in *commedia dell'arte* is a subtle correlation

between form and freedom through the synchronizing plot, the performative roles of actors, and the local specificities of gestures, moves and language.¹⁷ More specifically, the feature of localization has probably secured *commedia*'s adaptability to various cultural contexts and performative challenges, and preserved its vivid popularity among diverse audiences.

On the Tropological Elements of *Commedia dell'arte*

The tropological in *commedia dell'arte* is referential towards certain recognizable elements and the set of commonplace conventions, plot elements and visual denotations that have conserved the unmediated associations of its long-living practices with the original mannerisms of the *commedia* as a cultural medium. The truth of *commedia dell'arte* – apud Nietzsche¹⁸ – ultimately relies on “a sum of human relations which have been poetically and rhetorically intensified, transferred, and embellished, and which, after long usage, seem to a people to be fixed, canonical, and binding”. In other words, what has been truthful about *commedia dell'arte* and has been identified as consistently characteristic and distinctive points to certain signature marks or immediately recognizable elements. Accordingly, the most typical and widely ascertainable cultural tropes of *commedia dell'arte* reside in the characters, the masks, and the pantomime, respectively. These three ingredients of the *commedia* have not only popularized the theatrical genre as such, but have also been decisive for the augmentation of its diasporic power in time and space, due to their persistence and contiguous utilizations and adaptations.

The theoretical research dedicated to actors and personages of *commedia dell'arte* has endorsed the concept of ‘stock characters’. This commendable approach to critical and theoretical investigation points to the fact that the terminology of ‘stock characters’ is essentially indicative for a range of figures that are understood either as stereotypical (i.e., mental and uncritical associations with types of performing along recognizable patterns), or as archetypical (i.e., cognitive associations with codes of reference specific to each character separately), or according to an idiosyncratic association with a fixed typology of characters, locally embodied through specific names, masks, roles and dialectical speeches. Either way, a high degree of typification and stylization of characters in *commedia dell'arte* has made room for the acknowledgement of a certain iconography of personages and actors within a fully expressive cultural medium “dominated by character rather than story and by role rather than script”.¹⁹

Additionally, based on discernible performing patterns and stereotypical acting behaviours of the ‘stock characters’, certain closed forms of *commedia dell'arte* have been identified: the *bravura* (centred on the solo acting of one character, without being a monologue), the *servetta* (the practice of greeting the audience), the *sproloquio* (with its plot focus on the eloquence of the pansophical character), the *contrasti* (duets growing out of a confusing situation or a mistake), the *burle* (aiming attention at practical jokes), and the *sfessaria* (a kind of walking dance, distinct from ballet).²⁰ Characteristic for the theoretical efforts of revisiting the aesthetic resources of the *commedia*, 20th century debates and

controversies have critically questioned the accuracy of explaining commedia in terms of closed forms and stereotypical (stock) characters. Serious theoretical research and practical experimentation have reconsidered the adaptive, renewing, and enriching range of multi-expressive characters, masks, plots, and performative possibilities. In the field of characters research, Giovanni Poli aimed to reconstruct the Zanni figure in order to close the perceptual and epistemological gap between past meanings and present reifications of the typological *zanni* personages (i.e., foolish followers and clownish servants) in commedia dell'arte.²¹

Masks and costuming have also concurred to assigning certain cultural codes and 'stock perceptions' to commedia dell'arte representations. In fact, the immediate recognition of characters and roles in commedia dell'arte has been possible due to the fascination with the masked actors, and the visual and intuitive associations of mask and costuming with the actors' statuses and acting repertoires within the plot of the commedia. The aura of the mask in commedia dell'arte has probably generated the high contemporary interest for researching, testing, and reworking of the mask's expressive resources, resulting in striking discoveries and achievements. From Meyerhold, Copeau, Lecoq, Mnouchkine, Sartori and Fava, the theorists of the mask overused it for training and performing purposes, at the crossroads between theatre history and ritualic practices.²² Donato Sartori, who pushed forward his father's – Amleto – work and experimentation with the mask, specifically distinguished between the ritualic and ethno-anthropological mask, the mask within the history of theatre, and the mask as the

