Moliere And Commedia Dell'arte: past, Present, And Future

Nicole Klass
University of Central Florida

Part of the Theatre and Performance Studies Commons
Find similar works at: https://stars.library.ucf.edu/etd
University of Central Florida Libraries http://library.ucf.edu

This Masters Thesis (Open Access) is brought to you for free and open access by STARS. It has been accepted for inclusion in Electronic Theses and Dissertations, 2004-2019 by an authorized administrator of STARS. For more information, please contact STARS@ucf.edu.

Stars Citation
https://stars.library.ucf.edu/etd/960
MOLIÈRE AND COMMEDIA DELL’ARTE: PAST, PRESENT, AND FUTURE

By

NICOLE S. KLASS
B.A. Florida Atlantic University, 2003

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts
in the Department of Theatre
in the College of Arts and Humanities
at the University of Central Florida
Orlando, Florida

Summer Term
2006
ABSTRACT

This thesis will explore the application of commedia dell’arte technique to a contemporary performance. UCF’s spring 2005 production of Molière’s The Trickeries of Scapin will serve as a resource in both commedia dell’arte’s ability to resonate with a modern audience as well as an analysis of the actor’s process in fusing elements of commedia dell’arte and contemporary acting techniques.

This document will include a thorough description of the history and origins of commedia dell’arte in order to decipher existing elements today. Also included, will be major influences on commedia dell’arte including Greek and Roman Comedy. It is important to discuss Roman comedic playwrights Plautus and Terence as two major influences on both the style of commedia dell’arte as well as major influences on Molière and his writing. A description of both playwrights previously mentioned will be given as means to explore the similarities between the two playwrights and Molière, specifically the similarities of Terence’s Phormio and Molière’s The Trickeries of Scapin.

In addition to exploring the history behind commedia dell’arte and Molière, this thesis will include the rehearsal process of creating a contemporary version of Molière’s Zerbinette. The application of the previous two years of graduate work including studies of Laban, Linklater, and Cicely Berry will be used in creating Zerbinette’s vocal and physical life in a contemporary fashion, while maintaining certain elements of the commedia dell’arte style.

In concluding this thesis, the evolution of commedia dell’arte will be discussed, and how it is in existence today. Just as commedia dell’arte evolved in the seventeenth century from previous art forms, it has never stopped evolving, constantly being influenced by every generation. From Greek Comedy playwrights’ such as MeNander, to Roman comedic playwrights such as Plautus and Terence, to farcical and satirist Molière, commedia dell’arte does exist today, and will be examined throughout this thesis project.
For my mother, father, sister, grandma and grandpa, and the graduate faculty of the University of Central Florida. Thank you for teaching me everything that I know! I love you!
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES ........................................................................................................... vi
CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION ...................................................................................... 1
CHAPTER TWO: *COMMEDIA DELL’ARTE*, MOLIÈRE, AND 21ST CENTURY POPULAR CULTURE ................................................................. 4
CHAPTER THREE: SCAPIN MEETS TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY .................................. 27
CHAPTER FOUR: CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT ........................................................... 44
CHAPTER FIVE: REHEARSAL AND PERFORMANCE JOURNAL ................................. 60
CHAPTER SIX: CONCLUSION ......................................................................................... 85
WORKS CITED ................................................................................................................ 90
LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1: Comparative Images of 2005 Zerbinette’s costume to 1671 Columbine’s costume..... 38
Figure 2: Lessac's Table of Structural Energies................................................................. 54
Figure 3: Lessac's Consonant Orchestra ............................................................................ 55
CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this thesis is to examine the techniques of commedia dell’arte, using Molière’s seventeenth century play, *The Trickeries of Scapin*, and discuss its relevance to a contemporary twenty-first century audience. This thesis will also serve as an exploration of the evolution of commedia dell’arte and its existence in current pop culture. When approaching commedia dell’arte, actors, directors, and scholars are dealing with an oral tradition, not a literary one. For present day performers, there is no handy manual outlining the forms and techniques of the commedia dell’arte style. The people of the culture were illiterate, developing performance techniques that were highly secretive only to be passed in a highly selective process to their siblings and other younger members of their troupes. *Commedia dell’arte* is a process of active research through practice, rather then a literary one. This thesis will start with the origins of commedia dell’arte and trace how and when it came about.

During the sixteenth century in Italy actors took pre-existing folk forms, improvised masking, music, and dance and developed a theatrical genre. Chapter two will focus on these pre-existing forms, specifically that of Greek and Roman Comedy and the influence they had on commedia dell’arte. The fact is, though Roman comedy and its famous playwrights, Plautus and Terence, will be focused on as major influences on commedia, as well as on Molière himself, elements of commedia dell’arte can be traced back before the profession of the “actor” was born. Being that commedia dell’arte stemmed out of improvisation, the genre was originally developed without a conscious sense of culture as a common denominator between performer and spectator (Rudlin 2).

The study of commedia dell’arte would be incomplete without the examination of Molière. In Chapter three I explore Molière’s *The Trickeries of Scapin* which, I contend, serves as a main and necessary example regarding the study of commedia dell’arte. Director of UCF’s 2005
production of the play, Chris Niess, adheres to the belief that one must put into practice the study of commedia, rather then reading about it. Throughout an intense rehearsal process the cast explored the art form, its use of gesture, masks, lazzi and improvisation in its original form transforming the style for today’s audience.

In addition, I will also discuss the process by which I approached commedia dell’arte as an actress, a student, and an observer. I will refer to my graduate studies as the main source in overcoming obstacles, challenges and discoveries made throughout my entire process of developing the role of Zerbinette. As a personal quest, I challenged myself to create the character of Zerbinette relying solely on the techniques learned in the previous two years including that of: Arthur Lessac, Cicily Berry, Laban, and Linklater. Throughout my training, the above established an important foundation for me as an actress that proved to be successful. Before my graduate studies I felt like I was floating through the character building process, and relying on “tricks” and mugging, but never grounding myself in the world of the character to achieve any depth. I would ultimately create the character of Zerbinette from an honest place—balancing research on the origins of the character (Commedia’s Columbine) with practical application achieved through the physical and vocal exploration.

My ultimate goal for this thesis is to examine not only the application of commedia dell’arte technique for a twenty-first century audience, but how and where this art form exists today. One could say the art form in its original state had died centuries ago. I argue that yes, the era of masks, tights, corsets, and balloon pants is long gone in the form of contemporary practice, but commedia dell’arte does in fact exist in today’s entertainment. Masks were a representation of recognizable types of people during that era. Today, one could argue that masks do in fact exist, just not in the literal sense. Today’s tabloids and entertainment news broadcasts exhibit constant images of ‘types’ representing celebrities, politicians, etc. People in the spotlight are automatically boxed into a category and labeled. Consumers buy into that image, and anticipate the actions
associated with each image. Today’s television sitcoms consist of distinct archetypes, and universal situations, exemplifying many of the same communication barriers, conflicts, and antics that were the source of *commedia dell’arte* plays. Using sexually challenging language and physical comedy, *commedia dell’arte* pokes fun at society’s values by means of exaggerated styles and insightful character traits. One could define today’s situational comedies as such. I propose that the stock characters of Arlecchino, Colombina, il Dottore, il Capitano, Pantalone, and Pulchinella can be found in music, visual arts, dance, and theatre as themselves or as inspiration for specific characters. As I further propose in chapter five, *commedia dell’arte* has not died, it is very much alive, it simply has evolved with time.

My hope, then, is that this study will explore the origins of *commedia dell’arte* and the influence it had on Molière. This study will culminate in the conclusion arguing that the contemporary production of *The Trickeries of Scapin* was relevant to a contemporary audience. To do so, I will apply the teachings of Kate Ingram, Chris Niess, Mark Brotherton and Dr. Juilia Listengarten to my performance as Zerbinette to ultimately show how the original art form has evolved into the modern-day American situational comedy.
CHAPTER TWO: *COMMEDIA DELL’ARTE*, MOLIÈRE, AND 21ST CENTURY POPULAR CULTURE

In an attempt to define *commedia dell’arte*’s impact in the late-twentieth and twenty-first centuries, it is important to first define the genre itself as well as trace its development historically. The UCF’s production of Molière’s play, *The Trickeries of Scapin*, serves as practical research when thinking about how to approach *commedia dell’arte* today. Like Molière’s culling and contemporizing of multiple artistic and theatrical genres for his audiences, I suggest that UCF’s production of *Scapin* similarly contemporized *commedia dell’arte* to resonate with its own modern audiences.

Molière’s education at Cleremont and twelve year apprenticeship enabled him to become well versed in the elements of Greek and Roman Comedy and *commedia dell’arte*. In addition to providing theatre-goers a glimpse into his own life and education, Molière’s *The Trickeries of Scapin* exemplifies forms of Greek and Roman comedy that are essential to the *commedia dell’arte* genre. In this chapter I will show how *Commedia dell’arte* has continued to evolve since Molière’s time and is not only relevant today, but is an influential and thriving form of expression within twenty-first century pop-culture entertainment.

**Commedia dell’arte**

In order to clear the ground for the discussion of the origins of *commedia dell’arte*, it is important to identify what the phrase itself means and how to translate it. The following is the term *commedia dell’arte* as defined by David L. Hurst in 1974.

*Commedia dell’arte* means comedy performed by the professionals, those who are recognized as artists. Only artists recognized by the authorities were
classified as *commedia dell’arte* sactors. The word *arte* implied the incorporation of the dramatic arts; it brought together those who were authorized to perform for the counts, dukes, etc. (Rudlin 14).

As discussed above *commedia dell’arte* became an association of professionals. Comedians pledged themselves to mutual protection and respect. By mid sixteenth century, professional actors were in search of a form of theatre which would enable them to band together. In order to understand the significance of *commedia dell’arte*, one can draw comparisons to today’s Equity association. Actors associated with dell’arte would sign a contract offering them internal safeguards such as the ability to call on external protection from local authorities of rival companies appearing on their designated performance area and, for this reason, written permission to perform was often sought in advance by an Italian troupe (Rudlin 14).

The term *commedia dell’arte* was actually never used until the eighteenth century when Carlo Godoni used the term to distinguish Masked and improvised drama from scripted comedy. One can further define *commedia dell’arte* as Italian traditional theatre, represented by professional actors, whose text is not entirely improvised, but rather semi-impromptu. This genre of comedy, developed in Italy in the 16th and 17th centuries, is characterized by its use of improvisation on a standard plot outline and the use of stock characters, often in traditional Masks and costume. Performances took place on temporary stages, mostly on city streets, but occasionally even in court venues. The better troupes performed in palaces and became internationally famous once they traveled abroad. Music, dance, witty dialogue, and all kinds of chicanery contributed to the comic effects. Lacking a formal dramatist, we do not have anything tangible more than some documents, genuine working tools of the troupes, simply intended to indicate the succession of scenes, as well as the outcomes of the situation. These documents, no more than strong synopses, served as the foundation for the definition of *commedia dell’arte*.
In exploring the art form, one should explore three defining elements of the commedia: structure, character, and use of satire.

**STRUCTURE IN COMMEDIA**

The primal energies of *commedia dell’arte* can successfully be released into the nocturnal, darkened rooms we call theatres, but only after their potential has been fully developed in the full light of day (Rudlin 48).

Rudlin believes the only way to learn to play *commedia dell’arte* is to go outside, put on a Mask, stand on a box and give it a try. In defining the structure of commedia, one must understand the importance of not over-rehearsing which is inhibiting to spontaneity. The essence of *commedia dell’arte* consists, basically, of a platform and a scenario.

Scenario, like *commedia dell’arte*, is in fact a term which came into use late in the development of the form; earlier names were canovaccio, centone, soggetto, even *commedia dell’arte* (Rudlin 53). Canovaccio (that which is on canvas) is a word used to mean a short single plot sequence, rather than a three-act structure with sub-plots. The canovaccio is a simple synopsis, a technical indication of scenic content and a list of characters and the action to be accomplished by them (Rudlin 53). There are three distinct themes that might drive a canovaccio: love, money or vengeance, as opposed to a scenario which will often include all three in complications of plot and sub-plot. For instance, Molière’s *The Trickeries of Scapin*, would classify as a scenario: Scapin desires money; the lovers desire…love; and the fathers desire vengeance.

In a full scenario, which consists of three acts (among the hundreds of extant scenarios), there needs to be a proposition, a development, and a solution within each act and within each scene of each act. Within each individual scene, lazzi and improvisation (further discussed in
chapter 4) would enhance the given scenario. A basic *commedia dell’arte* scenario structure for performance would look something like this:

ACT I

*Prologue.* Traditionally having little to do with the actual entertainment, but were stock introductions by one of the characters.

*Exposition* of events so far: an optional scene played out by the characters as background to the story.

*First scene in the present* establishes a simple, uncomplicated normality.

*First complications* introduces and leads to a cliffhanger-ending on a reaction of surprise and despair.

ACT II

*Resume* of first act, possibly as a musical interlude,

*Continuation* is a series of complications, each building on the other, with attempted solutions creating even greater problems, and all with increasing tempo.

ACT III

*Take up all complications so far* and add more

*Another resume*

*Extreme consequences* is when complications are reached: a solution is imminent.

*The solution* is the revelation and unmasking of any disguised characters.

*Finale* is a joyous celebration-forgiveness all around (Rudlin 54).

The structure of Molière’s *Scapin* is similar to that of commedia. The following is a breakdown of Molière’s play, easily following the structure of commedia’s scenario:

ACT I

*Prologue:* Octave expresses his love for Hyacinte.
**Exposition:** Octave explains the history of his father, Hyacinte, Scapin, and his marriage to Hyacinte before the play takes place.

**First complications.** Scapin learns of Octave’s secret marriage, Leandre’s love for Zerbinette, and the lie Geronte has told about him to Leandre. Scapin plans for revenge.

**ACT II**

*Resume* of first act. Geronte and Argante (the two fathers) clarify the rumors of their sons and plan for action.


