Christopher Bayes directs

The Servant of Two Masters

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Dear Friend,

I have long loved the unpredictable and improvisatory form of the *commedia dell’arte*, and it’s my pleasure to introduce it to STC audiences with the fifth play of our 25th Anniversary Season, Carlo Goldoni’s *The Servant of Two Masters*. We’ve found an ensemble who are flexible enough to make it play and resourceful enough to make it funny in Christopher Bayes and his merry caravan of players. As The New York Times noted of this production, “The laughter would be quite enough to propel *The Servant of Two Masters* onto a theater lover’s must-see list. But then there’s the magic... Now that’s theater.”

Christopher Bayes directed *Servant* at the Yale Repertory Theatre, where he was the Head of Physical Acting in 2010. In this issue, you’ll learn more about Chris’ background and approach to the play in our interview with him and his brilliant Truffaldino, actor Steven Epp. In addition, playwright and adaptor Constance Congdon takes us behind the scenes with a modern-day *commedia* troupe, as we see how the laughs (and *lazzi*) are made.

*Servant* is also a classic play, Goldoni’s hybrid of Molière’s elegant farce structure with the ancient masked stock characters and street-theatre techniques of the commedia. The play’s star-crossed lovers, resourceful servants and miserly fathers will strike you as instantly familiar, but our ensemble embodies them in endlessly surprising ways. Learn more about the eternal archetypes and storied history of the genre inside. As always, additional information, full articles and behind-the-scenes commentary on *The Servant of Two Masters* can be found on Asides Online (Asides.ShakespeareTheatre.org).

I hope to see you in the theatre this spring.

Warm regards,

Michael Kahn
Artistic Director, Shakespeare Theatre Company

Agents of Chaos

Director Christopher Bayes and actor Steven Epp have been friends and collaborators since they met more than 20 years ago in the company at the Theatre de la Jeune Lune. In the decades since, they have combined performing and teaching—Chris as the Head of Physical Acting at the Yale School of Drama, where he teaches clown and *commedia dell’arte*, and Steve as the co-Artistic Director at the Theatre de la Jeune Lune, winner of the 2005 Tony Award for outstanding regional ensemble before it closed its doors in 2008. The Shakespeare Theatre Company’s Literary Associate Drew Lichtenberg interviewed the two recently—Chris from his house in Brooklyn, Steve at Berkeley Repertory Theatre, where he had just finished performing in their new adaptation of Molière’s *A Doctor in Spite of Himself*. They discussed their love/hate relationship with Carlo Goldoni, their process of adapting *The Servant of Two Masters*, and the eternal games of the *commedia dell’arte*.

**Drew Lichtenberg:** When did you guys meet? I assume you have worked together for a long time.

**Steven Epp:** We started together working at the Theatre de la Jeune Lune in Minneapolis.

**Christopher Bayes:** Yeah, 1984.

**SE:** I eventually became one of the artistic directors... Chris and I started at the same time, but he left and I didn’t. He abandoned me.

**CB:** Yes, I abandoned Steve...so he could become an artistic director. (*Laughter*)

**SE:** It was like a school. We would study all these root forms of theatre—clown, *commedia, bouffon*—but then apply them to make theatre for an audience today. I think that’s reminiscent of our *Servant*—we’re in masks, but we’re not trying to do some museum piece. It’s infused with a contemporary sensibility.

**CB:** Yeah, I first became interested in using *commedia* as a teaching technique. Nobody really does the hardcore *commedia* stuff in a traditional way anymore, which I think is a shame. If you do it right, it forces you to be alive in the moment. The ability to find the physical psychology of the mask, the playfulness and theatricality of the mask, is really useful for actors in terms of figuring out how to use their bodies to create character. The *commedia* is bawdy, earthy. It comes right out of the gutter. It has its own kind of poetry, but it’s the poetry of the downtrodden. It’s a political form.

**SE:** Yeah. It’s a very social form, whereas clown, for example, is more intimate, almost more private.

**CB:** *Commedia* has its own poetry, but it’s from the earth. Lots of hitting and bad words. The trick with *commedia* is that you have to give a nod to legacy, but at the same time be completely up to date and in the moment. Like, what happened on the news last night? What happened to Santorum yesterday? What happened on Wall Street? We source from the present day, but it’s a part of a legacy that stretches back to the 17th century. There’s a lot of verbal wordplay in Goldoni, but it’s built on a kind of broad physicality that has always supported the language.
SE: Goldoni is challenging, because of what’s there and what’s not there. Servant is the best known of his plays, but his later ones are more Chekhovian, almost, much more naturalistic and polite. At the beginning, he was writing for actors in Venice who came up in commedia and were trained in physical improvisation. The text is thin in Goldoni, because he relied so heavily on the physical, on the stuff that’s not on the page, whereas Shakespeare is completely text. His line is completely packed.

