Commedia Dell’Arte
Year 11 ATAR
Period 3 & 4 Tuesday 23rd June and 30th June
Period 3 & 4 Thursday 25th June and 2nd July
Period 5 Friday 26th June and 3rd July
Approx 9 hours lesson time over the two weeks.

Series of 6 lessons

Linking to Curriculum

Focusing on Presentational non-realistic drama, student will be introduced to Commedia Dell’ Arte as a historical form of presentational drama.

Over a period of two weeks students will develop knowledge and skills of drama language; voice and movement and the process of collaboratively shaping the elements of drama in interpreting this form of performance and characterisation. Students will develop contextual knowledge of how drama conventions are applied and begin to link the impact of Commedia on later styles of presentational drama.

Prior Learning

Students have completed a unit on Representational drama and will be introduced to Presentational drama this semester. Students will need to be encouraged to think differently and explore the meaning of non-realistic performance. By beginning with Commedia students are able to explore an approach to Presentation performance through larger than life physical acting style that relies on exaggeration and broadness of gesture. Its lighthearted comedic value will motivate students towards participation and evaluation.

Student Evaluation

Formative assessment will be utilised over the 6 lessons through class discussion and reflection at the end of each lesson and side coaching during practical activities and homework activities.
Students will participate in a performance-based assessment at the end of the two weeks to demonstrate application of key learning and demonstrate artistic choices to create and perform in character.
Lesson 1 (Shortened time 1 hr)

Introduction to Commedia

**Outcome:** Student will be able to identify Commedia Stock Characters and demonstrate the characteristics of a specific character. Students will be able to identify the elements of drama required to portray the physical characteristics of a specific stock commedia character

**Resources:** Lesson Notes handout, Access to a TV with internet or USB connection

**Lesson Introduction:**

1. View a short video introducing the characters of commedia
   
   National Theatre [https://youtu.be/h_0TAXWt8hY](https://youtu.be/h_0TAXWt8hY)

**Body Of Lesson:**

2. Give a brief overview of the history of Commedia and the elements that define the style.

   Students will use the note taking template to make notes about the elements of Commedia.

   *An improvisational-based form of comic theatre with plots and comic situations probably derived from Roman comedy and using a cast of stock characters in specific costumes and masks. Derived in Italy as what began as street theatre, Commedia Dell’Arte was a hugely popular form of theatre in the 15th and 16th centenaries. The elements that define Commedia are:*

   * **improvised performances based on scenarios** - actors worked off a base outline and made up their lines.

   * **stock characters** - the characters were always the same, only the situations changed.

   * **limited themes** - love, money, or food were the base of almost every scenario.

   * **use of mask** - the mask defined the characters.

   * **use of lazi** - short comedic physical bits within the story.

   * **use of mime**, acrobatics, and music.
3. Introduce the categories and stock characters of commedia

*The key to creating a Commedia character is to remember that they are **stock characters**. In every scenario or story they’re in, the characters remain the same. They have the same attitude, the same look, the same drive, the same physical action. That means you would be able to recognize a Commedia stock character in an instant by how they move, what they wear, and how they act.*

**Categories:**

- **The Servants (Arlecchino or Columbina)**
- **The Masters (Pantalone)**
- **The Lovers (Isabella or Flavio – unmasked)**

*The masters are usually foolish greedy old men, and the servants are hungry and mischievous. The young lovers are always in love. Most of the characters wear masks, but even those without masks (e.g. the Lovers) treat their personas as masks. In Commedia, the characteristics of a character (such as a walk, a pose, or a gesture) are just like wearing a mask.*

*Introduce students to a useful website they can use to research the characters. [http://shane-arts.com/commedia-stock-characters.htm](http://shane-arts.com/commedia-stock-characters.htm)*

4. **Warm up:** Walking Using the space to demonstrate different characteristics of styles of walking

*eg. Strut like an emperor, sneak like a spy, skip like a child, shuffle like an old person, move like a dancer, walk like a gym junky ect*