**ACT III**

*Take up all complications so far and add more.*

*Another resume* (perhaps a monologue): Zerbinette’s monologue recapping the entire first two acts.

*The solution:* The revelation of Zerbinette’s birth parents, the acceptance of Octave and Hyacite’s marriage, the union of Zerbinette and Leandre, and the forgiveness of Scapin.

**Finale:** A joyous celebration culminating in dinner for all at Gernonte’s house.

**CHARACTER IN COMMEDIA**

A physical description of commedia’s leading stock characters can be located later in chapter four. This particular section will focus on the importance of the characters’ Mask and the history behind them.

In commedia dell’arte, personality disappeared to be replaced by type: the personality of the actor is thus overtaken not by an author’s scripted character, but by the persona of the Mask to be played. John Rudin defines the use of Mask by examining the origins of the Latin word *persona:* A Mask is the person, part or character played by an actor as well as the part or character sustained by anyone in the world; it may also be a person who sustains character (Rudlin 34). In
commedia, ‘Mask’ refers to character type and is inclusive of each individual Mask. Italian Masks are among the tipi fissi, ‘fixed character types’, that are able to gain human significance from the context in which they find themselves, but can never be mistaken for the representation of human beings. The use of Mask enhanced an actor’s ability to personify any particular stereotype, never representing a particular individual person. Because the Mask represents a persona and not an actual person with a past, a *commedia dell’arte* plot, therefore, moves forward from its first moment of action, not back into the investigation of past events, and from that point on, one action begets another--but not as a series of psychological consequence.

When a Mask appears onstage, it has no individualized past, only a present presence as a Mask. The Mask remains what it seems and at the end of the play it is returned to its box unaffected by the game which has been played by it. Laughter is dependent on stereotyping objects that are less than human, and objects of amazement represented by the Mask. Each Mask represents a moment in everyone’s (rather than someone’s) life. One might say the Mask was used in a literal sense; masking the individual or situation resulted into a generalization, offering a sense of safety for the audience to laugh at, and with.

**SATIRE IN COMMEDIA**

No one can study the art of *commedia dell’arte* for long without recognizing the use of satire. *Commedia dell’arte* actors would introduce into their performances unmistakable satirical allusion to real-life situations, persons and issues. Commedia’s use of satire is an effort to expose or criticize certain individuals, prevalent beliefs, ideological fashions, topical events or situations. The devices used are mockery, irony, and exaggeration. The tone may vary from light-hearted and cheerful to bitter and cynical, but in order for satire to be effective, its target must be identifiable and familiar to the audience. This implies the author writes primarily for his contemporaries, directing his criticism at the present moment. A satirical text is intended for immediate consumption, and the actors may join in the satirical attack through their style of acting, costumes,
make-up or mime (Erenstein). Because a successful satirical performance relies on the topical nature of current events, satiric plays rarely survive the fleeting era. *Commedia dell’arte* plays still hold up today, not because of its use of satire, but because of the total dramatic impact of the play. This does not dilute the fact that satire is a key element of the *commedia dell’arte* style; it only further proves that the satire used must evolve with time and the topicality of the given society, allowing *commedia dell’arte* to be relevant in any time period.

Satire served as an outlet allowing actors and writers the opportunity to voice their opinions in an extremely dangerous time. The rise and growth of *commedia dell’arte* took place in a country undergoing upheavals and prey to chaos and lawlessness, a country mostly occupied by Spain; after the Council of Trent, the Church of Rome had launched a counter-offensive against the Reformation, and mainly under the support of Jesuits, anyone intent on voicing criticism was forced to do so in a very careful manner (Erenstein).

It is worth mentioning that Molière, besides being a great comic artist was a brilliant satirist. His intention for all that he wrote was to comment on and question society, through his plays and characters, using satire to challenge his audiences. Those dramatists and actors who chose to criticize society and higher authorities risked being arrested, thrown in jail, and in the extreme case, death. Molière was the exception to those who let higher authorities stifle their creativity and outlet for expression. Molière was not in the least concerned about attacking human failings by exposing them in a critical spirit.

**ROMAN COMEDY: HISTORY OF AND INFLUENCES ON COMMEDIA DELL’ARTE**

In this next section Roman comedy will be discussed in order to clearly define the specific elements of Roman comedy that were an important source while the style of *commedia dell’arte* was being developed. I will specifically focus on playwrights Plautus and Terence and
the elements and plot lines of their plays that influenced Moliere so heavily. Roman comedy is not only important in the development of *commedia dell’arte*, but to Molière as well, and the evolution of comedic dramatic structure as we know it today.

Dramatic performances seem to have played little part in the lives of the Romans until the mid third century B.C. It was not until 240 B.C, when Livius Andronicus, a Greek, captured when the Romans took Tarentum (a city with a good theatre and much drama), produced one tragedy and one comedy at the Roman Games. His plays were translations from Greek playwrights, but both seem to have affinities with native south Italian kind of farcical comedy. Thus, Roman comedy grew out of two distinct traditions: the Greek comedy of manners and the south Italian slapstick farce (Harris).

When we speak of Roman Comedy we are usually talking about the work of two comedic playwrights who wrote at the beginning and middle of the second century B.C.: Plautus and Terence. Virtually all of the pieces of literature that survive from this period are the plays of these two men, whose comedies present loose adaptations of original works by Athenian playwrights.

Plautus and Terence adapted what are known as New Comedies. The term New Comedy is used to distinguish the type of comedies composed by playwrights of 4th/3rd century Athens from the Old Comedies of 5th century Athens (represented by the surviving plays of Aristophanes). Aristophanes’ plays are filled with personal attacks against prominent politicians, generals, philosophers, artists, poets, and other well known personalities of the day. In the course of the 4th century, however, Athenian comedy underwent a radical transformation. Comedy turned from the highly confrontational, topical humor of Aristophanes to mythological burlesque and what we today refer to as New Comedy. Menander who was a greek New Comedy dramatist wrote his plays which date from 321 to 292 B.C. These plays show evidence that New Comedy lacked the specific political and social references of Old Comedy translated to Rome. The Romans called these adaptations of Greek comedies *fabulae palliatae*, plays in a Greek cloak
The fabulae palliatae had characters that were essentially Roman. This practice allowed the playwright to turn Roman values upside down without upsetting the audience or undermining the Roman morality. The most common inversion of Roman values in Roman Comedy is the mockery of the father. In real Roman society, the father’s power was legally undisputed. A father had the power of life and death over his family and his household, particularly slaves. In comedy, however, the son with the help of a slave regularly outwits the father and makes a fool of him. In many plays, the slave is the central character who dominates the action. It is impossible not to recognize this typical humor of Roman Comedy, in commedia’s, being that the previous situation is the plot and intention of Molière’s The Trickeries of Scapin.

As I previously stated, I suggest that Plautus and Terence began the process of taking an art form and contemporizing it for their audience. It is important to define the styles of Plautus and Terence in order to have a clear understanding of how the elements of commedia dell’arte evolved. In addition, Molière’s exposure to the Roman playwrights through his education instilled in him the necessary elements that would ultimately be the foundation of his canon.

PLAUTUS

Plautus was esteemed by the Romans as their greatest dramatist (Sandbach). The time of Plautus, which can be traced back as early as the later half of the third century B.C., can be noted as an extremely influential time for comedy. The maturity which comedy attained in a single generation is in remarkable contrast to the slow process by which other literature was developed in Rome. This can be credited to the dialogue of Plautus and his use of musical medleys, allusions to current events, banter, and Latin Dialogue. Like all the Roman comedians, Plautus borrowed his plots, incidents, scenes, and characters from the authors of new Attic Comedy, but much like Molière would later do, he treated his borrowed materials with a sense of originality and freedom that other dramatists were unable to achieve. Plautus often alludes to recent enactments and recent
events in Roman history, making his stories more relevant to the audience at hand. His use of lyrical monologue alternating with modern dialogue, puns, alliteration and play on words, separated Plautus from other dramatists as an original. In Plautus’s comedies, there is a clear picture of Roman life and thought in the age in which he lived. Plautus’s characters were full of life and embodied various types of characteristics animating them with strong human natured qualities. Plautus’s plays embodied dramatic expression of feeling and character by means of physical action, rhythmic dialogue and language, gesture and recitative dialogue all of which much later served as a vehicle for actors in general, commedia dell’arte and playwrights such as Molière.

TERENCE

Terence (Publius Terentius Afer), probably a native of Carthage, was a slave in the family of a Roman patrician. On account of his witty conversation and graceful manners, he became a favorite in the fashionable society of Rome and received his freedom. Terence, like all great writers, was inspired by the works of his predecessors. Specifically known for his translations of Menander’s plays, Terence took the plots of his six plays from the Greek. The comedy of the ancients did not allow characters showing the extremes of heroism, but in Terence all are marked by some redeeming qualities. His works are sedate and refined, presenting a gentle comedy of manners with an emphasis on character and on ethical/social themes. Like Menander, more than half of his lines are composed in spoken meters and there are few songs (Porter). Slapstick--either verbal or physical-- is minimal, presenting an organic plot and relatively realistic situations. Like characters of Menander, Terence’s stock characters are fleshed out. They are confronted with difficult ethical choices whose plights, while humorous, are regarded with a humane sympathy and seriousness.
It is important to mention that Terence was unique in that he broke away from tradition in his use of the prologue. By employing his prologues to address issues that concern him as an artist, Terence left his characters to introduce the necessary background to his plot. Terence’s prologues provide the audience with interesting glimpses into the professional life of a comic playwright in mid-second century Rome (Porter).

Terence’s six remaining plays (dated in the years 166-160) place Terence approximately a generation after Plautus. The two are associated together, but differ in language, style, and character. The two have often been compared, as each one seems to lack in what the other embodies. In an article from *The Minute History of Drama*, Alice Fort breaks down the two in a simple contrast:

The weakness of Terence lies in his lack of the bolder elements of action. His characters are somewhat deficient in variety, and his situations are inferior to those of Plautus. He is superior to Plautus in refinement and taste, but never equal to him in exuberance of spirits and in comic force. Comparatively speaking, Plautus was the untutored genius, Terence the conscious artist; Plautus the practical playwright, Terence the elegant literary craftsman. Plautus wrote for the crowd, Terence for the aristocracy. Even with the equivocal subjects of the new comedy, Terence did not make vice attractive. As with Plautus, when once the irregular situation is granted, the plays are found to be full of moral sentiments and advice of a prudent and wise nature (Fort).

The two are clearly different in structure, but offer us an example of how playwrights can take elements from their previous predecessors, interpret them for their own, and continue the growth and the evolution of an ever changing art form.

**INFLUENCE OF TERENCE ON MOLIÈRE’S WRITING**

At times, Molière follows Terence in presenting an action which is tied to the mechanical unfolding of a plot full of surprises. Molière’s *The Trickeries of Scapin* is traceable directly to the
world of Terence. The fathers and sons in Molière’s play have the same comic functions as those of Terence: the fathers are there to be deceived, outwitted, cajoled and appeased, while their love-struck sons, given to sudden bursts of despair, soon yield to surges of new hope, as their slaves think up new strategies to save them and their mistresses from all manner of catastrophes (Calder).

In reviewing the basic plot of Terence’s *Phormio*, the influence of Terence on Molière becomes obvious: The slave Geta (Molière’s Sylvester) explains that Phaedria (Leandre), the son of Chremes (Argante), has fallen in love with a flute girl (Zerbinette) and needs 3,000 drachmas to buy her, because the pimp is about to sell her. While Demipho (Argante) is away, his son Antipho (Octave) was able to marry a young woman Phanium (Hyacinte) having no dowry, because the trickster Phormio (Scapin) forced him to do so in a legal case as the closest relative of an orphan. When Demipho (Argante) returns, he tries to end his son’s marriage by paying Phormio (Scapin) 3,000 to marry Phanium (Hyacinte), Phormio (Scapin) getting the money for Phaedria (Leandre). When Chremes (Argante) learns that Phanium is his daughter by a second wife he had in Lemnos, he and Demipho try to keep it a secret; but Geta overhears them, enabling Phormio to blackmail Chremes, she concludes that if her husband had two wives surely their son can have a mistress; she happily invites Phormio for dinner (www.san.beck.org).

Though certain situations are fused, *The Trickeries of Scapin* follows this plot outline almost to the point of imitation. Molière did, however, create his characters to represent his own society; Zerbinette is a traveling gypsy, the fathers are money hungry merchants, etc. Basically, the only difference between the two plays is that their topicality is specifically associated with each of the playwrights’ society.

**YOUNG MOLIÈRE: BOYHOOD AND EDUCATION**

Jean-Baptiste Poquelin was baptized on January 15th 1622. Molière is the stage name he adopted twenty-one years later, when he first began to act. He was the eldest son of Jean Poquelin,
a bourgeois craftsman who nine years after his son’s birth became the official upholsterer by the royal appointment to the king, an office that Molière would himself pursue by inheritance for several years before renouncing it. As a boy, it is said, Jean displayed a surprising turn for mimicry, spending a good many of days marveling at the troupes of foreign and local players who performed on the streets, near the bridges, and all the makeshift theatres of Paris. He reproduced, with accuracy and humor, the peculiarities of servants, costumers in the shop, the priests, and worshippers of the church, to which his mother led him every Sunday for mass (Bates 120).

Madame Poquelin, though proud of her intelligent son, did not advocate such amusements of mockery, especially those that were indulged in at the expense of the clergy. Young Molière was too accurate in his imitations for his own good. It was clear that if he was to become a respectable citizen, he should have been kept away from the theatre. Much to the dislike of his parents, Molière’s maternal grandfather frequently carried him off to see Bellerose and the trios farceurs at the Hotel de Bourgogne. Before long, theatre was on Molière’s brain, but his father, aspiring bourgeois that he was, made sure his son received ample formal schooling at one of the best educational institutions in the city, the Jesuit College of Clermont.