CB: I have a sort of love/hate relationship with Carlo Goldoni. The original version of The Servant of Two Masters is a commedia dell’arte scenario. The dialogue wasn’t written down. He gave it to this troupe of commedia actors and they played it for a while and he came back and saw it and thought that it was too vulgar or something. So he took the play back from the actors and wrote it out, and then gave it back to them with all the naughty bits cut out. We’ve put all the naughty bits back. [Laughs]

SE: It makes you wonder, what did we lose that those guys had come up with, you know?

CB: So we mostly took our adapter Connie [Congdon, whose article begins on page 8] aside and said, “Well, what does it say in the Italian?” How do we explore this and how can we find what the original game was? It was really an excavation, an archeological dig.

SE: It’s such an early play in his career, and it was so dominated by this company of actors. For the bulk of his career he was really veering in a direction away from the commedia to this other form that he was slowly finding—so to me there’s a license to be loose with the material, to really infuse it with the dynamic of the true commedia—the vulgarity, the down-and-dirty side of it, which is very topical and very immediate in feeling. You kind of have to approach it in the way those commedia troupes did, which is to write up a scenario and then just play, create. You have to go after that spirit. It feels fresh that way, charged, dangerous, improvisatory without necessarily being improvisatory. When you’re wearing a mask it’s got to be that way. You have to find a way to make your body communicable.

CB: Connie trusted us in a really wonderful way. We would say, “Oh, what about this moment here? Can we push it further?” And we would work together to find out how. She was really open in the room to discussion. But with the spirit of play that commedia demands, even Connie had to throw her hands up in the air at a certain point. She was like, “What, are you gonna say whatever the hell you want?” and Steve was like, “Yeah, that’s what I’m gonna say!” That’s the way Steve rolls. You gotta go with it, man.

SE: Very often, the best stuff is found on your feet in the room. Sometimes, if you were just trying to write, by yourself on your computer in your room somewhere, it just doesn’t come. There are great and important plays that are written that way—but once you’re on your feet, and especially once you’re in front of the audience, everything changes.

CB: There’s this sense that you could go terribly wrong. It’s never a surefire thing. You should always feel that it could really tank really easily. Without that danger, it doesn’t have the same spirit. If it goes great, then that’s fine. But if it doesn’t go great, that’s where the work begins. That was horrible! Oh God, I’m never gonna say that again! But what if I try it this way tomorrow? Without the possibility of disaster, you’re never going to feel like you had a triumph.

DL: I think one of the things that’s so fascinating about this kind of comedy is that it’s tapping into something that’s really deep and mysterious and almost primeval.

SE: It’s very visceral for all the characters. Everybody wears their emotions on their sleeves. There’s no intellectualizing, no psychology.

CB: And that’s the beautiful thing—in commedia you can swing from one emotion to the other the way a toddler does. The characters will burst into tears at the slightest provocation and then they can completely forget that because they suddenly see someone they love or something they want. There’s no transition from one emotion to another, they just go there. Whatever the emotion is, they inhabit it fully.

SE: It has to feel true. Not true on a Death of a Salesman level or something. It’s true in a different way.

CB: It doesn’t really exist in a 21st-century realistic way. The mask demands such physicality and expressiveness that it gains this kind of elastic fluidity. It can be super violent one moment and then idiotically silly the next. And within a second. It’s a little bit like being in the room with a bunch of toddlers, that they have that kind of filter-less ability to play.

DL: Chris, do you like to be the toddler in chief, or are you the grown-up in the room?

CB: Oh, I hate to be that guy. I’m much happier if I’m throwing a turkey around.

SE: Chris is the one who always goes further, who’s pushing you to do the most lewd, outrageous thing. Once you think you’ve done it all, he has an idea of how you can do more.

CB: Yeah...and then we have to cut it.

SE: And then we cut it.

CB: But I like to see how far it can go, push it to the most unfortunate extreme, because there may be a sweet spot down the road. We will never know if we haven’t pushed it. So let’s play this game, and play it violently. Let’s play it sweetly. Let’s do this or that and see what it can take. Usually we end up cutting it, but there’s something to be had from the full, most ferocious kind of play. It has a residue, a logic, that stays. If we can keep it fun in the room, and the actors are having a good time, the audience is going to smell it. If there’s no pleasure of the actor at play, the audience doesn’t really fully understand what’s going on. They’re watching someone unload a UPS truck. Nobody wants to watch that. If what’s going on onstage is a chore, it doesn’t make any sense. So I try to encourage as much as I can a sort of freedom of play. Maybe we go too far and have to come back a bit, but without the possibility of that, you’d be watching something that feels like an antique, rather than something that is informed by the past and is pushing something into the present and in the future is going to have an effect.

I also love to find that place in the midst of the comedy where you can find the tragedy of the comic character. You know, when Truffaldino is lamenting about how hungry he is, it’s not like he’s a spoiled brat, he’s a man who is dying. His stomach is churning because he hasn’t had anything to eat for three days, and he has to work for this idiotic master in order to get a sandwich, in order to stay alive. If you run with that idea, you’re going to find something really beautiful on the other side. It’s still within the comic world, you’re just finding the tragedy inside of it. And that can be gorgeous.

