

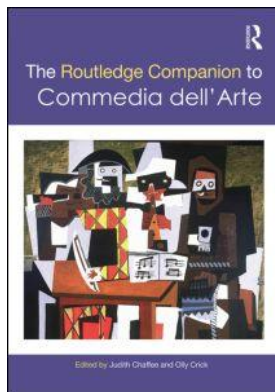
This article was downloaded by: 10.2.98.160

On: 28 Jan 2021

Access details: *subscription number*

Publisher: *Routledge*

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: 5 Howick Place, London SW1P 1WG, UK



The Routledge Companion to Commedia dell'Arte

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Form and Freedom

Publication details

<https://test.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9781315750842.ch2>

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Published online on: 08 Dec 2014

How to cite :- Robert Henke. 08 Dec 2014, *Form and Freedom from: The Routledge Companion to Commedia dell'Arte* Routledge

Accessed on: 28 Jan 2021

<https://test.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9781315750842.ch2>

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SCENARIOS

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FORM AND FREEDOM

Between scenario and stage

Robert Henke

The some eight hundred Commedia dell'Arte scenarios that survive attest to an art of improvisation that cannily negotiated flexibility and structure. Notwithstanding the professional actors' frequent performance of scripted as well as improvised plays, these curious and controversial texts quintessentially reflect the collaborative nature of an actors' theater, and the paradoxical fact that the performed scenario was both repeated and unique. The scenario provided the perfect textual machine for a theater that had to be constantly on the move, improvising on the entrepreneurial level just as it did in the performative domain. And, although the Italian actors equaled or excelled their English counterparts in internecine hostility, the short form of the scenario lent itself to collaborative dissemination more than did the zealously guarded English playscript. Mostly manuscript collections from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, produced by *dilettanti* as well as professionals, the scenarios can tell us important things about how improvisation actually worked, even as they only tell part of the improvisation story and, in most cases, bear marks of literary embellishment. Even in this last respect, however, they are not divorced from the performative world of the Commedia dell'Arte troupes, who freely pillaged conceits, tropes, and themes from Petrarch, Ariosto, Boccaccio, and other authors, simply bringing to the stage the humanist habit of modular, "rhapsodic" composition. The *comici* were, in that respect, humanists in action.

Form and freedom blended at three different levels in Commedia dell'Arte improvisation: an overall plot synchronizing all of the actors; a substructural level telling actors what scenes, character interactions and "speech-acts" were to be performed; and the local, particular level in which those scenes were fleshed out with verbal, gestural, and kinetic enactment. (In the case of Homeric improvisation, this triadic structure would correspond to the general guest reception motif; its substructural division into entrance, seating, and washing; and the verbal realization of dactylic hexameter accompanied by the performing rhapsode's expressions and gestures.) Although the ratio of freedom to form probably increased at the level of Hamlet's "word and action" (the third domain of the triadic structure), even there the individual actor's use of humanist-style training, memory techniques, and

rhetorical topoi to “find” pre-studied and pre-used material probably lent *Commedia dell’Arte* improvisation more structure than is characterized by Second City and other twenty-first century improv. (Crohn Schmitt 2010). The extant scenarios furnish salient details about the general structural and substructural levels, and not much about the third level, although they would have clearly indicated to the actors “insertion points” where they could deploy the speeches, gags, and feats that they had built up over their entire careers and were only too eager to display.

Overall structure

The different scenario collections—Scala, Locatelli, Corsini, Casamarciano, Vatican, Adriano, Correr, and others—vary in the complexity of their plots, but they often derive from the scripted *Commedia Erudita*, with which the highly literate actor-composers of the *Arte* would have been quite familiar. “Italian comedy” should be understood as a single system comprising both scripts and scenarios, with transformations from one to another working in both directions. Scala made one of his scenarios, “Il finto marito,” into a full-length play, and the Correr manuscript has a scenario version of Ariosto’s *Suppositi*—the play that George Gascoigne would translate and that Shakespeare would use for his subplot of *The Taming of the Shrew*. The more complex plots of the Scala scenarios, alone in prefacing the scenario proper with a detailed “*argomento*” or background plot, often contain the kind of circum-Mediterranean romance background familiar to readers of Shakespeare: sea voyages of captivity and liberation, wide expanses of space and time, unlucky dislocations and fortuitous reunions and recognitions. The Correr scenarios, apparently the product of seventeenth-century Venetian professional actors, render actions even more schematically than Scala does, perhaps as befitting professional actors, who would have known how to fill in the gaps. The Correr “*Zanni finto morto*” suspends practically the entire cast in a state of wonder and fear at spirits passing before them, only summarily to resolve matters with a simple “*Negromante scopre ogni cosa, e fanno finir la comedia*” (The magician reveals everything, and the play ends. [Alberti 1996: 259] translation Henke). But such range is to be expected in the scenario form, hovering between orality and writing and beyond the reach of normative literary canons.

