

Natalie Crohn Schmitt. 2019.
Performing Commedia dell'Arte, 1570–1630.
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This book is part of Routledge's Focus series and is a most welcome addition to the study of commedia dell'arte, an art form foundational to the very nature of theatre across the globe. It provides in one short volume all the important references to other studies that any scholar of the commedia would want, as well as a surprising wealth of sources. Commedia dell'arte is the only traditional acting style to survive intact in Europe, and although no professional commedia companies now exist, it is taught in almost every drama school of the world. This is because it remains the best introduction available to comedy and trains actors in the skill of improvisation, both aspects now very important in contemporary theatre and film acting alike.

Thus, an approachable resource like this is of considerable value. Although numerous books have been published on the commedia, including many by actors about performing it, and a wealth of images is available, it nevertheless remains fairly incomprehensible unless one views an actual performance, however rough. Better equipped than most, Natalie Crohn Schmitt has set herself the daunting task of evoking an historic performance art through words; and has chosen to focus on the 60 years generally agreed to be when commedia was at its height. This was not only in its native Italy but throughout Europe, which teemed with travelling troupes—one of which could easily have arrived at Elsinore Castle in Denmark, as reflected in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. Certainly several were watched in London in Shakespeare's time. Schmitt's 2014 study of the collection of fifty scenarios gathered by writer-actor Flaminio Scala (1552–1624) covered a prime source of the material most troupes used at that time. Here she extends her focus from *what* was acted into *how* these skeletal plots were fleshed out with words, how they sounded and looked in performance. Valuable to anyone wanting to understand this impressively dexterous and inventive comic style, this concise new book has chapters on Improvisation, Acting Styles (dialects, voice, gesture), and Uses of Masks, concluding with a chapter on where commedia remains an influence today and where elements of it are still to be found, for example in France's famed Théâtre du Soleil.

The book's title, *Performing Commedia dell'Arte*, accurately describes its focus. Clearly Schmitt's knowledge of this unique subject extends far beyond what can be contained in a mere 106 pages: apart from being professor emerita of theatre and English at the University of Illinois, Chicago, she is evidently a woman of the theatre and adds interesting observations about some improvisation groups active in her own city. Despite this, the title is somewhat misleading in that the book is not really a guide for today's actors: indeed, it presumes substantial prior knowledge of commedia on the part of the reader in order to appreciate its impressive wealth of scholarship and the range of the author's dedicated research. She cross-references between material that was available in the 15th century to

modern studies that have specialised in various aspects and the footnotes are every bit as fascinating as the chapters' contents. Citations included cover the widest list of publications we have seen regarding commedia and the illustrations provided from Rome's Corsiniana library may be unique to this gem of a book.

Debate continues today over whether commedia should be listed with UNESCO as an Intangible Cultural Heritage and on this point, Schmitt endorses Giulia Filacanapa's and Christopher Balme's view that commedia's unbroken continuity to the present day is somewhat of a myth. However, regardless of how many times (like theatre itself) it has died and been reinvented, theatre practitioners especially can see clear links from Roman theatre through medieval street performers to Giorgio Strehler's gathering of old commedia actors to create his famous 1947 production of *Arlecchino, il servitore di due padroni*. Yet Schmitt disregards many widely accepted precedents to accept the veracity of Massimo Ciavolella's claim that "we can say that commedia dell'arte has provided the basis for modern theatre in the Western World".

Schmitt's fastidiousness in crediting all her sources and influences is admirable—too many theatre studies books fail to do this despite the fact that it is of enormous value in underpinning an author's narrative and securely founding views expressed. Her well-selected quotes include many that will stimulate the reader to a closer and fuller reading of the sources quoted, e.g., Fabius Quintilian's *Orator's Education* (90 AD) and Baldessare Castiglione's *Book of the Courtier* (1528). She shines a light on numerous rare historic writings that should be better known to all teachers of performance as well as to theatre historians. The book invites the reader to share the author's infectious passion for commedia dell'arte and its world, and to admire the practitioners that have used social satire and comic invention to delight audiences through the ages. This is a book one will want to ponder over and return to time and again.

References

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Bionotes

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International theatre teacher, director, producer and dramaturge, guest lecturer across Asia, from Iran to Japan. Co-founder of Asia-Pacific Bond of Theatre Schools, Mellor had headed theatre-training institutions, including Australia's National Institute of Dramatic Art (NIDA). Artistic director of four influential theatre companies in Australia, Sydney's Jane Street and Nimrod Theatres, Royal Queensland Theatre and Melbourne's Playbox-Malthouse.

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