SE: It’s always beautiful when they sort of live right next to each other.

CB: Each time out is an adventure and a discovery. If it brings you back to something that you know, that’s fantastic. But if you’re not curious when you go on an adventure, you’ll never make any interesting discoveries.

[HONK HONK] DL: Was that a honking clown nose? Sorry, I thought I heard...
Commedia dell’arte

**Commedia all’italiana (1600–1700s)**
In the late 1500s, Italian troupes began to tour throughout Europe. One of the most famous companies, the Gelosi, landed at the French court. Slowly, a French commedia emerged: less free-wheeling, more melancholy and aesthetic. The love triangle of Harlequin, Pierrot and Columbine would revitalize the commedia’s reach in Europe.

**Molière (1660s)**
Molière encountered troupes during his years touring the provinces, and shared a theatre with the “Italian Comedians” back in Paris. Molière admired their vibrant performances and comedic creativity. The commedia tradition in France continued in the plays of Regnard, Marivaux and Beaumarchais.

**Harlequin in England (1700–1800s)**
Harlequin became the basis for an entire new art form: pantomime. These “low operas” were energetic musical theatre with their own set of conventions. For 150 years, every pantomime starred Harlequin and his “Harlequinade,” a comic chase scene.

**The Two Gentlemen of Verona**
Will Kemp most likely created the role of Launce; his tricks with his shoes and clothes are stock gags of the commedia.

**Commedia dell’arte (1800s)**
It was wildly popular, delighting audiences with conventionalized gags known as lazzi, grotesquely exaggerated masks and acrobatic performances.

**Improvisation**
The commedia differed from many other forms of theatre because it was non-literate. Actors had no script to follow, only loosely-written scenarios and plot points. Performances were created in the moment, changing according to new ideas and actual events.

**Improvising on Camera (2000s)**
Many popular shows now start with only basic outlines for episodes and let the actors improvise dialogue: Curb Your Enthusiasm, Parks and Recreation, Monk and Mindy, It’s Always Sunny in Philadelphia and Christopher Guest’s films.

**Clowning**
The commedia’s physical comedy, utilizing masks and slapstick, was a forerunner of clowns of all kinds.

**Cirque du Soleil (1980s–present)**
The modern acrobat.

**Molly Malone and Modernism (Early 1900s)**

**Sad Clown (1921)**
Charlie Chaplin, genius of physical comedy and the modern era descendant of Pierrot.

**Entertainment Tonight**
In Italy, the commedia was street theater for the masses, mirroring popular culture. The character types reflected people in Italian society, stylized and inflated. Actors played the same role, developing it over a lifetime and often passing it down to a brother or son.

**Early Film (Early 1900s)**
The commedia’s pair of comic servants, or zanni (one clever, one dim; one fat, one skinny), appears often in early comedies, from Laurel and Hardy to the Marx Brothers. We still see pairs like these in buddy movies and sitcoms: Gene Wilder and Richard Pryor or even The Odd Couple.

**Ballets Russes**
This Russian ballet company originated in Paris, where they were strongly influenced by the French obsession with the commedia as well as the Russian experience of the commedia characters.

**Petrouchka (2000s)**
Basil Twist’s interpretation of the Russian folk tale version of the Harlequin-Pierrot-Colombine love triangle.

**The Second City (1959)**
The Second City in Chicago was the first improvisational theatre troupe founded in the U.S. They were instrumental in popularizing a new style of comedy and still work with unscripted sketches built from audience suggestions.

**The Avant-Garde (1900s)**
Modern directors and theatre-makers have returned to the commedia time and again, admiring its use of physical style, masks and archetypes.

**Theatre of the Absurd (1950s)**
Like Meyerhold, other avant-garde movements embraced the commedia for its liberating influence. Writers like Ionesco and Beckett were fascinated by the nonverbal, nonsense-based appeal of clowns and looked to express metaphysical ideas through actor physicality.

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Lots of Lazzi
by Constance Congdon

Unlike Aristotelian tragedy, the commedia world is a world where character flaws aren’t tragic, where no one falls from a great height. Unless, of course, it’s from a ladder that is falling, too. This “fall” is a lazio, a comic bit that is rehearsed extensively until the performers can do it expertly. Lazzi, which form an essential vocabulary of the commedia, are always virtuosic. But more importantly, they are also dangerous. Just as a high-flying act in a circus brings an audience a particular thrill, commedia lazzi can work with my adaptation of The Servant of Two Masters at Hartford Stage, with the very brilliant and rude genius of Steven Epp as Truffaldino, that basis and brother of so many great clowns.