As part of the greater Italian humanist experiment of reviving classical comedy, *Commedia dell’Arte* scenario plots animate the generational conflict of New Comedy between father and child, mediated by the slave/servant. But much as with the *Commedia Erudita* the New Comedy framework is significantly fleshed out by two pairs of lovers embodying a full range of passionate actions and speeches unknown to Plautus or Terence but very familiar to Ariosto, Della Porta, or the collaborative authors of *Gl’ingannati*, the prototype for Shakespeare’s *Twelfth Night*. And not unlike the lovers of Shakespeare’s comedies, the passions of *Arte innamoratili* carry them into compelling and various situations well beyond the predictable rhetoric of the figures as they are often performed today. *Arte* lovers female and male could handle a sword, perform a mad scene, impersonate other characters, don both same-gender and transvestite disguises, cleverly outplot their antagonists, and practice pranks. Generally, in the *Commedia dell’Arte* dramatic plotting tends to become

more complicated, or at least more agonistic, than the hierarchically nested structures of oral-formulaic epic (e.g., the story of Odysseus' boar hunt and wound enfolded within the foot-washing scene): where there is one zanni plotting to help his *innamorato* master gain his erotic object, there is probably another zanni, or the *innamorato*'s father himself, trying to thwart him.

As with the complex *intreccii* of the scripted comedy, the scenario plots proffered the pleasure of what is difficult: continually testing, or playing, the ratio of complexity to intelligibility. But the general plot, at least in the case of Scala and most of the manuscript collections, could also function to harness in the centrifugal energies of the improvising *parti ridicole*, especially the Capitano, the zanni, and his brother-in-words, the anarchically associative Dottore. Pier Maria Cecchini, who wrote the first major acting treatise on the Arte, worries as much about the plot-distracting dilations of the *parti ridicole* (Marotti and Romei 1991: 85) as Hamlet does about the improvisations of the clown, who carries on off-book. But the scenario, balancing form and freedom, could also be seen as the secret ally of the virtuosic improviser, offering just enough structure and linear propulsion to make room for the ludic dilations of the zanni, the Capitano, and the Dottore.

Alone in Scala's collection, preceding the act-by-act notations, is included an *argomento*, whose function it is to provide the important background plot to the play (occasionally with some overlap with the actions of the play itself). Considerably varying in complexity, the *argomento* quite literally put the actors on the same page, and frequently in the course of the scenario is evoked as an *aide-memoire* (Scala 1976: Day 11, Act II. 124, Marotti Edition). In a dramaturgy constrained by the unities of time, place, and action, the *argomento* could also offer the reading public—explicitly considered an “audience” of the printed scenarios by Scala—the pleasure of greatly expanding the play in space and time, much like Prospero's initial narrative to Miranda in the unity-structured *Tempest*. A list of characters followed the *argomento*, grouped by household. As Richard Andrews has pointed out, this would have been crucial for actors who, in successive performances, might have been in love with Isabella one night and Flaminia the next, or might have had a different parent one evening to another (Andrews 2008: xvii). As Andrea Perrucci makes clear in his 1699 treatise on improvisational acting, it was crucially important for actors to know to which of the two or three houses designated on the stage set they would have belonged—and of course the houses would have corresponded to their family attribution (Richards and Richards 1990: 206).

One important function of the overall structure as revealed in the scenario would have been to limit the number of actors on stage at any given time. This constraint would have enabled the actors' improvisatory freedom for, as Tim Fitzpatrick has observed, improvisation works far better with two speaking characters (Fitzpatrick 1995: 106). But the scenarios also guide improvisation between more than two characters by various means. First, additional characters tend to align themselves with one of the others, as with a servant taking the side of his master. Second, characters might enter serially and perform the same action, as in Scala's “Il cavadente” (Day 12), when one after another figure enters, as part of a prearranged scheme, to tell Pantalone that he has foul breath (Scala 1976: Day 12, Act I. 132–33). Third, one character might perform the same action on several characters, as in

Scala's "Li duo Capitani simili," when the crazed Isabella beats one character after another (Scala 1976: Day 17, Act II. 124). As Anna Maria Testaverde notes, simple stage directions in the scenarios control presence and absence, entrance and departure: "*si ritira/ritirano*," "*parte/partono*," "*via*," "*resta/restono*," or "*in questo*" (Testaverde 2007: xx–xxi). Whatever the degree to which the *capocomico* guided performance, as Perrucci's treatise suggests at the end of the seventeenth century, the Duke of Saxe-Meiningen is still far in the distance, and the scenario did some of the work of the director.

