

## HARMS OF COMMEDIA DELL'ARTE

By Tara Cariaso

The following is a sample of the text from an article that is not yet published, but has been submitted for publication.

### *Harms I've created, harms I've passed along*

I created harm by working in this traditional form with diverse classes of students without amending my practice to acknowledge Commedia's built-in inequity. Commedia, in the historical form, represents a past society deeply entrenched in fixed classes and social standings. It brings with it all the harms that have existed in human civilization since time began: racism, genderism and sexism, poverty-shaming, ageism, ablism, body-shape prejudice. I created harm by encouraging my students of intersecting identities to enter a space, even of creative, theatrical play, where shaming someone due to their economic status was acceptable, where the historic masks contain prejudicial storytelling about entire populations of people, where gender-inequity is the standard. I took the students into this territory not knowing that by doing so, I would be creating preferential attitudes towards the characters that this form uplifts.

I want to add here, as someone that is learning to radically believe my body, I know I created harm because I felt somatic discomfort at the time, though I didn't always recognize that discomfort as harm. In hindsight I can say that the harms of Commedia were always present for me, even as a young, brown-skinned, filipina student, though I didn't know what to call them.

One would think I would have stopped playing in the form then! But I did not. The fact that it was difficult for me was a challenge, one that I wanted to conquer. I went on

to teach Commedia because I believed in the amazing skills it provides players: improvisation, expanded play, complicity with fellow performers, comic timing, playwriting, deliciously over-the-top physical character creation. There were so many amazing benefits, and I was getting so good at sharing those useful and practical acting skills. But my own needs were set aside in favor of welcoming more exacting teachers, and deeper, more incisive play in Commedia.

Once I was fully committed to using Commedia in my professional work, making masks and teaching it almost exclusively, I realized I was part of a legacy of this kind of storytelling. And as the recipient of a traditional form, as the teacher of a traditional form, wasn't I meant to teach what had been given to me, as it was given to me?

Another hurdle: I had only ever known this kind of theatre as exclusionary. I found myself asking: wasn't that harm of exclusion, in fact, the norm? Shouldn't I *\*expect\** to see it in my own classrooms?

It was in the last 10 years that I have been willing to reconsider the tools that I was given, and question the form. This life-changing shift in my thinking came about because, in that time, I've come to think of my job as a teacher as broader than simply passing on what I had been taught; now I center my work on uplifting the people in the classroom.