

The Rebirth of *Commedia dell'arte*: *Arlecchino, Servant of Two Masters*

Ioana Rufu¹

¹I.L. Caragiale National University of Theatre and Film, Bucharest, Romania

ioana.rufu@unatc.ro

Abstract

Commedia dell'arte is brought back in the spotlight in 1947 through Giorgio Strehler's performance, *Arlecchino, Servant of Two Masters*, a performance still played to this day, after more than seventy years. Giorgio Strehler's performance is one of the most famous of all times, a work that gives birth to many controversies, related to the fact that the most famous *commedia dell'arte* performance of all times is not really *commedia dell'arte*. Giorgio Strehler discovers, reinvents a new *commedia dell'arte*, where there is a director, the canvas is substituted with a written text that becomes the base for the actor's improvisation. Giorgio Strehler's *Arlecchino, Servant of Two Masters* represent the rebirth, reinvention of a new *commedia dell'arte*.

Keywords: *Commedia dell'arte*, mask, actor, *Arlecchino*, evolution.

How to cite: Rufu, I. (2021). The Rebirth of *Commedia dell'arte: Arlecchino, Servant of Two Masters*. *Doctoral Horizons* 1(3), 28-34.

Introduction

Giorgio Strehler, considered the father of the Italian theatrical direction, is the one who brings *commedia dell'arte* back in the spotlight, through his performance, *Arlecchino, Servant of Two Masters* (*Arlecchino servitore di due padroni*) at Piccolo Theatre of Milan, in the year 1947, a performance still played to this day with great success. Strehler "contributes at the foundation of an original theatrical language,

through the recovery of the artistic and professional knowledge of the comedians dell'arte" (Bentoglio, 2018, p. 46).

The success of the performance was also accompanied by controversy. Italian theatre critic Ferdinando Taviani argued that *Arlecchino, Servant of Two Masters* only gave the illusion of a *commedia dell'arte* performance. Starting with 1947, the performance seemed to incarnate *commedia dell'arte* in Italian culture and theatre. On the other hand, it showed Strehler's affinity to a directed theatre, that, in Italy, seems to have flourished after a big delay in comparison to other European countries." (Aslan and Bablet, 1985, p. 119) With *Arlecchino, Servant of Two Masters*, we witness the birth of the first *commedia dell'arte* performance as directed theatre in Italy.

A reinvented *commedia dell'arte*

The director chose not to work with a classical *commedia dell'arte* canvas, but instead decided to use Carlo Goldoni's text, *Servant of Two Masters*. Therefore, Strehler's performance did not respect the rigor of *commedia dell'arte*'s strict rules but was in fact a sort of reinvented *commedia dell'arte*. Giorgio Strehler used Goldoni's text as a starting point, he used the dialogues, the scenic situations, but he gave the actors the freedom to improvise, as *commedia dell'arte* actors did. Giorgio Strehler chose to write Goldoni's name on the poster, as the "dialogue's author" (Bentoglio, 2018, p. 46).

The text was used as a base for the actor's improvisations, the dialogues were developed with new lazzi, that were subsequently established. "Strehler gives a great freedom to the actors at rehearsals, asking to them to propose lazzi and to insert new text, that, once accepted, can be attached into the text of the performance" (Bentoglio, 2018, p. 47). Strehler's show was built as an intricate watch mechanism. Through Giorgio Strehler's creation, we are spectators to a *commedia dell'arte* performance which is no longer the theatre of the actor, but it becomes a directed theatre.

There are a lot of differences between a traditional *commedia dell'arte* performance and Strehler's work. When we talk about the traditional performance, the director doesn't exist, while in *Arlecchino, Servant of the Two Masters*, the director's role is fundamental. Strehler chooses to use a written text, Goldoni's text, and not a classical canvas. Goldoni's characters are better outlined than the

commedia dell'arte's typologies. Strehler changes Goldoni's main character's name—the famous servant from *commedia dell'arte*—from Truffaldino to Arlecchino, inserting his name in the title of the performance. "Strehler doubled with melancholy this *commedia dell'arte* character, Arlecchino, integrated by Goldoni in a text and placed this time in an abandoned building full of unsettling reflections" (Banu, 1993, p. 44).

