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THE PRE-EMINENCE OF THE ACTOR IN RENAISSANCE CONTEXT

Subverting the social order

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The sixteenth century represents the summit in the history of
laughter...

(Mikhail Bakhtin 1984)

It is commonplace to refer to the Commedia dell'Arte as actor's theatre when considering the centrality of the actor ensemble in creating performance through various modes of improvisation. Dario Fo goes so far as to assert that the Commedia can be distinguished from all other forms of theatre not by the use of the masks or the fixed stereotypes but "by a genuinely revolutionary approach of making theatre, and the unique role assumed by the actors" (Fo 1991: 13). But, if we are to appreciate fully the "revolutionary" quality of the Commedia and its lessons for contemporary theatre, it is important for it to be understood historically as a part of the wider cultural complex of the Renaissance from which it was both an offspring and a cultural force in itself.

Modern attitudes toward the Commedia tend to cluster around two opposing poles. One might be called the pole of naïve exuberance, imagining the masked comedy as the apogee of world theatre; the other pole tends to simply ignore the Commedia with an attitude of benign neglect. In the first instance we get enthusiastic but naïve theatre, in the second we get only a snobbish disregard for a truly extraordinary moment in theatrical history. But the exuberant and the neglectful suffer from the same historical myopia that prevents each from understanding both the depths of the art as well as the extraordinary potential for contemporary theatre that lies buried in its comic form.

It is not by chance that twentieth century theatrical innovators turned to the Commedia as an endless source of inspiration. Gordon Craig, Vsevolod Meyerhold, Yevgeny Vakhtangov, Nikolai Erdman, Max Reinhardt, Bertolt Brecht and many others saw in the Commedia the protagonist of a renewed theatre, the actor "filled with unconstrained joy, youth, laughter, improvisation, immediacy and closeness

with human emotions side by side with irony and humor.” (Vakhtangov in Fisher 1992: 139) For all of them, unleashing the creative powers of the actor was the essence of a new theatre. As Max Reinhardt wrote, “Where the actor is also a dramatic writer, he has the power to create a world according to his own image, thus awakening the drama to its highest form of life...” (Fisher 1992: 166) He envisioned a theatre in which the actor would be “at once sculptor and sculpture” (1992: 172). It is at this precise point that we will find the strongest link between the Commedia dell’Arte and the social imaginary of the Renaissance: man as the self-creator, sculptor and sculpture. If we fail to grasp this link, the Commedia will have little of significance to say to us today.

In the post war period a new interest in the Commedia was centered in Milan around the work of Giorgio Strehler, Paolo Grassi, Jacques Lecoq, Ameleto Sartori, Dario Fo and others. They engaged in intense historical research and experimentation in an effort to reinvent the skills of the trade for modern audiences. Their influence spawned a new generation of artists with a deep interest in the Commedia, notably, Théâtre du Soleil, the Bread and Puppet Theatre, the San Francisco Mime Troup, the TAG, etc. Many, if not most, of these artists and groups were also politically engaged activists who imagined theatre generally and Commedia specifically as a potential force in political struggles. Their interest was in utilizing the Commedia to provoke a comic critique of existing power relationships: against war, against racism, fascism, sexism and capitalism itself. The form of Commedia was valuable in that it was structured by social formations of real power relationships between masters and servants. However, attempts to utilize an antique art form in a modern context are fraught with anachronistic dangers and in less capable hands could quickly become naïve and even cartoonish, unwittingly distorting the animating spirit of the sixteenth century.

Mikhail Bakhtin, in his ground-breaking study of Rabelais writes:

In the Renaissance, laughter in its most radical, universal and at the same time gay form emerged from the depths of folk culture. It emerged but once in the course of history over a period of sixty or seventy years... and entered with its popular language the sphere of great literature and high ideology.... The wall between official culture and non-official culture inevitably crumbled.... This thousand year old laughter not only fertilized literature but was itself fertilized by humanist knowledge and advance literary techniques.

