



**TaPS MASTER CLASS RESOURCE PACK: Exploring Zanni in the Commedia
dell'Arte
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EXPLORING ZANNI IN THE COMMEDIA DELL' ARTE

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OVERVIEW

The origins of the 16th Century Italian art form *Commedia dell' Arte* lie within the character of *Zanni*, a poor and incredibly stupid migrant worker who initially was the only character in what were called *Zannata* comedies or *Commedia di Zanni*. In this masterclass we explore the Commedia art form through a focus on *Zanni*, understanding his character, but also the stylistic tradition which his character gave birth too, using Mask, improvisation and bold physicality.

GAMES

Theatre is playful, and games provide the essential format for an act of theatre to begin. Commedia especially requires a comic mindset, and the games used at the beginning of any session should set the tone. My favourite game to play in Ninja.

Within my version of Ninja, everyone is trying to eliminate the other Ninjas and the last Ninja standing wins. Everyone stands in a circle with his/her forearms held out. Ninjas are eliminated by the Attacking Ninja - using his arms as blade-like weapons - making contact (however light) with their forearms. Above the elbow does not count, anything below the elbow and you are out. There is only one Attacking Ninja at one time, and we take it in turns to fulfil this role, going clockwise around the circle until the game is over. Key to the game is the movement style – whether attacking or defending, every Ninja MUST use only one movement, from a to b. The movement should be sharp, Ninja like. The Attacker can attack anyone in the circle, though the easiest people to attack will be those nearest of course. Everyone else needs to avoid the attacker's arms. The Attacker always initiates movement, any pre-empting avoidance and you're out. Other rules: you must make a 'Ninja noise' whenever you attack (or you are out) and you must always try to attack. You can attack tactically, but running away is not aloud, and if repeated I usually eliminate the person.

The game will be slow to begin with, but on the second round enforce a quickened tempo. If you demonstrate the benefits of being fast (eliminating people!) they will quickly catch on. On a third round I will push the need to be big; big actions with big Ninja noises.

I'd then ask why we've played this game. Young people always need to know the 'why' to anything they are doing, especially in this work, as otherwise they can feel that they are just being asked to 'be silly' and they may not want to!

Parallels:

- Play! Fun! A key element of Commedia
- Physical awareness
- Speed
- Social Stereotypes – the exaggeration of reality

The final one is most important. All we have told the group is “be a Ninja” and most will have formed a social stereotype in their heads in a matter of seconds. I always explain that social stereotypes are usually very bad in social contexts, but in the theatre are very useful. Commedia is a celebration of social stereotypes, taking instantly recognizable culture and exaggerating it to comic proportions.

COMMEDIA IN THE 21ST CENTURY

It’s important for young people to see Commedia in its most modern examples from TV and film. I start by asking what people know of Commedia, and feed in that it features several different types of comedy:

- Slapstick – In Italian *Batocio*, the prop of Zanni, is where we get the term Slapstick. The Slapstick is a weapon of comic violence, where the violence becomes funny the bigger, more frequent and more ridiculous it is.
- Improvisation – Devising comedy without a script or acting on impulse within a pre-rehearsed show.
- Audience interaction – speaking to the audience (direct address) and interacting with them. Asides are especially useful (speaking to the audience while another character is on-stage, who it is clear cannot hear the interjection, which is therefore a private sharing between character and audience).
- Lazzi – From the Latin word *actio*, Lazzi simply means ‘comic actions’. It refers to physical comedy moments or routines which few playwrights could describe or dream up at a desk. They can be as simple as a pratfall and as complex as a three-minute routine involving multiple characters. Historically, actors would carry their own Lazzi books to log all new ideas born in improvisation or performance.
- Gags – Commedia is very much a spoken art form, certainly nowhere near mime or non-verbal physical theatre. Therefore characters speak and some with considerable force and vocabulary! Verbal jokes and gags are very much a part of the form.

Ask the young people to chat in pairs about any TV shows or films they have seen that use these types of comedy. Frequent examples will be Monty Python, Bottom, Miranda, Mr. Bean, The Simpsons, Laurel & Hardy, The Chuckle Brothers.

EXPLORING ZANNI

I then begin introducing Zanni. This will take on a different path if I did not have access to masks. As I have my own this is rarely the case but it is certainly possible to explore Zanni without masks. For an affordable set of masks I'd start by looking at Strangeface Theatre, made by Russell Dean.

THE MASK

In Commedia, everything comes from the mask. The Mask dictates the exaggerated physicality, the direct address, not to mention the character itself. I get some of the young people to stand in masks and face the group. I ask the group "What is different? An actor is wearing a mask – what changes?" I try to cover the following answers, which are often offered up by the group.