Exercise encourages students to think differently and exaggerate movement moving away from representational movement to presentational movement

5. **Activity:** Divide students into pairs. Choose a category and then a character remember they have clearly defined attribute that you must take on as the actor. The pairs must identify the physical characteristics of their chosen character and write them down.
Then students practice the pose, gestures and movements of their character. Partner A takes on their persona while Partner B observes. Partner A is to walk around the room, sit, stand, interact with objects - all in character . It is Partner B’s job to identify when Partner A strays from the character. The pairs then switch. Partner B takes on their persona and Partner A observes. The pairs switch back and forth in order to practice the character fully. 

At the end of a designated period of time, turn this from a pairs exercise into a full class exercise. Everyone moves about the room at the same time (in character) and starts to interact with each other. Remind students of their status. If they are playing a master character, how do they treat the servants? If they are a servant character, how are they going to treat The Lovers? What is their defined personality trait? Once everyone is comfortable moving in character, have students interact in character. Get them to greet each other, talk about the weather, engage in small talk. They have to stay in character and they have to react to each other according to their status. How would a servant talk to a master? How would a master talk to one of the lovers? http://tfolk.me/commedia

**Lesson Summary:**

Discuss the activity as a class. Did you notice that every movement you made was a deliberate choice based around the specific requirements of your stock character? Choices about how to move, use of space, levels and relationships to other characters. 

Homework Activity: To research Commedia Characters, focusing on one character you would like to experiment with next lesson.
Lesson 2

Creating a Lazzi using the character building from the previous lesson.

**Outcome:** Students will be able to demonstrate the relationship between stock characters and create and perform an improvisation as a Commedia Stock Character

**Resources**

White board and markers, access to TV or projector connected to internet, Sandwich Lazzi Activity

**Lesson Introduction:**

Recap yesterday's lesson by having the class write some key actions, characteristics, gestures etc of their chosen stock character on the white board for discussion and reference during the activity.

**Lesson Body**

1. **Warm up - Silent Movie** *Think about situations that may have occurred in silent movies. Working in pairs act out a scene from a silent movie, be over the top, exaggerate your movement, gestures, facial expressions in order to tell the story (no Speaking). If students are willing they can show the class their improvisation and the class will then relay back what they think happened in the scene.*

   Exercise again encourages students to think differently, unrealistic and unnatural it also prepares students for the activity in today's lesson.

2. **Explain what a Lazzi is and how it relates to their commedia characters.**

   *Every commedia actor has a number of lazzis in their repertoire. A lazzi is a physical comedic bit in the middle of the play, unrelated to the plot. The three main themes for Commedia are love, money and food in the extreme - so that means lazzis are also taken to the extreme. They are acrobatic, exaggerated, and sometimes obscene.*

3. **Activity:** Using the same pairs and characters from yesterday students will create a Lazzi.

   *(Handout of Activity)*

   **The Sandwich Lazzi as a silent movie**

   Your character enters a room. On a table in the center of the room, there is a beautiful sandwich. It has a number of layers. It smells delicious. It looks perfect. It does not belong to your character, but you are so hungry and you want that sandwich. In character, examine the room. Is the owner
of the sandwich nearby? You approach the sandwich. Interact with the sandwich. And eat the sandwich. You look around the room and leave.

Remind students that they have to stay in character at all times. The point of the exercise is to show how their character would interact with a sandwich. How Pantalone completes this exercise would be different than the way Columbina completes it or one of the lovers.

4. Introduce Voice: Explain that Commedia Characters often used gibberish instead of words. View a short video from National Theatre demonstrating the use of Gromalot (Babble speak) [https://youtu.be/9gTs9xWJcgg](https://youtu.be/9gTs9xWJcgg)

5. Using meaningless sounds try to explain to your partner that they are in trouble for eating your sandwich. Don’t get caught up on the meanings of word rather the meaning of your actions and tone of voice. (once again this activity gets students thinking in a presentational way)

6. Activity Cont: Keep students in pairs, so that one partner is always observing the other. Give students time to rehearse.