(Bakhtin 1984: 72)

Bakhtin places the Commedia squarely within this historic conjuncture (Bakhtin 1984: 34). To grasp what is most vibrant in the Commedia it is essential to explore what is meant by laughter that is radical, universal and gay or, in Bakhtin’s expression, *carnivalesque*. But equally important is to explore the humanist ideology that formed an essential component of Renaissance laughter.

What follows will be an effort to delineate three points of intersection in which the Commedia is embedded with Renaissance culture. The first point will explore the humanist ideal of the self-creating man: an ideal explicitly opposed to the medieval vision of eternal and fixed character-types bound within a cosmic order of ascending

values. The second point will explore the structure of contemporary power relations within Renaissance culture from which the Commedia drew its inspiration. It staged a microcosm of conflicting social forces into which the audience was invited to play a conspiratorial role. And finally, the aesthetic technique of “grotesque realism” as a means of “uncrowning” all that is high, abstract and sacred will be recast as a mode of comic subversion. All three of these points of intersection find their embodiment in the free imagination of the actor.

The maker and molder of thyself: sculptor and sculpture

In *The Moving Body* Jacques Lecoq rejects the idea that the Commedia is an expression of a specific place and time believing that a better nomenclature would be *la comédie humaine*, or the human comedy, suggesting that “historically, the social relations of the Commedia are immutable” (Lecoq 2002: 124). Its function is “to shed light on human nature...” and the “timeless elements of the human comedy...” (Ibid.) But Lecoq’s idea runs diametrically opposed to the ethos that was emerging in the Renaissance, an ethos that was certainly part of the intellectual culture that profoundly influenced the emergence of the Commedia. Many modern interpreters of the Commedia miss this point and, like Lecoq, revert to the idea of universal *tipi fissi* (fixed types) as if the springs of human action are to be found beyond the individual’s control in the primordial character of man. Still others make reference to Carl Jung’s concept of human “archetype” and the theory of the collective unconscious where the ancient image, character or pattern of circumstances is considered universal, originating in pre-logical thought, outside of time, space and culture. This distinctly modern and conservative version of Commedia is the inversion of the Renaissance idea of man as a self-creator. Alternatively, the ancient idea of the Platonic archetype, derived from Plato’s ideal forms, an idea prevalent during the Renaissance, would also be misplaced as Platonism explicitly excludes man as being modeled from an archetype (Plato 2013: 320d–322a). But, in either case, it implies that the social structure is the product of man’s fixed character and that hierarchies of power are natural hierarchies. Thus, only a fool would challenge such hierarchies.

While Bakhtin’s study of Rabelais reveals the influence of folk culture on high literature in the Renaissance, another recent study by Robert Henke demonstrates the profound influence that contemporary literature had on the popular theatre where “actors are the full bearers of humanist culture...” (Henke 2002: 109). Among the principle characteristics of Renaissance thought, at its most radical, was the humanist concept of self-creation. That is to say that man was not a *tipo fisso*, nor governed by necessity, as was the case in medieval thought and virtually all official culture. Original sin, manifesting itself in the seven deadly sins, corresponding to character-types within a timeless cosmos of a fixed order was precisely what was being rejected in the Renaissance. For the new humanists, man was mutable, embedded in real time and real space moving forever forward, ever changing. As Ginnazzo Manetti wrote in 1452, “All that surrounds us is our own work, the work of men... seeing such marvels we understand that we can create even better, more beautiful, more refined, more perfect things than hitherto...” (Manetti 1452).

Moreover, man himself was the result of this creative process. In *The Oration on the Dignity of Man*, often referred to as the manifesto of the Renaissance, Giovanni Pico writes, at the moment that God created Adam,

there was not among his archetypes that from which he could fashion a new offspring....He therefore took man as creature of indeterminate image... saying to his creation, ...constrained by no limits, in accordance with thine free will, in whose hand we have placed thee, shall ordain for thyself the limits of thy nature... so that with freedom of choice and with honor, as though the maker and molder of thyself, thou mayest fashion thyself in whatever shape thou shalt prefer.

