

# Covid Commedia: strategies for teaching Commedia dell'Arte in Zoomtopia

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Pike, Neideck and Kelly (2020, p. 2) state that the ‘boundaries of neo-liberal bourgeoisie capitalism have crumbled as artists dance in their lounge rooms and teachers instruct students from their living rooms, via Zoom’. As the world moves to a screen-to-screen lifestyle, so does Commedia, seeking to find its place among the digital elite. Commedia – a hyper exaggerated form of theatre known for its masks, gestures and movements that allows for immediate understanding of human nature – has survived for well over 500 years due to its ability to reinvent itself to suit varying socio-political contexts. Yet, in the digital space, the genre’s physicality has created a barrier for teachers trying to teach the genre within the walls of Zoomtopia – a place where our physical bodies are left behind while we’re transported to any part of the globe. How can the physical nature of Commedia be taught and enjoyed in a contemporary Zooming culture? Can Commedia reinvent itself for the digital world? To decipher these questions, I discuss my work as a Commedia specialist living in Adelaide, Australia who created a methodology for teaching Commedia to international secondary schools via Zoom. My three-dimensional approach extends upon early Commedia strategies of adaptation and accessibility to better fit the digital age. As the world reinvents itself to fit the unavoidable digital shift, so does Commedia. I argue that Commedia does indeed have a place within Zoomtopia and that it can still be taught and performed in a manner “authentic” to its translingual roots.

Key words: Zoom, Commedia del Arte, Acting, Movement

## INTRODUCTION

The downside of Covid-19 needs no elaboration. One of the advantages, however, has been the reaching out across time and space thanks to the facilitation of computer software such as Zoom. The enforced lockdown and restriction of movement has ironically generated

proliferation of engagement and dialogue in virtually all disciplines including business and science. Despite the positives of Zoom, many have voiced the opinion that for the speaker there is a disconnect to the audience and an acute sense that people may be tuning out (using iPhone / emailing etc) to which there is no recourse. This gulf between audience and presenter is even more relevant to the field of performing arts whose premise is based on live performance and direct engagement with an audience. Under the strictures of Covid, theatre in general has had to reinvent itself, as for example, *The Tempest* by UK based Creation Theatre, a modified performance via Zoom (Liedke 2020). This form of ‘Covidian theatre, performed in a state of emergency, reminds us ... that theatre—even if it cannot take place as we’re used to it at the moment, on a stage, in a theatre building—transcends spatial restrictions’ (Liedke, 2020, pp. 2-4). This applies even more to Commedia which relies on audience interaction and is now compelled to transcend the digital barrier to engage a ‘virtual spectator’ (Liedke, 2020, p. 6).

If practitioners of Commedia have needed to grapple with how to perform and engage an audience, the problem is magnified for school-based drama teachers faced with trying to convert their classrooms into an online space. This is particularly concerning for Australian-based drama teachers considering ‘allocated time in pre-service teacher education focusing on the arts has continued to be cut over recent years’ (Ewing 2020, p. 79). Furthermore, as Stinson and Saunders (2016, p. 101) observe, there ‘clearly is a need for pre-service teacher education in the Arts’ given that ‘over 64% [of teachers] said they could not deliver all five Arts strands’ (APPA 2014, p. 6). Lack of training at the tertiary level has resulted in Commedia being marginalised despite it being the foundation of acting given its skillset is widely applicable to all theatre genres (Di Niro *in press*).

While I would posit the advantages of a Zoomtopia in which ‘artists dance in their lounge rooms and teachers instruct students from their living rooms’ (Pike, Neideck & Kelly 2020, p. 2), the reality for drama teachers trying to teach Commedia is rather different – manifesting itself as a Zoomphobia. In the section that follows, I offer two case studies where I was approached by anxious drama teachers in NZ and the UK to facilitate their Commedia workshops at the secondary school level. In this I provide strategies for drama teachers to engage their students in a meaningful study of Commedia online with a focus on creating scenes relevant to modern times. This follows Fisher’s (1992, p. 9) point that originally

Commedia was ‘universally malleable and national, adapting in each country where it appeared to the needs of the culture’s artists and audience’.

