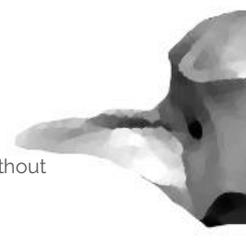


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Introduction

Commedia dell'Arte is a highly technical form that trains the performer to achieve total control of their body and voice. Commedia pushes performers to be expressive and exaggerated and demands energy, focus and spontaneity. Each character has precise, articulated movements that create a complete head-to-toe mask for the performer and provides a repertoire that a performer can draw on when improvising.

Commedia dell'Arte actors were first recognised as professionals in 1545 but definitive documents on how commedia characters should be played were never created – evidence has been gathered from various sources over the years and consequently there are many opinions on the specifics of the character movement. I have attempted to draw on the most traditional of movement repertoires for each character, informed by much personal research and my training with John Rudlin and Antonio Fava, both maestros of the Commedia dell'Arte tradition.

This guide is a resource for teachers, directors and performers providing a form of sketched notation for the movement repertoires and character interplay. Through adopting the body shape and movement patterns of the Commedia characters, much information about the personality can be discerned. It is not enough to wear a mask on your face: a complete physical transformation needs to take place before the character comes to life for an audience and this guide will show you how this can be achieved.

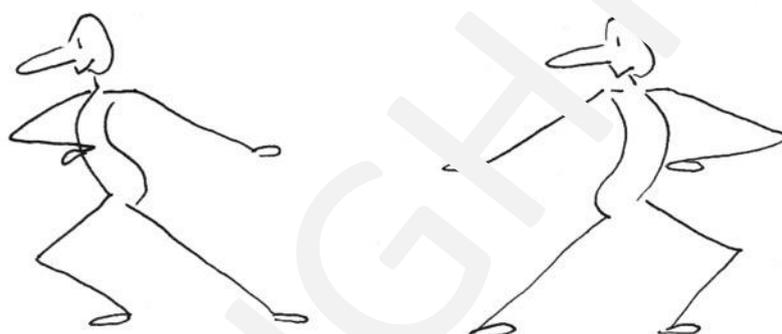
It is important to connect the breath to the movement; from the breath the character rhythm is discovered, and consequently the voice. By doing this, the voice is connected to the mask and the complete persona is embodied. Performed in the original Italian style, Commedia dell'Arte characters are never quiet; the breath is audible; the voice may form words or just sounds in the form of *grummalot* (gibberish that captures the musicality, rhythms and intonation of a language). The key is to make noise, right from the start.

This reference guide should be used alongside practical sessions to aid both director and performer as you explore the many comic routines. My focus has been the main stock character types as they form a core group of players common to most Commedia dell'Arte troupes. The numerous other characters are variables of the core group and movements will differ only minimally.

I hope you find this guide of use.