(Pico 1981: 478)

Man as self-maker, as the architect of his own being, had its counterpart in popular culture in what Bakhtin refers to as the people's "second world and second life outside officialdom" in which determinant necessity, expressed in the fixed order of official life, is "uncrowned" by the carnival spirit to free "human consciousness, thought and imagination for new potentialities." (Bakhtin 1984: 6, 49) This ideology of mutability and self-creation had its material expression in the very social structure of the Renaissance through the expansion of commercial life and the emergence of a mercantile spirit. Merchants, craftsmen, traders, innovators of every sort needed to loosen the ridged structures of the social order and laughter was but one of their methods. It should not be surprising to note in this context that Machiavelli, the founder of political science, also wrote one of the most important comedies in the Italian Renaissance, *La mandragola*, nor that Galileo, the founder of the new physics, was also known to write scenarios for the *Commedia dell'Arte*.

It is also logical that among the eight members of the first *Commedia* group registered in Padua in 1545 there were four members from the artisan class: two shoemakers, one blacksmith and one stonemason (Henke 2002: 70). Artisans, like merchants, wanted above all, control of their craft. Seeking guild status was an effort to guarantee the integrity and autonomy of their creative production and to find a relative freedom from patronage in the marketplace. Bakhtin describes the Renaissance marketplace as a "world unto itself" with an atmosphere of "freedom, frankness and familiarity.... The marketplace was the center of all that is unofficial; it enjoyed a certain extraterritoriality." (Bakhtin 1984: 153–154) Henke importantly points out that one of the dynamic elements of the *Commedia* was the creative tension between the centrifugal tendencies of the virtuosic actor originating in the *buffone* and zanni piazza performers and the "well-made plots" based on literary models (Henke 2002: 2). Within this tension—the fusion of high and low, popular and elite—the actor did indeed find the power to create a world according to his own image.

All attempts to depict the *Commedia* as a comic form that is eternal and immutable, a form that captures the essential archetypes of humanity, and a form that reveals man's eternal essence, runs counter to the spirit of the age. In Renaissance laughter, the fixed and essential nature of the world crumbles to become ambiguous, ever mutating, ever changing, and ever inverting to reveal a world of endless possibilities. This was the spirit of the age and the *Commedia* was its comic expression.

Subverting the symbolic order: masters, lovers and servants

A great deal has been written about the forms of social power during the Renaissance, a fact notably marked by the publication of Machiavelli's *Prince* in 1513. The subject of this extraordinary text was power itself. It should not be surprising that this should be the focus of many erudite studies at this time as old powers were dissolving and new ones emerging. There was, in a word, a self-conscious reflection of the meaning and modes of power throughout this period. It is worth pointing out that the history of the Commedia dell'Arte roughly bridges the period between the Council of Trent, marking the onset of the Counter Reformation, through the rise of great-centralized nation states and the outbreak of the French Revolution. Understanding the Commedia is inconceivable without considering the contemporary political and social upheavals of the time and in what manner contemporary social power appeared staged before a popular audience.

The very essence of the Commedia (if we can indeed find an essence) is captured by its unique mode of representing contemporary forms of social power. It was, in its origin, a synecdoche that attempted to reveal the flow of power in iconic form. That is to say that each of the characters individually represented a particular social formation and the characters in ensemble represented the whole of society as revealed in the relative distribution of power among each player. Who has power and who does not? How is power deployed and how is it resisted? The Commedia created a kind of tableaux of contemporary life in which various semiotic orders of power operated. Indeed, we can suggest that the masks themselves help to reinforce the appearance of social types. As Carlo Boso correctly points out "each character is the representative of a social class which, by the act of theatre, becomes the magical incarnation of all its class" (Rudlin 2008: 67).

Pantalone is not a merchant because he has a greedy character; rather he is greedy because he is a merchant. In the latter concept, the emphasis is not on the character as a human archetype but rather on the structure of social power relations, which the stock characters incarnate on stage. More specifically as Erhard Stiefel (mask maker for Théâtre du Soleil) put it:

The mask's revelatory power is not in giving the audience (and the actor) the possibility of constructing a preconceived stereotypical identification, but on the contrary, in giving them the means to see a particular class through the character, with which they can identify.... Thus, society can be unmasked with a mask, which becomes revelatory and makes life's truth, which we have never known how to see, spring forth.... The beauty and precision of its gestures generate a radiance, which reveals and distinguishes the inner workings of society, which denounces them, but at the same time invokes hope of a different life.