magic and subtle container of theatre and cultural meanings, respectively.²³ Another famous researcher in the field of mask and scenic movement, Jacques Lecoq, postulated the concept of the 'mimo-dynamic' mask in his impetus of moving beyond the sterile conventions and rigid associations of the masks with the archetypical characters.²⁴ In this way, Lecoq made a step forward in denouncing both Goldoni's rebuttal of the mask in theatre according to his view of 'maskless' naturalism, and the naturalistic masks which had been the cultural by-products of traditional theatre stereotypes, including a certain formal mannerism in the understanding of the mask in commedia dell'arte. All these efforts in reviving the multi-expressive dimensions of the mask have been focused on highlighting the very dialectical nature of the mask: while formally concealing the actor's face, it concomitantly unveils the character's moral traits and social status. In both cases, the mask stands for the communicative transactions between the actors and the spectators, and for the ever-changing cultural conventions of identification and recognition.

The diasporic and perpetual character of commedia dell'arte has also been ensured by the reconsideration of (panto) mime as a steady-going cultural trope. Not only through the conservation of substantive pantomime in comic gags (*lazzi*), masks (*zannata*), slapstick comics, acrobatics, troupe performances, physical theatre, and clownery, but also within cross-border forms of entertainment, pantomime has constantly remained one of the most enduring traits of post-commedia instantiations. In his 1974 manifesto of neo-commedia, Mazzone-Clementi

named pantomime, alongside movement research and corporeal expression, as one of the most resourceful tropes of *commedia dell'arte* for the future, due to the more and more visual character of contemporary culture and their potentiality of being responsive to wider categories of audiences, beyond times and spaces and/or peculiar cultural conventions. Jacques Lecoq, whose notable achievements in the study of theatre movement were probably connected with his experience as a physical therapist, investigated certain motion correlations between two of the most popular forms of entertainment industry, sport and performative arts, respectively.²⁵ Ole Brekke, disciple of Mazonne-Clementi and founder of the *Commedia School* in Copenhagen, placed *commedia dell'arte* at the crossroads between the dramatic forms of representation specific to theatre and the performative expressions and abilities of circus acts.²⁶ Whatever connections the new theorists might have envisaged in order to assess the expressive modalities of *commedia dell'arte*, pantomime has been constantly seized as an outstanding ingredient of rhetorical performance. In their view, the rhetorical in *commedia dell'arte* has encompassed acting skills, contextual versatility, and the essential empathy with the audiences. In the latter respect, pantomime has moved beyond vernacular associations with laughter and entertainment, to inflict gestural and corporeal significant communication with the spectators.

On Certain Salient Topological and Temporal Considerations regarding *Commedia dell'arte*

In the first section, the main argument of the present study is that the performative, language, and functional improvisation have formally preserved the diasporic theatrical character of *commedia dell'arte*. The diasporic character of the formal/theatrical in *commedia dell'arte* has decisively impacted upon the more recent developments of theatrical forms into the post-theatrical through diasporic processes of cross-cultural commonalities against the autonomy of the aesthetic forms and the constraints of the canonical theatre. The second section argues that the enduring cultural tropes associated with the characters, the mask and the pantomime have been consequential in spreading recurrent psychological and epistemological meanings of *commedia dell'arte*. The present section examines certain topological and temporal traits of *commedia dell'arte*, which are explanatory for the spatial disseminations and chronological developments, respectively.

