HowlRound TheatreCommons

Commedia Gets a New Face

By Tara Cariaso

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Over the last three years, I have been designing new masks and new pedagogy for an old form—**Commedia dell'arte** (CdA). In 2021, my company **Waxing Moon Masks** and our partner, **Faction of Fools Theatre Company** of DC, created *The New Mask Family,* the first six mask designs for a Commedia-inspired play. The pedagogy created alongside these masks is called Reimagining Commedia.

Traditionally, Commedia masks center historical features present in the masks hundreds of years ago,

even crafted today. We've broken from that tradition, and are re-configuring Commedia dell'arte for contemporary artists.

The New Mask Family. Masks by Tara Cariaso of Waxing Moon Masks. Photo by Cat Rice Photography LLC.

Stereotypes in Traditional Mask Designs

As a mask maker, I am tasked with representing a character on stage. I'm often asked to fabricate masks for training, rather than a particular character. The goal is to convey strong aspects of character for anyone wearing the mask. This is tricky because there are no genetically impartial features; our physical bodies all have connections to our unique heritage. When tasked with representing social status in a mask (as is required in CdA masks), you must answer impossible questions: “What does a lower class nose look like?” “What features should signify ‘poor’?” This is the mask maker’s conundrum.

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In the US in 2023, *anyone* is supposed to be able to attain wealth. This was not the case when Commedia

dell'arte was a dominant theatre form, and is not reflected in Renaissance-era masks. Of course, opportunities for people of color and marginalized identities to attain wealth today are drastically less than those of dominant cultural identities. But theatre is aspirational—it should serve everyone and reflect today's diverse world of players.

As a mask maker, my first instinct was to mimic the ideas and designs of my predecessors. It took years for me to realize that it is my responsibility to represent *students of today*, not players of the past. To do so, I have made many changes to this traditional form.

Separating the Harm from Commedia Characters and Their Masks

When I began, I had to identify the most important parts of the Commedia acting experience for students. I didn't want to do harm. Traditional Commedia dell'arte masks have rich histories, but also deeply embedded stereotypical features that stem from ageism, racism, sexism and misogyny, genderism, classism, ableism, etc. I refused to put that pain into the masks that I would use to teach Commedia. But how? If I didn't use the "stock"

characteristics of Commedia's traditional characters, would people know who they were? And given the harm that has come from contemporary artists using these masks, should I make new masks that are recognizable as the traditional characters they stem from, or should I abandon those models altogether for contemporary devising practice?

I had been using emotion play with Commedia students for fifteen years, so I knew I would be building emotions into the new masks. Emotions play across a face bombastically, throwing symmetry out the door in favor of fascinating visual events—a crinkly nose lifts one side of a lip, pulling the entire left side of a face upwards in wrinkles. Emotions create intersections, conflicts, and big changes of direction: everything the **Lecoq territory on Commedia dell'arte** might highlight as the purpose of the play.

Emotions are archetypal—recognizable in a large majority of humans across experience and history. Archetypal qualities differ from stereotypical qualities; archetypes are driven from within an individual, whereas stereotypes are driven from external identification. This was the foundation for my pedagogy, "Embodying Archetypes." I reasoned that if emotions are not generally part of the mask

shape for traditional masks, but I knew they lived in those stock characters, I could use those shapes to give definition to new masks.

There were other “archetype containers” I considered for building meaning into the Reimagined Commedia designs, several of which I used, including: inspiration from **Carl Jung and his archetypes**, the **Rasas from traditional Indian dance**, family member archetypes, the Grand Passions (a list of character qualities included in my training at Dell’Arte International School of Physical Theatre), elements from nature, and the **traditional hierarchical form from Commedia and European clowning**. These collections of archetypes gave definition to an idea that might be used in a physical way when sculpting a mask or embodied by an actor: I was looking for archetypes that could do both.

Partners

My concept was to reimagine the way Commedia could play in the Lecoq-informed traditions with archetypes rather than stereotypes, with masks that didn’t hold a history of harms embedded in their features, and with values that redefined the energetic focus of Commedia-inspired play by centering justice and joy. I needed collaborators who

could also see what I saw. I was actively seeking environments to develop these ideas into practices. It wasn't until I was approached by Faction of Fools Theatre Company that the work began to flourish.

I am blessed to partner with people who are passionate about this work: Francesca Chilcote and Kathryn Zoerb, the co-artistic directors of Faction of Fools. We spent many hours sharing concerns, observations, and interest in finding articulation of specific traditional stock characters for new, less harmful masks. They hired me to sculpt the masks using a rubric of archetypal qualities inspired by the traditional masked characters. We worked together to think about how these concepts would inform the company's foundational training, "Commedia 101."

