HOWLROUND THEATRE COMMONS

The Harm of Teaching Commedia dell’arte to Contemporary Players

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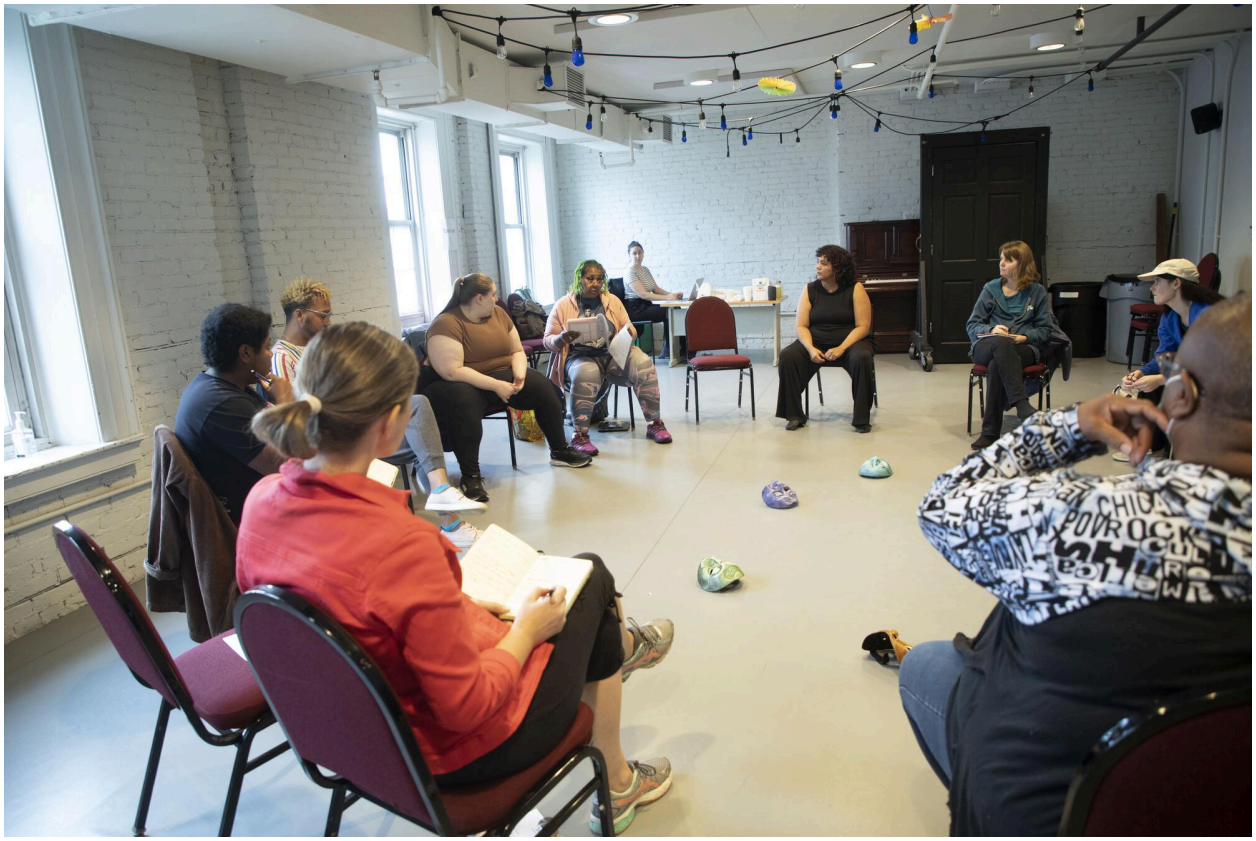
We need safer theatrical spaces and more actor agency. If theatre is to remain a tool for expression, one that moves with us and our descendants into the next century, it must amplify historically disenfranchised voices, and it must not create further harm. This is true for educational, rehearsal, and performance spaces.

So many of us in performance education settings are wrestling with questions of consent and rigor, wanting to offer actors both safety and opportunities to excel. But how can we offer safety and rigor without reexamining the tools we are already using? We must be allowed to use data from our experiences to inform our choices about what is safe now, and we must assemble more informed practices in creating consent. Over my twenty years of teaching commedia dell'arte, I have wrestled with why this traditional form hurts so many students and what tools I can use to shift this form of character creation away from harm and towards increased freedom and agency. Today I'd like to share with you what I've learned about how harm manifests in the classroom when playing in commedia.