Topologically, the diasporic descriptive features of *commedia dell'arte* are itinerancy, extraterritoriality, and transnationalism. These traits have highly contributed to the spatial transmissions of *commedia's* ethos and specificities, so that both the globalization and localization of its occurrences could be mentioned as topological phenomena of its geographical expansionism. Firstly, itinerancy functions as a genuine heuristic tool in explaining the essentially dynamic approach of *commedia dell'arte*. Albeit difficult because of limited transportation means and conditions, the

itinerancy of troupes according to carefully planned circuits had been quintessential for the evolution of commedia dell'arte as a spreading cultural movement. Also considering the historical context of the European states and, more specifically, the political fragmentation of Italy during the glorious age of commedia dell'arte, 1550-1650, the itinerant comedians were authentic cultural messengers in the age of post-Renaissance humanism. Itinerancy has also propelled the professionalization of theatre, since the troupes, already exhausted of their peregrinations from capitals and big cities between different states, had started to contract their performances to managerial companies in order to benefit of guaranteed payment and better places for their artistic representations.²⁷ More importantly, itinerance had decisively contributed to the increasing popularity of commedia performances throughout Europe, and had also been the prerequisite of enriching modalities of expression and acting skills. The local interactions between the itinerant troupes (e.g., Gelosi, Accessi, Infammati, Confidenti, Uniti, Desiosi, etc.) and the diverse cultural habits and expectations of the audiences in countries like France, England, Germany, and the Low Countries have not only expanded the performative vocabulary of commedia dell'arte, but also fomented its diasporic character. The very synthesis of commedia's lexicon in the 17th and 18th centuries professional commedia – especially in the French dramatic works of Molière, Beaumarchais, and Marivaux – was the ineluctable result of itinerant motifs, acting skills, and social conventions in the realm of theatrical entertainment. Utterly asymmetrical, centrifugal, non-linear, and amorphous,²⁸

itinerant topological transnationalism in the golden age of commedia dell'arte had secured its widespread popularity beyond the limited identification with the specificity of the Italian theatre. For instance, the entertaining force of itinerant troupes compelled the Royal Court of Bavaria to organize street celebrations of the 1568 wedding between Prince Wilhelm and Princess Renée of Lorraine in the spirit of commedia dell'arte performances.²⁹ In a nutshell, the topological itinerancy of commedia-type of theatrical performances have been an indispensable trait for ascertaining the circulation and “transnational exchange of theatrograms”.³⁰

Long time before the contemporary globalization of commedia dell'arte, the itinerant troupes have developed specific local strategies of verbal, gestural, and kinetic performing, and also contextual complicities and interactions with local audiences. Certain codified “socioallegorical constructs”³¹, as well as pragmatic adjustment and contextualization have facilitated the comedians' adaptability to diverse social and cultural environments through ‘embodied locality’ founded on “patterns of attitudinal and geographical sympathy and antipathy”³² towards the audiences. In their conversations and exchanges with the spectators, the comedians have developed a strong sense of “freedom, frankness and familiarity” with the audiences, as the very condition of possibility for the ‘extraterritoriality’ of their performances and acting skills.³³ Additionally, their ability to perform in various scenic places and settings is explanatory for their versatility and adaptability to both ad-hoc and decorum stages, not to mention the fact that they were perfectly trained and prepared to play

on the streets. The concept of the 'elastic scene'³⁴ in commedia dell'arte incorporates cleared spaces, trestle stages with or without curtains, open-air booth stages, indoor rooms, and – rather rarely – theatre buildings. The comedians' commitment to perform in various stage arrangements utterly speaks about their adaptability to local circumstances and practical conditions, apart from their preference for indoor stages, secured arrangements and wealthy patrons.

