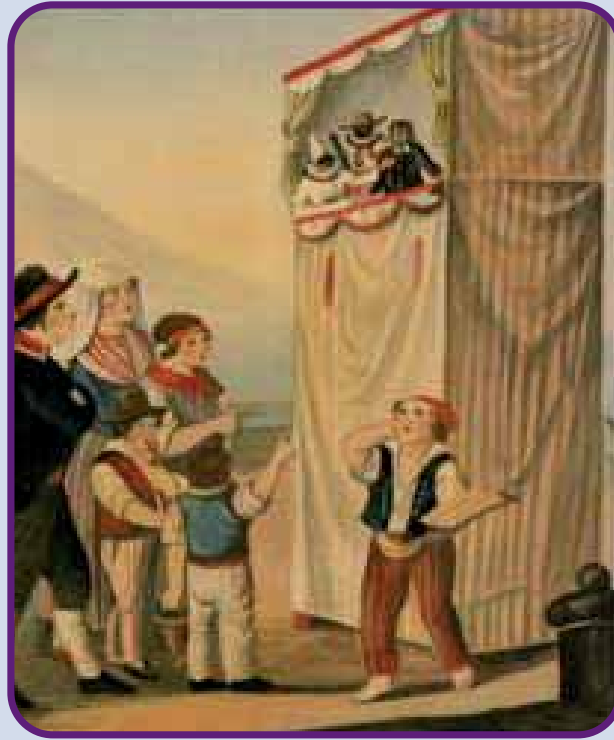




The Commedia dell'Arte



The *Commedia dell'Arte* is a particular form of theatre which began in Italy by the middle of the XVI century. It is also known as *Commedia all'improvviso* (*Extemporary Comedy*) from the particular skill in improvisation of the actors who would invent the dialogue of the whole performance following some kind of rough script containing a summary of the plot and some general information about the nature of each character (sometimes their life story). The origins of this kind of theatre date back to the medieval performances of the *ioculares*, the ancestors of the jesters: these artists were extremely skilful mimics and were able to entertain all types of public as they used to work in squares as well as in noblemen's halls. It is the work of such actors that brought about the character of the *Zanni*, a stock mask which was strongly characterised by improvisation and, thanks to great versatility in gesture, voice and modes which characterised him, could play three or even four roles wearing the same costume. The *Zanni* was invented in the area around Venice, and his name probably derives from a dialectal form of *Giovanni*; he soon became a renowned character as, between the XVI and the XVII centuries, many companies used the same "rough script" of the *Dialogo tra lo Zanni e il Magnifico* (*Dialogue Between Zanni and the Magnificent*), a sort of sketch where a libidinous old man (the Magnificent) orders *Zanni* to go and take a love sonnet to the young lady living across the road, whom he is in love with and who is finally unmasked as a sort of prostitute. When the girl receives it, the sonnet is dirty and oily because *Zanni* has used it to wrap a chicken. The actors of the *Commedia dell'Arte* were associated into professional *fraternal compagnie* (brotherhood companies) – the first to be historically documented was founded in Padova in 1545 – and, like the *Zannis*, worked either in town or village squares or in the halls which were eventually opened to them. The variety of roles and the great number of sketches brought about new characters which gradually developed into stock masks; this tendency also brought about the splitting of the *Zanni* into two types: the original one (a violent porter from Bergamo who is always looking for food and women) was joined by a second one, which turned back to the idea of a joker and good servant. It is easy then to trace a connection between these two characters and the masks of *Brighella* and *Arlecchino* which were based on them.

Harlequin

Harlequin is a porter – sometimes at the harbour – a ruffian, a good servant with simple ways and slow thoughts, always hungry and in trouble. It evolved from the *Zanni*, the comic character of previous comedies, and preserves its directness and its natural tendency to attract trouble. The costume of *Harlequin*, which is widely known as the most colourful among the masks, was at first white and shabby; its multicolour lozenge-pattern smock and pants are in fact the result of a long and continuous application of patches which were intended to cover its many holes. This is the costume he wore as a theatre character during the XVII century. He looks clumsy and stocky; his face is covered with a half-mask, which gives him a savage air, and he wears a white felt hat which is topped with a feather and a rabbit leg symbolizing fertility and intelligence, respectively. The *batòcio* (dialect), or stick used to mix the *polenta*¹, hangs at his belt as his sword.



He also has a peculiar wart on his forehead which is thought to be the remains of a devil's horn: the name Harlequin, in fact, echoes that of Alchino, a devil Dante hints at in the *Divina Commedia*. On the other hand, even when called by his other names (Truffaldino, Zaccagnino, Tabarrino, and so on), Harlequin is always a benign mask, which also correspond to his popular image.

Pantalone

He is one of the earliest masks of the *Commedia dell'Arte*; he comes from Venice and, in fact, represents the merchant class of that city.

Some critics think that his name derives from an ancient saint protector of Venice itself, that is Pantaleone; some other suggest that it may also come from Panta-leone, a merchant of ancient times who used to buy lands in the various Mediterranean ports he visited and to provide each of them with a flag bearing the image of the Lion, the symbol of San Marco and vessel of the Serenissima Republic. Pantaleone is a rich but stingy old man who, despite his age, still has «le voglie à pronte» (dialect:ready for sexual activity).

The colours of his costumes and the features of his face reflect his very nature: Pantaleone wears a tight red vest and breeches, which symbolize fertility, and a black cassock which which means the exact opposite; the lack of fertility is also underlined by the nose of his mask which is bent downward.



Pulcinella



He is one of the most recent masks and was in fact put on stage for the first time in 1609 by Silvio Fiorillo, who in 1632 also transformed it into a fixed character. According to some legends, Pulcinella was born from an egg which had been found on the volcano Vesuvius, which would explain the origin of his name, that is either from the Italian word *pulcino* (baby chicken) or from the Latin *pulcinellus*. As it happens, Pulcinella's voice is reminiscent of the noise hens make because the puppeteers make him talk by using the *pivetta*, which is a thin metal bar that, when correctly positioned near the palate, distorts the voice which becomes like that of... a hen.

Pulcinella is poor and both good and bad at the same time; his complex nature lets each actor interpreting this role chose the characteristics they feel more appropriate to the personality. This fact ensured the success of this mask all over Italy and Europe. His physical features were characterised by the same lack of strict rules: sometimes he may have a hump on his back or in his stomach (or even both), his nose may be either flat or hooked... He wears a white smock, with a belt around the waist, white pants with a belt, a cone shaped hat in white felt, and a black half-mask. The costume is similar to the normal clothes that the countrymen used to wear during the Middle Ages: it is made out of the cheapest cloth, hemp, which used to be woven at home and undyed in order to save money.

Curiosity

N° 15 – Italo Ferrari's Doctor Balanzone: this puppet has a special hole in the mouth which allowed it to smoke and drink. When he drank, the liquid flowed through a pipe and collected in a small balloon which was placed at the belly of the figure so, when the balloon was full, he would have a swollen gut.