In both cases I applied my three-dimensional approach (3-DA), which underlies my engagement with Commedia as a whole (Di Niro 2016; 2020). I find this methodology effective to engage first-contact audiences, that is, participants and audiences who have never engaged with the genre before.

The key features of 3-DA require simultaneous fidelity to:

- GENRE - focus on the key externally recognisable genre characteristics of Archetypes, Mask, Improvisation & Multilingualism - otherwise known as the ‘root form’ (Rudlin 1994, p. 10).
- TIME - apply genre characteristics to the present day and use theatre and prop elements that match the contemporary setting.
- PLACE - devise performances that are meaningful to the audience and the particularities of the location in which the performance occurs (Adelaide, London, Auckland etc).

My 3-DA approach expands on Fava’s (in Rudlin & Fava 2020, p. 60) philosophy to restore Commedia through researching the original attributes of the genre, applying them to the present day and adhering to a ‘code which one does not modify’. This is what Fava has previously referred to as walking the double track of ‘fidelity and renovation’ (2004, p. 17). Although the two case studies discussed below are based on monolingual English-speaking students, the importance of multilingualism as a key genre characteristic cannot be understated given that Commedia transcends the barriers of language and culture. Instead, as noted by Jaffe-Berg (2008, p. 198), Commedia has used multilingualism as ‘a discourse on cultural intermeshing’, while Myers-Scotton and Urry (1977) refer to code switching, code mixing and mixing languages as normal everyday occurrences. Nor does language stand alone for as noted by Scott et al. (2001, p. 294), the principle of embodied cognition in which ‘appropriate facial expression, gestures, body language and tone of voice’ is the hallmark of Commedia. This is further supported by Henke’s (2010, p. 203) view that:

At all costs, the actors should avoid the deranged style and silly pretension of rolling their eyes and flapping their arms about. Instead, gesture should serve as an escort, which holds up speech, not a clumsy servant who trips over it. (Henke 2010, p. 203)

## CASE STUDY 1 - NEW ZEALAND

In 2016, I was invited to Auckland to run a professional development workshop on Commedia for drama teachers. Approximately 25 drama teachers from across New Zealand attended. In early 2020, New Zealand went into a Covid-driven stage 4 full lockdown. A teacher who had attended my 2016 workshop emailed me under duress having just commenced teaching a face-to-face unit of Commedia for her year 12 drama students and now forced to shift to an online mode. Lacking precedent and confidence to engage with the physicality, gestures and comic nature of the genre in a virtual setting, she basically asked me to take over her class. The anonymity of email shielded my own discomfort at this request since I myself had not engaged in Commedia in this virtual way. Initially, I declined the request on the grounds that though my live workshops had proved immensely successful, I was reluctant to put my name or charge for a workshop that I had not previously tested. To her repeated requests and as a compromise, I offered to deliver a 2-hour complementary workshop that might facilitate her ongoing teaching.

## INTRODUCING THE GENRE

I give the students a brief overview of the history and emergence of Commedia, highlighting the 25<sup>th</sup> February 1545 as an official “birthdate” traceable by documentation of a contract between players in Padua, Italy. I explain the importance of multilingualism – noting that troupes were comprised of twelve or more players who spoke various Italian dialects as well as other languages and that this matched with exaggerated, yet precise gestures, following the dictum of maximum body, maximum voice. This worked to the troupes’ advantage and made their performances sellable to an international audience. Next, I explain the hierarchical system of the Commedia characters, which ones are masked and unmasked, and their motivations and drives. Most importantly I explain the relationship dynamics between the

archetypes and their relevance to the present day – a point that is often overlooked by drama teachers. For example, the patriarchal Old Men are also potential in-laws who invite lampooning in the modern setting, thus following Rudlin and Crick’s (2001, p. 100) idea that ‘to survive and prosper at any time, Commedia must reflect the society and audience of that time’. This analysis sets up how scenes are created as this determines the parameters for what each character can/cannot do. Finally, I state that no scripts will be used, rather, students will devise short snippets of dialogue on the spot, which they can then refine in subsequent lessons and flesh out into entire scenes. This follows the practice of the early troupes – improvisation as the process used to devise performance, albeit within set guidelines.