Next mix up the groups so we have a master and servant together or Master and lover or lover and servant.

This time the owner of the sandwich returns to find their sandwich is gone the culprit is hiding and tries to run away but is spotted by the sandwich owner act out the reaction and confrontation using your knowledge about you stock character. Allow time to practice and then present the improvisation to the class.

**Lesson Summary:** Discuss the Lazzi as a class. Was the story told clearly and true to character? Could we see who was higher in the social order by their movements and relationship to the other character? How did the addition of voice (Gromalot) enhance the performance?
Lesson 3

Commedia Scenarios and Lazzi

**Outcome:** Students will be able to identify the forms of theatre used by Commedia and apply the performance elements required to portray the story message to an audience.

**Resources:** Lazz and Scenarios Handout

**Lesson Introduction:** Group circle discussion about where we have come from in the previous lesson and what we will be covering in today’s lesson. Go straight into the warm up today.

1. **Warm-up: Knots;**

   1. *If you have a large group, split them into two smaller groups and have them make a circle facing inward. They also need to be shoulder to shoulder.*
   
   2. *Have everyone place their arms outstretched into the centre of the circle.*
   
   3. *Each person must then grab the hand of two different people. This will create a big looking mess of arms and hands in the centre of the circle.*
   
   4. *The aim of the exercise is to now try to untangle the knot without letting go of any hands.*
   
   5. *Once the group has succeeded (and this may take some time), try it again but this time without any speaking at all.*

   *At the end of the exercise, discuss the differences between the first situation where you were allowed to communicate and the second situation where you were not.*

   This game will get them thinking about communication, in Commedia we use improvisation but the scenarios have structure pre-communicated by the actors to ensure they were working together to ensure the plot arrived where they wanted it to go, with out it the audience wouldn’t make sense of the action either.

2. **Discuss the idea of the Improvised scenario and a Lazzi**

   *It’s a misconception to think of Commedia improvisation as actors just making everything up on the spot.*

   *Yes, the lines of the play would have been improvised each time they performed, but the actors were also following well laid out scenarios, well defined lazzi (each actor would have had several lazzi in their arsenal) and specifically detailed characters. Many actors only played one or two characters in their lifetime so they would have years of practice to draw on as they “improvised.” Since Commedia troupes (often comprised of close family members) spent all their time together, they would have worked well together as they brought the plays to life.*
“One of the reasons Commedia actors were able to improvise with ease is that there weren’t a lot of different themes to draw from. It boils down to love, money, and food in their most exaggerated forms. The motivation for any Commedia character is to go to the ends of the earth to obtain one of the three. And since Commedia characters are a mix of high status and low status characters, you can be sure any story involves a clash between them. Since the dialogue was improvised it was also easy to add current events and local scandals to the story.

I recently read a description of Commedia scenarios as “earthly,” which is a rather lovely way of saying Commedia can be downright obscene. True Commedia is not for the faint of heart! Many of the characters don’t pursue love per se, they seek out sex or adultery. Pantalone is often portrayed as a letch. The best way to describe the stories is that there is always someone who lusts after something: lusts after a person, after gold, after food. To keep that image in your mind is going to go a long way to finding the right tone in performance.” [https://www.theatrefolk.com/spotlights/commedia-dell-arte](https://www.theatrefolk.com/spotlights/commedia-dell-arte)

3. Discuss some of the common scenarios used in commedia (handout)

- The young lovers wish to be married but their fathers deny their wish. This leads the servants to trick the old men into allowing the marriage.
- The Zanni trick one of the old men out of their money.
- Arlecchino is starving but keeps getting pulled away from his favourite food by his master, then the lovers, then every other character.
- Pantelone wants to date Isabella and turns to Arlecchino for advice, who in turn gives the worst advice possible.
- Capitano is new in town. He hears there’s a rich widow and turns to the zani to get help.
- Pantelone has a new young wife. He’s very jealous and instructs Arlecchino to keep all men away from her. Arlecchino does the opposite.