- Their face is covered. 80% of our expression comes through our face, so removing that leaves us with a void that must be filled by our body. In Commedia, the body speaks. I ask the actors to show us their character is thinking, simply by using their body.
- Their mouth is not covered. They are free to speak and the mouth becomes part of the mask, I ask the students to pull a teathy grin, then a "I've just seen a ghost" shocked face. The difference says it all.
- It's comic. The mask is comic and this is a comic art form so we are off to a good start!
- Exaggerated features. The face follows the pattern of Commedia, which is to take something true and real and make it bigger.
- The actor must face the audience for the mask to work. Of course I don't mean that they must never turn away from the audience, but the actor must continually check in with the audience, and must not leave the back of his head facing the audience for more than a couple of seconds. The strap on the back of his head reminds the audience that he is wearing a mask: it breaks the illusion they have created in their minds that this mask is actually a face.

INTRODUCING ZANNI

I briefly explain there are four main 'types' of character in Commedia. Much like in football, there are many different individual players, with various peculiarities and dodgy haircuts, but they all fall into one of four categories: goalkeepers, defenders, midfielders and attackers. Commedia's four 'types' are:

1. Zanni – servants
2. Innamorati – lovers
3. Il Capitano – an imposter
4. Il Vecchio – an old man (or occasionally old woman)

Together they form a little society, in which no one gets older, no one dies, and everyone is chasing after something.

So who is this Zanni?

Zanni literally means 'John'. Jonathan in Italian is Giovanni, John is Gianni which in some dialects of Italian would be pronounced Zanni with a 'dz' at the start. So why John?

Zanni is an instantly recognizable social stereotype of Renaissance Italy, he/she is a migrant worker who has travelled from the rural areas of the country to work in the city. He hires himself out and is picked up by a rich merchant to work in his house.

These servants were very prevalent, had strange rural names, dialects and customs, and weren't familiar with city life. Consequently they were stereotyped as being stupid, clumsy and able to solve a problem by creating three more. The masters used to call them all 'John' as a way of avoiding memorizing their unfamiliar names. 'John' therefore became associated with being someone who serves others.

Zanni is therefore poor, hungry, dignified (he wants to work), and extremely stupid.

In performance 'Zanni' however is not the character's name, but the *type* of character, and is therefore a term used by the actors but not used by the characters onstage. Pantalone would not say "Zanni! Come here!". Famous 'Zanni' actors from the golden age of Commedia invented stage names such as Arlecchino, Truffaldino, Bagattino, Brighella, Finocchio, Scapino, and for the ladies Columbina, Ricciolina, Smeraldina. These names are all a Mask in themselves. Arlecchino, the most famous of names associated with Zanni, comes from Dante's writings, in which Arlechin is a little devil causing trouble wherever he goes. So Arlecchino is a trouble-maker by name as well as by nature. (It's worth mentioning that he is not a 'devil' as some suggest. Commedia was strictly non-religious in its original form to avoid giving the Catholic church any more reason to oppose its existence).

A great example of a modern Zanni type is Manuel in Faulty Towers.

ZANNI'S ANATOMY

I talk through Zanni's physical mask.

The feet are turned out, opening up the body.

The knees are bent, not forcibly, but in a relaxed state.

The curvature of the spine is exaggerated, pushing both the bum out and the chest out. This again should be in a relaxed state, not with bags of tension. Zanni is ugly and grotesque, not because he tries to be, but simply because he is.

The curvature of the arms is also exaggerated, giving space in between the arms and the body. The arms continue to function as normal arms, doing what arms do, but with that extra sense of space and shape.

The head is like one giant eyeball. Wherever Zanni looks the whole head must move as one, from a to b (as in Ninja).

This is Zanni's body. He cannot change it, he doesn't have the knowhow or the desire to. Try walking around in this body. See the principles of Zanni's body as a helpful guide, rather than a constricting straight jacket. Zanni is a human being, so make sure he still looks like one. Adapt the principles to suit your interpretation of Zanni.

ZANNI'S BASE POSITION

Each character in the Commedia has a base position, a way to stand on stage when resting, as indeed all humans have a habitual way of standing. Zanni's corresponds to those who wait at bus stops and the like, with all the weight of his body on one leg, with the other protruding keeping the balance. Then when the leg becomes tired, Zanni switches to the other. You and I would simply shift our weight, but following the Commedia principle of exaggeration, Zanni jumps from one side to the other, keeping his head and upper body at the same level, while the legs do the work.