In the 20th century, especially under the impact of the avantgarde movements and rejection of traditional canons of the (performative) arts, further changes have pushed forward the spatial exodus of commedia dell'arte. During the interwar period, partly due to the iconoclastic views of the avantgardes and partly because of unsteady social, political, and economic conditions after the first world war, further attempts to decentralize theatre have been made. In Italy, the country of the commedia, the itinerant troupes, collectively called *Theatre Viaggiante*, generally avoided to voice outright political messages, but continued to disclose the social worries of the masses in a comic manner. On the other hand, in France, the new theorists and practitioners of commedia dell'arte – *les Copiaus*³⁵ – aimed to enforce the implicit ideological agenda of the new theatre by localizing their performances in the cultural environment of rural France. The expansion of research and experimentation in commedia dell'arte has transgressed the European borders to reach distant places and cultures worldwide. One of the leading theorists of neo-commedia, Mazzone-Clementi, brought it to the United States in 1958 and inaugurated the Dell'Arte School of Mime and Comedy in California (1975),

concomitantly working as assistant professor of movement at Carnegie Mellon University and collaborating with the San Francisco Mime Troupe. The enthusiasm of the new explorers has reached the Asian and African continents, and even 'exotic places': Joan Schirle, the founder of the Dell'Arte International, conducted a month-long training session in commedia in Bali!³⁶ Carlo Boso, a neo-commedia researcher and activist, had moved to organize international workshops in the 1980s in order to popularize the new techniques of acrobatics, body mime and public performance; resulting from these notable efforts in the postmodern reconstruction of the commedia, a committed study group founded Theater Without Borders in 1999, with a special focus on the transnational and cross-comparative perspectives and investigations on the new forms of expression and practical approaches in the field of commedia dell'arte.³⁷

Within almost 500 years of historical evolution, the extraterritoriality principle of topological adaptations in commedia dell'arte has coexisted with the so-called extemporaneity of invention. The concoction between temporal adjustments to avoid anachronism and timeless reiterations of its substantive forms and contents has created a certain sense of "fictive temporality", according to which the temporal evolution of commedia dell'arte could be comprehended "neither (as) development, nor (as) age".³⁸ However, contemporary research in the field of commedia dell'arte has followed two basic directions: firstly, the broadest ideological one, in the footsteps of Bertolt Brecht, has endorsed the concept of theoretical critique of power in the service of political action and social

discourse as the most meaningful pattern of studying the historicization of theatre; secondly, the proper chronological investigations of *commedia dell'arte* should be focused on both the study of its historical origins and precursory intellectual and cultural forms, on the one hand, and its legacy in diverse contemporary occurrences, on the other. In line with the first direction of research, certain timely transformations of *commedia's* cultural tropes have become referential for ascertaining recurring critique of power: i) the reconfigurations of the theatrical mask from Edward Gordon Craig to Japanese Noh Theatre, and the reconceptualization of both the masked mime by Amleto and Donato Sartori, Jacques Lecoq, Giovanni Poli, and the dance mask by Oskar Schlemmer's Triadic Ballet or John Weaver's narrative dance; ii) the emergent critical mediums of the new comic in Theatre du Soleil and San Francisco Mime Troupe, and the entertainment cinematic industry in Buster Keaton's pantomimes, Marx Brothers' farces or Charlie Chaplin's tragicomedies. The gradual sophistication and increase of the audiences and the new cultural forms of critique and comprehension of the political have precipitated temporal revisions and accommodations of *commedia's* expressive capabilities. Secondly, the study of its chronological evolution has situated *commedia dell'arte* in the long-living tradition of European comedy, stemming from the first century's farcical *fabula Atelanna* of histrions, the ancient cities' mime performances, and the acrobatic entertainment of mountebanks at the fairs and carnivals.³⁹

On the other hand, the enduring popularity of *commedia dell'arte* has not only impacted the development of European

theatre (i.e., in both its influential and crisis periods), but also pushed forward its historicity up to contemporary neo-*commedia* representations. Noticeably, one could even postulate the historical (dis)continuities between two mainstream time generations of neo-*commedia*: the first generation of pioneering commitment to radical transformations includes Jacques Lecoq, Jacques Copeau, Giorgio Strehler, Carlo Mazzone-Clementi and Giovanni Poli; the second generation of neo-*commedia* theorists and pathfinders most notably includes Carlo Boso and Antonio Fava as its leading representatives. The undeniable expansionism of *commedia dell'arte* to incorporate the more and more diverse comedy patterns and vocabularies comes with the risk of becoming an over-protean movement. Furthermore, the postmodern infatuations with permanent modernisation of its aesthetic forms and experimental expressiveness would have to confront the danger of 'temporal inappropriateness'.⁴⁰

