

Elk Grove Unified School District
Visual and Performing Arts Resources
Theatre

Grade 6: Lesson 4

Title: Commedia dell'Arte

Standards Addressed

Artistic Perception

Processing, Analyzing, and Responding to Sensory Information Through the Language and Skills Unique to Theatre

- 1.1 Use the vocabulary of theatre to describe theatrical experiences, such as *action/reaction*, *vocal projection*, *subtext*, *theme*, *mood*, *design*, *production values*, and *stage crew*.

Creative Expression

Creating, Performing, and Participating in Theatre

- 2.1 Participate in improvisational theatre activities demonstrating an understanding of text, subtext, and context.
- 2.2 Use effective vocal expression, gesture, facial expression, and timing to create character.
- 2.3 Write and perform scenes or one-act plays that include monologue, dialogue, action, and setting together with a range of character types.

Historical and Cultural Context

Understanding the Historical Contributions and Cultural Dimensions of Theatre

- 3.2 Differentiate the theatre traditions of cultures throughout the world, such as those in Ancient Greece, Egypt, China, and West Africa.

Aesthetic Valuing

Responding to, Analyzing, and Critiquing Theatrical Experiences

- 4.1 Develop and apply criteria for evaluating sets, lighting, costumes, makeup, and props.

Time: 50 minutes

Floor Plan: Classroom with an open area for presentations.

Materials Needed:

- Copies of overheads with this lesson
- Photocopies of lazzi from this lesson

Purpose:

The students will recall and identify traits of Commedia dell'Arte and improvise a lazzo.

Background:

The style of the Italian Commedia dell'Arte (co-MAY-deeuh dell AR-tay), 1550-1750, was popular throughout Europe. It was performed by traveling troupes on informal stages and without dramatic texts. Few written scenarios exist because Commedia troupes could not copyright material and they needed to protect their material from other troupes. Also censorship was an issue, so not recording the lazzi in writing provided protection from church and government censors. It is also possible that it never occurred to Commedia performers to write down their routines. The lazzi that are left to us are usually in a single sentence but may have in fact been elaborated into a five or ten minute sketch.

Several theories have been advanced to explain the origin of Commedia. Some historians trace it to farces in Ancient Rome which were preserved by wandering mimes during the Middle Ages. Other historians trace Commedia to mime troupes of the Byzantine empire who fled west when Constantinople fell in 1453. Still others believed Commedia grew out of formal farces presented on the Italian stage which appeared during the late Middle Ages. None of these theories can be confirmed or refuted. Regardless of the source, before 1600 Commedia had spread throughout Europe.

Commedia dell'Arte had a significant impact on theatre because it developed large audiences composed of all social classes. The influence of commedia can be seen on playwrights, such as Moliere and early silent film characters, such as the Key Stone Cops, Charlie Chaplin, W.C. Fields, The Marx Brothers, The Three Stooges, and Laurel and Hardy. In television, Commedia dell'Arte traditions influenced shows, such as *I Love Lucy*, and more recently shows, such as *In Living Color*, *Saturday Night Live*, and *Whose Line is it Anyway*. Even the characters and conflicts of professional wrestling can claim Commedia as an influential source of their format and style.

Key Questions:

What theatre skills will the students use to improvise a lazzo?

Vocabulary:

- * *Commedia dell'Arte*—a professional form of theatrical improvisation, developed in Italy in the 1500s, featuring stock characters and standardized plots. Relied on physical or “slapstick” comedy.
- * *Improvise*—to act out without previous study or preparation. To act out a scene without a detailed script.
- * *Lazzi* (*plural*), *Lazzo* (*single*)—is most often defined as stage tricks, comic business, something foolish or witty in words or actions. Though often thought of as improvisational and spontaneous, scenarios were rehearsed and used over and over.
- * *Objective*—a character’s goal or intention.
- * *Pantomime*—acting without words through facial expression, gesture, and movement.
- * *Scenario*—a plot outline for a story or play.
- * *Stock Characters*—established characters, such as young lovers, neighborhood busybodies, sneaky villains, and over protective fathers who are immediately recognizable by an audience.
- * *Stereotype Characters*—a character representing generalized racial or social traits repeated as typical from work to work, with no individualizing traits.
- * *Rehearsal*—to practice in preparation for a public performance.