4. Activity: The three main themes for Commedia are love, money and food in the extreme. In groups come up with a modern scene that explores one of these themes. Also include characters
in clashing status groups. Example: A boss scratches a winning lottery ticket, and a lowly clerk goes to the extreme to get that ticket from his boss. Present your ideas to the class in a discussion.

5. Lazzi; recap from knowledge of this concept from last lesson.

A Lazzi (or Lazzo singular) was a physical comic bit in the middle of the play unrelated to the plot. Each actor would have a number of lazzi in their repertoire. They were acrobatic, exaggerated, and often obscene. They could either be performed individually or in groups. Lazzi don’t connect to the plot or move the story forward. Their purpose is to make the audience laugh.

6. Activity: In small groups; come up with a routine for one of following lazzi. Allow time to rehearse and perform for the class. Remember the job of the lazzi is to make the audience laugh, so that is your job as well. The characters have been kept general, so make sure you choose a specific stock character to play.

**Hunger:** The character is so hungry that they decide to start eating their masters shoes, clothes, anything they can get their hands on.

**Favourite Food:** A character lusts after their favourite food, almost like they are courting it. (how will you include other characters into this scene?)

**Bad Breath:** A servant convinces their master the only way to stop his bad breath is to remove his teeth.

**The Brave General:** A character talks a big talk, and then shows his true cowardly colours when a mouse crosses his path.

**Flirt:** A character keeps flirting with another but keeps running into walls, tripping, and falling.

**Mad Love:** A character is so in love with another, they go mad.

**The Surgery:** A doctor performs surgery with disastrous results.

**Flatulence:** A character has a bout of uncontrollable farts. (how will this affect the other characters?)
**Lost Money:** A character has hidden a large sum of coins, and forgotten where they are.

**The Flea:** A character attempts to catch a flea with much acrobatics.

**Snatching Food:** Just as two of the inamorata (Lovers) are about to eat something, the food gets snatched away.

**Defend:** A young woman is offended and demands a man to defend her honour.

**Lesson Summary:** Discuss the need for structure surrounding the scenario. Even though it is an improvisation the story has a set of guidelines actors must follow in order for the story to make sense to the audience. What were some good points about today's group improvisations?
Lesson 4

Masks

**Outcome:** Understanding of a key convention of this genre. Students will be able to identify specific attributes associated with the different character masks. Understand how masks are traditionally made. And begin to create their own mask based on the elements of their developed character.

**Resources:** Access to TV with internet connection for access to the mask making website, Activity handout, Mask making craft (Masks, feathers, wool, Sequins, paint, pens, glue guns, anything textural)

**Lesson Introduction:** Due to large amount of absences in the previous lesson there will be a need to revisit the key ideas of the structure of a scenario and lazzi. Explain that students who were here will take those who weren’t through the creation of one of the lazzi’s. There are two benefits here firstly those students who missed the lesson will have an understanding moving forward but also gives the other students an opportunity to demonstrate their learning to the teacher, themselves and fellow classmates.

**Lesson Body:**

(Warm up may not be required due to additional work in the introduction)

Warm up:

Yes Lets – *Students name movements associated with animals for the group to act out. Continue until everyone has had a turn.*

This warm-up will get the students thinking about and making deliberate choices of what kind of movements they associate with particular animals. This is key to the creation of their own commedia character in todays lesson.