## TEACHING PHYSICALITY. DEVISING SCENES

I now move to teaching the physicality, walks and postures of each key character in each archetype, following the sequence preferred by the teacher. I teach two characters from the same archetype and then workshop dialogue with the students before moving onto the next. For example, the sequence may look like Old Men physicality (Dottore / Pantalone) and scene; Captains physicality (Il Capitano and La Signora) and scene; Lovers physicality (Isabella and Flavio) and scene; Servants physicality (Brighella and Arlecchino) and scene.

Two students were called upon at a time to create a scene based on the archetype covered with all other students observing. I would begin by describing the scene for the students – eg- the Old Men are meeting to discuss the marriage of their children and to negotiate who will pay for what aspects of the wedding. I then remind the students of the wants and motivations of each characters – Pantalone is greedy miser wanting a cheap wedding, while Dottore is after something far more lavish. I then invite the students to adopt the posture of the character they will play and begin dialogue with input from myself and fellow students. In particular, I invite students to draw on their familiarity of similar characters from current TV shows, social media and other sources. For example, Pantalone might adopt traits from the popular 2012 Netflix show *Extreme Cheapskates* while the Dottore could be inspired by the 2018 movie *Crazy Rich Asians*. Invariably the reference to known similar storylines and character traits generates enthusiasm and a sense of ownership – the students “get it”. Likewise, students are encouraged to be authentic to time and place by referring to real locations and

situations within their own context. If Pantalone shops at Cheap as Chips in Adelaide, where might he shop in Auckland? As the scene progresses, I rotate the students to ensure everyone can participate.

For the Lovers, after discussing a modern scenario and demonstrating the physicality, I sent pairs into breakout rooms to work on their dialogue with the view to then have each pair present their scene back to the group. I found this method time consuming and challenging for the following reasons: some students did not engage with the task at all, while others struggled to create dialogue without my assistance. Inevitably, I found myself repeating the task and instructions several times over which was ineffective given the time constraints. As a result, for the Captains and Servants, I reverted to the original format of keeping the whole group together. By focussing on the relevance of Commedia archetypes in the present day and by connecting scenes to modern situations and contexts, students engaged in progressively freer dialogue while also remaining true to the authenticity of genre characteristics. In this I provided building blocks for future lessons with their drama teacher so that a performance could ultimately be devised and staged.

## THE TROUBLE WITH TECHNOLOGY

From the outset there were problems with teaching the exaggerated nature of the physicality via Zoom. From my perspective there was a range of difficulties: adequate space within my home, restrictions of my laptop camera, and audio and wi-fi issues. One of the biggest challenges was teaching the archetypal walks. I found that I would move in and out of camera view, the students were unable to see my full body and the audio from my headphones would fall in and out of range as I moved about. From the students' perspective similar issues were noted, particularly that their workshop space ranged from bedrooms, living rooms and backyards making it difficult for them to move around. In both instances there was a disconnect between the need to step away from the laptop to perform and the need to hear my verbal instructions. Similarly, break out rooms did not yield the level of interaction and participation required due to a lack of supervision.

To compensate for these challenges, I minimised teaching the walks and focused more on status, gestures and posture of each character and most importantly, strategies for devising dialogue as part of the rehearsal process. Commedia is a genre of theatre whereby the script is developed through improvisation and devising scenes based on everyday people in everyday situations. The dialogue is rehearsed until it becomes fixed and is memorised, ready for the performance. I have found creating scenes that are relevant to the lives of the students encourages them to have free-flowing speech and removes their inhibitions of performing Commedia, especially via Zoom when other aspects of Commedia may be difficult to teach such as walks, stage combat and slapstick. This understanding of improvisation as a method to develop a Commedia performance sits within Fava's idea that the study of Commedia is profound and intellectual, and practitioners should not be deluded that it is easy to perform – 'Improvisation is a way of writing, not of performing' (in Rudlin & Fava 2020, p. 60).

Notwithstanding the troubles associated with delivering a Commedia workshop via Zoom, it was very gratifying that the feedback from both teacher and students was overwhelmingly positive.