The construction of this performance was a very long process, based on research of a great team, that brought a crucial contribution to the rebirth and invention of the *commedia dell'arte* we are familiar with today. Strehler's performance became the new model of *commedia dell'arte* all over the world, an icon not only for the public, but also in the theatre and theatre pedagogy of today.

The development of *Arlecchino, Servant of Two Masters*

Arlecchino, Servant of Two Masters suffered a lot of transformations during the years. Although Strehler built a very stable mechanism, he accepted the possibility of change destined to improve the performance. The fact that he continuously shifted some details of the performance gave the actors the possibility to remain fresh and alive on stage.

Giorgio Strehler started his research from the historical data available. In 1948, Strehler decides to collaborate with Jacques Lecoq, in order to develop a specific training for the actor that used pantomime elements. The duo worked together on a training and rehearsals plan for the actors, especially for the actor that played Arlecchino, who had the most difficult mission. In 1951, Giorgio Strehler and Jacques Lecoq started the collaboration with Amleto Sartori, the mask maker artist who rediscovered an art that was lost during centuries—the art of the construction of the leather masks. Sartori will create the masks for Strehler's performances. "He resumed, starting from zero and without me insisting very much, a long-lost technique, the one of the mask crafting from the 16th, 17th, and 18th centuries" (Tonitza-Iordache and Banu, 2004, p. 426).

Strehler, Lecoq, and Sartori used the periphery of Padua as an important source of inspiration when building the new *commedia dell'arte* character's bodies. They chose the periphery because the human typologies were out of the usual range. Lecoq was the one who studied the physical part, the posture, the way different people walked, while Amleto Sartori observed their physiognomy. By

putting together the historical data, documents, stamps, the observation of the different individuals with an unusual body, the out of the ordinary, together with dance and ballet movements, they gave birth to the *commedia dell'arte* bodies and typologies we are familiar with today. Each element that composes the body has a very clear meaning, no element was chosen at random, but these highlight the typology of the character. In this way, the inside features of the typologies are also visible in the body.

During this long and in-depth research, we also assist to the creation of the new *commedia dell'arte* leather masks. Body and mask are in direct connection because each line on the mask is continued in the body. This is the reason the collaboration between Lecoq and Sartori had to be very close. It was an important step in the rebirth of *commedia dell'arte*, that could be also considered an evolution, a reinventing of *commedia dell'arte*, or a “re-placement in the situation” (Tessari, n.d.).

At the beginning, the performance was played without masks, only with make-up, that had the purpose to imitate old *commedia dell'arte* masks. For the actors it was convenient to play without masks because they had the freedom to move, without the constraints of the mask, especially for Marcello Moretti, the actor that played the main character, Arlecchino. He had to move a lot on stage, making acrobatics, and the mask would limit the possibilities of the stage movement. “It was more convenient, especially for him, who moved continuously, but it was also the most hid the resistance with which the actor opposed the mask” (Tonitza-Iordache and Banu, 2004, p. 425).

The famous actor Dario Fo claimed that Marcello Moretti “refused to wear the mask for two reasons: first of all, because, for an actor, wearing a mask is an anguish” (Alberti and Piizzi, 2005, p. 15), because of the difficulty of breathing, the acoustic and visual limits. All these limits prevent the actor from focusing at maximum capacity. The second reason Dario Fo refers to “is the magical, mystically nature that manifests when you take off your mask: you have the feeling that a part of your face remains bonded” (Alberti and Piizzi, 2005, p. 15).

