

Commedia Dell' Arte Presentation Instructions

You will create a short 10 min SCENE based on a Commedia stock character who you learned about this semester (obviously, you will also use 2 other masks to support the character you choose) using appropriate prologue, epilogue, and lazzi. Each member of the group will be responsible for one area of the commedia topic (acting, staging, governance, masks, etc.) and will provide a 1-2 page paper about their research for this area, due before the presentation. Use the research to help you with your performance. Following find the guideline for writing a scenario.

Writing a Scenario

1. Choose a contrasting range of Masks from within the company, playing to the strengths of the performers, ensuring at least one potential love interest, at least one strong master to get the plot started, and a servant to act as go-between, plus one outsider (usually Il Capitano) to complicate matters.

2 At the earliest possible stage decide what songs and dances the company will need to learn for the proposed scenario: these have to be practiced regularly over a period of time, whereas the scenes would go cold with such an amount of rehearsal. This step is optional for our class purposes, but if you want to put in a short song, you may.

3 Choose, if possible, a general theme for your show. The combination of Masks that you have will very often suggest one, e.g. more than one Capitano leads almost inevitably to a war scenario, but which war? In relation to the theme, choose a location for the action. If you choose the basic street with its traditional houses, then fine, but if you choose a different location, make sure that it has enough entrances and exits to ensure the potential for exciting action. Outdoors is generally better than indoors, unless the indoor space has plural exits and entrances (hotel lobby, palace antechamber, etc)

5 Choose a motivation for each Mask that relates to the other Masks or to their relationship within the scenario's dramatic location. Note that each motivation or need is to be treated as the equivalent of a Stanislavski super-objective: it is what the character wants above all other things. Call it the 'Gimme', as in 'Gimme sex', 'Gimme money' or 'Gimme food'. In a scenario these basic drives need to become more specific and must have the potential for action, rather than contemplation. They are the springboard for each Mask's plot line through the scenario, and must be directly related to both its traditional needs and also the strengths of the performer currently interpreting it.

Carlo Boso considers that fear, and the attempts by the individual to escape from it and find happiness, lies at the core of a Mask's motivation. Antonio Fava (quoted in the programme to Love is a Drug) puts it even more strongly:

The pleasure we derive from comedy corresponds to the fulfilment of a basic need – the need to overcome fear, even if only for a moment. Fear of all kinds: terror, superstition, vertigo, our fear of dying, our fear of the unknown, of our leap into the abyss – all the fears which stalk us. Our greatest fear is the fear of Death – an enduring and central feature in the comic tradition.

All chosen motivations or needs should, on one hand be clear enough to the audience to open a direct emotional channel between them and the performer, and on the other hand be consistent with the Mask's known behaviour. This implies that every time a Mask is on stage it is either actively trying to gain something, or else escape from something. These actions must appeal to the audience on an emotional and visceral level, not an intellectual level. Ideally a Mask is always on the journey between the complete joy of getting what it needs, and the total fear of losing something it holds most dear.

6 Perhaps ask the company to do some initial improvisations to check whether each Mask has an opposition to their want or need. A Mask with no other opposing force is useless on stage. Each Mask must go through the following process: need realised and stated – opposition or series of oppositions to need – conclusion.

Keep in mind that oppositions can come from the Masks themselves, other Masks, or the constraints of society in general. Do not try and be too original or creative at this stage: the existing Commedia hierarchy works for, not against you. Try to create in each scene that initially comes to mind the maximum emotional possible 'stretch' for each Mask.

7 Envision a 3 act/part structure (beginning, middle, end).

The beginning section, or Act I, is the briefest when, in order to get the plot moving, the audience and Masks need to get the information across in as brief and comedic a manner as possible. If the plot information a Mask needs to impart is fairly 'dry' in nature then it is appropriate to dress this up with improvised or preplanned business so the audience don't go to sleep, get bored or go away. Molière is recommended reading.

The middle section, or Act II, is where the chaos starts, as all the information the audience needs to understand the comedy has already been put in place. In this section the only special instructions needed are to keep the pace up, and don't solve any of your Masks' problems, unless only seemingly. Try to save all the resolutions up for the end. If one Mask does inevitably end up getting what it wants at this point, perhaps due to the needs of the other Masks in writing the scenario, simply put another opposition in place, or have satisfaction interrupted at the last possible moment by a chase, fight, conscription into the armed forces, earthquake or other random earth-shattering event.

The final section, or Act III, should take place on a high plateau of fantasticality which can only be reached by means of the previous two acts. This may be an imagined place, e.g. Pantalone has been taken to the moon, or an actual one, e.g., the gardens at night. The process of Commedia is from the physical to the metaphysical and this is the time to get meta-physical. All the Masks' difficulties must be re-presented, and a positive resolution provided for as many of them as possible, in this order: first the Lovers, second the servants, third the old men and Il Capitano. Do this as quickly as possible so the audience is left reeling with the skill, bravado and sheer unlikeliness of this happy surprise. They need to appreciate the wonder, satisfaction and sheer joy of a simple ending after encountering such difficulties in the plot. It is often necessary to build in a deus ex machina device at this stage to keep the pace up and to wrap up all the surviving plot strands. However the audience is also generally aware that this kind of luck doesn't generally happen in real life. The happy ending in itself is an ironic joke. If it has any message it is that love will triumph if we let it, and that this generally doesn't happen in the real

world. The speed of the resolution should, however, be backed by a celebratory carnival ending: a song and a dance in a suitably upbeat and joyful manner.

8. Other information to consider: Commedia troupes often came into town early or played towns several times, so they knew the townspeople well. They used this information by including it in their improvisations. They flattered those that were paying them and ridiculed those that the majority of whom the audience did not approve.