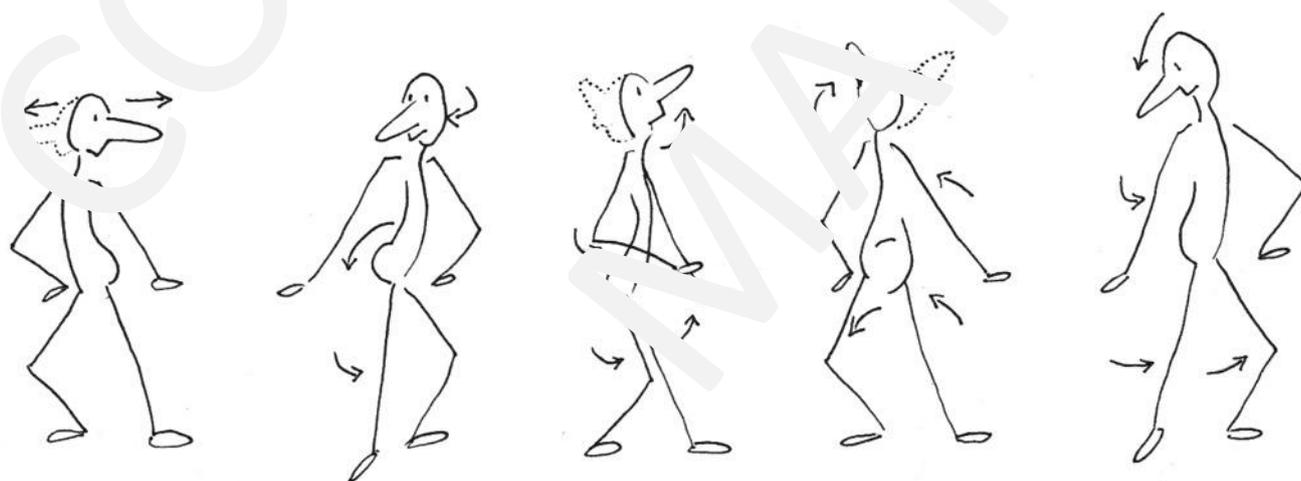
Zanni: The Servants

The *zanni* is the archetypal fool; a low-ranking male character, usually a servant in a household. Female *zanni* are known as *zagna* (initially, probably played by men in a *zagna* mask) or *servetta* (usually played unmasked by female actors). 'Zanni' is a generic term for a character type that will be given a name according to the region or context of the play, e.g. Arlecchino, Brighella, Pulcinella, Francatrippa, Pedrolino, Coviello, Scapino. There are hundreds of different names for *zanni*, and their level of intelligence varies as well. Some named *zanni* only existed briefly, created by one actor for him alone to play; others, like Arlecchino, have endured across the centuries and into different countries, evolving into Arlequin in France, Harlequin in England.



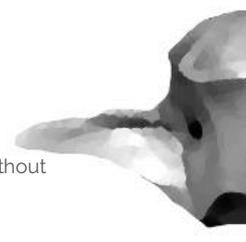
This is the basic stance of the *zanni*. Weight on one foot, bottom stuck out, back slightly arched, chest high, head balanced on the horizon. Never completely still, the *zanni* bounces from one foot to another, keeping the centre low with one leg bent, the other straight. There is a slight tension under the upper arms to give them a lift, but the lower arms hang loosely. Feet are flat on the ground - no pointed toes for the male *zanni*.

As the *zanni* moves, weight transfers from one foot to another; head moves sharply in all directions with punctuated moves and precise isolation. Eyes are wide, looking around for food, opportunity or just in naïve wonder. Parts of the body frequently move in opposition, so the head might look one way while the body turns the other. This creates a sense of the body having a will of its own and the brain often not leading.





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Brighella



There are first zanni and there are second. The first zanni are slightly higher ranking, more intelligent, more lazy, slower moving generally. First zanni usually hold a secure serving position or may even own a small business. The second zanni are more stupid, gullible and lower ranking, often a lower servant in the same household as a first zanni.

Brighella is a first zanni. His name derives from the verb “brigare” which has many English translations: to solicit; to busy oneself; to intrigue; to manoeuvre; to plot; to pull strings; to wheel and deal; to scheme. Brighella is all of these, making him the crafty schemer and an opportunist. He is a loyal servant, sharp of wit and able to anticipate everyone else's intentions. He can find a solution for every problem.



He generally holds a good job and is a successful small businessman: an inn keeper, a bailiff, an organiser of concerts. He is broad, strong and can be unscrupulous and cynical when he sets his mind on something he wants. A regional working-class accent works well for this character. He has a sharp mind and will have second zanni working for him, doing the hard labour. He will always look for the shortcut in how to get the job done and looks for ways that he can reap the most benefit.



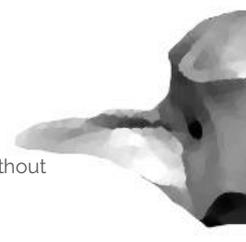
In addition to the basic moves of the zanni, Brighella has one unique way of travelling: a rocking run, much akin to a ‘wide boy’ swagger! Knees bent, belly forward, the torso bends from side to side; the shoulder goes down on one side, as the hip goes up on the same side; arms in opposition with elbows bending towards the raised knee, chest wide. His head is pulled back but with the chin jutting out. This foreshortens his neck, giving him the appearance of being broad chested with a strong jawline.

His movement should look effortless; he is agile like a cat and can slink on stage unseen. He is an observer, who sees all and says little, until such time as he can use the found knowledge to his advantage. Unlike lower ranking zanni, who find it hard to be static, Brighella may hold still positions with arms crossed or on hips as he listens and watches others.



“Crafty, bold, a habitual liar who looks out only for himself. He thrives on quarrels, intrigues, secrets”

(J. Rudlin, *Commedia dell'Arte: An Actor's Handbook*, Routledge 1994)





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