As each lazio was being rehearsed, I found myself gasping and laughing, a reaction I still have when I see it in performance. For example, Truffaldino has some exit lines that are “up for grabs” and, in rehearsal, Steve would frequently go, even for us, over the line. “Okay. Laughed a lot. But not for the performance,” I heard Chris shout, in a friendly, yet firm, way. “Oh,” you may be saying, “don’t cut that.” Well, you may hear it in one of the performances.

There are still nights, when the audience and the actors are perfectly aligned, as stars can be, where anything can happen. One moment of “alignment” in the play is the extended improvisation around the planning of the wedding dinner at Brighella’s Inn. Pantalone referred to Beatrice contemptuously, with a term that rhymes with “Aer Lingus.” I nearly peed my pants with laughter—what a commedia moment—the animal functions are never to be ignored. “Hmmmhm,” said Chris. We all nodded at each other (as if I had anything to do with it), yes, we had gone over the line. In the last performance of Servant at Yale Rep, Pantalone looked at me and said the line. I have never heard an audience emit such a sound: “WHOAAA!!” It was a glorious moment, and one that can’t be replicated. Or maybe it can—what will the troupe say tonight?

Goldoni’s comedy is modern, written in the Venetian dialect and based on the model of Molière. His plays are his version of what we might today call sitcoms. But he relied on scenarios drawn from the commedia, an ancient form grown out of Roman comedy. Servant was itself a scenario that Goldoni wrote for the great Venetian commedia actor, Antonio Sacchi. After a year of development “on the road,” in front of hundreds of audiences, Goldoni began to shape it into the play that you see today. Theatre is a collaborative art form. It is a collaboration between writers, actors and audiences. We all made it and we continue to, through every performance and every age. When you see this play, you will hear “jokes” that are completely of your time, and yet they come from a structure that is thousands of years old.

And, for those who might think that I added the profound indictment of male attitudes toward female sexual behavior, delivered by Smeraldina at the close of the play: that passage is Goldoni, unchanged for 400 years.

Constance Congdon has published verse versions of Molière’s The Misanthrope, Tartuffe and The Imaginary Invalid, as well as A Mother, her adaptation of Maxim Gorky’s Vassa Zelezhnova. Her adaptation of The Servant of Two Masters was originally commissioned by Hartford Stage in 1996, where she collaborated with director Bartlett Sher and translator Christina Sibul. All of her adaptations have been produced. She currently teaches playwriting at Amherst College.

What Makes Me Laugh?

STC favorites share what tickles their funny bone.

Bradley Whitford (Actor): I think it is hard to beat Mel Brooks’ statement about the difference between tragedy and comedy. “Tragedy is when I cut my finger. Comedy is when you fall in an open sewer and die.” This brilliant definition embodies the function of all comedy—to smash the wall of pretense and show us the truth that lies beneath (in this case, the petty, insecure, selfish beast within us all).

Floyd King (STC Affiliated Artist): The question makes me laugh. It’s just very personal...Our sense of humor is probably the most personal thing about us.

David Ives (Playwright): Many more plays, movies and songs make me cry than make me laugh. Maybe this is true about life in general for those of us who aren’t bodhisattvas, or maybe it’s just true of life the longer I live. In my experience, a lot of humor is probably the most true thing I have ever found funny which are largely torture to me (don’t get me started on the Marx Brothers) and stand-up comedians with their desperation to please make me reach for my pistol. Few stage comedies make me laugh out loud and I won’t name them because that would probably take away their magic. Also, having laughed at them once probably take away their magic. I think it is hard to beat Mel Brooks’ statement about the difference between tragedy and comedy. To me (don’t get me started on the Marx Brothers) and stand-up comedians with their desperation to please make me reach for my pistol. Few stage comedies make me laugh out loud and I won’t name them because that would probably take away their magic. Also, having laughed at them once probably take away their magic. I think it is hard to beat Mel Brooks’ statement about the difference between tragedy and comedy.

To read full reflections and thoughts from other STC favorites, visit Asides Online (Asides.ShakespeareTheatre.org).
The Gallery of Rogues
Compiled and edited by STC’s Literary Associate Drew Lichtenberg

The commedia dell’arte troupes that roamed the street theatres of northern Italy or those that played the courts of European nobility relied on a set of masked stock characters that evolved over generations into social archetypes. Though Goldoni only calls for four “masks” in *The Servant of Two Masters*, all of the play’s characters are drawn from the form’s rich history. Their influence is still felt, not only in the works of Shakespeare and Molière, but in all forms of comic entertainment today.

### THE ZANNI (THE CLOWNS)

**Truffaldino**

**Pseudonyms**: Arlecchino (“Harlequin”), Bagatino (“the little juggler”).

**Birthplace**: Bergamo, a northern Italian town legendary for rustics, dunces and clowns.

**Costume**: Motley patches of color on a valet’s breeches and laced jacket. “Truffaldino” is Italian for “tatterdemalion,” Renaissance slang for hoboes who wore tattered rags as clothing.