At the age of fourteen, after losing his mother, Jean was sent as a day-boarder to the college of Clermont. Jean’s fellow students at Clermont included such aristocratic scions as Armand de Bourbon, prince de Conti, a cousin of the future Louis XIV and future patron of Molière’s theatrical troupe. The curriculum at Clermont was rigorous, emphasizing Greek and Latin. According to biographical information, young Molière made rapid progress in humanities and rhetoric, and took special delight in his readings of classical Roman comedy (Bates 120). It is important to note Molière’s education was not confined to what he learned at the college. Chapelle, a fellow classmate of young Poquelin, entered an independent course of Philosophy under the great materialist philosopher Pierre Gassendi, and Molière, along with other classmates, Bernier and Hesnault joined him. As legend goes, it is said that 17th century French dramatist
Cyrano de Bergerac may have also attended the course, but that question is still debated (Seidel 102).

After his studies at Clermont, it is believed Molière devoted himself to law studies, a career it soon became clear he would not pursue. There is little known as to what Molière was doing in the early 1640’s; but he must have had some certainty that his father’s office of royal upholstery provided him with the credentials to travel to Narbonne in 1642 as a member of the entourage of Louis XIII. On his travels, he met actress Madeleine Bejart with whom he carried on an affair through 1643. Molière became acquainted with Madeleine’s entire family of roving players, and at the age of twenty-one, officially quit his position as valet de chamber tapissier, received a 630-livre inheritance due to him from the time of his mother’s death, and joined the Bejarts in a theatrical venture called The Illustrious Theatre (Seidel 102).

**MOLIÈRE: PROFESSIONAL LIFE**

Molière’s company, The Illustrious Theatre initially played in a racket court supported by trestles in the quartier de Saint Paul. These performances were well attended, perhaps for the reason of free admission. The amateurs, attributing their success to what they thought was their own brilliant talent, removed their theatre to Mestayers’ Tennis-Court on the left bank of the Seine, just outside the walls of Paris. In defiance of the privileges of the comedians by profession, they charged a small fee for admission. The company struggled for two years, playing tragedies and comedies to audiences so small that in 1645 the enterprise collapsed under the weight of increasing debts and decreasing ticket sales (Seidel 102). Molière was arrested for bankruptcy, had bail posted to give him time to straighten out his affairs, and left Paris with Madeleine Bejart early in 1646.

Molière’s previous failure did not stop the young player from continuing on his journey from becoming a successful playwright, actor, and director. His desire for the art became a passion, giving way to an overwhelming impulse; he took the inheritance from his mother and
determined to go into the country with the Bejarts as a strolling player. It is during this time he exchanged the name of Poquelin for that of Molière. It is uncertain the intention of this; in order to diminish his families annoyance, or to leave the failure of his The Illustrious Theatre behind him.

The next twelve years of Molière’s life would prove to be the most educational, influential, and successful time for Molière and his career. The following section will discuss Molière’s exposure to Roman Comedy, Terence and Plautus, commedia dell’arte and Scaramouche, which became a major source of influence on Molière’s writing.

**MAJOR INFLUENCES ON MOLIÈRE**

Molière’s life as an actor in the provinces was a twelve year apprenticeship in several crafts: acting, writing, and staging. Whatever knowledge of classical comedy he possessed from his years at Clermont was reinforced by a practical experience with rhythmically paced and riotously staged Italian farces that made up so much of the repertoire of his strolling company. Molière’s observations of the farceurs and the successes of commedia dell’arte comedians, reminded Molière of his education of Roman Comedy. Elements of Roman Comedy and its major playwrights-- Plautus and Terence-- would serve as a major source for Molière’s plays.

**MOLIÈRE AND ROMAN COMEDY**

Molière’s plots fall broadly within the conventions of Roman Comedy; he most often portrays young lovers overcoming a series of obstacles and then, with the help of timely providential intervention, marrying happily at the end of the play. Knowing that Molière knew the theatrical writings of Roman Comedy, one would gather he was familiar with its practice in the plays of Plautus and Terence. We can find evidence of this in his plays *L’Avare* and *Amphitruon*, which are adaptations of Plautus’s *Aulularia* and *Amphiloyon*, while *L’Ecole des maris* and *Les Fourberies de Scapin* are adaptations of Terence’s *Adelphi* and *Phormio*. 
Characters in New comedy have only general characteristics. Molière’s characters have both universal and particular characteristics: they represent both timeless human types and types belonging to his own age (Calder). In this case, Molière departs from the traditions of New comedy and reintroduces an element of Old Comedy, the practice of mocking recognizable contemporary figures. In plays such as *L’Ecole des femmes* and *Le Misanthrope*, the balance between the universal and the particular is even; Arnolphe and Alceste could easily be real individuals, who might turn up in the audiences’ own circles (Calder). In *Les Femmes savants*, the character Philaminte represents the satirical element, mocking a kind of pretentious and empty learning, particularly widespread among the women of seventeenth century. Molière’s women, his religious hypocrite Tartuffe, and the lawless aristocrat Don Juan are all very pointed satirical portraits taken from Molière’s own time; all of them share the usual timeless faults of vanity, hypocrisy and dishonesty, but it is the particular seventeenth century characteristics these vices take which provide the basis for the comedy and create, for each of them a strong individual character.

*MOLIÈRE’S EXPOSURE TO COMMEDIA DELL’ARTE*

In what would be the most important education of his life, Molière and his troupe traveled the provinces for twelve years, giving themselves the best apprenticeship money could buy. Forced to fend for themselves, Molière and his troupe dived into a world of acting, writing, and staging. All of the formal education Molière had gained from Clermont; and whatever knowledge he had of classical comedy was now transformed into a more practical experience. While observing the successes of others, Molière began to rebuild his company through imitation, trying to find his place as an actor, writer, and director. The company’s repertoire soon was filled with Italian farces, much like the ones he was exposed to in the streets.

Molière’s works are saturated with farce, as this old art form evolved and began to regain momentum among Italian actors. His travels and experiences put this ancient form that he had
studied and read about in books into life form. Common sense began to tell him that the style reached the audience. This light, comedic theatrical genre developed characters and events that were greatly exaggerated to enhance broad, absurd humor in which the audience found great pleasure. He then used the structure of farce that included a run of stock characters (masters, servants, fools, braggarts, cuckold, mistresses, young wives) and an array of characteristic plots (deceiving schemes, mistaken identities, double crosses, domestic betrayals—the usual comic imbroglios). If not all, then most of these qualities are found in Molière’s works, only to prove the significance of his twelve year apprenticeship. Early examples of farce can be found in the comedies of Aristophanes, Plautus, and Terence. During the fifteenth century, farce became its own genre, originating in France, with such plays as *La farce de Maitre Pierre Pathelin* dating all the way back to 1470 (www.bartleby.com). Instances of farcical elements, such as broad, ribald humor, physical gesture, and absurd situations will later be the heart of *commedia dell’arte*, and the core of Molière’s plays.

In 1653 Molière’s troupe had there first success when he and the Bejarts performed at the provincial court of the prince de Conti at Languedoc, Molière’s former classmate. The prince was a patron of the troupe until 1656, when he turned to Jansenism and abandoned his interest in theatre. We would later see the affect that Jansenism had on Molière later on in one of his most controversial plays, *Tartuffe*. During his time with the prince, Molière began to develop and expand the farces of his work. His works, *The Blunderer* and the *Love Tiff*, are said to be his earliest works produced during this time.

*HOTEL PETIT*

Molière was about to embark on his most significant performance that would change his writings and his troupe’s future success. After establishing themselves enough to have a humble following, they, while seeking patronage, were noticed by the duc d’Orleans. In 1658, Molière got the opportunity to perform Pierre Corneille’s *Nicomedes* for Louis XIV at the Louvre.
The opportunity to perform in front of ‘the greatest King in the world’ would be the most important performance of Molière’s life. His troupe was now awarded permission to perform in a theatre that housed the King’s favorite actors since his early childhood; but more importantly for Molière’s sake, this royal theatre was home to Italian actors who were known as masters of improvised comedy. Molière would now be exposed first hand to the techniques and secrets of Tiberio Fiorilli, the leader and Scaramouche of the Italian Company, Molière was later alleged to have stolen all of Fiorilli’s secrets for his own use. In the following picture of the satire *Elomire hypocondre*, Elomire (Molière), is seen with mirror in hand being coached by Fiorilli, whip in hand (McCarthy, see figure 1).

Molière’s players alternated at the Petit for a year with the Masters of Improvisation. They were granted Wednesday, Thursday and Saturday—the days the Italians did not perform. During his time spent at the Petit, Molière fined-tuned his early farces including that of *Les Precieuses ridicules*, his first farce that he was obliged to publish. As it is evident in his early works *L’Amour Medicine* and *Le Cocu imaginaire*, Molière had begun to borrow from the Italian actors and *commedia dell’arte* with his characters such as Mascarille and Sganareele. In his later plays, Molière would take from *commedia dell’arte* its ability to build immediacy and invention, reinforcing the action between actor and audience. He would then combine that with his texts supporting a more distinctive but still physically charged style of acting, responsive to the actor’s unfolding experience in the play. After great success with his *Les precieuses ridicules*, the Hotel du Petit Bourbon was torn town, and in 1661 Molière and his troupe were given the privilege of transferring to the renovated theatre at the Palais Royal. Over the next few years, Molière threw himself into the world of comedy and the Italian actors that surrounded him.

*COMMEDIA DELL’ARTE IN 21ST CENTURY*
One does not have to search far when looking for evidence of *commedia dell’arte* in today’s pop culture. Simply turn on the television, and one might notice the evolution of *commedia dell’arte* is present in today’s situational comedies, political talk shows, and variety sketch comedy shows. Previously in this chapter, *commedia dell’arte* has been broken down into three defining elements-- improvisation, character, and satire. One could argue that each one of these elements is present in contemporary American pop culture: improvisation in ‘Saturday Night Live’; Stock characters such as ‘Joey’ in ‘Friends’, ‘Kramer’ in ‘Seinfeld’; Satire in such controversial shows as ‘Will and Grace’ and ‘The Late Show’ with David Letterman. Each one of these examples is inclusive but not limited to the one specific element. The following will discuss the existence of *commedia dell’arte* elements in ‘Saturday Night Live’ and ‘Will and Grace’.

*LIVE FROM NEW YORK, IT’S COMMEDIA DELL’ARTE!*

‘Saturday Night Live’ (SNL) is a weekly late-night 90-minute comedy-variety show from NBC which has been broadcast nearly every Saturday night since its debut on October 11, 1975. Each week, the show’s cast is joined by a guest host and a musical act. ‘SNL’ may be acknowledged as today’s version of *commedia dell’arte*. Its structure which culminates in a live performance resembles that of the improvisational structure that produced the plays of *commedia dell’arte* time. The two main differences in comparison are as follows: ‘SNL’ is supported by a team of writers, *commedia dell’arte* had no dramatist; ‘SNL’ uses improvisation to culminate in a series of skits, *commedia dell’arte* used improvisation culminating in a full length play. ‘SNL’s’ improvisational structure, recurring stock characters, and satirical commentary on today’s society are the elements of our modern day *commedia dell’arte*.

SNL is satire in art form. On the surface, it is slapstick or abstract. The show’s content is heavily influenced by US current events, and has the ability to leave international viewers cold, rightfully so. Similarly, *commedia dell’arte* troupes would engulf their repertoire with political on goings in their surrounding society, portraying societies’ opinions, disregarding offense from those
they were satirizing. The only difference was that *commedia dell’arte* troupes had the ability to travel from one city to the next, offending only groups of people at a time.

FORMAT OF THE SHOW

The show usually follows a standard format, resembling that of a modern day version of commedia’s scenario previously discussed. SNL opens with a cold opening sketch often parodying politics, pop culture, or other current events followed by an opening monologue by the guest host. One can compare this to the prologue of commedia’s scenario which has little to do with the actual entertainment, with the exception of containing stock introductions by one of the characters. Like commedia’s prologue, the opening monologue of SNL sets the atmosphere and possibly the theme of the piece.

The show continues with more comedy skits, including sketches that might feature recurring characters (Masks), running gags (lazzi), celebrity impersonations, movie and TV spoofs, and skits parodying the news issues of the day (satire). This is followed by a performance by the guest musical act (musical interlude). The news parody segment, ‘Weekend Update’, marks the show’s midway point (Act II). The second half of the show continues with more sketches (continuation of a series of complications), and in most cases a second performance by the musical guest (musical interlude leading into Act III). The last segment of the program resumes with feature filmed segments, often featuring cast members culminating in the finale of the program, or ‘good-bye’ segment (Finale). Though generations apart, the structure of both SNL and *commedia dell’arte* shares a basic formula. Perhaps, if SNL incorporates a through line in all of their skits, the only difference between the two would be modern topicality.

PRODUCTION PROCESS

When researching the structure of SNL, I came across a detailed format for the week long process it takes to produce the show every Saturday Night. This is extremely interesting when looking at the loosely structured format they chose to work with. This reiterates that the actors
basically do not know what skits they will be performing up until the final minute. The following is a summary of the process used to produce the show. It is based in part on an August 2000 *Writer’s Digest* article and an April 2004 *Fresh Air* interview with writer and performer Tina Fey:

- **Monday**: The day begins with a topical meeting, identifying the biggest story for the show's opening. This is followed by a free-form pitch meeting with Lorne Michaels and the show's host for the week. According to an October 2004 *60 Minutes* segment on the show, throughout the week the host has a lot of influence on choices of sketches to be aired. Following the meeting, writers begin to draft the two scripts each must produce.

- **Tuesday**: Starting in the afternoon, anywhere from 30 to 45 scripts are written, which is significantly more than will make it to air. Most writers work through the night. Once a writer's scripts are complete, he or she will often help other writers on their scripts.

- **Wednesday**: All scripts get a read-through. After the read-through, the head writer(s) and the producers meet with the host to decide which sketches to work on for the rest of the week, with Lorne Michaels and the host having the final say.