From the Teacher –

- During Lockdown I faced the complexities of online learning and an overwhelming question of HOW! ... I was confused on how to approach this highly physical theatre form with the energy and passion needed, via a computer. Corinna listened to what I needed, my struggles and desired outcomes. She tailored an online zoom class for my students to introduce Commedia in a fun and non-threatening way. My students warmed to Corinna instantly. They were engaged and are still buzzing about their experience. I loved how relatable Corinna was, she was comfortable in her delivery and she was able to link Commedia characters to modern day examples, so the kids understood straight away. The content was broken down for the students to understand simply, using the Masters and Servants as polarising examples. She engaged them to think creatively. It was fantastic to see the students really embrace this mode of learning and just have a go at improvising a lazzo.

From the Students –

- She was really helpful and explained/demonstrated everything in a way that was easy to follow. Didn't feel awkward at all either, would definitely want to do another one :)
- Not only did I find it super beneficial, but it was fun and interesting! I never felt uncomfortable and the way she explained everything made me want to participate even more. I would LOVE another session with her :)
- Found her very easy to understand and it was fun to participate. Would be cool to have another session with her! :D
- Really great session! It was good to hear about the characters from a different perspective.

## CASE STUDY 2 – UNITED KINGDOM

In 2014, I was invited to London to run a professional development workshop on Commedia for drama teachers. Some 20 teachers from within London attended, including some from the London Academy of Music and Dramatic Arts (LAMDA). Following the positive response to my Zoom Commedia workshop for the New Zealand teacher, which was shared on social media, I was contacted in mid 2020 by a teacher who had attended my 2014 London workshop. The teacher expressed that her students were learning Commedia both as a drama skill and to learn about social issues in line with Hennessy's view on Drama curriculum in the UK (2016, p. 82). The circumstances were similar: London was in lockdown; courses were online, and the teacher was grappling with student lack of motivation. Her intention was to invite a professional practitioner to enthuse her otherwise indifferent students. I agreed to deliver four two-hour workshops at a fee.

## FORMAT

Coming as it did only a month after my NZ workshop, I was able to capitalise on both the strengths and weaknesses of my former Zoom teaching experience. For example, I was relieved to be contacted by the UK teacher that there would be no breakout rooms allowed due to school policy. The fact that I was offered two sessions for each Year 9/10 group enabled me to go deeper into Commedia and to set the students a task for homework.



On the first day, the format was essentially a replica of the NZ prototype noting that the only difference was the sequence in which the archetypes were taught. I deliberately ended the first session with the Captain archetype and a discussion on La Signora. For homework, I asked the students to watch *The Devil Wears Prada* (2006) in particular the character Miranda Priestly and research Kris Jenner (the mother of the Kardashian family) to gain inspiration of the modern-day Signora: physicality, personality, behaviour, gestures, fashion sense, etc. In addition, they were asked to list suburbs, names of department stores and fashion labels that were associated with both lower and higher economic demographics in their hometowns. This was to prepare them for the short scene (lazzo) between the two female Captains: Due Signore (the two Signoras) that they would develop the following week.

The follow up workshop started with a recapitulation of the first and then moved to a greater practical analysis of relationship dynamics between the archetypes. Students were asked to think up everyday situations between master and servant looking at stereotypes such as the “mean boss” or conversely, the “lazy employee”. Often students would identify the modern personae of Mr Burns and Homer Simpson with Pantalone and Pulcinella respectively.

The culmination of the workshop was to play out the Due Signore lazzo where both women come head-to-head. Putting their homework into practice, two students at a time assumed the roles of La Signora and asked to devise the following scene:

Each Signora believes they have been invited to shop at a prestigious fashion store, opened exclusively for them. However, as they are shopping there, to their disgust they soon discover each other’s presence. These women are rivals – they both want to be the best dressed in the latest fashion. Neither wants to be second to the other. To start, they engage in “sophisticated trash talk” and by the end their language becomes quite crude and rude.

Encouraged to assume the roles, students were initially too polite to their fellow/rival actor and therefore out of character. Under my direction, they gradually – then enthusiastically – engaged in more vicious banter. In terms of physicality, the students stood still and faced the camera so to engage their audience and fellow actors and held a very haughty and up-tight posture relevant to their characters. During the first lesson, I had mentioned the role of

multilingualism and non-sequential languages such as grammelot as a key feature in early Commedia. To my surprise and delight, some students took this on board and stretched their use of the English language by first having La Signora adopt a very posh upper-class accent and then slip into common vernacular and finally utter gibberish as she lapsed into more unsophisticated modes of behaviour. This alternating between language style within a monolingual setting was not only a ‘productive process in learning’ Commedia but also generated much hilarity through the translanguaging and mixing of languages (Heugh et al., 2017, p. 264).