Coda. Further Reflections on the Diasporic Transgressions of *Commedia dell'arte*

The post-avantgarde attempts to rejuvenate *commedia dell'arte* in keeping with the cultural needs and aspirations of the ordinary people have culminated with Carlo Mazzone-Clementi's publication of the neo-*commedia* ideological manifesto, in 1974, entitled 'Commedia and the actor'.⁴¹ It was probably not by accident that the manifesto was published in the United States, since the American second half of the 20th century had been markedly dominated by the resurgence of lowbrow culture. The unprecedented explosion of

popular culture has paralleled profound transformations in the fine arts, whereby abstract expressionist action paintings, pop art, happenings, performance, and graffiti art have supplanted and subverted the traditional canons of representations specifically associated with elitism and high-brow culture. Since the cultural bridges in the transatlantic world have turned dominant, the European trends have mirrored the emergent cultural turn in the United States. In the domain of the commedia, Giovanni Poli and the Ca'Foscari troupe at the University of Venice attempted to rejuvenate commedia dell'arte as a pure theatrical form for the ordinary people against elitism, TV naturalism and realism, to embrace theatre of masks, vocal and corporeal rhythms, and performative and actional interactions with the audience in the attempt to undermine Stanislavski's pleas for theatre-going publics and mainstream approaches to theatrical representations. Many such initiatives have propelled the development of popular theatre that had emerged at the turn of the 20th century as a means of transgressing the romantic, naturalist, and psychological mannerisms of theatre. Moreover, the new theorists have also transgressed the barriers between managerial competence, social activism, and the professional roles in theatre, working simultaneously as theatre directors, researchers, script writers, and actors. The concept of 'total theatre' aimed to undermine the division of work within the professionalized theatre and to co-opt more and more diverse audiences, irrespective of their social statuses. At the turn of the 21st century, Hans-Thies Lehmann published a compelling academic work which acknowledged the 20th century

complete transgression of traditional theatre of staged dramas, scripted texts, and moralising plot into postdramatic theatre based on experimentalism, performativity, and ensemble theatre experientialism. Lehmann's subversion of theatrical narrativism through the inversion of aesthetic categories and hierarchies between images, movements, and language was a strategic move he probably inherited from surrealism in order to repudiate the normative and the canonical in theatre.⁴²

In my view, what has utterly characterized the dissemination potentialities and the plethora of expressions in commedia dell'arte is less related with theoretical and ideological programs properly – unlike the postmodern stances of critical theatre – but rather with the prevailing impetuses of the entertainment industries, commercialism, and consumerism in the arts. Additionally, pragmatic considerations have prevailed over purely aesthetic concerns, so that commedia dell'arte could be assessed less as “a historical style, but rather as a source of inspiration in the creation of new characters for contemporary times”.⁴³ The entertainment attractions of the middle social classes in the contemporary age intermingle social criticism, farce, pastiche, and laughter. Dario Fo's irreverent farces of 'Mistero Buffo', often introduced by an improvisational prologue and sometimes communicated in the incongruous idiom of Grommelot,⁴⁴ has been one of the most captivating responses to the neo-commedia expectations with certain origins in the late-medieval practices of the *giullari*,⁴⁵ blending social and political dissent, mockery, and irresistible laughter to create expressive transactions with the audiences. Furthermore, Vsevolod Meyerhold's