**Mask**: Black half-mask with almond-shaped eyes, a wrinkled forehead and a wide snub nose.

**Character**: “His character is a mixture of ignorance, naïveté, wit, stupidity and grace. He is both a rake and an overgrown boy with occasional gleams of intelligence, and his mistakes and clumsiness often have a wayward charm. His acting is patterned on the lithe, agile grace of a young cat, and he has a superficial coarseness which makes his performances all the more amusing. He plays the role of a faithful valet, always patient, credulous and greedy. He is eternally amorous, and is constantly in difficulties either on his own or on his master’s account. He is hurt and comforted in turn as easily as a child, and his grief is almost as comic as his joy.”

Jean-François Marmontel (1723-1799).

**Smeraldina**

**Pseudonyms**: Colombina (“little dove”), Arlecchina.

**Birthplace**: In the papal states, actresses were banned from the stage by the Catholic Church until the 16th century. They appeared in commedia dell’arte troupes centuries before actresses elsewhere on the continent.

**Costume**: Originally dressed as a woman of the people with a large wide apron and no corset, by the 18th century her outfit was almost the same as that of her mistress.

**Mask**: Women wore no masks in the commedia dell’arte, though Colombinas were known for wearing heavier makeup than their mistresses, and carrying a tambourine which they could use as a weapon to ward off unwanted advances.

**Character**: The role of the servetta birichina (“feisty servant-girl”) was invented as a female counterpart for the zanni. Colombinas ranged from saucy country girls to francophone coquettes (like Lisette in this season’s *The Heir Apparent*). As women in a men’s world, they were famous for their quick-witted resourcefulness.

### THE VECCHI (THE VILLAINS)

**Pantalone**

**Pseudonyms**: Gaultier-Garguille (“great greedy mouth”), Harpagon the miser.

**Birthplace**: Venice, the city of merchants.

**Costume**: Turkish slippers, brimless Greek cap, long red tights or trousers or “pants” and a loose black cape.

**Mask**: Brown and wrinkled, in the shape of an ancient old man, with a prominent hooked nose that shakes ludicrously when he talks.

**Character**: Always old, always greedily counting his pennies and always keeping the young lovers apart, Pantalone is the principle antagonist of all commedia scenarios.

**Fun fact**: Shakespeare knew of Pantalone, and mentions him in the melancholy Jaques’ “seven ages of man” speech:

> The sixth age shifts
> Into the lean and slipper’d pantaloon,
> With spectacles on nose and pouch on side,
> His youthful hose well sav’d, a world too wide
> For his shrunk shank:
> (As You Like It, act 2, scene 7)

“I have always loved the commedia drawings of Maurice Sand (son of the novelist George Sand). We based our costume designs for this production on them. They are a beautiful example of character from a particular time when commedia was alive and flourishing. The colors are fabulous, the physicality is strong and the silhouettes are playful.”

Christopher Bayes, Director
Il Dottore

**Pseudonyms:** Il Dottore Baloardo (“Dr. Dullard”), Il Tartaglia (“the stammerer”).

**Birthplace:** Bologna, famous for its universities.

**Costume:** Clothed entirely in black, with an academic gown extending all the way to his heels.

**Mask:** A half-mask, covering the forehead and the nose; cheeks smeared with red, a tradition remarked on by Goldoni, apparently recalling a birthmark on a famous legislator’s face.

**Character:** Il Dottore is a man of great erudition and little insight. He knows everything and understands nothing. Best friends with fellow greybeard Pantalone, he is an expert garbler of Latin phrases, a world-class pedant and a genius at putting onstage audiences to sleep.

Silvio, Florindo

**Pseudonyms:** Leandro, Lelio.

**Birthplace:** The *innamorato* was traditionally played by men of distinction, often the actor-managers of the commedia troupe.

**Costume:** Dapper and gallant to the point of affectation.

**Mask:** Like their female counterparts, the male lovers wore no masks.

**Character:** The lover is a state of mind more than a character. He is defined by no other trait than being in love and could be a poet, a swordsman, a dandy or a wandering aristocrat. Goldoni’s *innamoratos* have the same eagerness for duels and naive aestheticism of Renaissance lovers, but they are respectably bourgeois, bound by a strict sense of honor.

Clarice, Beatrice

**Pseudonyms:** Isabella.

**Birthplace:** The first famous *innamorata* was Isabella Andreini, and after her most female lovers would simply take the names of the actresses playing them.

**Costume:** Dressed magnificently, in the finest and most expensive fashions possible.

**Mask:** The innamorati wore no mask; as lovers, their beauty (and makeup) were considered mask enough.

**Character:** Most commedia scenarios call for two pairs of lovers. As in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, the four lovers were often kept apart, confused and interchanged before finding their soulmates. Traditionally, they spoke conventional love poetry, in contrast to the antics of the *zanni* and the *vecchi*.
A Well-Made Comedy: The legacy of commedia dell’arte and Carlo Goldoni by Matthew R. Wilson

“If we are to make plays of commedia dell’arte, we shall want to make them well.” So insists the fictional Placida, a leading actress depicted in Carlo Goldoni’s play The Comic Theatre.