My Personal Experience

The harms of commedia were always present for me as a young, brown-skinned, Filipina student learning the form, though I didn't know what to call them. I recall feeling thrilled to wear the masks, to practice the traditional character shapes, and try on the bold, familiar attitudes. However, I couldn't escape that the power felt ill-fitting to me. Rather than being encouraged to learn to use the power of the character, I was encouraged to take on a character

that others saw more in me, like a busty, sexually-manipulative **Colombina** (the clever servant character). One would think I would have stopped playing in the form then! But I did not. I went on to teach commedia because I believed in the amazing skills it provides players: improvisation, expanded play, cohesion 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. I set my own needs aside in favor of welcoming more exacting teachers and deeper, more incisive play in commedia.



Participants and co-facilitators in the Reimagining Commedia workshop at Baltimore Center Stage, co-hosted by Waxing Moon Masks and funded by the Maryland State Arts Council (MSAC) Creative Grant, September 2023. Photo by Shealyn Jae.

Inequities in Teaching Spaces Are Complex

In truth, inequalities have always revealed themselves in teaching spaces, probably because of our learned tendency towards competition. I am reminded of **a quote from Deborah Cullinan in 2018**: "Arts and culture organizations must understand themselves not as arbiters of taste, but as creative homes for the people." Theatrical spaces need to be creative homes, not places for educators to hone their specific flavor of "best." It's an unfortunate truth that so-called "natural talent" is often celebrated over the fruits of hard work. In our culture, we tend to view the former as a mark of prestige, the latter as a mark of struggle. In a theatre classroom, the hierarchies created by a student's success and failure lands them in or out of the teacher's and classmates' favor. We are told that some students are "talented" and some are not. We tend to lean towards models of ease and away from signs of struggle.

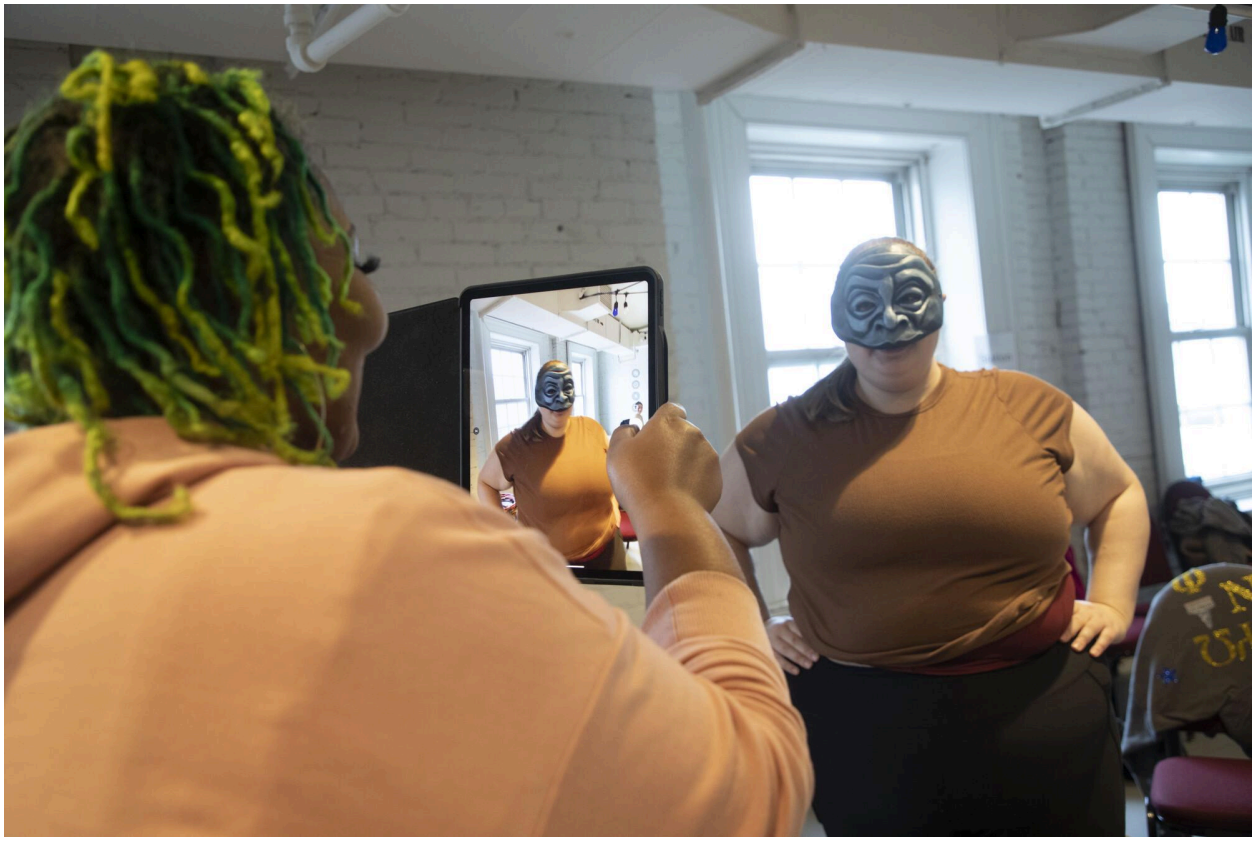
However, our culture has yet to unpack the systems of power that function and thrives on this kind of preferentialism. Specifically, patriarchy, white supremacy, and other refined forms of oppressive cultural norms amplify the importance of uplifting some while diminishing others. If folks with certain identities continuously find success in some forms, is there a reason beyond “natural talent?” What if, at least sometimes, “talent” is actually a convergence of privileged identities, rather than inherent ability?