The Due Signore lazzo was repeated until all students had a turn with male students participating equally, just as female students had played Capitano the preceding session. The practical workshop was a great success judging by the input of fellow students from the privacy of their own homes. It was as if we had transcended the barrier of Covid induced isolation and entered Zoomtopia. The teacher and student feedback were equally positive.

From the Teacher

- Corinna gave a masterclass not only in Commedia dell'Arte but also in how to deliver a physical drama workshop remotely. Her energy and enthusiasm transcended the limits of technology and reached the students in such an engaging way. The workshop was dynamic and interesting, captivating and gave my students a refreshing experience where they could learn from a leading professional. I am so grateful that Corinna was so accommodating to create a bespoke workshop for us and due to different time zones even worked at 10.30pm - what an amazing practitioner she is. Highly recommend!

From the Students

- I thought this workshop was fantastic I really enjoyed learning about Commedia dell'Arte and trying out some of the various characters!
- I found the Commedia workshop really interesting and it was a fun experience learning about a different kind of theatre despite it not being what I'm used to.

- It was an enjoyable couple of lessons and I'm glad I got the opportunity. My favourite part was the trash-talking Signoras! :D
  
- Learning about the Zanni and trying to make a cake with my fellow Zanni on the other side of the screen was hilarious! :D
  
- Thank you very much for this opportunity, I thoroughly enjoyed gaining an insight into this wonderful part of theatre. Corinna's energy poured through the screen and it was great to feel a part of an ensemble even though we're in isolation. I would love to go and see a Commedia dell'Arte production so perhaps a school trip?!

## ACCESSING ZOOMTOPIA

Starting as a neophyte to offering Commedia through Zoom, I offer the following reflections to future practitioners/drama teachers as a tentative guideline for turning a technological nightmare into Zoomtopia. These strategies are not only to create a successful Commedia workshop, but equally, to break down the barriers of isolation associated with virtual learning:

- Do not use scripts. Always create a new Commedia play.
- Avoid breakout rooms – keep all students in the same virtual classroom at all times.
- Give a brief overview of the history that highlights how Commedia is relevant to today.
- When teaching characters within each archetype, connect the historical version to a contemporary one. Eg: Pantalone = Mr Burns; La Signora = Miranda Priestly; Capitano = Zapp Brannigan from Futurama; Lovers = children in the movie *Enemies In-Law* (2015); Servants = Homer Simpson, Blackadder, Hermione Granger.
- For teachers who are not trained in the postures and walks, there are a number of Commedia video resources available and practitioners offering teacher workshops. However, where this is not possible, encourage students to adopt the posture, walk and mannerisms of a modern-day example of a Commedia character and have them exaggerate it.

- Mask refers to both the physical mask and the facial expression/make-up of the non-masked characters. Students could make masks at home as well as props and costumes, however these tasks should be kept minimal or used as homework. This is because these are individual based activities. Given the Zoom environment, the focus of the Commedia workshop must be on creating dialogue as this breaks down the anonymity of the computer screen and encourages paired/group work.
- Set up activities in pairs – Commedia invented the comic duo.
- First introduce two characters within the same archetype that would typically be seen together in a scene or lazzi. Eg: Pantalone and Dottore (Masters); La Signora and Il Capitano (Captains); the Lovers; two Servants.
- After introducing binary couples within each archetype then introduce characters from different archetypes. Eg: Pantalone (Master) and Arlecchino (Servant), Isabella (Lover) and Colombina (Servant); Il Capitano and Dottore. This extension assists with the development of relationship dynamics and a deeper understanding of the importance of status in the hierarchical system.
- Setting up dialogue: First introduce the scene to all the students. Describe the two characters and their motivations, the relationship dynamic between the two, the situation and where the scene takes place. Make this scene relevant to the time and place of the students – refer to 3-DA.