1. Explain the traditional techniques of mask making, show students the mask makers website

2. Discuss the traditional respect for the craft through the way of applying the mask or becoming the character.

3. Activity: Begin to develop ideas for the creation of their own masked character. Establish the social order of your character, how will they interact with others, physical attributes like movements, voice or sounds, facial expressions and personality. Rules: Characters must be based around an animal but be able to be performed in the Commedia Style. Make notes and drawings. Draw attention to a relevant quote for inspiration “The characters have been compared to barnyard inhabitants. Hens, chicks, roosters, capons, ducks, peacocks - all the farmyard bipeds make us laugh, their walks absurd parodies of man's own gait. Pantalone, Arlecchino, Columbina, Smeraldina, Brighella, Capitano, Dottore and the others are not identified so much by the color and cut of their costumes as by the walk, the gesture, the manner in which each uses his “feathers” to express pride, joy, anger, and sorrow, alternately swelling and drooping, preening and ruffling, as he picks his way like a strutting fowl, ever vulnerable, across the stage before the appreciative eyes of the audience”

- Carlo Mazzone-Clementi with Jane Hill, The Drama Review

4. Discuss the ideas as a class, ensure everyone has an original idea and that we have characters from all categories of Servants, Masters and Lovers.

5. Creation of masks

Lesson Summary: Homework activity will be complete their masks ready to be used in the next lesson.
Lesson 5

Working with masks and creation of Character

**Outcome:** Analyse and evaluate elements of character in the development of an original comedic character. Demonstrate application of movement, voice and gesture in portrayal of their created character.

**Resources:** Mask making equipment and completed masks, list of scenarios and rubric handouts.

**Lesson Introduction:**

1. Begin discussing the students created Commedia Character, ensure everyone is ready to begin working with their created masks. Those not ready either because of absence or not completing homework will need to complete the masks before beginning the activities. Explain that we will be developing the movements, facial gestures, and sounds associated with your new character.

2. Warm-up: *Centers of Personality; Tell the group they are at the airport waiting for their flight and there is lots of people moving around. Begin with them passing each other as they walk around the room. Then call out a body part that they must come up with some action that will immediately identify them with that body part, it must be the first thing anyone would notice about them. Add in some context like stomach you have just eaten a large meal. Mouth you have just burnt yourself on hot coffee, eyes fixed on a beautiful person, Hand you just caught it in the door of the cab, knee you banged it on your heavy suitcase. If someone comes up with a really good action make the others copy it or watch them.*

This warm up will get the group more aware of their bodies and the choices they make to establish character.

3. Activity: In pairs; work on refining your movements, actions and sound of your created character. Assist each other in this process.

4. Now we will bring the pairs together as small groups, ensure there is at least one character from each of the three categories (Servant, Master or Lovers). Groups will choose one of the
given scenarios to create and rehearse an improvisation using their created characters. Give thought to how you will show status and personality traits in a presentational way. Allow time for planning and blocking movements.

**Exaggerated want: Money**
Create a scene on any topic. But one of the characters desperately wants the money he/she knows the other has in his/her pocket. How do they get it? And how do the other characters react on seeing this trick take place?

**Exaggerated want: Food**
Create a scene on any topic. But two of the characters are devastatingly hungry throughout the scene. How does that impact the conversation, what the characters do to find food, and what the other characters want in the scene?

**Exaggerated want: Love**
Create a scene on any topic. But one of the characters desperately wants the other to help them get the attention of a third. In a second scene, a character wants the attention of another, who is ignoring them. What does the first character do to get what they want?

5. **Lesson Summary:** As a group discuss and evaluate the process of creating an improvisation using their newly created characters. What considerations and creative choices did you make to ensure your characterization was relevant and effective?

**Lesson Summary:**

Explain that we will work on these improvised scenarios again in the next lesson with the view to performing them at the end of the lesson. (Handout the rubric for students to consider before the next lesson)
Lesson 6

Outcome: Analyse and evaluate of elements of character in the development of an original comedic character. Demonstrate application of movement, voice and gesture in portrayal of their created character. Ability to work constructively in a group to create an improvisation.

Resources: Mask making equipment and completed masks, list of scenarios and rubric handouts.