- **Thursday**: The surviving sketches are reviewed, word-by-word, by the writing staff as a whole (or in two groups in the case of co-head writers). Some sketches which survived the cut because of their premise but otherwise needed a lot of work are rewritten completely. Others are changed in smaller ways. Thursday is also the day that *Weekend Update* starts coming together, starting with the news items written by writers dedicated all week to the segment. This is also the first day the crew comes in for rehearsal. The music act is rehearsed as well as some of the larger, more important sketches.

- **Friday**: The show is blocked. The writer of each sketch acts as producer, working with the show's set designers and costumers.
Saturday: With the show still far from finalized, the day begins with a run-through, with props, in front of Lorne Michaels. After the run-through, the cast and crew find out which of the sketches are in the dress rehearsal, and which are cut. The writer/producer deals with any changes. This is followed by an 8 p.m. dress rehearsal in front of a live audience, which lasts until 10 p.m. or sometimes later, and which contains around twenty minutes of material which will not make it to the broadcast. Lorne Michaels uses first-hand observation of the audience reaction to the rehearsal, and input from the host, to determine the final round of changes, re-ordering sketches as necessary. The show then begins at 11:35 p.m.

Though commedia dell’arte troupes did not have a writing team, they did have a basic skeleton of a script that they would improvise with. Because their stock characters were ‘set’ and audiences expected to see certain characteristics and antics from them, plays often would derive simply from the characters, their given characteristics, and their reactions to social and political ongoings of that time. SNL’s process does not stray too far from this in that the writing team of SNL relies heavily on skits featuring specific recurring characters as well as the antics today’s audience anticipates from them.

‘WILL AND GRACE’ CHALLENGING SOCIETY

When ‘Will and Grace’ premiered on NBC September 21, 1998, society was forced to acknowledge its challenge on society. A situational comedy, based on two central characters, ‘Will’ and ‘Grace’, this comedy continues to confront society’s stereotypical generalization of homosexuality, creating their own society in which ‘gay’ is normal and ‘straight’ is abnormal. In a society that continuously presents a stereotype of homosexuality, and that does not allow the union of marriage amongst homosexuals, ‘Will and Grace’ challenges society’s political and social views through its use of exaggerated character types and outlandish situations.
Like commedia, “Will and Grace” confronts society by the exaggeration of character. The character ‘Jack’ is perhaps the stereotypical image of a ‘gay’ persona, as perceived by most heterosexual people, particularly heterosexual men. Because Jack’s character is so extreme, it allows audiences to laugh with him, at him, and perhaps even at themselves. One might even compare ‘Jack’s’ character to commedia’s zanni recognizing such characteristics as dynamic and exaggerated movement, the head constantly moving independent of the body, and quick thinking.

For the past eight years, Jack’s character has satirized the opinion of society, bringing what was once a taboo topic to talk about into homes all over the world. Eight years later, the use of comedy, satire, and exaggerated characters found perhaps a blueprint for establishing a foundation for future acceptance. Either way, ‘Will and Grace’ has had people talking for eight years, opening up discussion in a light-hearted, non-threatening way. In writing The Trickeries of Scapin, Molière had the same intention of creating what seemed to be a light-hearted comedy which would appear to be froth, yet give him the opportunity to get even with his opponents, whose narrow-mindedness and bigotry he would personify in his characters. One might conclude, the writers and actors of ‘Will and Grace’ shared with Molière this same intention.
CHAPTER THREE: SCAPIN MEETS TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

In the spring of 2005, the University of Central Florida mounted Molière’s *The Trickeries of Scapin* at the Orlando Repertory Theatre. Our mission, as a cast, would be to adhere to director Chris Niess’s vision in the application of *commedia dell’arte* technique to contemporary performance. We would attempt this through a short yet thorough rehearsal process combining *commedia dell’arte* elements such as gesture, lazzi, Masks, universality, and improvisation with contemporary elements incorporated in set design, costumes, and a carefully designed pre-show. The focus of this chapter will be the four week process of contemporizing Molière’s *The Trickeries of Scapin* while keeping Molière’s intentions intact.

**Seventeenth Century Scapin**

As discussed in the previous chapter, Molière was heavily influenced by *Commedia dell’arte*. The application of his influence is noticeable in *The Trickeries of Scapin*. Molière used specific *commedia dell’arte* elements such as stock characters, Masks, universality, and improvisation in combination with contemporary (17th century) political and social issues, in attempt to connect with his modern audience. In the original production of *The Trickeries of Scapin*, plot, characters, and setting represent not only his originality of creating distinct characters demonstrating basic human condition, but also his ability to take a timeless art such as *commedia dell’arte* and make it resonate with his audience. When talking about Molière’s application of *commedia dell’arte*, it is worth mentioning the unconditional support of King Louis XIV. Having such support from the King, Molière was able to question society through his use of comedy, particularly *commedia dell’arte*. 
Molière basked in the creative freedom he was given, due heavily to the support of the King. One might say King Louis XIV was Molière’s biggest fan. In the preceding chapter, Scaramouche was mentioned to be a great influence on Molière’s writing and use of commedia. Ironically, the King’s love for the theatre and arts in general was inspired by the same man that held so much influence on Molière—Scaramouche. Louis XIV was just a baby when Scaramouche was invited to perform for the future king, and thus began his infatuation for theatre, arts, and commedia dell’arte actors. The King paved the way for future growth and acceptance not only of commedia dell’arte but all cultural activities during this French civilization. Molière used the support from the King to his advantage, specifically at the end of his career in The Trickeries of Scapin, pushing the boundaries of art imitating life as he brought life as he saw it to the stage.

In the Trickeries of Scapin, Molière intended to look at society around him, exaggerate it, and put it on stage. His intentions in writing the play will be discussed later in the chapter, but for now it is important to have a clear understanding of the original story and the characters he created: Two young men, Octave and Leandre, secretly fall in love with two women, Hyacinthe and Zerbinette, while their fathers were away. Octave meets Hyacinthe as she is sobbing over her dead mother’s body, immediately falls in love and gets married. Leandre meets Zerbinette at a gypsy camp where she grew up after being stolen from her biological parents. Upon the fathers’ unexpected return, the sons beg Scapin, Leandre’s servant and a consummate con artist, to help them. His efforts scramble the situation into a worse mess. In the meantime, the sons need money for the dowry to ransom Zerbinette from the gypsies. In a hilariously funny series of events, Scapin manages to get the money from the fathers and then gets revenge on Geronte, Leandre’s father, for telling a lie about Scapin to Leandre. After a series of revelations, Geronte reveals that Hyacithe is his daughter from a secret second marriage, and Argante (Octave’s father) recognizes Zerbinette as his long lost daughter (who was stolen by gypsies). As the lovers are reunited,
Scapin is wheeled in on his death bed. He manipulates Geronte into forgiving him and is miraculously healed.

The play premiered at the Palais-Royal on May 24th, 1671. Molière played the title role (Scapin) at the age of forty-nine nearing the end of his career and his health. Speculations of why Molière chose to play the part of a youth, requiring such vigor and energy can be summed up as the following: Molière created the part of Scapin for himself in order to show his prowess as a performer before saying farewell to what he valued most—his art and life itself.

**Twenty-First Century Scapin**

When talking about bringing Molière’s *The Trickeries of Scapin* to a modern day audience, it is worth mentioning previous attempts at applying the technique of *commedia dell’arte* to the twenty-first century. In a recent interview, Chirs Niess, director of UCF’s production states, “Many companies attempt to recreate commedia, bringing it to a modern day audience, and it ultimately fails…it just doesn’t land (Niess)”. I found evidence in this in two recent productions of *The Trickeries of Scapin*, one from a Boston company, the other from The University of Nevada. According to published reviews, ultimately, in both attempts, they lack the history and the knowledge of *commedia dell’arte* needed to support such a historic art form in order to modernize it.

Sandy McDonald, reviewer of the Chicago based company writes, “Despite feeble stabs at topicality [mad cow disease], this rendition of *Scapin*—transposed to Texas—is incohesive and has no cutting edge. Instead of evoking *commedia dell’arte*, it seems to trace its antecedents only as far back as Vaudeville (www.theatremania.com)”. McDonald makes it clear the company did indeed attempt to re-create the style of *commedia dell’arte* in a more contemporary way, replacing old fashion *commedia dell’arte* masks with plain old fake noses. The Chicago based company incorporated Molière’s use of Music, representing an important element of *Commedia*
dell’arte, modernizing their Scapin into full fledge musical comedy with characters such as Zerbinette singing songs like “Fools and Their Money”. McDonald also mentioned the company’s attempt in using lazzi, pre-determined stage business, but it ultimately failed in trying to modernize it. With stage business such as changing the character’s name Hyacinte to Hyacinthia for the sole purpose of an ongoing joke, “Hiya Cynthia!”, McDonald notes, “Had Molière merely dabbled in over obvious hijinks, his work would have long since been forgotten and therefore not subject to clumsy, flash-in-the-pan adaptations (www.theatremania.com)”. 

In another recent attempt to modernize The Trickeries of Scapin, The University of Nevada director, Doug Mishler, took the liberty of setting his Scapin in the 1970s. The question is, was this merely done for entertainment purposes, or was the company trying to stretch the limits of time, and universality? Molière was successful in that he wrote a play using the elements of commedia dell’arte and applying them to his specific time period and more importantly, to his specific audience. Mishler perhaps put a twist on this idea, assuming that the majority of his Las Vegas audience would have experienced the 1970s and would be able to associate Molière’s words with memories of that time period. In another attempt in using the element of music, the show’s setting is clear beginning with the song “Staying Alive” by the Bee Gees. The characters wore silk suits, gold chains, and hair styles reminiscent of the 70s. Though the company played with the element of time, reviewer Amber Brookshire mentions that Mishler plays dangerously with Molière’s intent, stating, “Molière created a smart humored script that has relevance to his society. Though highly exaggerated, the characters in Scapin were meant to represent the human qualities of the observer.” Brookshire goes on to state, “In this version of Scapin the production seems more to be poking fun and satirizing the many clichés included in a commedia dell’arte style (www.nevadasagebrush.com)”. According to the review, it seems as though the company was unsuccessful in its attempt to apply the technique of commedia dell’arte to today’s audience ignoring elements such as masks, costumes, and set design. By updating the original setting to the
70s, commedia’s most important element, stock characters, got overlooked by stereotypes of the 70s such as hippies, flower girls, and bell bottoms. The original intention of commedia’s stock characters was to represent universal characteristics of human condition, as well as specific features pertinent to its respective society. This production ultimately failed in its attempt to apply commedia dell’arte to a modern day society, simply in its disregard for Molière’s original intention of “mental giantism masquerading as servile humility (www.theatremania.com)”, which is ultimately the intention of the play.

Rehearsal Process

In an attempt to successfully apply the technique of commedia dell’arte to contemporary performance, UCF director Chris Niess had one ultimate vision, broken down into three layers: to embrace the true style of commedia, to support the original intention of Molière, and to tackle the play in a contemporary fashion. The following is an analysis of director Chris Niess, his vision, and the four week rehearsal process culminating in UCF’s 2005 production of Molière’s The Trickeries of Scapin.

Recently I sat down with Chris Niess in an interview to find out what specifically constituted his ultimate vision for the performance. Since Chris has been my movement professor in course work such as mask work, clowning, and stage combat, it was important for me to learn about his background in relation to the commedia dell’arte style. Niess was first exposed to commedia dell’arte as a student at Kentucky State University under Chuck Richey. I was particularly interested in finding out his thoughts on the existence of commedia dell’arte today, and examples of characters he would constitute as stock characters in today’s pop culture. In a split second Chris mentioned one name: Lucille Ball. Ball was an icon comedian representative of the twentieth century. In Ball’s sitcom, “I Love Lucy”, Niess states, “Her character would be characterized as the silly servant” (Niess). One can compare Ball’s character to that of Scapin in
that she continually conjured up ways to manipulate Ricky, her husband on and off screen, into getting what she wanted. Though exaggerated, Ball created a stock character representative of housewives in her society. Her physicality, wild gestures, and vocal qualities such as her famous cry (to get what she wanted) became recognizable trademarks to her audience, mirroring the qualities of a stock character and the gesture, mask, and costume anticipated by its audience. Chris states, “Her comedic timing comes down to a rhythm. Lucille Ball lives in physical comedy, a style that consistently is able to reach an audience” (Niess). Physical comedy, I would later learn, would be the foundation of Niess’s direction. “I chose to direct Scapin because I wanted to direct a physically based show, translating it to a contemporary audience. As ballet speaks to a certain audience, Molière uses physicalization to speak to his. The audience finds the familiar funny. The ‘surfer dude’ or ‘valley girl’ resonates” (Niess). Mastering the physicalization element would be the first step in the process of Niess’s attempt to fully embrace the true art form of commedia.

“We must have a historically correct understanding of the elements of commedia dell’arte first and foremost before we can even begin to take liberty modernizing them. It was very important to me to have the actors understand a sense of what the traditional physical style is” (Niess). The first week of rehearsal was an intense workshop emphasizing the history and physicality of commedia dell’arte. One week before our initial read-through we were to learn the history behind our individual stock character applying gesture and movement associated with the proper status and class of the character. In what seemed more like a dance class, Chris broke down the physicality into a pattern of beats. All of us were to explore the stance, walk, movement, and gesture of all major stock characters.

Starting with the bottom of the pecking order we explored the Zanni. One of the most sympathetic characters, the zanni character reacts emotionally and has no self-awareness. We first focused on his stance. Zanni stands with an arched back, knees bent apart and his feet splayed. The support knee is bent with the other leg extended and toe pointed. He changes feet repeatedly while
talking or listening within the same position and without his head bobbing up and down. The elbows are bent and the arms are half lifted (Rudlin 69). In two counts of eight, we were to explore the stance on each beat, exploring the different possibilities of body placement. A Zanni’s gesture consists of an urgent quality. His head moves a lot while his hands do the talking for him. Again, in two counts of eight we were to take the stance, adding a specific gesture on each specific beat. At the clap of a hand we struck sixteen specific poses.