Substructure: scenes, actions, routines, and speech-acts

The scenario provided ample information about the substructural level of plotting: determining what kinds of actions, scenes, speech-acts, and routines the actors would perform. These monological or interactional units, as Richard Andrews has shown in his analysis of the "elastic gag," could expand and contract as the actors saw fit, especially in response to the audience's perceived interest and pleasure (Andrews 1993: 175–82). Even a simple action, no more than a line in a scenario, could provide richly expandable possibilities. To take an example analyzed by Andrews (actually deriving from a piazza/banquet pamphlet), Pantalone's call to Zanni to appear before him could be richly delayed and expanded in ways for which the scenario importantly provides a location point, without furnishing any of the verbal texture (Andrews 1993: 176–80). (The zanni asks his master if he is really talking to him; if he wishes him to come with his hat; if he means for him to come at just that instant; etc.) And as well as the "insertion point," the scenario would also indicate to the improving actors clear beginning and end points: the improvisatory unit begins when Pantalone calls for his servant, and ends when the servant finally appears before him.

The vast majority of scenario indications, to be sure, refer to the very plot that functioned, in part, to differentiate the professional comedy from the virtuosic but anarchic improvisations of piazza charlatans. About nine-tenths of the following instruction in Scala's "Il cavadente" refers to plot: "Capitano enters, and rants at Arlecchino, who takes him aside and tells him that his mistress has made arrangements with Pedrolino about what he must do to get into her house. The Capitano turns to Pedrolino, and Arlecchino runs away. Pedrolino, knowing nothing about it, suggests off the cuff that he should go and dress in Venetian costume like Pantalone, and he will then take him in. The Capitano is delighted, and goes off to disguise himself" (Andrews 2008: 65). Still, although only the Capitano's "ranting" at Arlecchino provides a clear insertion point for a detachable, pre-performed set piece, this routine may well have taken over a greater proportion of the entire scene than the few words that Scala devotes to it.

Especially if read with an eye to the rich corpus of printed and manuscript poems, dialogues, *contrasti*, *orazioni*, etc. sometimes performed by Arte actors themselves and culturally adjacent to regular company performance, the scenarios can be seen to accommodate many verbal set pieces that constituted the individual actor's repertoire. A fine case of the Bakhtinian "speech genre," the detachable Arte speech-scene viscerally rendered speech as action, in the form of insults, threats, curses,

“caresses,” praises, denunciations, challenges, mockery, “desperations,” complaints, laments, reproaches, amorous declarations, blusterings, supplications, and much more (Bakhtin 1986: 60–102). A quick scan of the above list suggests the deeply binary nature of character interaction in Commedia dell’Arte action, in which allies and enemies were usually clearly distinguished: in one moment, the besotted Pantalone fulsomely praises the virtues of Isabella, and in the next minute acidly fulminates against his dissolute (and perhaps rival) son. (As a spin on this binarism used effectively in contemporary Commedia performance, Pantalone and the Dottore abjectly and excessively praise each other to their faces, then snarl away to the audience to say what they really think about their fellow *vecchio*.) Scanning the scenario would have told each actor where he or she stood with most of the other major characters—whether friend or foe. In this regard, the agonistic tonality that Walter J. Ong has attributed to oral culture and the binary nature of humanist epideictic rhetoric nicely conjoin (Ong 1982: 43–46).

Some “insertable” forms indicated by the scenarios were even more detachable than the “speech genres” listed above, and could threaten to run away with the entire play. In Act I of Scala’s “La fortuna di Flavio,” the Dottore Gratiano, said to be “chief of all the mountebanks,” performs an entire mountebank scene with Arlecchino and other assistants, probably as centrifugal as the oft-cut Scoto of Mantua mountebank scene in Jonson’s *Volpone* (a scene explicitly associated by Jonson to the Commedia dell’Arte). (See Scala 1976: Day 2, Act I. 22.) The splendid “Il vecchio geloso,” Day 6 in Scala’s *Il teatro delle favole rappresentative*, includes the demi-monde of itinerant beggar-musicians, who perform a dance number for their supper. Also in “Il vecchio geloso,” Burratino tells the very Boccaccian tale of jealousy and cuckoldry that has structured the scenario itself (Scala 1976: Day 6, Act III. 83). Novellas circulating in both written and oral form would have provided another important source for Commedia dell’Arte material, as appears to be the case in Scala’s version of the Romeo and Juliet story, (“I tragici successi” or “The Tragic Events”: Day 18 in Scala’s collection [Andrews 2008: 111–12] arguably mediated through the Massuccio/Da Porto/Bandello conduit.) Many of the speech genres used in performance, such as the tirade, the lament, the curse, and the supplication, could have inserted material from the piazza-banquet arena fairly seamlessly, but there were also opportunities to perform piazza material more like a detachable set piece, as with the “Tale of Cuccagna” told by two rogues to the starving Burratino in “Le burle d’Isabella” in order to steal his dinner (Scala 1976: Day 4, Act I. 57). (Poems regarding the mythical land of Cuccagna, where one is paid for sleeping and imprisoned for working, and where food fairly drops from the sky, were extremely popular in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Italy, and could sometimes have a subversive instead of an opiate effect.) And crowd-pleasing fighting scenes, either with or without weapons, are frequently indicated in the scenarios.