Her sentiment seems obvious enough, but—like commedia itself—it merits a second look.

For starters, this sentence penned in 1750 is often cited as the first appearance of the term commedia dell’arte. Though the tradition of commedia had begun in Italy more than 200 years earlier, it was previously known by other names: The Improvised Theatre, The Zanni-esque Theatre (with reference to bumbling servants called “zanni,” from whom we get the English word “zany”), The Theatre of Masks, or—more widely in Europe—simply, The Italian Comedy. It was Goldoni who popularized a new and lasting name for the art form: commedia dell’arte (with “arte” denoting “skill, technique, craft, or profession”). Ironically, Goldoni, whose name is forever linked with the commedia, coined the phrase to describe a style of theatre that he did not like.

Goldoni’s dissatisfaction with commedia dell’arte raises a larger issue embedded in Placida’s plea, an issue that still plagues modern comic artists: What is the measure of a well-made comedy? Is it enough to do as Donald O’Connor insists in Singin’ in the Rain and “Make ‘em laugh”? Or, if we agree with Placida and want to make our plays well, must we do something more?

The commedia tradition grew out of necessity and invention, when, around the 1520s, Italian comic actors began to create models for achieving that elusive dream: to make a living in the arts. The resulting work not only kept them fed, but it revolutionized drama throughout Europe, spawning many innovations that are now taken for granted. Italian “commedians” signed the earliest documents of incorporation recognizing performance as an industry and the theatre “company” as a business entity. These artist-entrepreneurs were the first to employ women on the professional stage, a regular occurrence in Italy 100 years before it would become standard practice in England. Touring companies played to every major court and Italian Comedy was at the vanguard of modern, transnational business.

Scholarly consensus has highlighted myriad ways in which Elizabethan dramas (including the plays of Shakespeare himself) are indebted to commedia conventions, and it is likely that Shakespeare’s famous clown Will Kempe traded professional secrets with Italian “commedians” on tour in England. In France, the connection was stronger still as Italian companies made Paris a permanent home, occasionally sharing venues with Molière. The French playwright was quick to “share” their material as well, borrowing heavily from the commedia repertoire in creation of a French national theatre.

By the mid-18th century, Italian artists like Goldoni lamented that their own native theatre paled in comparison to their European rivals, whose national dramatic traditions had blossomed after, ironically, taking root in soil fertilized by earlier Italian tours. Within Italy, however, innovation had apparently slowed and commedia was on the wane. To Goldoni, the form had grown stale and commercial. Apparently the artist-entrepreneurs had lost the hunger that had first prompted their ancestors to innovate.

Goldoni responded with a self-described mission of “reform,” a project which he details in his Memoirs. In his view, commedia had given a propitious birth to modern theatre, but it was high time for the Italian stage to grow up. The Venetian lawyer-turned-playwright planned to lead this painful maturation himself, waging war on three fronts.

First, Goldoni worked with renowned commedia actors of his day, whose careers had been built on improvisation, but he dared to give them scripts, insisting as Shakespeare had done 150 years earlier that the actors “speak no more than is set down for them.” Detractors claimed that the playwright was squelching creative fire, but literary audiences agreed that Goldoni’s poetry and crafted narratives were an improvement over improvised texts.

In his scripts, then, Goldoni attempted to shift the theatrical style from “farces” to “comedies of character.” Goldoni hoped that a new “comedy of character” would revive the theatre with a sense of realism and particularity drawn from modern, middle-class life: merchants, courtiers, waiters, porters and the like—real people presented not as types but as individuals.

The last and most controversial of Goldoni’s reforms was a slap to the very face of Italian culture: he began to require that his actors perform without their venerated leather masks. Commedia—the so-called Comedy of Masks—had flourished based on a system of character masks, and the material culture of the leather mask was a source of Italian popular pride, even outside of the realm of theatre. In some cases, the public responded with rage, and Goldoni describes being accosted by people who accused him of killing their culture by daring to present unmasked comic actors. Goldoni, however, saw himself as a harbinger of the future, insisting that modern, realistic theatre required a nuance, a pliability and a life that the mask would not allow: “The actor must, in our days, possess a soul; and the soul under a mask is like a fire under ashes.”

Some theorists still say that Goldoni killed commedia. In his words, he merely reformed it. Either way, his work helped to shape a new Italian national theatre based on more realistic characters, more naturalistic representations and the primacy of the playwright over the actor.