(Stiefel 1975)

The early Commedia plots were in themselves quite simple in their basic form, though sometimes maddeningly complex in their execution. But it was not the plots that revealed the structure of social power in the Commedia: there were seldom

wars, revolts, ecclesiastical conflicts, or even a depiction of the lives of the great and powerful; rather it was the enigmatic embodiment of power within each small character in their habitual behavior.

Michele Foucault (1991) locates a critical transition in the deployment of power in his studies of early modern Europe drawing our attention to the “micro-physics” of power or how the technics of power are actually imposed on the human body. The first phase he designates as a system of “sovereign power” where power is embodied in the actual person to whom it is identified. An epochal transition occurs when power itself goes into hiding, to become disembodied or anonymous while taking up residence in rules, regulations, organizational techniques, surveillance, etc. For Foucault, this new mode of “disciplinary power” is the principle characteristic of modernity (Foucault 1991). The *Commedia* however was born into a world of sovereign power where the social hierarchy was always on display and was always deployed between bodies and within bodies. Furthermore, power was performative; it had to be re-enacted continually through the infinite gestures of daily life. But, these gestures were specific to the power structure, not to the whims of the individual or his ancient archetype. Just as costumes were socially coded in a way to make visible the social structure, so, too, were the mores and manners of every individual. It is here that power or its absence deploys itself through the socially coded body. It can be suggested that all of the principle characters of the *Commedia*, be they masters, lovers or servants, enacted their dramas within the structure of conflicting symbolic orders.

Grotesque realism: Pantalone’s two bodies

Sovereign power always operates on two levels, one visibly and the other invisibly. Visibly, it is the power that compels others to act submissively toward the sovereign, whereas invisible power enables the sovereign to act powerfully. The crown and scepter visibly give a king his social aura, but it is the invisible self-knowledge that divine blood runs in his veins that enables him to act royally. The visible and the invisible are formed by systems of images and signs that structure internal and external meaning. Moreover, such systems structure perception itself. Pantalone, for instance, can only see the world mediated by money; everything has its price, whereas Dottore subsumes the world into forms of esoteric knowledge, as Capitano understands the world as a perpetual contest of strength. Such systems constitute competing symbolic orders that give shape to the socially coded body. In the *Commedia* what is visible almost never coincides with the invisible. Externally and visibly Capitano is full of strength and power, but internally and invisibly, he is cowardly. The focal point of this non-correspondence is the body itself.

Bakhtin characterizes this play between the socially coded body and the natural or “universal” body as a carnivalesque vision of the world that is artistically expressed as “grotesque realism.” For Bakhtin, grotesque realism, of which *Commedia* is a prime example, is characterized by an inversion of stable hierarchies, the dissolution of conceptual boundaries, the degradation or materialization of all that is high, spiritual, ideal and abstract; distinguished overall by “a celebration of the relativity of the symbolic order” (Brandist 1988: 139). It is in the act of revealing the mutability

of the symbolic order that we will find the comic genius of the Renaissance actor best displayed.

In his book *On Humour* Simon Critchley suggests that the comic function of the socially coded body's relationship to the natural body is through exploiting "the gap between being a body and having a body, between... the *physical* and *metaphysical* aspects of being human. What makes us laugh... is the return of the *physical* into the *metaphysical*" (Critchley 2008: 43). The Commedia constructs each character by delineating the difference between the socially coded body—Critchley's metaphysical body that one has—to the natural body that one is, in order to "uncrown" any and all symbolic order that imposes submission on what is natural, universal and joyous in man.