After exploring the bottom of the pecking order, we moved on to the lovers. The lovers were high in status, but brought low by the hopelessness of their infatuation. Hyacinthe, Octave, Leandre, and elements of my character, Zerbinette, would fall into this category. The lovers’ stance lack firm contact with the earth as their feet rest in ballet positions, creating an inverted cone. Leading with the chest and heart heavy, they are full of breath. Sometimes, when situations become too much for them, they deflate. Chris had us explore the lovers’ stance by connecting the physical to the emotional. At Chris’s command we would use breath to indicate emotion. For instance to indicate a happy emotion we would place our chest out, chin up, with our arms out and be full of breath. To show that we are sad our bodies would be deflated of breath, our arms down, and chest caved in. On each specific beat we explored the extremes of one emotion to the other through the specific gestures previously mentioned.

At the top of the pecking order are the old men such as Pantolone, who signify money, control and power. The stock character Pantolone represents the fathers in Scapin, dictating to his children and controlling the social structure and future of their lives. The father character walks at only one pace: whatever his feet do, his legs cannot go any faster, whatever the motive or stimulus. Physical gestures of the old men are old in body, keeping the head, feet, and hands active. The hands flutter continuously, emphasizing each thought as it comes into his head. At times, the father character would attempt to stop the overuse of hands by holding them behind his back or underneath his cloak. After repeating the same pattern of exploration as the other
characters, Chris had us change the gesture and stance from character to character in the same count of eight. Each count would be a different physical position and gesture in conjunction with a different emotion in eight specific beats.

Having this workshop focusing on the history of the major stock characters helped me personally in establishing a foundation of what the style of commedia dell’arte actually is. Learning the physicality of all of the characters, not limited to just mine, allowed for a more in depth understanding concerning the characters’ relationships toward each other, invariably effecting their interaction, as well as the action of the play.

Having established a foundation of the physicality of commedia, we would turn our focus to elements such as improvisation and lazzi. I will later discuss the use of these commedia dell’arte elements as a major function in contemporizing commedia, but for now I’ll focus on the process of exploring the origins and application.

The amount of improvisation in commedia dell’arte can be overestimated. All of the exits, entrances, etc. are fixed by the scenario. Stock characters remained the same from one piece to the next, which consisted of individual lazzi. Improvisation was used as a tool to emphasize a certain spontaneous moment, but proved to be successful only when used to further the action of the story. Actors would adapt their movements and positions precisely but spontaneously. Each stock character had its own stock of common topics. The artist used improvisation to display his ability to introduce fresh points, adapting then to his own conception of the part.

“The constant quest in improvisation is for form, not content” (Rudlin 59). In a series of exercises, Chris incorporated the character work previously done into a group of non verbal scenarios. We were challenged by removing the luxury of words to express ourselves, only to use gesture. In one exercise we were paired with another character and given five minutes to come up with a relationship, situation, and conflict. We would express the above mentioned using our bodies only. I found this extremely difficult, as I dangerously walked a fine line of insinuating
emotion through gesture, and letting the emotion lead the physical. (This will be a challenge of mine discussed in depth in chapter 4.) In this particular scene, Lisa Bryant (Scapin) and I (Zerbinette) paired up to create a scenario which proved to be a major source of information for both of our characters. Through improvisation, our characters seemed to conflict as we were both sexually charged and both highly competitive. It is from this initial exercise that our relationship was established, ultimately leading to various lazzi in the production.

The use of lazzi served as two very important functions in our production of *Scapin*; it remained a significant element of *commedia dell’arte* style, and also became the main source for contemporizing the show. In *commedia dell’arte* time, lazzi served as an interruption of a scene in progress. A Tuscan word, lazzi translates to ‘tied’, because the tricks are supposed to have tied the action together (Rudlin). In other words, lazzi served as an entertainment purpose, useful when the action was flagging. Through improvisation, the actor would invent bits consisting of comic business and invariably renewing the action.

Chris introduced us to this element by having us create simple units of action: throwing a ball, getting our foot stuck in an imaginary hole, physicalizing simple actions of pain. Our goal was to start an improvised scene and then interrupt the action from an impulse, including the other actors on stage. For instance, one actor walked from one side of the room to the other, pantomiming taking a dog for a walk. As the actor crossed the room, the imaginary dog got out of control and the actor, walking the dog, asked another actor to hold the imaginary leash, while he calms the dog down. After getting the other actor to participate, the original actor escaped off stage as fast as he could, abandoning the actor and the imaginary dog. The actor then must go on with his scene, imaginary leash and dog in hand. “Performing commedia, readiness is all: you must be constantly prepared not only to interrupt and be interrupted, but also be called on even when you are not on stage” (Rudlin 58). The cast now has had formal workshops in physicality,
gesture, improvisation, and lazzi, and was now ready to approach the text and Molière’s intention for the play.

**Application of the Text**

Translator of our version, Tunc Yalman hypothesizes his own theory of Molière’s original intention of the play:

Under vicious attacks from the clergy for impiety, certain segments in society for immorality, with his private life in disarray and his health failing, Molière evidently felt the need to write a comedy which would appear to be more froth, the lightest of entertainments, totally devoid of any social criticism, but which nevertheless, would give him the opportunity to get even with his opponent, whose stupidity, narrow-mindedness and bigotry he would personify in the two father figures (Argante and Geronte), which Scapin ridicules and chastises with such relish on the stage. (6)

As an actor, this theory holds substance to me, in that Molière was famous for using his plays and characters as an outlet for his opinions and feelings in his surrounding society. As a student, my educational hypothesis of Molière’s intent for *Scapin* is as follows: Molière wrote a play which succeeds in glorifying the evident class structure of his time, magnified through the use of commedia’s stock characters the social differentiation from servant to master. Molière’s *Scapin* serves as a social and political commentary, exemplifying the ridiculousness of status and its consequences. Chris Niess would adhere to Molière’s intent by staying true to the setting, costumes, and physicality of stock characters. To incorporate Molière’s use of setting and characters as a vehicle for political and social commentary, Chris would use lazzi and improvisation to bring today’s social and political issues to this seventeenth century play.

Though Molière’s intention for writing *Scapin* may only be hypothesized, one can say for certain Molière’s main intention was to create a connection between player and audience. His main goal in all of his writing was to please his audience. Molière would achieve this by having a
clear understanding of who his audience was. Molière made his characters and locations specific to his audience. For example, the play is originally set in Naples, which at the time, was an Italian city under Spanish control. My character, Zerbinette, is noted as a traveling gypsy. Gypsies are the English name for the Romany people who came to Europe in the fourteenth or fifteenth century from India. At the time Molière wrote his play, gypsies were a fact of life in all parts of Europe. The fathers, Argante and Geronte, represented the power hungry, money obsessed merchants of this time. The characters Scapin and Sylvester served as an outlet for Molière’s commentary on the servants of this era. The characters on stage represent the audience itself: merchants, university trained lawyers and doctors, financiers, bankers, and municipal officials. This middle class became the backbone of French society during the seventeenth century, and Molière’s characters portrayed them as so.

At this point it is worth mentioning the on goings in Naples, Molière’s idea of where an Italian comedy should be set. The political happenings of the time directly effected the action of Molière’s play. At the time the play was written, Naples was a big international port. During the time, the Ottoman Empire was one of the great powers in the world and a serious military threat to Christianity. They had overrun what is now Yugoslavia. But as Muslims, Turks world be entirely foreign and extremely threatening (courtttheatre.org). Molière’s deliberate choice of setting both heightened the intensity of the story and served as a major element for Scapin’s relationship to the characters and his audience. Scapin’s humorously fabricated story of the Turkish ship Geronte’s son is being held on was an extremely probable lie being that a Turkish ship in Naples would be a common occurrence at this time. This allowed for the audience to indulge in the humor, having relevance to what was indeed going on during that time. Molière’s universal setting in fact resonated to his audience. It would be our challenge as a cast to create a universal setting and relatable characters appropriate for our audience.
In attempt to hold true to the text, the designers of our UCF production presented their vision of what the stage should look like. It was extremely important not to remove the audience from present day society, rather create timelessness, allowing the audience to connect to the characters and story in their own way. In the initial design presentation, it was made clear the set would be a celebration of commedia’s style. The main playing area resembled a typical wagon commedia dell’arte actors would use to travel as well as their stage. Its extremely steep rake, sharp edges, and triangular patterns supported the physical element of the show representing everything being off balance. Colors of the set would be washed out, pastel like, contrasting the richness of color in the costumes. To clarify for the audience, each family was color coordinated, to not confuse the audience. The costumes were a key element in bringing the style of commedia dell’arte to today’s audience. Though we played in a ‘timeless’ setting, the costumes were clearly representative of the seventeenth century, where as our overall physicality would be purely contemporary (see figure 1). The combination of seventeenth century costumes and twenty-first century actions served as a foundation for a timeless setting.

Figure 1: Comparative Images of 2005 Zerbinette’s costume to 1671 Columbine’s costume.
**Contemporizing the Play**

“If there is to be a regeneration of the theatrical medium in the next century, it must come via the re-empowering of the performer rather than the continued hegemony of playwright and director” (Rudlin 1).

After establishing the initial groundwork of practicing *commedia dell’arte* and agreeing on Molière’s intention, it was now time to apply that information to our contemporary audience. Chris would approach this carefully by using such techniques as: identification of audience, lazzi, and effectively transforming seventeenth century street theatre to our Orlando Repertory Theatre lobby in an audience participation pre-show.

As Molière so effectively identified his audience in an attempt for his characters and story to resonate, Chris Niess would begin his quest to communicate to his audience by initially identifying the ticket holders. Being that this was a University production, our challenge was to make this production relevant to university students. If we look at today’s society, we must recognize technological intrusion in live theatre. Computers, video games, and twenty-two minute sitcoms have tampered with the attention span of most young audiences. We live in an age of remote controls, radio dials, game controls, and Tvo. At the push of a button, we have access to hundreds of TV channels, satellite radio, and thousands of songs burned into one tiny box the size of a cracker. If for any reason we are not entertained at any given moment, we have a plethora of options at the push of a button. We live in an extremely fast paced society, with constant interruptions, that we must be ready for at any given moment. In other words, one could say today’s society could be branded as a string of lazzi perhaps interrupted by something of importance.
Lazzi played as a key element in the attempt to connect to today’s audience. Chris held a separate workshop during the rehearsal process focusing specifically on how we could use lazzis as a means to insert today’s political and social issues. Through improvisation, each character would create a lazzi that paid tribute to today’s pop culture. For example, after a brief intermission, Geronte is left on stage huffing and puffing as he has just run up and down all around the theatre trying to catch Scapin. Scapin enters as if no big deal, and Lisa Bryant the actor said one day in rehearsal, ‘what’s up’. From this stemmed ‘wassssuuuuuuup’—a throw back to an enormously famous television advertisement—and it ultimately became a lazzi for the entire cast. The audience took pleasure in something that was so familiar to it and at times joined in the frivolous fun. As for my character, I found importance in creating a dialect that more or less was a comment on the melting pot our society has become. The simple misunderstanding of the word ‘ship’ for ‘sheep’ became my personal lazzi, including sheep noise, and commenting on the growing language barrier we face. Aaron Kirkpatrick, who played Octave, basked in his glory of playing with the intense violence that television, film, and video games represent today. He took pleasure in exaggerating Octave’s broken heart, by repeatedly stabbing himself in the heart while unraveling his guts. Yes, the audience took immense pleasure in this showcase of humorous violence, which comments on today’s obsession with meaningless violence.

To effectively achieve a connection with today’s audience through the use of lazzis, the actor must be willing to take risks. Just like the characters, the actor must be willing to fall and pick themselves up again, because that is what any audience in any time period can relate to. The audience wants to see the fight, the struggle, the vulnerability, which is a universal quality that all humans can relate to. “Leap and allow yourself to be open enough to be a fool-to aspire to great things, to be doped and then to hit rock bottom again” (Niess). You can find these qualities in all of the characters of Scapin, and most of Molière’s characters in general. That is what makes pieces like The Trickeries of Scapin resonate with today’s audience.
Chris’s most drastic attempt to literally engage the audience would be the transformation of Orlando Repertory Theatre’s lobby into the scene of seventeenth century Paris street theatre. “The pre-show was an attempt to draw the audience into a communal relationship in the same way that commedia dell’arte existed during actual festivals or in a festival like atmosphere” (Niess). Again, Chris would attempt to celebrate the true style of commedia dell’arte, making it approachable to the audience by creating ‘clowns’ inviting the audience to play with them.

In the seventeenth century, the streets of Paris became a stage for diplomatic and political happenings, advertisement and trade spectacles, and, of course, the Italian commedia dell’arte performance. The market place was the principle vehicle for the exchange of goods and news. Actors were hired to read, out loud, advertisements that were posted for those who were illiterate. They were also hired to act out the functions of various goods to draw attention and sale of the item-- much like the free standing carts we see today in malls, as the sellers demonstrate the function of their item. The presentations brought the sellers success, and, soon, stages were set up beside them allowing the actors to address their audiences directly. From this, theatre became known as theatre of the street, the beginning of the traveling commedia dell’arte actor (McCarthy 8).

In recreating this street theatre scene, Niess chose to have the cast create separate characters (other than the stock characters) he called ‘clowns’. Each one of our clowns would ultimately be an exaggeration of ourselves, the actor, and our own characteristics. Chris held a separate workshop focusing in the examination of ourselves and exaggeration culminating in the creation of our own personal clown and lazzi.

In an initial exercise we were to name three idiosyncrasies of each cast member—we were asked to work on the following: a certain walk, facial expression, hand gesture, etc. We would then take these three characteristics of ourselves and exaggerate each one, attempting to create extreme yet definable clowns. For instance, three characteristics of mine included: huge
smile, bouncy walk, and nervous laughter. My clown would then turn into an out of control laughing, hopping, smiling character. The goal of this exercise was the following; our clowns would become stereotypes of ourselves, ultimately creating a society of clowns representing all types of people today—resembling the essence of commedia’s stock characters representing people of that time.