The improvisational system of the Commedia dell’Arte was based on the Brechtian notion of function rather than the realist idea of personation. The character system itself could drive the plot; it was based on a tripartite status hierarchy of *vecchio* (Pantalone and the Dottore), their children (*innamorati/e*); and the servants, ostensibly serving the *vecchi* but often subversively intervening on behalf of the younger generation. A play like “Il vecchio geloso” can be seen to reach down into

what might be considered a fourth-status level: the underground beggars, rogues, card sharps, itinerant entertainers, thieves, and prostitutes associated with the zanni—obliquely lending the Commedia dell’Arte a social resonance realized today by Dario Fo but too often obscured by the baroque visual trappings through which it is usually viewed.

Verbal and physical enactment

Having scanned the scenario to determine what kinds of scenes or speech-acts he or she would perform in the course of the play, in order to realize its verbal texture the actor could have then drawn largely upon pre-studied and pre-performed material, calling on the full archive of his or her past performance repertoire. Like Renaissance rhetoricians, the actors organized their material according to codified topics, preparing “mental storehouses” for the different scenes that they would play. As the actor-writer Nicolò Barbieri writes, “the actors study and arm their memory with a great farrago of things, like proverbs, conceits, love speeches, reproaches, desperations, in order to have them ready for the occasion, and their study matches the behavior of the persons whom their represent” (Barbieri 1971: 23). The *zibaldoni* or actors’ commonplace books, such as the extant example produced by Stefanelo Botarga and Zan Ganassa, were not just post-performance remembrances (such as the *Lettere* and *Fragmenti* of Isabella Andreini so clearly are), they also indicate pre-performance preparation (Ojeda Calvo 2007). As Natalie Crohn Schmitt has aptly demonstrated, the actors drew on techniques of rhetorical *inventio* in order to “find” topics organized in their mental storehouse, including memory techniques such as the use of grids, “places,” images, and alphabetical organization (Crohn Schmitt 2010). Familiar topoi recur in the scenarios of Scala and others, such as the relative merits of the scholarly versus the military life (Scala 1976: Day 14, Act I. 151), the praise (or dispraise) of courtesans (Scala 1976: Day 9, Act II. 105), and the reproach of a daughter for not working hard enough (Scala 1976 Day 6, Act I. 78). If, as Brian Vickers has argued, by the early sixteenth century several million Europeans would have had a working knowledge of rhetoric, the educated Commedia dell’Arte actors (of which there were many) would have employed many of its techniques (including those of epideictic and disputational rhetoric) and, even more importantly, its “habits of mind” (Vickers 1988: 256).

At the linguistic and gestural level as well as the substructural level that we have just examined, the Arte character system could have, in effect, generated language: simply put, knowing one’s place in the system would have often told one what to say. Characters occupying the same status level (*vecchio-vecchio*, *innamorati/e*, *servant-servant*) tended to share the same world view, lexicon, rhetorical formulae, topoi—and favorite gripes. Pantalone and the *Dottore*, fluent in the lexicons of finance, parenting, and bourgeois sagacity, would have much to say together about the laziness of servants, the pros and cons of marriage, the perils of courtesans, the need to keep a close eye on nubile daughters, and the dissolution of sons. *Pedrolino* and *Arlecchino*, endowed with a rich gastronomic lexicon, would see the world very differently. A historical taste for improvisational wit, elegant wordplay, and poetic conceits deftly deployed would have rendered the amorous exchanges of the lovers

much more compelling to early modern audiences than they tend to be to the present-day public. When figuring centrally in a Commedia dell'Arte scenario, as they do in "Le burle d'Isabella," the nether world of tricksters, rogues, and beggars (what I am calling the lowest, fourth-status level), could have engaged more socially and occasionally politically provocative registers than one typically associates with the Commedia dell'Arte.