<u>Steps of the Lesson</u>	<u>Thoughts for the Teacher</u>
<p>1 Set up purpose/goals What are lazzi?</p>	<p>How are you making your purpose clear to the students? By presenting historic background and clear directions.</p>
<p>2 Engage students The students will become engaged in Step 2 of the lesson.</p>	<p>How can I effectively get the students interested in the content of the lesson? Through the use of clear directions.</p>
<p>3 Learning Sequence See actual learning sequence below.</p>	<p>What are the BIG idea(s) of your presentation? How will students understand/experience the material that you present? Students prior knowledge of personification in modern cartoons will draw the students into the activity.</p>
<p>4 Assessment Performance of a commedia scenario.</p>	<p>How will you allow your students to deepen their understanding of content presented? (Reflect, revise, retell, refine, practice) Student performance with peer and teacher observation and rubric scoring.</p>

Actual Lesson Sequence

1. Share historic background information on Commedia dell'Arte. Show the pictures of the characters and describe the characters.
2. Put each character up on the overhead and have the students stand up and try to stand in the posture of each actor. Review each character as the students walk around the room as the character, without talking or bumping into each other.
3. Put the students in pairs or groups of three. Hand out scenarios. Explain that these are actual Commedia scenarios. Allow the students a few minutes to plan how they will perform their scene.

Assessment:

Peer and teacher observation based on rubric.

Advanced: The lazzo includes, in a complete and effective manner, the elements of Commedia, including stock characters, silly plot, broad gestures, humor, and improvisation. The performance is expressive and unique.

Proficient: The lazzo includes, in a complete and effective manner, most of the elements of Commedia, including stock characters, silly plot, broad gestures, humor, and improvisation. The performance is adequate and clearly demonstrates the major concepts of Commedia.

Approaching: The lazzo includes, in a somewhat complete manner, some of the elements of Commedia, including stock characters, silly plot, broad gestures, humor, and improvisation. The performance demonstrates limited understanding of the major concepts of Commedia. The performance lacks focus.

Below: The lazzo includes, in an incomplete manner, few of the elements of Commedia, including stock characters, silly plot, broad gestures, humor, and improvisation. The performance is inadequate and clearly demonstrates little understanding of the concepts of Commedia.

Other Considerations:

- If the students have difficulty with the comedic aspect of Commedia, try to show sample scenes from performers, such as the Three Stooges to give them the idea.
- Choose a lazzo that you think would work well with your students and have the entire class, working in small groups, do the same lazzo.

Possible Extensions:

- Read *The Miser* by Moliere.
- Write a modern comedy sketch using the Commedia style.
- Design and make character masks.

Sources:

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Gordon, Mel, Lazzi—The Comic Routines of the Commedia dell'Arte, New York, New York, Performing Arts Journal Publications, 1983. ISBN #0-0-933826-69-9.

Rolfe, Bari, Commedia dell'Arte—A Scene Study Book, Oakland, California, Persona Books, 1981.

<http://www.delpiano.com/carnival/html/commedia.html>

<http://www.hedndh.dk/info/commedia.html>

<http://www.furman.edu/~dcummins/commedia>

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http://www.geocities.com/commedia_dellarte/

<http://www.paragonmasks.com/commedia.html>

The Characters:

Arlecchino (ar-lay-Kee-no) or Harlequin—A Zanni. The clown or fool. Often a childlike and bratty or a mixture of cunning and stupidity. Often an accomplished acrobat and dancer. Extremely agile. His costume was originally patches, but developed into the diamond-shaped red, blue and green pattern now associated with harlequin. Some times he wore a felt hat. He wore a black half-mask, and carried a wooden sword.

Captain or Capitano (cahp-ee-TAH-no)—A braggart and a coward, who wore a sword, cape, and feathered headdress. Constantly boasted of his victories in war and love but was always discovered to be a coward and terrified of women. Known for smooth flowing movements.

Columbine or Harlequina—A servant. The maid of one of the Old men or the wife of Arlecchino. She was happy-go-lucky and a successful schemer. Intelligent, pretty, and skilled in dance and rhetoric. Dressed like her mistress or like Arlecchino.

Doctor or Dottore (do-TOR-ay)—An old man. A doctor of law or medicine, who wore a long academic gown and cap. He showed off his learning, but was often tracked by others. He often speaks in gibberish. Often greedy. A great bore to the other characters. He had a pot-belly. He wore a semi-mask that covered his nose.