conceptualization of *commedia dell'arte* as “fairground entertainment”⁴⁶ finds its sources of laughter and joy in the 18th century France *opéra-comique* and *opéra-bouffon* and constitutes the main drive of *commedia*’s longevity and relevance for the contemporary tastes and theatrical sensibilities. Ultimately, the recurrent popularity of *commedia dell'arte* as a diasporic paragon of popular culture could be assessed in terms of rough commercialism, advertising strategies, and fashionable consumerism. In the contemporary world of the post-theatrical, post-aesthetical and post-canonical, popular culture meets the recurrent traits of *commedia dell'arte* in the prevalence of the visual over the textual and (realist) aesthetic representation, in the rejection of elitism and highbrow culture and preferences for entertainment and leisure, and/or in the disengagement with the normative and

the purist forms of theatrical expressions. According to Antonio Fava, “*commedia dell'arte* was a brutally commercial proposition, a product for sale. It had to please; otherwise, it wasn’t saleable”.⁴⁷ Both the shortcomings and achievements of its mutations, transgressions, refurbishments, and peregrinations eventually inform the story its comforting capital, pragmatic inventiveness, and market-oriented stratagems of dissemination. Ultimately, the solid features that have secured the diasporic character of *commedia dell'arte* reside in the performative and improvisational ways of the *commedia* transgressing linguistic barriers and cultural specificities, in the universally recognizable themes, motifs and expressive modalities, and in the transnational and utterly itinerant spread of both the comedians and *commedia*’s patterns of manifestation and cross-cultural conventions.

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NOTES

1. Chiara D'Anna, *A Journey Back Home. Through a Mask for the 21st Century: The Legacy of Commedia dell'Arte in Postdramatic Theatre with Particular Focus on the Centrality of the Actor in Devised Performance*, London, London Metropolitan University, 2019, p. 51.
2. Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, Translated by Helene Iswolsky, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1984.
3. Antonio Fava, *The Comic Mask in the Commedia dell'Arte*, Second edition, Evanston, IL, North Western University Press, 2007.
4. Christopher B. Balme, Piermario Vescovo, Daniele Vianello (eds.), *Commedia dell'Arte in Context*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2018, p. 34.
5. Ion Marin Sadoveanu, *Istoria Universală a Dramei și a Teatrului*, Volumul 1, București, Editura Eminescu, 1973, p. 151.
6. Antonio Fava, *The Comic Mask in the Commedia dell'Arte*, p. xv. According to Fava, considering its multivalent contemporary reassessments and impact on the development of theatrical practices, commedia dell'arte "stands in equal dignity with Shakespeare, Lope de Vega and Moliere".
7. Chiara D'Anna, *A Journey Back Home*, pp. 6-7.
8. Domenic Pietropaolo, *Semiotics and Pragmatics of Stage Improvisation*, London & New York, Bloomsbury, 2016.
9. Marc Silberman, Steve Giles, Tom Kuhn (eds.), *Brecht on Theatre*, Third edition, London & New York, Methuen, 2015, pp. 5-6.
10. Olly Crick, Sergio Costola, *The Dramaturgy of Commedia dell'Arte*, London & New York, Routledge, 2022, pp. 25-28.
11. Robert Henke, "Orality and Literacy in the Commedia dell'Arte and the Shakespearean Clown", in *Oral Tradition*, 11 (1996), 2, p. 222.
12. *Idem*, *Performance and Literature in the Commedia dell'Arte*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2003, p. 147.
13. John Rudlin, Antonio Fava, *Commedia dell'Arte, Its Structure and Tradition: Antonio Fava in Conversation with John Rudlin*, London & New York, Routledge, 2021, p. 60.
14. Matthew Buckley, "Eloquent Action: The Body and Meaning in Early Commedia dell'Arte", in *Theatre Survey*, 50 (2009), 2, p. 252. This method is known as 'physical acting'.
15. Judith Chaffee, Olly Crick (eds.), *The Routledge Companion to Commedia dell'Arte*, London & New York, Routledge, 2015, pp. 30-40.
16. Chiara D'Anna, *A Journey Back Home*, pp. 26-27.
17. Judith Chaffee, Olly Crick (eds.), *op. cit.*, p. 21.
18. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Philosophy and Truth: Selections from Nietzsche's Notebooks of the Early 1870's*, Translated by Daniel Breazeale, Atlantic Highlands, N. J., Humanities, 1979, p. 23.
19. Matthew Buckley, *art. cit.*, p. 256. The preference for the identification of 'stock characters' in commedia dell'arte is also detectable in engravings and paintings (Antonio Tempesta, Jacques Callot, Jan I Bruegel, Louis de Caulery, Sebastian Vranx, Tiepolo, Antoine Watteau, Paul Cezanne, Lucian Freud, among many others), or in the famous representations of commedia's characters in Recueil Frossard's woodcuts (p. 277).
20. John Rudlin, Antonio Fava, *Commedia dell'Arte, Its Structure and Tradition*, pp. 49-51.
21. Judith Chaffee, Olly Crick (eds.), *op. cit.*, pp. 382-384.
22. David Roy, "Masks in Pedagogical Practice", in *Journal for Learning Through the Arts*, 12 (2016), 1, p. 3.
23. Judith Chaffee, Olly Crick (eds.), *op. cit.*, p. 146.
24. *Ibidem*, pp. 132-134.
25. Olly Crick, Sergio Costola, *The Dramaturgy of Commedia dell'Arte*, pp. 13-14.
26. *Ibidem*, p. 47.

