

The Story of Theatre: The European Renaissance

The European Renaissance is known for the painting and sculpture of Italy, the exploration and conquests of Spain, and the social reorganization and philosophical speculations of France. In addition, the theatre thrived during this period. Public theatre in Germany was stimulated by traveling troupes of English actors. In Spain, the theatre flourished with the plays of Cervantes and Lope. France had its court drama, which was later to affect the English Restoration. But the most important and most lasting in influence was the **commedia dell'arte** of Italy, an improvisational comedy using stock characters.

After the fall of Rome, formal drama ceased to exist for centuries, but theatre was kept alive by the vagabond troupes who traveled the countryside, usually in family groups, performing wherever and whenever they could for whatever pay—usually food and lodging—they could get. The skills and arts of juggling, acrobatics, singing, dancing, and comic routines were passed down from generation to generation. By the sixteenth century, permanent theatre structures were used, and the **commedia dell'arte** was established.

There are no existing scripts from **commedia** productions because the shows were largely improvisational. There would be a *scenario* or plot outline, and then the performers would try various jokes, tricks, or bits of stage business they called **lazzi**. The performers kept what

audiences liked and used it again and again, each troupe jealously guarding its own **lazzi** and passing them down from parent to child. The basic scenarios were from Roman comedy, as was the cast of stock characters.

Commedia actors needed to be skilled in all the performing arts. Performers played the same character for years, maybe for an entire career. The most famous of the young lovers were **Arlecchino** (later **Harlequin**) and **Columbina**. **Arlecchino** is sometimes one of the *zanni* or clown servants, and his **lazzi** included turning a somersault while holding a glass of water on a tray and not spilling a drop. His costume of black and white diamond-shaped patches has been used for centuries in masquerade and design. **Columbina** first appeared as a pert servant girl character. Gradually she became the daughter or ward of a tyrannical father. She loved **Arlecchino** and eventually eloped with him, but was often presented as unhappy in love. Other **commedia** stock characters were **Scaramouche**, **Scapino**, **Pantaloon**, and **Coralina**.

Commedia played to all types of audiences. It was truly family entertainment, and its descendants can be seen in today's clowns and mimes. The stock characters of Roman comedy, expanded upon by **commedia**, are the ancestors of today's staples of situation comedy: the arrogant jock, the stuffy English butler, the outraged father of teenagers, and the saucy secretary.