Pantalone (pahn-tah-LO-nay)—A middle-aged or elderly merchant, who wore a tight fitting red vest, red breeches and stockings, soft slippers, and a brown mask with a large hooked nose and gray beard. Authoritarian, tight with his money which he often carried in a pouch around his waist. Pantalone liked to chase women, but women did not like him. Walked bent or hunched over.

Pierrot and Pierrette—Zannies. Dressed in black and white, loose fitting outfits with large collars. White-faced without a mask. Often these characters are sad and mute. They do acrobatic turns. Dancers.

Scapino—A Zanni. A schemer. Very musical. Dressed in rakish fashion with green white stripes. Wore hook-nosed mask.

Young Lovers—Male and female who played the “normal characters,” against whom all the others looked exaggerated and foolish. They were witty, handsome, well-educated young men and women.

#1 Lazzo of the Snoopy Servants

Cast: Pantalone

Two Servants

Scenario: Pantalone, suspicious and paranoid has shut himself in his office so that he can count his money which is hidden. But the servants, curious to know something about his secretive financial affairs, keep interrupting him. More and more exasperated, he tries to keep them from even knowing that there are cash boxes, or book, or keys.

Acting objectives:

Pantalone: You want to be left alone to count your gold. Get your servants to leave you alone.

Arlecchino and Friend: You are busy bodies. You want to know about Pantalone's affairs. You are snoopy. Keep interrupting him, to clean or to get some papers, or to announce a visitor, or to get a drink of water etc.

2 Lazzo of the Crane (Venice 1611)

Cast: Arlecchino

Magician

Scenario: A magician transforms Arlecchino into a crane. As he pleads with the magician, Arlecchino notices his neck becoming longer and longer.

Acting objectives:

Arlecchino: While slowly turning into a crane keep trying to convince the magician to turn you back to into a person.

Magician: You love playing magic tricks. Have fun turning Arlecchino into a crane.

3 Lazzo of the Statue (Paris 1670)

Cast: Arlecchino

Other character or characters

Scenario: Arlecchino is brought in as a statue or a robot. He plays tricks on the other characters when their backs are turned, always returning to the statue positions when they face him.

Acting objectives:

Arlecchino: Play a convincing robot or statue while playing tricks on other characters without their seeing who is doing it (toss paper, tap back).

Other character or characters (Doctore etc.):

Marvel at beauty of statue or the skills of the robot, but you are unable to figure out the mysterious things happening to you.

4 Lazzo of Falling into Unconsciousness (Paris 1674)

Cast: Arlecchino

Other character or characters

Scenario

Arlecchino continually falls into a deadly state of unconsciousness, without regard to his surroundings.

Acting objectives:

Through movement establish where you are and then fall unconscious into an embarrassing or dangerous situation. Remain unconscious no matter how hard others try to revive you.

Other Character or Characters:

Discover that Arlecchino is unconscious or asleep. Try to revive him. Or is he dead?

5 Lazzo of the Sack (Paris 1688)

Cast: Harelquina or other character

Arlecchino

Scenario: As Harlequina throws packages, Arlecchino catches them in a sack.

Each time he bags one, Arlecchino falls down.

Acting objectives:

Harlequina: Toss imaginary boxes to Arlecchino so he can put them in the sack. The boxes should be of different weights and sizes. Use as many different throwing styles as you can think of. When Arlecchino messes up, you may or may not help him.

Arlecchino: You seem unable to catch the boxes. You drop them, break some, smash some, but you keep on working the best you can until the giant bag is stuffed full.

6 Lazzo of the Hatching Egg (London 1729)

Cast: Arlecchino

Scenario: Arlecchino, hatched from an egg, learns to coordinate each part of his independently-jointed body.

Acting objectives:

Arlecchino: Convince the audience you are really just pecking your way out of an egg and learning to use each part of your body and to walk for the first time.

7 Lozzo of the Tooth Extractor (Rome 1560)

Cast: The Doctor
Pantalone

Scenario: The Doctor (or Arlecchino disguised as a dentist) fools Pantalone into thinking that rotten teeth are causing his noxious breath. Using oversized or ridiculous tools, the Doctor extracts two or more good teeth from Pantalone's mouth.

Acting objectives:

Doctore: You are a person who wants to make money by removing teeth. Convince your victims that they need their teeth removed and then use large imagery tools to pull out the teeth.