Once we defined our personal clown, we then began playing with lazzi. We spent a significant amount of time improvising certain outlandish scenarios with our clowns, choosing which ones we should keep and which ones we shouldn’t, since they would be less effective in pulling the audience in. It was important not to create clowns that would intimidate an audience member, or scare them away, but create a clown and a scenario that would invite the guest to play along. To ensure interaction with the patrons, our clowns would wear red noses. Based merely on the immediate smile and participation of the guests, this was a perfect tool in establishing a safe and playful environment for the guest. Niess states:

The red-nose clowning was a device I felt would be more audience friendly, encouraging a ‘mannered [quietly take your seat in the dark and ignore each other] American audience’ to allow themselves to be targeted, laughed with and at, from the moment they entered the theatre. At the same time, the red-nose clowns of the pre-show was used to provide enough separation between audience and performers so they felt the safety to allow themselves the choice of being a part of the action [Risk vs. Safety] (Niess).

Ultimately, the patrons would be included in the action of the show from the moment they opened the lobby doors until the end of the show: they were escorted to their seats by a clown perhaps engaging them in a quick lazzi as they took their seat; they were constantly surrounded by players running through the isles; they were bombarded with confetti at the end. Audience members would constantly be included in the show, referred to, and questioned, which made it almost impossible for them to not take part in the action. Chris intended for the audience to establish a
sense of trust and safety with the players, before the show even started, for the sole purpose of engaging them from the beginning, establishing a connection, and keeping their attention-- all through the use of timeless commedia dell’arte elements.
CHAPTER FOUR: CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT

Molière vs. Aristotle: Laws of Character Development

“Turning to Aristotle to check whether or not one is right to enjoy a play is like consulting a cookery-book to find out if the sauce one has just tasted is as delicious as it seemed” (Calder 3): Molière made this statement in reaction to those who turned to Aristotle’s laws for their success. Molière turned to his own rule in the creation of his characters-- to please his audience. Molière’s gift lies in the fact that although he rejected Aristotle’s rules, he in no way disrespected them. In his play, *La Critique de l’Ecole des Femmes*, Molière uses the character Lysidas as a means for stating his own opinion towards Aristotle. Lysidas states; “Those who know their Aristotle and Horace see immediately, Madame, that this comedy sins against all the rules of the art”. Molière believed that these so called rules were nothing but common-sense observations. Though Molière rejected Aristotle’s rules he does not break any of them. Lysidas goes on to state, “I have read them, thank God, as well as any man; and I can show you easily that there is no play more regular than this one.” The words of Lysidas signify Molière’s familiarity with Aristotle’s rules, ultimately stating through his character these rules are nothing but common sense. If a play is successful, it will indeed conform to the rules of Aristotle.

According to Aristotle’s *Poetics*, the role of an actor in comedy is as follows: “Comic characters are those who are somehow in error in soul or body. Comedy represents characters that are inferior to ourselves, i.e. worse than we are. Typical characters of comedy are the buffoonish, the ironical, and the boasters”(Janko 53). Common sense, or not, Molière’s characters in *The Trickeries of Scapin* adhere to the characteristics above mentioned. If Molière himself did not feel he followed any rules, his most influential predecessors certainly did having already established that Molière’s play is a direct adaptation of Terence’s *Phormio*, who adapted from Menander, who
adapted from Aristophanes, all following the rules of Aristotle; therefore creating Scapin-the buffoon; Argante and Geronte- the boasters; Octave, Leandre, Hyacinte, and Zerbinette; the ironical.

The following is the process executed in my development of Molière’s Zerbinette, starting from the casting process. Contemporizing the character for a modern day audience required the following: examination of Zerbinette’s origins in relation to commedia dell’arte, physical and vocal development, and application of pop culture.

Casting Process

The casting of the show, focusing specifically on the title role Scapin, had a direct effect on the development of my character. Scapin, typically played by a male, was played by Lisa Bryant, a second year female graduate student. Scapin as a woman, influenced Zerbinette’s relationship with the character Scapin, in turn, influencing Zerbinette’s relationship towards other characters, her physicality, and ultimately served as the catalyst for contemporizing the character.

Niess chose to cast a woman in the role of Scapin to question the notion of a woman being able to command the attention of an audience and maintain it. Lisa Bryant asked the question, “What roles out there, written specifically for a woman, offer the opportunity to carry such a massive responsibility in carrying a show, all the while pushing the limits of masculinity” (Bryant)? In attempt to answer this question I return to Niess’s response concerning the existence of commedia dell’arte characters representative of today’s pop culture: Lucille Ball. Ball certainly pushed the limits of masculinity in the 20th century, as a forerunner of comedic leading ladies. Bryant debates, “True, but ‘I Love Lucy’ was a sitcom in the 50s specifically written for a woman, what modern play written for a woman allows for the same opportunity today” (Bryant)? The answer is simple; the number of women characters, who are the main source in carrying the action of a play are far and few between, if any. Though Niess chose to cast a woman in the role of
Scapin, still, the character would not be identified as a woman. Rather, the character would take on an ambiguous nature, unidentifiable as man or woman. Niess’s choice of ambiguity for the role was an attempt to further connect with the audience, simply sparking the interest and thought process of the audience regarding ‘he’, ‘she’, ‘it’- a running lazzi.

In searching for the style of *commedia dell’arte* in today’s society, one can say the idea of a woman playing the role of male, though ambiguous in gender, exists today. “Saturday Night Live” featured a skit called ‘It’s Pat’. This mid 1990s skit featured a character that could not be characterized as either man or a woman. The ongoing quest to figure the gender identity of the character sparked interest and laughter amongst audiences of all ages. Scapin would spark the same interest in our audience using ‘his’, ‘her’, ‘its’ relationship towards other characters, specifically Zerbinette, and sexual innuendos that left the audience wondering the gender of this character.

Scapin’s ambiguity was a driving force in the creation of my character. As I previously mentioned an improvisational exercise Bryant and I explored early in the rehearsal process, I made important discoveries in the direction my character would proceed. Being that Zerbinette is sexual in nature, as is Scapin (man or woman), the dynamic between two woman overtly sexual was undeniable. As Zerbinette, I found myself focused on the competition aspect that naturally takes place between two conflicting women; Scapin being funny, smart, sexy and tricky; Zerbinette being smart, sexy and tricky. The relationship started to take the form of who could top the other, a relationship, I feel, would not have taken place if the part was played by a man. This would ultimately affect Zerbinette’s physical and vocal life.

**Zerbinette’s Origin**

Adjacent to the cast list was each coinciding *commedia dell’arte* character the characters in Scapin were influenced by, and a brief description; Zerbinette-Columbine: strong,
attractive, overtly sexual, buxom, sharp and gossipy. Before I would begin creating Zerbinette’s physical and vocal life, I immersed myself into Columbine’s world discovering her history, vocal, and physical origins.

After reading numerous sources about Columbine, I learned that Columbine was the only lucid, rational person in *commedia dell’arte*. Initially, she was strong and attractive like a circus artist; later she became petite and pretty taking on a more passive quality than ever before. I found great use in the circus art imagery of Zerbinette. Autonomous and self-sufficient, she has no negative attributes. She has enough to eat (hence the buxom adjective), decent clothes, and no ambition to be rich. The more information I would gain about Columbine I was content in that all of these attributes were befitting to Zerbinette. It was clear that Zerbinette traveled, and that she enjoyed it. She never complained about money, and found joy in other people’s quarrels. In common with Molière, Columbine saw everyone else as having zero common sense. She felt and was psychologically beyond the stock lovers and fathers, and found humor in their stupidity. Columbine uses her brain and thinks things through. There have been many references to the fact that Columbine was a loner, often appearing solo. This made perfect sense in that Zerbinette spends about ten minutes by herself on stage, occasionally talking to Geronte. Columbine has a very strong relationship with the audience, almost confidential in the sense that she too can see what fools the rest of them are and occasionally finds pleasure in flirting with the audience. This information about Columbine would be useful in Zerbinette’s time spent with the audience sharing her very funny story, to the point of mockery, and belittling the other fools. It is the audience Zerbinette would have the strongest relationship with. “She is a woman of the world and understands more about life than the scholar or philosopher. She is a feminine; however her femininity is usually an afterthought as her wit, sarcasm, and strength usually seem masculine in nature (Personabooks)”. Staying true to the *commedia dell’arte* style, Columbine most often wears a mask, but only one that covers just her eyes, as she is not considered a part of the Innamorati: the
lovers of *commedia dell’arte* time. Why I felt like I was putting together a puzzle and all of the
pieces seemed to match up too perfectly, I don’t know, being that I already new Molière had based
his Zerbinette on commedia’s Columbine. The similarities were evident, and the influence of
*commedia dell’arte* on Molière was even more apparent.

**Physicality**

One of my biggest challenges as an actress is the physicality and the connection to my
body. One of the most important things that I have learned through out my studies at the
University of Central Florida is that the physical can lead to the emotional state of a character.
This is something that I fully understood mentally, and agreed with, but had very little experience
in actually achieving. When creating a character in the past I was very used to mentally fleshing
out this person to their fullest, thinking of every aspect, creating the characters’ history, but I was
never able to successfully put it in my body. There quickly became two very important reasons
this would become my ultimate goal in creating this character: Number one: this was a physically
based show; we would be wearing masks; we in no way, could rely on our faces to do the acting
for us; it was our bodies that would have to ultimately create these characters. Number two: *The
Trickeries of Scapin* was my last opportunity at UCF to accomplish the creation of character
connecting the physical to the emotion. I would do this with the help of two very important
people: Kate Ingram, voice instructor at the University of Central Florida, and Chris Niess,
director and movement instructor at the University of Central Florida. You will later here me talk
of Ingram in my voice work but for now I will concentrate on the physical aspect of her teachings.

It would be in Professor Ingram’s Voice for Shakespeare Actors class that I would have
my first glimpse of achievement in connecting the physical with the emotional. Even though she
teaches voice class, she is an instructor who is extremely physically based. It is from her that I first
learned that your body can create things organically that you could never mentally think of or
anticipate. Throughout my two years of course work at the University of Central Florida there is nothing that we did vocally that wasn’t introduced physically. All of our work was based on Arthur Lessac, Kristin Linklater, and Cicely Berry. Though each focused on a different aspect of the voice, all shared a common ground in that they all started with the body. All three are very clear in that the voice and body go hand and hand. You can not achieve success with the voice without connecting it to the body. In Frank Langella’s forward in *Arthur Lessac: The Use and Training of the Human Voice*, I found comfort in the following statement, “I can remember quite clearly the day I grasped his technique for the first time, or should I say, the day I felt it for the first time. I was twenty-four years old, new to New York and a member of the Lincoln Center Training Program. Arthur was leading us in a vocal exercise…I didn’t get it…Like any other training approach, until a certain ‘body truth’ happens, it can seem somewhat strange” (v). Langella goes on to mention the lack of respect he had for the power of the body. But on that day he found it, and when he did he spoke of it being immediate and profound. “My body said ‘Yes’ and from that moment on I was free. The way you are free when you finally learn to swing a bat, or play a scale, or when you effortlessly pull up on your skis for the first time. You may fall down from time to time, but you’ve got it forever” (v). Kate Ingram was my Arthur Lessac. It was during her “Voice for Shakespeare the Actor” class that I shared in a similar revelation as Langella, at the age of twenty-four. Three weeks before the first rehearsal for *Scapin*, we purposely chose monologues that were the extreme of our type. For instance I was doing the Queen Margaret speech. This would be the perfect opportunity for me to create a character that was much larger than myself both physically and vocally, as Zerbinette is larger than life. There was no way possible that I could think my way into either one of these characters. The sole purpose of this was to challenge ourselves both physically and vocally, and stretch beyond our capabilities and our usual ‘type’. We explored Lessac’s lessons of buoyancy, potency and radiancy. All relying on the NRG of the body to create these vocal qualities. We would use
exercises involving balloons, experiencing buoyancy, stretch bands, experiencing potency, and different tremoring positions to experience radiance NRG. Like Langella, I just didn’t get it. I mentally understood all concepts, and wanted so much to feel it, but constantly questioning myself got in the way. I would continue to refer back to Lessac,

As part of the higher or deeper trinity (physical life, vocal life, and emotional life), ‘vocal life’ is as much an inner energy as is emotion; it is as much a function of the body as is gesture. If vocal life is to be an organic experience, you must feel it as a truly private and intimate personal involvement- you must feel your inner NRGs instinctively, spontaneously. (222)

Lessac continues on to tap into my biggest challenge, “it must not involve any preparation or previous contemplation”(222). I would not be able to begin creating the character of Zerbinette physically until I was able to make the connection between my voice, mind, and body.

I remember the day that I came into contact with my first ounce of success. January 21st, 2005 was supposed to be the date of our midterm. I had been struggling with the different exercises, on a continuous roller coaster that never seemed to stop perpetuating my growing frustration of continuous analyzing and commenting on my own work. The frustration was overwhelming to say the least, but ultimately it became the driving force that led me towards the right direction. After watching each one of my classmates diving whole heartedly into his or her explorations and finding great success, I sat back, and for the first time simply observed. There were no lines running through my head, I knew them; there were no predetermined thoughts or focus on myself, as I waited on the sidelines for my turn. I simply sat back, put my mind aside, and watched. When there was no one left but me to go, all I can say is that I literally felt like I pulled up on my skis for the first time. Only I didn’t fall, I went for it, having no idea where the wind would take me, but for the first time I let it lead me. The words, the buoyancy, potency, radiancy led me for the first time, instead of my mind taking over. I followed, and it was within
these few moments that for the first time my body took over, and the outcome was someone I never thought I was capable of-- a character I in no way could have scored, or derived on paper. Langella said it best, “My body decided to accept his lessons. I felt in my upper palate a tingle as if the words were born in my mouth. My breath eased, and out came a sound I had never before made. My body said ‘Yes.’ ‘God’ spoke, and from that moment on I was free” (v). I was free in that this was just the beginning for me. I was now able to explore even deeper levels of voice and body for the first time. I was now able to tackle Zerbinette and truly create this character through my body. The door finally squeaked open for me to embark on one of the most physically challenging roles I’ve had.