Lesson Introduction:

1. Recap on the last lesson with regard to where groups are at in their creative process. Ensure all groups have the handouts they need especially a copy of the rubric to consider while constructing the improvisation. Explain we will reflect on this and discuss the groups’ success at the end of the lesson.

2. Warm-up: Beach, Boat, Bank

   Divide the room into three areas; the far left is the “beach”, Middle of the room is “boat” and the far right is “bank”. Move students to each position and explain they must come up with Tableaux to represent they are on the beach, boat or in the bank. Make sure they incorporate levels and work together to create the scene. Once students have worked out their scenes Teacher calls beach boat or bank and students movie the area and present the tableaux. The last person to get to their spot in the tableaux is out.

   This exercise will energise the class and get them working together to create scenes. An extension on todays lesson, where they will be working together on their improvised scenarios and presenting them to the class.

3. Break up into the small groups and begin rehearsing the scenes. Side coach where necessary to ensure students are using all the elements of Commedia in their performance. Give students 15-20 mins rehearsal time, explaining we will be presenting to the whole class at the end of the lesson.
4. **Performance:** After each group presents their performance spend a few minutes discussing as a class how the group did with regard to the rubric. Ask for suggestions and positive feedback.

   (peer and self assessment)

   **Lesson Summary:**

5. Give feedback on the whole series of lessons, reaffirm to students the progress and learning they have achieved over the last two weeks.

6. Finish with a photo of the group in their masks with me as a memento of our time together if possible.
# Commedia Character Rubric

**NAME:**

**CHARACTER:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>4</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>1</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Comprehension</strong></td>
<td>Full understanding of the task.</td>
<td>Mostly understands the task.</td>
<td>Somewhat understands the task.</td>
<td>Little understanding of the task.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Physicality</strong></td>
<td>Portrays the physical characteristics in full detail.</td>
<td>Portrays the physical characteristics most of the time.</td>
<td>Portrays the physical characteristics some of the time.</td>
<td>Uses few to no physical characteristics. Physicality needs work.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Voice</strong></td>
<td>Clearly and consistently uses Gromalot to convey meaningful sounds that enhance understanding</td>
<td>Often uses Gromalot clearly to convey meaningful sounds that enhance understanding</td>
<td>Occasionally uses Gromalot to convey meaningful sounds that enhance understanding</td>
<td>Rarely uses Gromalot to convey meaningful sounds that enhance understanding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Story</strong></td>
<td>Lazzi story is told clearly and true to the character.</td>
<td>Lazzi story is mostly clear and mostly true to the character.</td>
<td>Lazzi story is sometimes clear and mostly in character.</td>
<td>The story is confusing and not told in character.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Effort</strong></td>
<td>Presentation effort goes above and beyond the assignment requirements.</td>
<td>Presentation effort meets the assignment requirements.</td>
<td>Presentation effort mostly meets the assignment requirements.</td>
<td>There is little to no effort in the presentation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Preparation</strong></td>
<td>Clear indication of prep work beyond the assignment requirements.</td>
<td>Mostly prepared as per the assignment requirements.</td>
<td>Some indication of prep work.</td>
<td>There is little to no indication of preparation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Overall</strong></td>
<td>Excellent presentation.</td>
<td>Solid presentation.</td>
<td>Satisfactory presentation.</td>
<td>Presentation needs work.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Performances should consist of at least 3 to 4 Characters and be no longer than 5 minutes in duration.

**Exaggerated want: Money**

Create a scene on any topic. But one of the characters desperately wants the money he/she knows another has in his/her pocket. How does he/she get it? And how do the other characters react, assist or hinder this trick?

**Exaggerated want: Food**

Create a scene on any topic. But two of the characters are devastatingly hungry throughout the scene. How does that impact the conversation, what will the characters do to find food, and what effect does that have on the other characters in the scene?

**Exaggerated want: Love**

Create a scene on any topic. But one of the characters desperately wants the other to help them get the attention of a third. OR In a second scene, a character wants the attention of another, who is ignoring them. What does the first character do to get what they want?