Developing the masks and training side-by-side, I continued to bind mask functionality with social justice directives. Faction of Fools funded and co-created the reimagined masks, and became my partners in discovering how these parts would converge to make new, Commedia-inspired actor training.

Abandoning Traditional "Hungers"

Aiming for masks that were true to the work we loved, we first identified qualities that we did *not*

want to see in the reimagined masks. We referenced the traditional wants and needs of the historical characters, the “hungers” of the three societal classes presented in historical Commedia. Generally, when CdA characters are taught, they are given a class-specific directive like, “The servant class wants to eat. That is their behavioral motivation.” I recognized how classist it is for today’s actors to categorize an entire class of people as “servants,” and to say, “all that class wants out of life is to eat.” This line of thinking denies human complexity, and makes stereotypes of everyone. However, by removing singular wants, I removed a lot of what practitioners found so advantageous to the form: its ability to quickly facilitate embodiment and movement stemming from those wants. It is this freedom to play in a well outlined container that makes Commedia so fun. I needed to keep a central *want* for each character, but one that didn’t encourage stereotyping.

Eliminating the articulation of “a class of person with specific class-wants” loosened the chokehold of stereotyping on the form. When we drop the connection between character social class and character hunger, we acknowledge that our human identities have definition beyond our status within capitalism.

Symphony Hall, Tara Cariaso, and Parker Matthews at *Reimagining Commedia* workshop at Baltimore Center Stage in September 2023. Photo by Shealyn Jae Photography.

Defining “Essential Qualities”

Instead of defining characters by their class, age, or gender, we began to define them by their "Essential Qualities:" the *want/need* of each historical character, chosen from our collective knowledge. We made that essential quality the new “hunger” for that character—making space for each character to

inhabit their humanity instead of dominant culture's expectations.

For example: we did not make **Magnifico's (the wealthy boss and father**) dominant "want" money. Instead we asked, "What does Magnifico need from all their interactions?" *Control*. That is an essential quality that can be played again and again, by any actor, and it fits Magnifico perfectly. I put that hunger into the mask.

Another example is **Capitano**. Capitano is often played as a man of machismo who fawns over, lies to, and cheats on women. Our job was to tease out their desire for love and leave behind the need to be adored by women and idolized by men. By essentializing the character's want, we made them easy to play, and took away the dominant cultural harm they posed.

Carl Jung expressed his archetypes as having an **essential state and a shadow state**. I like to think of Capitano's essential state as seeking love and validation, with a shadow state of abusing power. By making their essential nature clear, and acknowledging the abuse of power they are prone to, we cut out much of the harmful stereotypical play that can come from this character, and focus on the

responsibility of each character to be better than their shadow selves.

Reframing these historic characters with values around accountability and normalizing mistakes gives today's actors a clearer path to identifying and shifting harm when they recognize it. Since doing this work, I've seen the stories improvised by actors shift from acts heavily laden with harmful tropes towards stories where the control-monger will learn to be better tomorrow.

Essentializing the character's central want does not eliminate the potential for harm; harm is simply not inherent in the portrayal. We give the character space to pursue their wants and hold them responsible for their choices. This is *especially* true for the characters who hold the most power in traditional Commedia dell'arte. Rather than accepting the character's harmful behavior as "just the way it is," we separate the behavior from the essential character, and let the storytelling examine, critique, or condone their choices.

Actor Agency in Design

My partners at Faction of Fools and I identified six characters we wanted to reimagine without the historical layers. We talked through each character

with regards to their relationships, goals, and needs, and then picked essential archetypal characteristics for each of the traditional stock characters. I then began sculpting *TheNew Mask Family*.

For training, these masks are useful. However, for a production, having the actors determine the archetypal characteristics for their characters is a more effective tool of empowerment for a reimagined creative process. Using this pedagogy for character creation, the actors are equipped to create unique archetypally-based characters. Realizing this, our team decided to create new masks unique to the actors for *each* production.

Oftentimes, the work of designing a character mask is left to the designer to create from historical precedent or an existing text. Masks for future Commedia-inspired plays *need* to come from the character choices made by the actor. The actor's agency in mask-creation through archetypal choices makes far more sense to the representation of characters than all the masks designed by a single person. Collaboration between the actor and the designer creates more opportunities for representation, and tangibly connects the creative spirit of the actor with the emotive face of the character.

Ruth Diaz, Natalie Cutcher, and Andrew Quilpa in *Missed Connections* at Faction of Fools Theatre Company. Directed by Francesca Chilcote. Scenic design by Johnny Weissgerber. Costume design by Lynly Saunders. Photo by DJ Corey Photography.

This is now a pivotal building block for productions by Faction of Fools: actors and designers share the same archetype vocabulary, which is explored through the body and in conversation before it is ever put into clay.