This changing of the base position can be used to pivot on the spot and change direction. This movement will be lead by the head, because the head is the first to react in Zanni's body. The head turns to look at something, the body catches up, much like a train leading its carriages.

ZANNI MONOLOGUES

It's important to quickly find the voice of Zanni to avoid 'silent Commedia'. Early on I will introduce the monologue, helping young people to begin improvising, find their Zanni voice, and also introducing the practice of speaking to the audience. This direct address is not to be confused with the rehearsed interactions of pantomime. We ask the audience questions that we then answer ourselves, not leaving a gap for them to respond. Why? Because the audience have come to watch not perform, and besides they don't know their lines, so a question is usually followed by an awkward pause, and awkward pauses have no place in the Commedia.

The voice is a mask too. We understand who people are by how they use their voice. Zanni's voice must be unrefined, without any sense of received pronunciation, but also muscular so that the audience can hear clearly his words. Regional accents and to some extent foreign accents work fantastically for Zanni.

Zanni speaks to the audience about many things, though in this exercise I focus on his key desire: food. Starting points may be simply to expand on the pain Zanni feels having not eaten for so long, dreaming up food of epic proportions, having a conversation with his rumbling stomach, hallucinating about the audience being bits of food etc.

All improvise their Zanni monologue in unison, imagining before them an audience of Zanni, who can identify clearly with their struggles.

I repeat this exercise asking everyone to go further with their voice (for Commedia is rarely quiet) and further with Zanni's emotional range (for Commedia is rarely small).

ZANNI GESTURES

There are over 300 recorded gestures for Zanni from the renaissance period of Commedia. To start with I usually offer up 3 to help students learn to move Zanni around the space. Gestures are not rules. They should not be enforced as a law where the Director says "You should have done this gesture for that emotion". They are principles, tools that help the actors to create a physical language for the character consistent with the rest of the Mask. Gestures are a discipline, which begin cranky, odd looking and uncomfortable, and over time with attention to detail become fluent, natural and give great colour to the interpretation of the character.

In short workshops where this process is not possible, I encourage the students to connect with the heart of the gesture, i.e. what is underneath it, and try to make it natural and exaggerated at the same time.

An exercise to help build this idea would be to get them walking around the room, then ask them to secretly watch someone else, observe how they walk, then imitate them. Then ask them to exaggerate their imitation to certain degrees. Finally get a few to show back their exaggerations and see if the class can identify who they copied.

Grand Zanni (Big Zanni)

Zanni tries to remain silent, unseen and inconspicuous, three things impossible for Zanni. Zanni 'creeps' around a house late at night looking for some food, or perhaps has been sent to steal something. Every sound gives him the willies. From the base position, the protruding leg raises to waist height, while the chest comes down to meet the leg. The arms add expression and balance in front and behind the body, the head as usual is free to move. Then the leg returns to the floor, usually only having advanced Zanni a tiny distance and the other leg goes up. It's a walk designed to disguise Zanni's presence, and obeys another key principle of Commedia:

“Commedia is the maximum amount of action in the minimum amount of space.” (Antonio Fava)

The gesture is malleable, and can be performed forwards, backwards, fast, slow, big, small and with turns included. At any point that the actor wants to pause the gesture he/she returns to the base position or simply pauses mid-flow.

Due-Tempi (*Two-time step*)

This step is when Zanni wants to get somewhere fast, often because he is scared or very scared. It could also be celebratory or out of urgency.

The principle is that Zanni’s legs are running faster than his body can keep up with, creating a diagonal axis in the body. The arms act as mini-propellers alongside his body. The movement is completely lead by his feet, which remain turned out (Zanni cannot change his body!).

Zanni Stanco (*Tired Zanni*)

This gesture is particularly flexible, and could also be Zanni Pensato (*Zanni thinks*) or a sorrowful Zanni. The diagonal axis is the opposite from Due-Tempi, leaning forward this time. The gesture is a jump from one foot to the other, though with the weight in the body which would come from being incredibly tired. The head pigeons forward with each step.

The character of this gesture is dictated by the emotional mask the actor attaches to it. If tired, the actor will huff and puff and struggle to get his words out from being out of breathe. If thinking, the actor will recreate the sound of Zanni’s cogs turning and perhaps the pain of thinking in itself. If upset, the shoulders are key to Zanni’s cry, rising and falling with each sob.

Using these gestures and the base position, I lead the group through a scenario. They have been charged to break and enter in Pantalone’s house and steal something. It’s midnight, pitch black, and every sound is scary. But they must do this task, though they might be easily distracted by food, another Zanni, or anything that seems more interesting. I ask the actors to use the gestures as a basis for movement. They can invent new ones, or move ‘freestyle’ but encourage them with the truth that the gestures usually provide more stimulus for improvisation.