When Amleto Sartori created the first masks for *Arlecchino, Servant of Two Masters*, the actors tended to refuse them, despite Sartori’s efforts to create a mask that could be less hostile to the face of the actor, made of a soft leather. Marcello Moretti, the moment he put on the mask, he realized that most of the actions he had

on stage would be impossible to realize with the mask on, because the eyes of Arlecchino's mask were very small, like the traditional mask. This was the reason Moretti rejected the mask in a very violent manner, that made Sartori also react in an instinctive way, by cutting the masks eyes. This proved to be a historical moment, the birth of a new *commedia dell'arte* mask—Arlecchino cat, probably the most famous mask of all times. It took some time until the actors got used to the mask and accepted it, but they soon discovered its usage and its force. They understood the importance and the function of the mask, and they started treating it with respect, because they finally discovered an essential element of the *commedia dell'arte*, that was no longer an element against them, on the contrary, it became essential in the realization of the artistic act. "Since then, I had never seen a mask thrown in any corner, not even in the dressing rooms. The masks sit in a place of honour" (Tonitza-Iordache and Banu, 2004, p. 425).

Marcello Moretti was the one who discovered the secrets of the *commedia dell'arte* mask, secrets that were transmitted by Giorgio Strehler to the other actors. He discovered the mouth's function when playing with the mask, one that gives the mask dynamics. He also discovered the importance of highlighting the mouth with white make-up, that became the go-to make-up when playing with mask. Moretti discovered movements and angles that bring more expression to the mask. Giorgio Strehler expressed his admiration regarding Marcello Moretti, considering him an

actor of extraordinary bravery, capable to melt in his own craft an acting that is orchestrated in a perfect and balanced way, in different and complementary records of the word, gesture and acrobatic movement, of realistic intent. (Bentoglio, 2018, p. 47)

Moretti became the master of his younger colleagues, he was the one who prepared the one who would take his place, Ferruccio Soleri. From 1959, Soleri becomes Moretti's duplicate, playing once a week, and after Marcello Moretti's death, Soleri becomes the holder of Arlecchino's role in *Arlecchino, Servant of Two Masters*. Soleri played Arlecchino until 2019, when he withdrew at almost ninety years of age, and the new Arlecchino became Enrico Bonavera, who was part of the show since 1987.

Although Marcello Moretti, Ferruccio Soleri, and Enrico Bonavera played

the same character, the differences were obvious, their style was different. We witness an evolution of the role, because of the artistic personality of each actor, although we can talk about a steady character, an exact posture, a standard way of walking, a mask. First of all, each actor had his own mask, built for his unique face, with different details. Moretti shifted from working without mask towards working with a mask no one knew nothing about. His role as Arlecchino was a continuous evolution,. He became the model for all Arlecchino's in all *commedia dell'arte* performances. Feruccio Soleri had a great technique, an extraordinary physical preparation. Each gesture, each movement he does is perfect. The perfection of his technique is extraordinary, but, sometimes, all this rigour and perfection makes he seem without soul, without life. On the other hand, Enrico Bonavera's Arlecchino is totally different, although Bonavera studied with Ferruccio Soleri. Bonavera is an actor who enjoys playing, enjoys the moment he is on the stage. Bonavera is an actor with great experience, a good technique, but his emotions, the soul, the joy of playing are the main characteristics of Bonavera's interpretation. His way of moving is very soft, like the moves of a dancer. "Moretti, Soleri and Bonavera, through their flesh, through their sweat, through their acrobatics brought to life the effort, the pain, the passion of Tristano Martinelli, the one who invented Arlecchino in Paris in 1584/1585" (Sesso, 2015, p. 119).

Conclusions

Arlecchino, Servant of Two Masters is still played to this day, after more than seventy years. The main actors of this performance were three and the number of the actors that played during its lifetime is impressive. Giorgio Strehler used to say that in this performance probably saw the biggest actors of Italy. All of them had an important artistic contribution, through their artistical creation, even when we refer to strict rules, as the ones of *commedia dell'arte*. The work of Giorgio Strehler is an essential part of the theatrical history, but also an important part of our present, a theatrical mechanism, still in a continuous evolution. Strehler continuously proves us, though his performance that "everything advances, nothing stays unmoved, everything is in motion, in perennial development, that life is always "improvvisa" (Kessler and Strehler, 1974, p. 191). So is theatre, so is *commedia dell'arte*, so is the art of the actors.

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