Harms I’ve Created, Harms I’ve Passed Along

As the recipient of a traditional form, as the teacher of a traditional form, I wondered: was I meant to teach what had been given to me, as it was given to me? Also, since 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? And if it was the norm, did I have a responsibility to teach differently?

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, classism, ageism, ableism, body-shape prejudice. I created harm by encouraging my students of intersecting identities to enter a space 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.



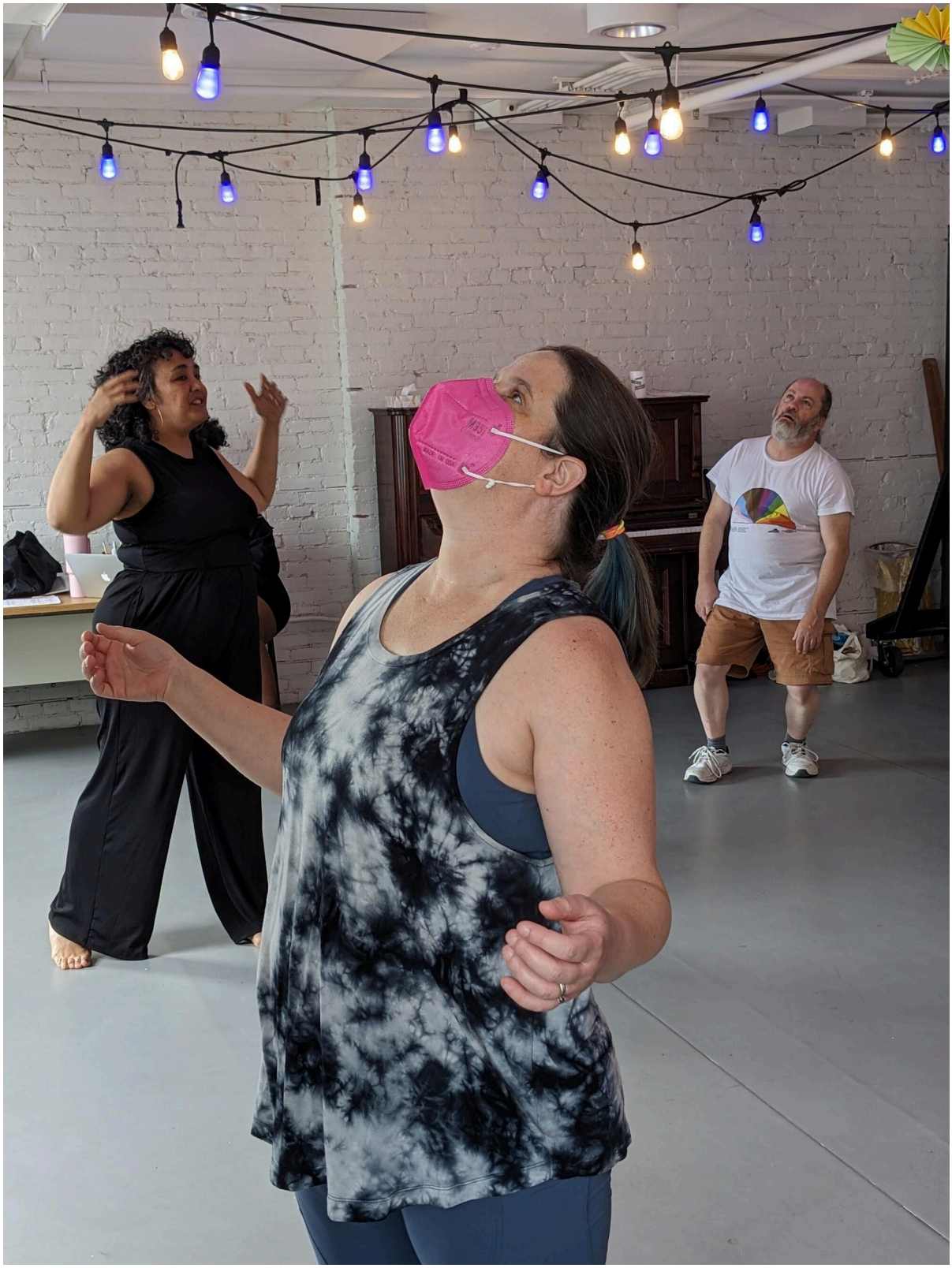
Symphony Hall and Mira Klein at the Reimagining Commedia workshop at Baltimore Center Stage co-hosted by Waxing Moon Masks and funded by the Maryland State Arts Council (MSAC) Creative Grant, September 2023. Photo by Shealyn Jae.