Matthew R. Wilson is Artistic Director of Faction of Fools, D.C.’s commedia dell’arte theatre company. He holds an MFA from STC’s Academy for Classical Acting and is pursuing a PhD in Renaissance Theatre History at the University of Maryland, College Park.
A How-To Guide for Teaching Comedy

Shakespeare Theatre Company’s Teaching Artists share their craft with hundreds of students through STC’s classes. Here, they talk to Audience Enrichment Manager Hannah J. Hessel about how to help others make people laugh.

Know What’s Funny.

Sabrina Mandell, who teaches clowning and physical comedy, likes starting with showing examples of things she finds funny. The video clips and demonstrations help students realize what they already know: “I think that we all essentially understand comedy, we just haven’t ever really thought about it. It’s important to get people realizing what’s funny and why, so they can discover how to recreate that.” She is clear that it’s not about teaching how to recreate the pros: “I don’t believe there’s a right way to do something. When it works, everyone will acknowledge that it works. There’s a consensus about what’s funny. People have different takes but generally, if people laugh, it works.”

Floyd King disagrees—when teaching he stays away from pointing out what he thinks is funny. “If it’s not funny to you,” he says, “It doesn’t mean it’s not funny.” Instead he tries to help the individual student to understand what makes them laugh and how to clarify that for audiences.

Teaching Artist Wyckham Avery is always nervous about the first day: “My biggest fear teaching comedy is that I won’t be funny myself—totally ruins the credibility.”

And speaking of fear...

Have No Fear.

One of the most important tools a comedian can have is the ability to push beyond societal norms. Mark Jaster, who teaches mime and physical comedy alongside Sabrina, notes that in order to do comedy, “One has to be willing to go there first...and some people just have a talent for it.”

In order to feel comfortable moving beyond boundaries, different teachers follow different practices. Sabrina likes pushing her students to open up emotionally: “The realization is that laughter and crying live right next door to each other—when you open yourself emotionally, you can suddenly start to access all of them.”

Another option is to push the students to experience fear in order to move beyond it. Wyckham’s clown teacher taught using fear: “We were being yelled at and dodging tennis balls being hurled at us onstage.”

Be Precise.

All the teachers agree that, as Resident Teaching Artist Jim Gagne states, “In drama there is room to play loose. In comedy you have to be precise.”

For Wyckham teaching comedy is all about precision: she tells her students the key to comedy is “making things crisp and clean and well timed.” Teaching timing however, is not easy. “Some students have a talent for timing,” shares School Programs Manager Vanessa Hope. “It’s hard to cultivate...you need lots of time for them to learn and practice.”

Sabrina thinks it is possible to teach comedic timing. “It’s a slow process,” she says. “You can develop it as a muscle by becoming aware and then by playing and seeing what works. With rigor!” She talked about an exercise that Mark learned in high school. The assignment was to enter a room in a comedic way. It was all about the timing. People just worked and worked and eventually they figured out what would get the laugh.

Encourage Playing.

“Comedy itself cannot be taught, but it can be encouraged,” shares Floyd.

Sabrina made clear that “personally I don’t set out to teach comedy, I set out to remind people how to play.” Mark talks about creating a lab “in which to explore the mysteries, a lab in which I share and continue my own discoveries and exploration.” For him it’s a balance between the play and the analysis. He wants to create a space where comedy can be constructed and deconstructed. “The more one inhabits comedy, by seeing people do it, by doing it in front of others, by exploring its mysteries, the better one can become, both in its execution and in the delight of perceiving it in the world.”

Never Expect a Laugh.

A room full of students wants so badly to make each other laugh. Teachers have to remind their students that playing comedy is still about telling a story. “The stakes,” Vanessa notes, “need to remain as high for a comedic character as they do for drama but the consequences are different.” Jim agrees, adding a favorite quote from a teacher friend of his: “In drama you throw the dishes down, in comedy you throw them up.”

Using precise timing and being open will help—but to be a comedic actor, you must play the scene with authenticity, not thinking about what will or won’t get the laugh. “The final step,” Jim says, “is getting a laugh.”
The ReDiscovery of the Mask

One of the great things about working in the theatre is the way in which it can connect you to the past. For example, the play we just produced, *Strange Interlude*, is only the fifth American production of the play since it was written in 1928. Robert Stanton, who played Charles Marsden in the show, has been corresponding with Edward Petherbridge, who played the same role, 30 years ago, at the Roundabout Theatre in New York. Two dear old Charlies, united by a role over the span of decades.