ZANNI CANOVACCIOS

Canovaccio means Canvas, and is the canvas that Commedia artists paint onto. It gives them the boundaries of their scene, and the basic instructions of what occurs. It features a series of bullet pointed instructions, which are

descriptive not artistic, give a structure to adhere to. If Hamlet's 'To be or not to be' scene was in a Commedia canovaccio it would read "Hamlet enters, considers suicide and leaves".

A classic Canovaccio for studying Zanni comes from Antonio Fava and builds on the scenario we begun just earlier.

There are three Zanni, all friends, but all working for different masters. Coincidentally those three masters all have given their Zanni the same task: to break into Pantalone's house and steal the marriage contract (An agreement between parents that their children can marry). If Zanni gets the contract he will receive a great reward, but fail and he will be punished.

I remind the actors that it's pitch-black and that they are not expecting anyone else to be in the room, let alone their mates. I also drop in that they may not necessarily find the contract, the focus is on the looking.

I coach improvisations, shouting out instructions and encouraging the actors when a comic opportunity arises. Often they will ignore such opportunities or not go far enough with them. Some feedback I regularly give:

- Stay with the audience. Remember that we don't know anything of this scene, teach us what is happening. If we don't understand, we can't laugh. Give every reaction, thought, excitement to the audience, share it all with us first.
- Use the gestures. When scenes become static, ideas do too, and the audience becomes bored. Use the gestures to spark ideas into life.
- Try not to block each other. Blocking is very simply saying "no" to an idea. Say "Yes" to any idea your co-actors offer up. "Look, over there!" followed by "What? There's nothing there" is a block. "Look, over there!" followed by "Wow! What is it?!" is a build. When actors build on each other's ideas something great happens, not all the time of course, but most of the time.
- Explore Zanni Logic. Zanni is slow to realise and quick to jump to the wrong conclusions. He jumps up to a window ledge to shut a window then remembers he's scared of heights and can't get down. He divides the contract into three pieces so that all the Zanni can return home with 'the contract'. He thinks and thinks and thinks until finally he comes up with an idea, and then celebrates having an idea so vigorously that he forgets what it was.
- When the audience laughs, do it again. We are obliged to follow the audience, we are there to serve their taste. Repetition is a key part of Commedia.

- Speed it up, make it bigger, remove the pauses. These are universal notes I will give to almost any Commedia scene.
- Big start, big finish. A scene must start and end with a flourish. Get this right and you can cover a multitude of sins! Never let a scene splutter to a conclusion, always tell the audience exactly when it's finished and when to clap.
- Stretch the 'Elastic' moments. Elastic moments are when a situation can be eeked out for comedy, for as long as the actor's inventions thrive. In the scene above, there are two clear moments. The first is the discovery of the other Zanni in the space, which could take a few seconds or five minutes. The second is the searching for the contract. The joy of a scene is in the elastic moments being stretched to just the right length, and then at the right moment they are 'snapped' by finding the other Zanni and finding the contract respectively.

ZANNI SKETCHES

As a final development, ask the students to get into groups and use improvisation to create material for a sketch, using the following scenario:

4-5 Zanni are sleeping (spectacularly!) on and around a chair. The voice of their master shouts "Zanni! Bring me my chair!" which wakes them up. They begin to search frantically for the chair (Zanni logic) until finally they realise it's in the middle of the stage. As a team they try to lift the chair, but cannot, due to there being a counter-balance of some Zanni trying to lift and some trying to push, or perhaps some Zanni trying to lift by putting their foot on the chair (for extra grip!). Whichever way, it's obvious to the audience why the chair won't lift, but a strange mystery to Zanni.

This elastic moment develops for as long as the actors can sustain it. Zanni might try a psychological approach "I don't want you anyway chair", peer pressure (a Mexican wave in which the chair must participate), romance (seducing the chair with another one) and so on. The chair remains utterly motionless throughout. Finally the master shouts "Zanni! Bring me my chair NOW!" at which they all grab the chair and rush off stage, forgetting the saga of lifting it.

The key to this exercise is the process of using improvisation firstly to create material, then secondly editing, honing and refining the material into a slick polished performance, and finally adding 'active improvisations' during the performance, should there be an opportunity/necessity.

CONCLUSION

By studying and understanding Zanni, we can understand the whole of Commedia. He embodies the stylistic approach to comedy, the essentials of mask, the key principles of exaggeration and disaster, and is in many ways an Everyman character. We are all Zanni, bumbling along through life, making silly errors, trying to serve others, following our key desires.