Rehearsals for Scapin started immediately after this experience, allowing me the confidence and openness of letting the physical life happen organically instead of mentally. Though certainly not cured from my analytical ways, my mind often would retreat to Columbine’s physical traits previously mentioned. For the first time I allowed the information that I gained from Columbine’s character to serve only as a source of information, a starting place, but not the stopping point. I

I began with the image of a circus artist that was used to describe Columbine. Simply saying the words -- circus artist -- brilliant colors of red, yellow, orange, and green came to mind. I envisioned animals such as birds, monkeys, and elephants. I can’t help but think of the plump bearded lady who serves as the featured attraction, introduced by the fire blowing, unicycle riding ring leader. My mind was full of these bigger than life images, enhanced by my playful competition with Scapin. The bigger the image became, the more empowered I felt. The louder that staple circus anthem rang in my ears, the more playful my voice. I was allowing the physical life to be influenced by color, images, and sound coming from within my body, spirit, and imagination-- not my brain. It was only natural that these images and sound would lead to the
development of Zerbinette’s vocal life—only after I would have to go through the same process all over—letting go.

**Vocal Life**

I return now to the teachings of Kristin Linklater. Like Lessac, who embraces physical, spiritual, and vocal qualities through his NRG’s—buoyancy, radiancy and potency—Linklater naturally links right in to this with her book *Freeing the Natural Voice*. She clearly states, “To free the voice is to free the person, and each person is indivisible mind and body. Since the sound of the voice is generated by physical process, the inner muscles of the body must be free to receive the sensitive impulses from the brain that create speech” (Linklater 2). In my search for Zerbinette’s voice I returned to Linklater’s words, “How do you induce a new use of the voice? By taking hold of the body and moving it in new directions which break conditioned, habitual movements” (4). Here I am drawn back to my biggest challenge—habitual movement. I am consistently used to anticipating or predicting the way in which my body moves, the way it knows. If I wanted to give Zerbinette her own voice, I had to break these habitual movements in my body in order to break the habitual vocal qualities I was used to. My first challenge was to throw away my pre-conceived notion of what I thought Zerbinette should sound like. Considering that my brain was already infected with ideas, I literally felt my body and voice being closed off to other possibilities. I must remind myself of my experience in voice class and the freedom I felt when my body took over. I must remember the sounds that came out of me that I have never heard before. I must retreat back to Arthur Lessac and his teachings. For me, Lessac offers the perfect mixture of combining the vocal, physical, and emotional life that is integral to all styles, particularly *commedia dell’arte*. *Commedia dell’arte* depends heavily on the use of gesture and physical positioning of the body. Lessac’s foundation for his training easily ties into the physical demands of commedia. Lessac believes:
Speech and voice training is body training, and body training is language/communication training. The eyes, the vocal tones, the face, the gestures, the body-whole certainly divulge and transmit more meaning, interpretation, information, and intelligence than do words and sentences. Creative vocal life includes all the other vital ‘life NRG’s’ within the inner human environment. (Lessac 203)

It is through his NRGs’, buoyancy, radiancy, potency/tonal and structural, that I will begin to find the voice of Zerbinette.

Lessac explains each NRG in a series of exercises. To achieve success in creating an organic sound, it is important to have a complete understanding of what he names the consonant orchestra and the music of the vowels to be able to start from a position of knowledge that all sounds made have a potential to become music. Each consonant and every vowel represent a different instrument in the orchestra. In creating the voice of Zerbinette, I would reach for an understanding of all the NRGs and then apply those that are appropriate to the text given to me. My first instinct for Zerbinette was that of power. It seemed befitting to explore Lessac’s tonal NRG first. This NRG is also referred to as Y-buzz, associating the Y consonant to the sound EE as in easy. On comfortably lower pitch you should feel a buzz or vibration on the forward gum-ridge section of the hard palate and in the nasal bone, traveling toward the bridge of the nose and the connecting forehead (Lessac 122). In doing this, we prove that tonal vibrations can be felt as well as heard. The tonal NRG should, in essence, be sound taking the place of breath. The more you feel the sound vibes, the less breath you use. This is what I feel makes this NRG so powerful. When done correctly, it should ultimately be a clear, strong, confident sound. In our course work with Ingram we did certain exercises such as pushing heavy bean bags across, as we lay on the floor, having to dig deep inside our selves to create a clear and breathless tone. I immediately referred back to my text to find the tonal energies that are given to me in Molière’s words. I was intrigued by the fact that there was very little evidence of any consistent tonal NRG, but instead,
only single words sporadically such as, “I am an easy going person, have a playful nature…”, and “I need some fresh air”. While useful on these certain word, it was clear that tonal NRG was not the force of Zerbinette’s character.

I would now turn my focus to Lessac’s Structural NRG: Music of the Vowels. This NRG is exactly how it sounds, specifically focused on keeping the structural shape of each vowel referred to as the megaphone shape. This energy refers to the mold, shape, and size of the human voice and speech instrument and its sound box structure. Structural NRG is broken down into eight specific categories (see figure 3). All of these sounds are usually buoyant in nature, meaning they are light, expansive, and necessary to be indulged in. After referring to my text, again I found only sporadic consistency in the use of structural vowels. The most consistent sentence representing the structural NRG was, “But you, at least, have the advantage of knowing who you are”. Again, though the structural NRG was visible, it was not the focus of Zerbinette’s voice.

Figure 2: Lessac’s Table of Structural Energies
Consonant NRG is the next energy that Lessac speaks of. This energy is perhaps the most fun and playful. The sole purpose is to concentrate on the music of the consonants, playing each consonant as a fine musician would play a particular instrument. Lessac classifies each consonant as an orchestral instrument-melodic, percussive, or sound effect (see figure 4). Some of these consonants are sustained like instruments such as strings, brass or woodwinds, while others are assorted with drums or cymbals because of their sharp, percussive beats. When combining all of the consonants, our outcome is a unique blend of rhythms and tempos. The musician does not need to think about where to put his fingers for each note or how to move the bow once he has learned the ‘feel’. Once you learn how to produce the feel of the orchestral consonants, you can focus your attention on playing them lightly, softly, smoothly-musically. (Lessac 69) I, once again, returned to my text, and was pleased to find that Zerbinette was explosive in the use of her consonants; “Let me tell you the trick he used to
catch the old man.” The repetitive ‘t’ is specifically visible within this sentence. What I have also learned while looking for the consonants is that Molière overwhelmingly uses what Lessac calls neutrals. Lessac describes neutrals as the shortest distance between two consonants. It was now clear to me that Zerbinette was made up mostly of consonants and neutrals, which ultimately provides great information about her energy. To create this sensation of an orchestra occurring through the sounds provided by Molière, I must fully invest in the NRG associated with consonant work, which befittingly is raidiancy. Zerbinette’s voice became more clear to me in that she was a fast thinking, witty, intelligent person. She is extremely quick on her feet, therefore quick to speak.

It is from the use and playfulness of the consonants at my discretion, from drumbeats to cymbals, to strings that I was able to create not only Zerbinette’s voice, but her personality as well. This in turn affecting the physical aspect.

**Modernizing Zerbinette**

My biggest challenge was yet to come. Now that I learned the physical qualities of Columbine from the original style of *commedia dell’arte* as well as the vocal qualities and energies of Molière’s Zerbinette, I had to combine these aspects into a character that matched the style of our show. It was now my challenge to take all of this information I have discovered about my character and transform her into a modern day character all the while keeping the intentions of the playwright. Though not simple, the answer was clear. Keeping in the style of commedia, under the direction of Chris Niess, we would use improvisation to explore society today, and its political and cultural influences. A true gift that Niess offered to all of us was that of creative freedom. Though at times our riffs of improv took on a life of their own, it was Niess who was able to seek out the rhythms and issues that we touched on. In my case specifically, the script called for
Zerbinette to laugh uncontrollably on more than one occasion. As this did not come easy to me, and simply did not feel natural for me, the vocal NRG’s I discovered and the physical energies I explored led my character in a whole different direction through the use of improvisation. When I took a closer look at the information that Molière has already offered me about the character, I found it quite interesting that Zerbinette makes her main appearance in the second act. She then begins to recap the entire action of the first act, taking extreme pleasure in the gossip nature of the issue broadcasting it to the entire audience. The pieces began to fit together when Niess directed me to speak to audience members, interacting only with them. I physically went out into the audience, using the qualities of good old fashioned Columbine and took pleasure in ‘flirting’ with the audience. The first time I did this, I literally felt like I was a story teller, recapping everything that has happened prior to my appearance, wrapping up the action just in case the audience was lost. This is when I had the first image of a newscaster broadcasting the same story over and over again. It was when I combined the element of radiancy, the use of consonants, and the gestures of *commedia dell’arte* that this urban, Hispanic; northern dialect came out of me. I was having so much fun ‘playing’ the instruments that a dialect, I feel safe saying I have never quite heard before, came out of me. At last! A sound I could have never predicted. My director then proceeds to tell me that I reminded him of a strange version of Roseanne Roseannadanna, a repeating character, you might even say ‘stock character’ on Saturday Night Live. I ran with the image, completely under its spell. As the character progresses throughout the action of the story she repeatedly says the word ‘ship’. With this accent that I have created, living in the vowels and the consonants, ‘ship’ sounded more like ‘sheep’, as I thrived on that Ybuzz. That soon became a ‘lazzi’ in commedia’s time, and the image of Roseanne Roseannadanna took over as I began to improvise my way into a five minute monologue about sheep and how disgusting they were. Only to be brought back to reality by Geronte. It was the most rewarding, inspirational feeling as an actress to date. I was able to take all that I have learned vocally, physically, emotionally, and
historically and combine that into this character that had become my Zerbinette—a woman who could relate to all she encounters, encompass contemporary traits, and most importantly become a woman all others could identify with, laugh with, and relate to—all the while keeping true to the style of commedia. In this twenty-first century production, Zerbinette stayed true to Molière’s buxom, sexy force of nature, all the while morphing into a northeastern, Spanish speaking, urban newscaster that can not wait to tell the next story.

**Summary**

Creating the role of Zerbinette was a long and challenging process, resulting in the role of a life time. My ultimate goal was to create a character which embodied all characteristics of commedia’s classic style, combining those elements with the qualities Molière intended, ultimately creating a contemporary, modern day traveling woman relatable to a present day audience. My intention for Zerbinette was to be a conglomeration of past, present, and future. I wanted every person in the audience to find a small part, however miniscule it might be, even the tiniest bit of themselves, in Zerbinette. The amount of confidence and knowledge I have gained from creating this character is indispensable. I have been in many shows and have created many characters, but I honestly say with my whole heart that this is the first time that I have ever taken aspects from all areas to build a character. Through my voice class, I was able to designate not only the vocal energy but the physical energy. Through the entire rehearsal process I was consistently led in the right direction by Chris Niess, and given the creative freedom and the confidence to continuously explore the depths of Zerbinette. I was then able to incorporate that with the history of *commedia dell’arte* and the physical characteristics of Columbine. Molière provided the skeleton, the source, and, for the first time I was able to give to that source a body. My ultimate source in creating the character of Zerbinette was her vocal life. As I have learned and now experienced first hand that the vocal life goes hand and hand in creating the physical, leading to the emotional aspect of the character, I am able to exit UCF with the belief of Arthur
Lessac, “Vocal life is more than the extension of inner energy; it is a creative and controlling influence upon the dynamics of these energies. As a creative tool, exploring vital vocal life allow us to experiment with and plumb these energies—not merely to express emotions but also to perceive new dynamics, new subtexts, new visualizations, and new images” (Lessac 9).
CHAPTER FIVE: REHEARSAL AND PERFORMANCE

JOURNAL

The following is a record that follows my journey in creating the character Zerbinette. This journal focuses specifically on the rehearsal process, and the performance aspect of *The Trickeries of Scapin*, and reflects my thoughts, feelings, adjustments, challenges, and discoveries during that process.

1.11.05

I am so excited to have been cast as Zerbinette in *The Trickeries of Scapin*. What better way to leave the University of Central Florida than in a show that will showcase my biggest challenge these past two years in my coursework, as well as an actress; physicality. We start rehearsal in two weeks and I am extremely nervous to find out the extent of the physicality in the show, knowing the limits that have been pushed in class with Chris. I think what I am most worried about is the fact that every time I have been observed not being connected to my body, I didn’t realize it. Every evaluation I have been through, this issue has been brought up. My first year of grad school it was assumed that a recent weight loss left me not in touch with my body, not being used to my new size, not owning it. Maybe that was true, but it’s been two years now, and I’m still having the same issues. I personally think the main problem is simply my brain. I think way too much, rather than just being. I simply CAN NOT do this as Zerbinette. There is no way in getting around the mask, that will cover my face. I have to rely on my body to express myself. This will be my biggest challenge and my biggest fear in approaching this show.

1.15.05 GESTURE WORKSHOP
We had our first workshop today in gesture work associated with *commedia dell’arte*. Chris keeps reiterating the importance in mastering the exact technique down to a science. I found at first my body automatically contemporizing each gesture and movement. For instance, the physicality of *commedia dell’arte* is so detailed, a simple half turn requires one straight leg, one leg out, toe pointed and knee bent. I would turn, but I felt so uncoordinated both legs ended up straight, and at times, I found both knees bent. Again, I was thinking way too much, making it completely unnatural for me. We went through the social order of the characters, which makes sense, but who knew a simple raise of the arm can differentiate the difference between high class and low class.