This production of *The Servant of Two Masters* is another example of the ways in which different generations can suddenly start talking to one another through a play. Today, *Servant* is Carlo Goldoni's most popular and often-performed play. But this wasn’t always the case. The play owes most of its modern-day popularity to the famous 1947 production directed by Giorgio Strehler at the Teatro Piccolo in Milan. The Piccolo was the first of the "national theatres" to emerge in Italy after World War II. Like his contemporaries Laurence Olivier and Kenneth Tynan at England’s National Theatre, or Bertolt Brecht at the Berliner Ensemble, Strehler and the Piccolo reignited Italy’s theatre. He staged new interpretations of the classics and nurtured emerging artists, such as the Nobel Prize-winning playwright Dario Fo. His production of *Servant* was the first of the “national theatres” to emerge in Italy after World War II. Like his contemporaries Laurence Olivier and Kenneth Tynan at England’s National Theatre, or Bertolt Brecht at the Berliner Ensemble, Strehler and the Piccolo reignited Italy’s theatre. He staged new interpretations of the classics and nurtured emerging artists, such as the Nobel Prize-winning playwright Dario Fo. His production of *Servant* was the first to revive the tradition of commedia dell’arte masks and archetypes. Much of what we now know of the commedia today emanates from Strehler’s project of rediscovery.

Here’s where the story turns. Strehler was unable to get his masks—made of cardboard and string—to work. They would fall apart underneath the actors’ sweat, and most importantly, they weren’t funny. One day, a French teaching artist at the Piccolo named Jacques Lecoq introduced Strehler to a maskmaker named Amleto Sartori. Sartori is the man most credited with rebuilding the commedia mask, but it was Lecoq who would become an international guru.

Deeply inspired by the writings of Antonin Artaud, as well as the French mime tradition, Lecoq would arrive at a synthesis of his teaching while working with Strehler and the Piccolo. In 1956, he would move back to Paris and open a school for actor training. The École Lecoq quickly became a center for aspiring young performers all over the world. Among the many distinguished graduates are Simon McBurney (of Complicité), Ariane Mnouchkine (of Théâtre du Soleil) and the inimitable Julie Taymor. In 1978, a group of graduates from the school founded the Theatre de la Jeune Lune in Minneapolis. Christopher Bayes and Steven Epp joined the company in 1984. And here they are, 25 years later, part of a continuum which stretches from Bayes and Epp in America to Lecoq in Paris and Strehler in Milan, all the way back to the roots of the modern-day commedia renaissance. What were the methods behind the mask, the ones which Strehler and Lecoq rediscovered? That’s for them to say.

I introduced Amleto Sartori to Giorgio Strehler in a café in Vicenza, which led to the making of masks for the Teatro Piccolo in Milan. Sartori suggested to Strehler that he could try to make some leather masks for *The Servant of Two Masters*, and thereby revive the tradition of commedia dell’arte masks. And that was it. I remember taking him to the Opéra museum in Paris to look at the old zanni masks. Shortly afterward, the first leather Harlequin mask took shape. I put it on and tried to make it come alive, but to no avail. It didn’t work. I have that very mask at home, hanging on the wall, which is a sad place for a mask to be. One day, Sartori decided to make me a neutral mask from leather. It took a long time, and there were many attempts, much measuring of my face, and finally I went to his workshop to try it on. It was so tight on my face that I couldn’t make it play and the leather was too soft. When he remade it in firmer leather, that was it: it worked. That’s when I realized that you need a distance between a mask and a face to make the mask play.

When you talk wearing one of these masks you have to find its voice, its language, its way of talking. The masks of the commedia dell’arte demand maximum physical rigor, as seen in the amazing body attitudes. It is not possible to act in a mask as you would in everyday life. You have to go beyond naturalism toward performance, finding the elements of vivacity that life has not yet revealed. Performing in front of a mirror is useless, you have to live within the mask. I remember one time when Marcello Moretti [Strehler’s Harlequin] took out his mask at a restaurant. He wanted to look at it before dessert came.

The stage is a physical and concrete place which demands to be filled and which must be made to speak its own concrete language. It consists of everything that occupies the stage, everything that can be manifested and expressed physically on a stage, all that addresses itself first to the senses instead of addressing itself first to the mind. This pure theatrical language has nothing to do with speech, it is a language of signs, gestures and attitudes [...]. This language, which evokes in the mind images of an intense natural (or spiritual) poetry, gives an idea of what it might mean for the theatre to have a poetry of space independent of spoken language.

Antonin Artaud
("Mise en scène and Metaphysics")
### PERFORMANCE CALENDAR

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#### CREATIVE CONVERSATIONS

**WINDOWS ON THE SERVANT OF TWO MASTERS**

**FREE**

Sunday, May 20, at 5 p.m.
Lansburgh Theatre Lobby

Join STC’s Artistic staff and a guest scholar as they provide a “window” into this production. This hour-long pre-show conversation articulates the production process through an insightful, lively discussion.

**POST-PERFORMANCE DISCUSSION**

**FREE**

Wednesday, May 23
after the performance

Extend the experience by staying immediately following the evening’s production for a post-performance discussion with the cast led by STC’s Literary Associate Drew Lichtenberg.

**CLASSICS IN CONTEXT**

**FREE**

Saturday, June 9, at 5 p.m.
Lansburgh Theatre Lobby

Put the show in context with this lively roundtable conversation. The Classics in Context panel gives the audience the opportunity to discuss the production with a team of experts, led by Director of Education Samantha K. Wyer.