As an educator determined to look critically at the teaching tools I was using, I found that commedia was deeply disliked and distrusted in classroom and performance communities with majority students of color. Disabled and differently abled bodies recognized the ableism in the tropes that punched down at people for being less-than, and the traditional training practices were largely geared towards able-bodied people, so immediately these students felt that this training wasn't for them. I watched as Black audience members left performances because traditional masks were painted black and appeared to mock African features. I felt it when my queer, nonbinary, and transgender students experienced not being represented in many roles because of the many gendered tropes in commedia. Again and again, students with existing racialized and gender trauma felt unable to relate to the dominant culture tropes.

Perhaps the most devastating of all my own experiences was when I would walk into a room of young actors and the Jewish students recognized

the harm of the **Pantalone mask** before I even introduced it. The mask, with a distinctive nose shape meant to echo the Venetian character "Pantalone" of the early Renaissance, carries baggage; and playing that character harms no one more than those with Jewish heritage. Most often taught as a combination of stereotypes for Jewish people—old and parsimonious—the Pantalone character puts together some of the worst parts of the commedia stereotyping process and offers it to actors as gleeful exercise: "You're old, you're greedy, and you're crotchety… now put all that into your body and play!"

In 2018, I encountered two students who were brave enough to let me know that what I was sharing with them was hurtful to them and their identity as Jewish people. There were tears as they told me, "I want to participate, but I just don't know what parts [of this exercise and which of these characters] are okay." There was the power dynamic at play: I was the authority asking these students who were vulnerable to the harm of this form to ignore that it hurt them. I realized that as an abuse of my leadership, and I vowed to stop teaching traditional commedia until I could answer, "Which parts are okay?" for myself.



Vanessa Strickland, Tara Cariaso, and Stephen Shetler at the Emotion Mask Performance workshop at Baltimore Center Stage, co-hosted by Waxing Moon Masks and funded by the Maryland State Arts Council (MSAC) Creative Grant. Photo by Parker Matthew.

Observations on Acting with Stereotypes

In my classroom, I found that my students played with less commitment when stereotypes of a character's age, gender, intelligence, ability, social caste, race, or sexual orientation were involved, particularly when the students did not have close personal experience or relationship with that aspect of the character. Once a stereotype is permitted into a space, and once it receives laughter and approval, playing other stereotypes becomes fair game. In this way, the classroom can become playful, teasing, leaning towards satire (and commedia is satirical!), but sometimes it reads as insincere and just plain unkind.