Cross-status exchanges were rife with drama and conflict, exemplifying the Bakhtinian utterance in which the speech-act is already "shot through" with the anticipated response from the (usually hostile) interlocutor. Pantalone's smug defense of his largesse and generosity inevitably invited his abject servant's accusation of mortal stinginess. Lofty innamorati/e encomia to the transcendent power of love were parried by the coarser registers of their servants, much as in Shakespeare. The tripartite status level could generate six different kinds of interactive modules (vecchio-vecchio, innamorati-innamorati, servi-servi, vecchio-innamorato, vecchio-servo, and innamorato-servo), with, of course, additional permutations based on gender (an innamorato's cajoling of his servant Pedrolino in order to get him to do something would be different from his rhetorical strategy with Franceschina). Actors modulated decorum and vocal register across status levels, so that Pantalone cursed the Dottore in the high (if effectively ridiculous) style but his servant in *sermo humilis*. Many speech genres could be performed by all of the characters, some, such as the Capitano's *bravura*, were fairly specific to one *maschera*. Commedia dell'Arte improvisation simply brought to the stage the modular habit of thinking practiced in all early modern theater, whether in the "plots" divided among English playwrights working collaboratively, or with the modular units without which Lope de Vega could not possibly have written, at least according to his claim, a thousand plays.

In the early modern age of "secondary orality," when strong traces of residual orality engaged with emerging forms of print culture (especially in the sphere of popular culture), the verbal realization of scenes, topoi, and speech-acts by improvising actors pervasively enlisted techniques of oral composition. The actors relied upon *sound* as a powerful mnemonic aid, captivating their audiences with the "illocutionary power of the voice" (Zumthor 1990: 21). Especially the Dottore, particularly enamored with the materiality of language, and the incantatory lovers frequently used sound play in their "compositions": "*nume solo di nome, per cui più non spero, ma spiro*" (Oh power [of love] only I name, for which I no longer hope, but breath; Perrucci 1961: 212). The technique of *copiousness* disseminated by Erasmus to increasing numbers of students aimed to create the "orality effect" in writing by means of repetition with extended variation. The technique was easily transferable to the stage, where key words could have provided useful mnemonic anchors. (No rhetorical technique more effectively demonstrates how reciprocal the relationship between orality and writing was in the early modern period.) The Capitano, with a genius for matching subject and predicate, was a particular champion of copiousness, but all characters employed this "compositional" technique. *Additive* or paratactic rather than hypotactic or subordinated construction, eased transitional flow within speeches, as in the Dottore's pseudo-logical elaborations, "stitching together" in the manner of a "rhapsode" the flotsam and jetsam of humanist culture, just as the innamorata stitched together verses of Petrarch

and other poets in the bricolage manner of the *centone*. (With the Dottore, it is important to counteract the common view that he speaks pure nonsense: an analysis of the extant speeches of Lodovico de' Bianchi and other Dottori demonstrate the kind of negotiation of sense and nonsense that characterizes Rabelais, the Shakespearean clown, and even the Dottoresque “tirade” of Lucky in Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot*.) The actors frequently used *epithets*—words or phrases applied to a given person or thing to describe a given quality, as in Pantalone’s invocation of “the counsel of old men, the curiosity of the young, the adulation of ruffians, the gluttony of parasites” (*Capricci* 1601: A3r). Perhaps, and in a parodic manner, the mental storehouses of the improvising actors constituted something like the *encyclopedic* patrimony of the oral performer, whether medieval *giullare* or early modern charlatan.

In all of this, the actors *performed* literature—classical and contemporary, high and low, from the court and from the street, printed and manuscript—but always extracted, digested, and reprocessed in modular forms. Their cultural and literary range, their channeling of deep sources from popular culture, their practical application of rhetorical techniques involving *inventio* and *memoria*, and their skillful melding of form and freedom made them, in Polonius’ words, the “best actors in the world” for the law of improvised “liberty.”

Additional notes

- 1 Citations refer to the Marotti edition of Scala (1976), with the day, act number, and page number of Marotti’s edition cited. Although Marotti’s edition is in two volumes, the page numeration is consecutive, and so I have not noted the volume number. Readers may very well wish to consult Richard Andrews’ superb edition and translation of thirty Scala scenarios (Andrews 2008).
- 2 The connection between Polonius’ famous remarks on the itinerant troupe traveling to Elsinore, and the *Commedia dell’Arte* has been nicely made by Clubb (1989).

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