

Reviews

Performing Commedia dell'Arte, 1570–1630. By NATALIE CROHN SCHMITT. London and New York: Routledge. 2020. viii+112 pp. £44.99. ISBN 978-0-367-08565-0.

R06387 Natalie Crohn Schmitt's book is a welcome addition to the Anglophone historical scholarship on *Commedia dell'Arte*, investigating its performance features from the perspective of the literary and rhetorical traditions that constituted one of its essential premisses. Each chapter addresses an aspect of *Commedia* performance: improvisation, acting styles, and the use of masks. Although supporting the contention that there is no direct continuity between the historical form and any contemporary theatre practice, a final chapter entitled 'Coda' briefly discusses renowned contemporary theatre groups that claim to be inspired by *Commedia*.

As a form of theatre that traverses two hundred years of European history, *Commedia dell'Arte* poses a challenge to any scholarly attempt at being both concise and exhaustive. When striving to capture the essence of *Commedia*, early twentieth-century prominent theatre reformers such as Meyerhold and Copeau used the emphasis on physical actions as a catalyst for a new theatre aesthetics that stood the test of time. In doing so, however, they contributed to obfuscation of the literary elements of *Commedia* performance, which were historically at least as important as its visual and physical manifestations. By applying rhetorical discourse to the analysis of *Commedia* performance techniques, *Performing Commedia dell'Arte, 1570–1630* gives due attention to the oratorical skills of its practitioners, and places the devices of improvisation, gestural code, and masks in their proper historical and cultural context.

Schmitt aptly reminds us that improvisation in early modern *Commedia*, far from being comparable to contemporary 'improv-comedy', was founded on memory (p. 14), with actors deriving their compositional material from mnemonic access to an ample selection of sources, ranging from classical literary texts to commonplace books (p. 11). For instance, documentary evidence shows that the *Commedia* 'diva' Isabella Andreini integrated Petrarchan lyric poetry into her own impromptu performance (p. 12). By referring to the scenarios by Flaminio Scala, which were published in 1611, Schmitt follows in the steps of previous scholarship, demonstrating how *Commedia* characters, including the *parti ridicole* of the servants and old men, needed flexible and accomplished performers. The parallel with Charlie Chaplin is apt: while easily identifiable, the characters were employed in a variety of dramatic situations and roles. By way of example, the *zanni Burattino* could play a servant, innkeeper, beggar, peasant, or postman (p. 58).

It is regrettable that access by Anglophone scholarship to the wealth of Italian studies on *Commedia* remains very limited. This leads to some misconceptions. For instance, Schmitt's focus on the practice of the prestigious troupes that operated in Italy and Europe between 1570 and 1630 necessarily restricts the field of investigation to a theatrical practice which was contiguous with but not identical to that of piazza performers. In fact, similarly to London companies of Shakespeare's time, these troupes operated alternately under court patronage and in indoor spaces,

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where they played for a paying audience mostly composed of nobility and the middle class. This point is not clarified in the book, which leads to some confusion. For example, the assumption that the different dialects used by the *parti ridicole* rendered their utterances barely understandable (p. 26) appears to contradict the emphasis on the rhetorical force of *Commedia* performance. While arguing in favour of actors' passive understanding of more languages and dialects than they could speak (p. 27), the book fails to mention that development of a prototypical Italian common language rendered dialect speech in *Commedia* equally accessible, at least in part, to an educated audience, particularly within the geographical confines of Central and Northern Italy, where several of the renowned troupes operated. As Ambrogio Artoni discusses in *Il teatro degli Zanni: rapsodie dell'arte e dintorni*, Studi di storia del teatro e dello spettacolo (Genoa: Costa & Nolan, 1999), there were extensive overlaps between the use of language and literary sources in *Commedia* and in the contemporaneous process of cultural homogenization across the Italian peninsula, which was directed at the middle classes and partly promoted by the rapidly developing printing industry.

Schmitt proposes that improvisation (p. 7) and the use of masks (p. 64) were primarily aesthetic devices selected by *Commedia* performers to enhance the success of their art. They were rather, as Italian scholars have demonstrated, derivatives of the material and contextual conditions of *Commedia's* development. For instance, the masked characters of the *Zanni* and *Pantalone* represent the legacy of the mountebank tradition that, along with the literary heritage, constitutes the other parentage of this highly successful hybrid form of theatre. Still, Schmitt's hypothesis that masks were useful as far as they made *Commedia* players easily identifiable in the busy market places, where they were supposedly competing for attention with other street players (p. 62), is hardly applicable to the celebrated troupes which are the focus of the book, for it is unlikely that they would ever have performed in a piazza. Roberto Tessari's *Commedia dell'Arte: la maschera e l'ombra* (Milan: Mursia, 1981) discusses in detail the documentary evidence that illustrates the complex relationship between the mountebank tradition and the practice of the prestigious professional companies: closely related and yet crucially distinct manifestations of a form of improvised comedy that we tend to conflate under the common term of *Commedia dell'Arte*.

When participating in *Commedia* workshops, run by practitioners trained in the methods of physical theatre, I have sometimes been bemused at being 'instructed' that *Commedia* characters, such as the *Zanni* or *Pantalone*, were scarcely vocal and expressed themselves primarily through zoomorphic gestures and guttural sounds. *Performing Commedia dell'Arte, 1570–1630* helps to rectify such a grave misapprehension: with its agile style and relative brevity, it is a must-read for any actor studying or teaching *Commedia* who is genuinely interested in its historical features. As a scholarly source, it adds to the plethora of analyses that testify to the fascination that *Commedia dell'Arte* continues to exert on theatre practitioners and researchers alike. But if Anglophone scholars are serious about their interest in *Commedia*, they may need to call for the translation of at least some of the

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many masterly studies so far available only in Italian. Siro Ferrone's *La Commedia dell'Arte: attrici e attori italiani in Europa (XVI–XVIII secolo)* (Turin: Einaudi, 2014), a refined and accessible compendium, supplies an extensive bibliography for those interested in widening their knowledge of this foundational phenomenon in Western theatre history.

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