

Improvising Commedia dell'Arte Lazzi

Unit(s): Theatre History (Renaissance), Stage Movement (physical jokes)

Purpose: To teach students the theatrical style of commedia dell'arte and, through their improvisations, to reveal the connections between commedia and physical comedy in modern plays and movies; additionally, to sharpen their ability to execute physical jokes onstage

Objective: After reviewing types of lazzi popular in commedia dell'arte scenarios, students will improvise short scenes using at least 2 lazzi.

Materials:

1. Information about commedia dell'arte (eg. from An Introduction to Theatre and Drama by Marshall Cassady and Pat Cassady, 1987, pp.84-85, or The Stage and the School by Harry Schanker and Katharine Ommanney, 1989, pp. 301-303) and lazzi (see attached hand-out).
2. Cardboard gift wrap or paper tubes for use as "slapsticks"
3. Room having a table, chairs (other than desk/chairs), stools, and any other props which could be used in the improvisations*

Optional:

4. Costume pieces and hand props

*Since this is physical comedy, props are especially helpful. Pantomime can be effective, but it's better used by those who have mastered the basics of that specialized type of stage movement.

Procedure:

1. Read and discuss information about commedia dell'arte and lazzi.
2. Ask students to give many modern examples of commedia character types and lazzi from contemporary plays and movies.
3. Divide students into groups of 3 or 4 and ask them to create a short improvisation which uses at least 2 lazzi, preferably from different categories, such as "food" and "acrobatic".
4. Allow students to practice the lazzi.
5. Ask students to perform the improvisation for the class.
6. Videotape the presentations and view them the next day.

Optional extension:

7. Ask groups to create a commedia scene using stock characters in a typical conflict, including at least 3 lazzi and a stock speech by one of the characters.
8. Have the scenes presented to the class, videotaped, and viewed.

Lesson Plan: Theatre History

Unit: Commedia dell'Arte

Topic: Lazzi

Objectives: Describe and perform different types of lazzi

Materials: Lazzi, The Comic Routines of the Commedia dell'Arte, Mel Gordon
(Performing Arts Journal Publications: New York), 1983, 92 pp.
Illustrated (ISBN 0-933826-69-0)

Preparation: Previous lessons on Commedia companies, scenarios, stereotyped characters, and stock speeches.

SET:

Definition - "stage tricks" or "comic stage business," can be "planned or unplanned," any "comic and repeatable activity that guaranteed laughs for its participants."

1. Planned - required props, rehearsals
2. Unplanned - created spontaneously when scene dragged or became boring

1. Describe examples of lazzi

A. Acrobatic and mimic lazzi

1. Based on especially on Arlecchino's physical ability, featuring tumbling, stilt-walking, tightropes, handsprings, etc.

Example: Lazzi of the ladder

- a) Walk it like stilts
- b) Ladder slips against wall
- c) Brighella rattles ladder; Arlecchino sways above

Example: Lazzi of falling

- a) Falling fits while running from danger
- b) Prtfalls over furniture

2. Based on imitating animals or objects

Example: Lazzi of the cat

- a) Hunting for wild birds
- b) Cleaning self
- c) Scratching ear with foot

Example: Lazzi of the statue

"Arlecchino is brought in as a statue or automation. He plays tricks on the other characters . . . always returning to the statue position"

B. Violent Lazzi - victims usually Pantalone, Il Capitano

Example: Lazzi of tooth extractor

“Arlecchino (disguised as dentist) fools Pantalone into thinking that rotten teeth are causing his noxious breath. Using over-sized or ridiculous tools, the Doctor extracts two or more good teeth from Pantalone’s mouth.”

Example: Lazzi of the innocent bystander

Two zanni “meet face-to-face, armed to the teeth. They heap abuse on each other, relying on others to hold them back. . . . Finally, when the Captain seeks to separate them, they strike out at each other with the Captain receiving most of the blows.”

C. Food lazzi - jokes based on ravenous hunger, food messes, cooking mistakes, etc.

Example: Lazzi of the waiter

As a waiter, Arlecchino can play several jokes.

D. Stage props as lazzi - using exploding books, disappearing fruit, moving tables, for example

E. Transformation lazzi - mocking the “transitory nature of human commitments,” possibilities of behavior changes

Example: Lazzi of nightfall

“Using candles and lanterns, the character signified that the scene was taking place at night or in the darkness. . . characters grope around the street, climb ladders into various houses, falling, bumping into objects and people. . . mistaking identities and conversations.”