Pantalone: You want to get rid of you bad breath, but you would also like to keep your teeth. As your teeth are pulled, be sure the audience can see your pain. You may unsuccessfully try to talk your way out of the doctor's chair.

8 Lazzo of Kissing the Hand (Venice 1611)

Cast: Captain
Pedrolino
Burattino
Arlecchino

Scenario: Instructed by the Captain to give a bowl of macaroni to Pedrolino, Arlecchino finds Pedrolino weeping. Accepting the dish, Pedrolino explains that something awful has happened to his wife/husband. Pedrolino begins eating and crying. Saddened, Arlecchino also begins to eat the macaroni and cry. Burattino enters and begins to eat and cry as Arlecchino and Pedrolino tell about Pedrolino's wife.

Acting objectives:

All Characters: Use convincing pantomime macaroni, dishes, eating, and crying while you discuss the death of Pedrolino's wife. Remember movements are exaggerated and silly.

9 Lazzo of Eating the Cherries (Paris 1722)

Cast: Scapino
Arlecchino

Scenario: While Scapino is speaking, Arlecchino shows his indifference by taking imaginary cherries out of his hat, eating them and throwing the pits at Scapino.

Acting objectives:

Arlecchino: Use convincing exaggerated movements to show you eating cherries and throwing the pits. You may do this with different emotions such as boredom, hate, sorrow, joy etc.

Scapino: You would really like Arlecchino to listen to you. You think the event you are telling about or directions you are giving are really very important.

10 Lazzo of the False Bottoms (Rome 1618)

Cast: Two Zanni characters

Scenario: Zanni (Arlecchino or Coviello) hides ropes or tools in pies or trick purses in order to smuggle them into the jail.

Acting objectives:

Zanni: Show the audience, with large movements, the creation of an escape package for your friend who is in jail. Sneak the tools into the jail and help your friend.

Friend (Zanni, Captain, or Arlecchino): Discover the tools your friend has brought you and escape from jail without being seen.

11 Lazzo of Rage (Rome 1622)

Cast: Pantalone

Any Zanni

Scenario: After being bawled out by the Captain, Zanni and Coviello silently receive the scolding. As soon as the Captain leaves, they show complete mimic of rage. When the Captain returns, they resume their “we do not care” attitude.

Acting objectives:

Pantalone: Scold your employees for being so foolish. Each time you scold them, you leave the room and remember something else they did wrong.

Zanies, Captain, etc.: You do not care what your boss thinks, but he is your boss, so do not get caught being disrespectful

12 Lazzo of The Dispute (Rome 1622)

Cast: Any Zanni

Any Gratiano or any other character

Scenario: A common routine that revolves around an endless and frequently pointless argument between two or three characters. Often after arguing for a while the characters change their point of view and argue for the other side.

1. Zanni and Gratiano argue over who should be the first to eat the macaroni, the one who brought the flour or the one who brought the cheese.

2. Zanni and Coviello argue over which is the nobler beast, the goat or the sheep.

13 Lazzo of Friendship. Rome 1622)

Cast: Zanni
Pantalone
Scapino
Doctor

Scenario: Zanni is hired by Pantalone and Scapino is hired by the Doctor to fight their old feud. When Zanni and Scapino meet, ready to battle, they discover that they are long lost friends and embrace and salute each other to the dismay of Pantalone and the Doctor. Lazzi also refers to elaborate and ridiculous embraces and handshakes of Coviello and Pulcinella when they meet.

Acting objectives:

Pantalone: You want to win this fight with the Doctor, but do not want to fight it.

Hire a Zanni to do your dirty work

Doctor: You want to win this fight with the Pantalone, but do not want to fight it.

Hire a Scapino to do your dirty work.

Zanni: You love the money Pantalone paid you, but you are so happy to see your old friend Scapino.

Scapino. You love the money the Doctor paid you, but you are so happy to see your old friend.

14 Lazzo of Touching and Fright (Naples 1700)

Cast: Pulcinella or any other character.

Coviello or any other character.

Scenario: Pulcinella enters the stage and tells of the shipwreck he has survived.

Coviello enters from the other side of the stage and tells of the same story.

Seeing each other, they become frightened, thinking that the other is a ghost. Only after touching each other, do they realize they are both alive.

Acting objectives for both actors--You are overjoyed to be alive, but very much afraid of ghosts.