27. Judith Chaffee, Olly Crick (eds.), *op. cit.*, p. 47.
28. Robert Henke, Eric Nicholson (eds.), *Transnational Mobilities in Early Modern Theater*, London & New York, Routledge, 2016, p. 5.
29. Margaret A. Katritzky, *The Art of Commedia. A Study in the Commedia dell'Arte 1560-1620 with Special Reference to the Visual Records*, Amsterdam & New York, Rodopi, 2006, pp. 45-46.
30. Judith Chaffee, Olly Crick (eds.), *op. cit.*, p. 230.
31. Matthew Buckley, *art. cit.*, p. 256.
32. Olly Crick, Sergio Costola, *The Dramaturgy of Commedia dell'Arte*, p. 129.
33. Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, pp. 153-154.
34. Richard Andrews, *The Commedia dell'Arte of Flaminio Scala*, Lanham, MD & Plymouth, Scarecrow Press, 2008, pp. xlv-xlvi.
35. Olly Crick, Sergio Costola, *The Dramaturgy of Commedia dell'Arte*, pp. 2-5.
36. *Ibidem*, p. 51.
37. Robert Henke, Eric Nicholson (eds.), *op. cit.*, p. 1.
38. Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, Translated by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, Austin, University of Texas Press, 1982, pp. 40-63.
39. Nancy Kay Pennell, *Three Theories of the Origin of the Commedia dell'Arte*, Manhattan, Kansas, Kansas State University, 1989, pp. 8-69.
40. John Rudlin, Antonio Fava, *Commedia dell'Arte, Its Structure and Tradition*, pp. 58-60.
41. Carlo Mazzone-Clementi, "Commedia and the Actor", in *The Drama Review*, 18 (1974), 1, pp. 59-64, www.jstor.org/stable/1144862.
42. Hans-Thies Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre*, Translated by Karen Jürs-Munby, London & New York, Routledge, 2006.
43. Claire Canavan, "Created by the Ensemble: Generative Creativity and Collective Creation at the Dell'Arte International School of Physical Theatre", in *Theatre Topics*, 22 (2012), 1, p. 49.
44. Judith Chaffee, Olly Crick (eds.), *op. cit.*, pp. 155-164.
45. The term *giullari* points to itinerant players and acrobats who spread the latest news through their on-the-road performances.
46. Vsevolod Meyerhold, *Écrits sur le Théâtre. Tome II: 1917-1930*, Lausanne, L'Âge d'Homme, 2009, p. 356.
47. John Rudlin, Antonio Fava, *Commedia dell'Arte, Its Structure and Tradition*, p. 35.