Dominant culture in contemporary United States classrooms is, obviously, heavily influenced by the dominant culture of the United States. Dominant cultural qualities are those that are associated with the people who most readily have the majority of

power. I observed that often, only some students really find facility and play when embracing stereotyped characters. Usually they are students who possess and present multiple dominant culture qualities. It's like they already know what works. I want to emphasize that I do not believe these students are simply more talented because they find more success in commedia! Rather, in contrast to those whose unique identities are less culturally powerful in the United States, these students are better equipped to play the dominant cultural character who, in commedia, exerts power over others, because they are already closer to understanding how to wield the dominant cultural power. Students with marginalized identities have much more difficulty using the tools of dominant culture.

The result of this phenomenon in my classroom was that students who already had identities that more fully aligned with the dominant cultural qualities seemed, superficially, to be better actors, and were thus more revered by their classmates for their skills, boosting their confidence at the expense of others and deepening the already existing power gap between students. I've watched in disappointment as many of my students of color, disabled students, and nonbinary students left the form excited by the

possibility of playing these characters but confused as to why they were not as uplifted by the audience as other students.

Whether commedia is being used in the classroom or at a labor rally protesting ill treatment of a factory's workers, the form can transform to serve the vision of the ones making it.

Being of Our Time

Commedia dell'arte is not a good or bad theatre form; it is simply of its time. The form can tell stories of liberation or enslavement easily. It all depends on the folks making those choices. Commedia was brought back from the dead by **Jacques Lecoq**, who used it as a ferocious physical training practice for actors, but the form was also taken up by numerous other practitioners as a means of making social commentary on the inequities of their societies. For folks like **Dario Fo** and the **San Francisco Mime Troupe**, commedia's fixed structures of harm were

an avenue to a reclamation for the lower income peoples of the world, creating biting satire and social commentary by using the form to push back at the wealthy corporate leaders and ineffective arms of the state. Whether commedia is being used in the classroom or at a labor rally protesting ill treatment of a factory's workers, the form can transform to serve the vision of the ones making it. When I lead workshops and ask people what they love about commedia and why they want to keep using the form, they often speak of the potential to speak truth to power.

I didn't go looking for reasons to remake commedia, the reasons were already in me and my own experiences. They kept showing up in my class and lingered in my head, heart, and body.

I want to use commedia to tell stories of our time that are grounded in joy, justice, and liberation, and I believe that by making our creative educational and performance spaces safer for our many diverse identities, our culture's storytelling will expand and cultivate the empathy needed to solve large societal problems.

Vanessa Strickland, Tara Cariaso, and Stephen Shetler at the Emotion Mask Performance workshop at Baltimore Center Stage, co-hosted by Waxing Moon Masks and funded by the Maryland State Arts Council (MSAC) Creative Grant, September 2023. Photo by Parker Matthew.

Centering on Joy, Justice, and Liberation

To make stories that are grounded in joy, justice, and liberation, I need to abandon the use and creation of

stereotypes in my classroom. I need to leave space for the actors to speak their own observed characters into the space, characters that better address the societal inequities of our age. For a student in a class in 2024, that means tearing out the comforting norms of a fixed social structure from the machinery of commedia. I want students to make stories that use the inequities as powerful engines for telling the truth in an entertaining way. By letting go of stereotypes that come with the traditional form, we are left with bare-faced wants and desires that are *not* predetermined by one's social status, race, gender, ability, age, sexuality, or body shape; this is the beating heart of the theatre I want to see. Me and my collaborators are changing the tools used in commedia to serve contemporary players. That work includes: reconsidering the existing stock characters for essential traits, offering masks that are not reminiscent of the old ones and their biases, and re-centering our stories on people working to be in right relationship with one another. You can read more about this work in my previous essay, "**Commedia Gets a New Face**."

Theatre in its most essential state exists for players and stories to be seen, heard, and understood through the immense healing of a shared experience. It is not to make money (thought that

helps); it is not to increase our egos (though that can feel good). A reason to make theatre is to open wide the door of empathy where there was only a sliver of light coming through. Historically harmful art forms like commedia dell'arte urge us to reimagine how we teach it. Using commedia in its purely historical form pours salt into old and still unhealed wounds. Reimagining commedia gives us a chance to learn from the past harms and inequities, value how far we have come, and plan for how far we must go. Our spaces must be safer to our intersecting identities so that we do not lose theatre's "why," which for me, is to be seen, heard, and understood. A reimagined commedia offers so many wonderful ways to tell unique, comedic stories, and empower young artists to make characters that reflect their experiences.