We can think of Don Quixote as a perfect example of a physical uncrowning of the metaphysical, in this case with the comic subversion of medieval chivalry. Quixote sees what is not there, as he perceives the world filtered by the symbolic order of chivalry. He imagines himself as a knight, constructed from the fantastic account in his dusty library. He can see only through the knight's eyes. Windmills become giants, sheep become armies, tavern wenches become ladies and nags become chargers. The courageous body of the errant knight confronts the giant and the old man is tossed to the ground by the windmill.

We see a similar uncrowning of the symbolic orders within each of the characters of the Commedia, the uncrowning of romanticism in the absurd pretenses of the lovers who can express carnal desire only in the sublimated form of poetic declarations; the uncrowning of esoteric knowledge by the endless malapropisms and the gluttonous body of the Dottore; the uncrowning of the military aura in the cowardice of Capitano; and the uncrowning of money's power in the impotent body of Pantalone. Sovereign power is always in conflict with itself.

These characters and dozens of variations within the Commedia were the inventions of the actors who understood quite well the reluctance of the body to conform to the socially constructed codes of appearance and corresponding modes of perception. By exaggerating these codes with the use of the mask—understood as the whole character—we quickly see how social relations are unmasked on the stage. Such inventions were certainly the result of the profound sensibility of the actors to the forms of contemporary power, not to mention the virtuosity required in fusing the metaphysical with the physical body. By exposing the social construction of the symbolic orders the audience may recognize the potential freedom to construct others.

Power must have its object: Zanni, Harlequin and Pulcinella

The servants in the Commedia have a different relationship to the various forms of power. Though they are not entirely free of the symbolic order; Zanni is still the Bergamasque peasant, as Pulcinella still expresses all the gestures of Neapolitan life, but as servants they have no investment in maintaining the world of the master. They are not iconic in the same way that the orders of power are iconic. In fact, their unique and crucial role in the comedy is to subvert the various symbolic orders by creating havoc. We must remember that without the servant, the master's world crumbles. A master is only a master if he commands servants. But the deeper truth is

that the master is always dependent upon the servant to interpret his orders. This is the true secret of the servant's power. The servant is closer to the universal natural body than to the metaphysical body of the master, as Sancho Panza is in contrast to Don Quixote. The apparent stupidity of the servant is actually the comic refusal—whether intended or not—of the natural body to accept the logic of power itself. The servants are predictably unpredictable as they act typically outside of the accepted codes of behavior imposed by the master, always asserting what is charmingly human in all of us. Dario Fo once stated that he had been playing Harlequin all his life, adding, “Harlequin is a character who destroys all conventions.... He came out of nothing and can transform himself into anything” (Swain 1993: 14). In this sense the servant in the Commedia represents the free creative spirit of the actor to invent the world according to his own image.

If we are to grasp the “revolutionary” quality of the Commedia dell'Arte and breathe its spirit into modern theatre it will not be through dragging masked characters that were born into a world of sovereign powers—characters who in truth have little real resonance today—into a modern world governed by disembodied, impersonal and anonymous powers. Today's social codes do not function in the same way as they did three centuries ago. What is the power of Pantalone when set against the global rule of finance capital that governs through logarithmic functions and is able to bankrupt entire nations overnight? What is the power of Dottore's knowledge when set against technological proliferation, media bombardment or electronic social networks? And what is the power of Capitano against computer driven drones that rain terror from the sky and can enforce submission of whole populations? Today, the old masters are themselves the servants of a vast mechanic process, each desperately seeking to be a reliable cog in an inanimate wheel. But, regardless of what form power takes, in the end it is still the “servant” who must interpret its commands. As long as power imposes itself, there will always be the mischievous Harlequin who will show us that “laughter liberates not only from external censorship but first of all from the great interior censor...” (Bakhtin 1984: 94). The “revolutionary” spirit of the Commedia will show itself in the freeing of the imaginative force of the actor to reinvent the body as it confronts these modern powers. The actor/author “filled with unconstrained joy, youth, laughter, improvisation, immediacy and closeness with human emotions side by side with irony and humor,” (Vakhtangov in Fisher 1992: 139) will uncrown these modern forces and remind us that we can once again become the sculptor and sculpture of our own lives.

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