Example: Isabella and Flavio (the Lovers) are arranging to meet before their wedding to share with each other a beautiful poem they have written about being in love. To make these arrangements, students should think of current technologies and modes of communication that the Lovers could use (TikTok, Instagram). When the Lovers meet, they are so obsessed with technology that they do not realise their love is right in front of them. This obsession with technology connects us with today's world of people always on their phones. The location of the meeting place should be a real place known by the students so they can easily describe it while improvising the scene.

- Focus on the dialogue and interaction between the students. Keep them talking. Encourage fellow students to offer dialogue when someone is stuck. Keeping the

scene relevant to the students will help keep the dialogue stay free flowing with supportive teacher input.

- All scenes must be performed to camera so that the students are continuously facing each other, as they would be in a traditional classroom setting.
- Play with language. Encourage students to speak diverse languages if they can, stretch the nuances of a single language, or experiment with grammelot.
- Ultimately, when all students are together either creating or witnessing the scenes being workshopped, they feel more connected as members of an ensemble.

These guidelines follow the 3-DA approach to Commedia that I have developed over years of engagement with teachers and students worldwide. The aim of this approach is to provide teachers with a ‘way in’ to Commedia, cutting through the dense complexities of the genre whilst still maintaining a connection to the root form. By simultaneously being faithful to genre characteristics and relevant to the present time and place, both teacher and student can find immediate connections with these historical yet universal archetypes whereby the characters within are localised. The Master archetype exists no matter where or when, however, the individual attributes of the Master differ depending on the particularities of the local context. This is in line with Dutton’s (2009, p. 54) observation when he defines styles as ‘coterminous with culture’, stating that:

by providing artists and their audiences with a familiar background, [styles] allow for the exercise of artistic freedom, liberating as much as they constrain. Style can oppress artists; more often, styles set them free.

In my practice, I have continued socio-cultural updating in both my workshops and performances by developing scenes/lazzi that ‘draw on news stories and the social norms of the audience, and that incorporate the local language and its variations’ (Di Niro 2020, p. 10).

My advice to teachers is that knowledge of the Commedia hierarchical system, status, relationship dynamics and how these characters exist in a modern context is vital to an effective Commedia workshop and ultimately to a successful performance. There is no need to attempt to recreate relic Commedia performances of the past or to look to Commedia’s

history with nostalgia. Instead, we can be inspired by an understanding of the ways in which the early troupes during the ‘heyday of the great companies’ (Richards & Richards 1990, p. 57), capitalised on their success through localising their performances and making them relevant to each new audience, inserting topical jokes, applying multilingualism, focussing on physicality and precise gestures that upheld language, and that diversified by encompassing all types of entertainment including acrobatics, dance, singing and music.

## CONCLUSION

My experiences of teaching Commedia online in a time of global pandemic or Covid Commedia, has reinforced my conviction that the genre is an adaptable form of theatre and remains relevant in the digital age. The workshops have shown that it is possible to engage meaningfully with Commedia in the online space. Specifically, this includes my 3-DA methodology and a focus on dialogue, pair work, physicality and importantly - relevance to the students’ local settings. Nevertheless, there remains a lack of training and resources for drama teachers to equip themselves with the necessary skills to confidently teach Commedia in both schools and online. This problem stems from the marginalisation of the genre in the tertiary sector, where despite it being the keystone of professional theatre, it is othered and pushed aside as an outdated historic form.

Looking ahead, if Commedia continues to be taught at the secondary school level, tertiary institutions must do better to promote the genre and create courses that give it proper recognition. While I have a clear notion of the shortcomings of Drama Education / Performing Arts degrees in the Australian tertiary sector, the very fact that UK and NZ teachers sought my expertise poses the question of the quality and range of tertiary engagement with Commedia in those countries. The worldwide tendency towards economic rationalism and focus on employment as the ultimate determinant of undergraduate courses necessarily undermines the role of Arts in our everyday life.

The irony is that if the current trend to devalue the Arts continues then the future of Commedia may well be in offering tuition through virtual classrooms given that the genre

itself will and must remain the foundation basis of theatre training. How ironic that the Coronavirus indeed may save Commedia by creating a place for it in Zoomtopia.

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