15 Lazzo of the Ghost (Naples 1700)

Cast: Any two or three characters.

Scenario: A Zanni dresses as a ghost to frighten the other characters. But seeing their frantic reactions, he becomes frightened too.

Acting objectives:

Zannie--You want to scare your friends.

Other character or characters--You believe in ghosts and are very scared and worried upon seeing a ghost.

16 Lazzo of the Dead Hypochondriac

Cast: Pantalone

Dottore

Others (Arlecchino, Harlequin, etc.)

Scenario: Pantalone, hypochondriac, complains of feeling ill in order to avoid paying out money. Dr. Dottore is sent for. Pantalone is frightened by his hocus-pocus into fainting; he is then pronounced dead by the doctor. Everyone-family, servants, neighbors-attend his wake. They eat and drink, paying no attention to the corpse. Pantalone comes to, realizes the situation, decides to remain quiet in order to hear what they say about him. But they're drinking his wine and speculating on his wealth! Intolerable! To teach them a lesson, he rises as a ghost, and frightens away the assembled company.

Acting objectives:

Pantalone--You believe you are sick and are sure you are dying. You do not want let go of your money for any reason. You are happy to find yourself at your own wake.

Dottore: You are not a very good doctor, but you can put on a good show to convince others that you can heal people as if by magic.

Other Characters: You are not very sad that Pantalone seems dead. You thought Pantalone was a mean old tightwad. So have a great party with his money.

From the Miser by Moliere

Cast:

Harpagon/Pantalone

Cleante/Lelio

Elise/Isabella

Text

Harpagon: (Alone)

It's a terrible anxiety to have a large sum of money at one's house. Happy is the man who has all his money well invested and who retains only what will suffice for his current expenses. It's hard to find a safe hiding place in any corner of the house. I should never think of trusting in strongboxes; they are just a bait for thieves, the ten thousand crowns sent me yesterday; ten thousand crowns in gold in one's house is a large sum...(sees son and daughter approaching). The devil! I've betrayed myself; my anxiety has undone me. I'm sure spoke aloud what was passing through my mind! (to them) What do you want?

Cleante:

Nothing, father.

Harpagon:

Have you been here long?

Elise:

We've only just come.

Harpagon:

Have you been here long?

Elise:

We've only just come.

Harpagon:

You heard...

Cleante:

What, father?

Harpagon:

You know perfectly well what I mean.

Elise:

No, father, what?

Harpagon:

What I said just now.

Cleante:

No, father.

Harpagon:

Yes, you did, you did.

Elise:

No, father.

Harpagon:

Yes, you did, you did.

Elise:

No, father.

Harpagon:

I'm quite sure you heard a few words. The fact is, I was talking to myself about how hard it is nowadays to find money, and I was saying how happy a man must be who has ten thousand crowns in his own house ... I want to tell you this in order that you may not take things amiss and imagine I said I had ten thousand crowns ... Would to heaven I had ten thousand crowns! It would be a fortunate thing for me. I'm in great need of them ... it would suit me exactly ... I should not then complain, as I do, that times are hard...

Cleante:

Really, father, you've no cause to complain; everyone knows you are comfortably well off.

Harpagon:

What! I well off! People lie who say that! Nothing is further from the truth: they are villains who spread such a report—even to my own children who betray me.

Elise:

Betray you!

Harpagon:

Yes. Talk like this, and the expense you run me into, will, one of these days, lead to my throat being in my own house, in the hope that I shall be found to be stuffed with gold.

Cleante:

What great expenses do I incur?

Harpagon: Gad!

Can there be anything more scandalous than the costly apparel you indulge in? I scolded your sister yesterday, but this is worse. If you were summed up, from head to foot, a good annuity would be found in your attire. To be able to clothe yourself as you do you must certainly be robbing me. How else could you obtain the means-not from *my* hand.

Cleante:

I, father? I play, and as I've been very lucky, I spend on clothes all the money I win.

Harpagon:

That's very bad. If you're lucky at play you ought to profit by it, and put out at good interest the money you win, against a rainy day. How foolish to spend money on wigs when one can wear one's own hair which costs nothing. I'll wager that there are at least 20 pistols in your wigs and ribbons, and 20 pistols will bring in 18 livers, six sows and eight deniers per annum, even if you only get eight percent, and if you lend it out at compound...(he becomes more and more involved in his calculations).

From the *Miser* by Moliere