Just an after thought; I am really liking the dynamic of the cast. I get the feeling that this is going to be an incredible experience of collaborating ideas. I feel comfortable with everyone, and feel an enormous amount of safety. To reiterate my extreme lack of coordination, all of us were assigned corners, one by one we were to get to the center, is some extreme way, either rolling, cart wheel, etc. and strike a pose choosing one of the gestures we had learned. The point was to demand the attention of our audience, all in using the ‘timing’ of comedy. So there was a sense of competition among the cast…who could be funnier; when it was my turn, I knew that I could not compete with the tumblers, and the acrobatics of the other cast members, so I literally just dived into the center, ridiculously, falling hard on my bum, then struck a pose as if it was the greatest thing any one has ever seen. It felt great. Though I sensed a bit of competition with the cast, it was a healthy competition with everyone supporting each other. It was a great atmosphere. I can’t wait to see what we will come up with.

1.22.05 TUMBLING WORKSHOP

O.k. This wasn’t as scary as I thought. Today was a big day for me. We spent four hours, tumbling, jumping off a trampoline over 6ft mats, shoulder rolls, etc. Funny thing is, I went into this workshop with a bit of confidence, being that we had just finished doing these things in class. The one thing I could not accomplish in class was running, jumping in the air, over Chris’s head.
(while he is standing up right) then falling into a roll. I just couldn’t do it. As a child I attempted something similar and ended up in the hospital for three days, and never attempted anything like that since. Today, instead of jumping over Chris, he piled up all of the mats, so they were more or less as tall as he was, and we were to jump, flip, and land with a shoulder roll. For some reason the mats were not as intimidating as jumping over a human body. I cleared up to four mats, more than I had achieved two weeks earlier in class, and attempted the fifth, but just couldn’t pull it off. The worst, or should I say scariest, was having to jump off the trampoline doing something in the air, i.e. toe touch, full spin, etc, than land still (like a gymnast after doing the balance beam) on top a 6ft high mat. So we would start at the ground, have to get enough height from the trampoline to jump six feet in the air and have a perfect landing. The only thing that got me through it was letting out a ridiculous scream as I jumped. Accomplishment: I tried! Perfect landing-no, not quite…but…I tried! Question: Is Zerbinette the tumbling type? Or maybe she is the type who thinks she is, but really is horrible at it…or maybe, she would never stoop so low as to throw herself to the floor…hmmm. No, I won’t make it that easy…but I wonder, we are spending an awful lot of time tumbling and rolling, is this going to be the gymnastic version of *The Trickeries of Scapin*? I am interested to find how this will be incorporated in our characters, as well as the show.

1.24.05 LAZZI, IMPROV, LAZZI

Today was a BIG day. First of all, EVERYONE must JUGGLE! What?! With my spastic coordination, I really don’t think that I will be able to juggle. Why is it, that everyone else who says ‘they never juggled before’ had no problem with in five minutes?! My balls were going all over the place…not to mention if my ball flew off somewhere else, it just landed in the pattern of someone else’s balls, and they would start juggling with my ball as their fourth! AHHH! We’ll see how that ends up.
After my failing attempt at juggling, we started to explore Lazzi. Chris made it sound so easy. He introduced the theory behind it by showing us simple actions such as throwing a ball, or tripping, almost resembling mime. Of course, that was just an introduction. If we were to master Lazzi (the interruption of action) especially while being masked, we were challenged to use no words. We had to make our actions clear through the physical only. We would have to exaggerate every movement, every gesture to get what we wanted, and leave nothing to the imagination. We were to come up with at least three, and present them in front of others. We were not to incorporate our characters yet, simply come up with three specific actions and carry them out. We were allowed to have up to three partners. In my first approach, Aaron Kirkpatrick and I chose to have a bit of a love quarrel. I would misinterpret him reaching in his pocket for his wallet, for him reaching for the engagement ring I assumed he would propose marriage with. We set it up by sitting at a table as if we were out to dinner, and I, in extreme anticipation, was waiting for any sign of when he would pop the question. The moment he reached in his pocket, I burst into tears and excitement, as he is left helpless, with no other choice than to deal with the enormous pressure I had placed on him. He then begins to fail (as Chris has reiterated the most important element of comedy, especially in commedia) to come through with a proposal and fumbles through a series of actions until I ultimately storm out. This was a bit more complicated than throwing a ball, but it was fun. It was a good exercise for me, in making a relationship, conflict, and environment clear without the use of words. Ultimately, Chris commented that all of these things were clear, which was good, but it was too complicated. He than had us do a rather similar situation, but broken down into a series of beats. The scenario would change. We would be sitting down at dinner; the only difference was Aaron would propose. The problem, or failure would be, the ring would be placed in the bread. I wouldn’t be anticipating the proposal, rather starving and scarf down the bread, predictably choking on the ring. Here the theory of interrupting the action became clear to both of us. The latter of situations, was an interruption, where as the first scenario was not
interrupting anything, resembling a simple scene with a conflict. It was also about five minutes shorter. A Lazzi should not take up too much time and become the action, rather it should rejuvenate the action that is already there. This started to become clear to me.

The second half of the day was dedicated to improvisation. Even though our exploration of Lazzi was more or less an exercise on improvisation, we would concentrate on the basics, and incorporate our characters. We began, using contemporary improv games, focusing in accepting not denying your scene partner. We played a game called ‘yes, and...” where there are movers and clickers. The point is two people went on vacation, creating a slide show of the snapshots they took. A group of people would be the snapshots, working together to create abstract images. So, both the movers and the clickers must be constantly aware of each other, and are forced to work together. The two clickers are required to explain the pictures together, starting every sentence with ‘Yes, and…” There was no way around not agreeing with anything your partner says. If anything this exercise made me realize, how easy it is for actors to get self absorbed in their own creativity, not being open enough to what others have to offer. There were many times throughout this exercise that many of us (and I include myself) would follow the rule saying ‘Yes, and..’ but having no idea really what our partner had just said. It was a really great exercise in simply listening and responding, let alone agreeing. You can not agree unless you listen, and allow your impulse to respond, rather than trying to think three steps ahead as to what you are doing to say.

We were than asked to pick a partner, and come up with a short improv, including a relationship, conflict, and environment, while including aspects of our characters we wanted to explore. Lisa (Scapin) and I (Zerbinette) chose to work together. I knew for myself, I wanted to explore the ‘Gypsy-like’ element of my character, while Lisa decided to explore the sexual element of hers. For whatever reason, probably because of both of our ridiculous humor, we decide to set the improv in a bathroom. Our conflict was we were locked in. this simple little
exercise told me so much about my character that I really want to continue to explore. First of all, Lisa chose to not only play up the sexual nature of Scapin, but the ambiguity of her character. Me, embracing what I interpreted as ‘gypsy-like’ was extremely extraverted. Placing ourselves in extreme close courtiers, made for an awesome dynamic between the two of us. We were competitive in that both of us had to be the one to figure a way out. We both used our flirtatious side to get what we wanted out of the other, i.e., sit down and let me do the work, or at times, I’ll sit down and you do the work. I loved the sense of playfulness between the two of us, being that we would come onto each other, playing with the idea that I was a gypsy whore, and not knowing if Lisa was male or female. It fabulously fun! I know that I have to incorporate this somehow into my character. Perhaps, I will use Zerbinette’s sexuality as a ploy, to get what I want from Scapin. Zerbinette would never, ever be interested in Scapin, but she would let her think that she was, to use it in her favor….great ideas!

1.28.05 FIRST READ THROUGH
First of all, to start, I got my answer to my last question: all of the tumbling will be incorporated not necessarily to each character, but to the entire show, as a means to represent a fast paced feel to the show; continuous action.

The first read through was bursting with energy! What fun! Every cast member brought their own sense of humor the characters. The timing was there, as well as a sense of history of what this show and style was about. Again, there was a sense of healthy competition between the actors, which made the read through that more exciting and energized. Scapin as a woman is hilarious, and Lisa is already getting a sense of what fun she can have playing with the idea of ambiguity. Zerbinette doesn’t appear until act III, so I found myself putting down my script, and just watching the other actors do their thing. The connection between the characters had already begun to be established, and the characters seemed to already be jumping off the page. Not
reading along, the action and the words made perfect sense to me, because the actors knew what they were talking about, which made me think of my thesis. If I am exploring the application of commedia dell’arte in today’s audience, and whether it will resonate or not, I can’t see why not. Seventeenth century or not, this play is funny, and the characters are relatable. The script no doubt will resonate to the audience. We’re talking about young people who are in love, revenge, scandals, and sons making fun of their fathers, and daughters trying to get away from their overprotective families. Even if we are taking a very dated style such as commedia, I can only imaging the over-exaggerated gesture and movement enhancing the humor, not disengaging the audience. I guess only time will tell.

DESIGNER PRESENTATION

Set:

- Antiqued, aged
- NOT a specific time period
- Colors washed out
- Players not from a typical time period
- Triangles- everything off balance, always in motion
- Start off playing with the audience, lulling them in
- Transition right in front of the audience
- Playing the lobby in red noses-never a separation of when the ‘show’ begins
- Festival atmosphere
- Spirit of commedia
- Active/liquid show
- Earn place on stage-person takes over, own space, takes focus-commedia dell’arte anthology

COSTUMES:
Each family has its own color

Faded colors

Rich, saturated color with an antique feel

MASKS:

Definitive part of character

Respect the Mask, this is the character you’re going to live with

Part of the characterization

1.29.05 CLOWNWORK

Started of the day with my favorite thing…Juggling. Good news is, I got one whole rotation today. The idea of it sounds really fun. Ultimately, in what will be our pre-show, we will all be clowns who have a juggling competition in the lobby in front of the audience. Well, at least I’ll be available to judge.

Today happened to be really fun. Chris introduced his idea of creating this pre-show before the show. In effort to re-create the festival style atmosphere of the marketplace in Paris, we will all be clowns inviting the audience members to play with us. It’s a bit nerve racking. It’s one thing to be on stage, as a ridiculous character, but now we will have to have one-on-one interaction with the audience members. That can be a little intimidating. What if we scare them away? What if the audience is intimidated, let alone us?

Chris explained to us, that the clowns would have nothing to do with our characters; they would be exaggerations of ourselves. We began by simple walking in a circle, one person leading. We would all have to imitate exactly the leaders walk, body weight, alignment, etc. Once we had the walk down we had to magnify that tenfold. The leader would then step out of the circle, to see each actor’s interpretation of what their walk looked like. Each actor would get to experience this. When it came to me, I thought I really didn’t have anything that noticeable about my walk. Well, I was wrong. Once I stepped out of the circle, I say 15 skipping, hopping, arms
flaring, and head tilting actors. I have to say it was absolutely hilarious and scary at the same time. Is this really how people interpret my walk? Is this what I look like when I’m approaching someone? I guess the answer is yes… Chris agreed. After that eye opening exercise, we all got into a circle and were to name three idiosyncrasies about each other. We weren’t allowed to speak of ourselves. The funny thing is everyone was in denial about what people had to say about them. But they were true about each one. I knew when it got to me, I couldn’t say no, that’s not true, because everything was true about the others, but of course, when it got to me, the first thing I said was, no, I don’t do that. But, yes, I do. Number one: I laugh at everything, and everyone. Number two: I am extremely expressive with my hands. Number three: I tilt my head from one side to the other when listening to people. Do I really? Tilt my head? O.K. Our goal after humiliating ourselves was to take these idiosyncrasies and exaggerate them just as we did for the walk. They could not be subtle. Once we combine these elements together, our clown will be created. Next step will be to incorporate different Lazzi to get the audience to play with us. I don’t know, form the looks of my clown and others; I would be scared to death as an audience member.

1.31.05 BLOCKING

JUGGLING: 1 ½ ROTATIONS

I found myself doing a lot of observing today. I was called for rehearsal but not used. I had a feeling, being that I’m not on until the third act, so I took the opportunity to observe Chris’s style of directing, and the other actor’s approach. I was really surprised at the balance of creative freedom Chris allows with the preciseness of movement down to a beat. Basically, as I watched, the actors would improv their way through action, and lazzi, Chris would say yay or nay, and the improvs he did say yes to, he then would break down into a series of beats. Down to the turn of a head, or a raise of an arm. The gestures became so articulate and immaculate, like a dance. I have complete respect for the risk factor of the actors. They all throw themselves out there, trying
anything on an impulse. Nobody cared whether they failed or not, and when they did, it in no way affected the next thing they would do. I only hope that I will have this ability. I’m worried that even today as I was watching, I started to anticipate what it was I was going to do. I don’t want to. That has gotten me in way too much trouble in the past. I know what it feels like to not anticipate, and just live through the impulse, but I feel like having the pressure of performance takes away from that free spirit of exploration I felt in voice class.

2.2.05

I hate not being at rehearsal. I feel like I’m missing something. Like I’m going to be out of the loop when I get back. I’m at UPTA’s trying to get an internship for next year, and I much rather be at rehearsal. I guess I feel a little nervous because before I left we didn’t get to my scenes, and the time I get back, the show will be basically blocked. Did I miss my time for exploration?

2.6.05

In the car with David, Brooke, and Alan driving back to Orlando. And I’m sick. Each one of us with our appropriate script in hand trying to memorize lines. I’m struggling with the idea of memorizing my lines. I know myself, and when I memorize my lines too early, I too get stuck in a holding pattern. My scenes haven’t even been blocked yet, I have no idea what I’m doing, and we open in less than a month! I think my head…cold is getting to me…head. I’m going to take a nap.

2.8.05

Feels really good to be back. I finally get to work tonight. Just a couple of things I need to remind myself of when it comes to the physical stature of Zerbinette, when relating her to Columbine:

- strong
- little flick of foot at the end of a grand walk
- stance- one knee bent, the other leg extended.
- slight forward tilt from the hips to show best features
- tiny waist and wide hips (complete opposite of what I really have)
 movement continues during speaking
 fast and nimble in order to escape unwanted attention or butt in, then escape from situation

Use these elements as a starting place, not an ending place.

2.8.05 (continued)

Just got home from rehearsal. It went really well. Fast, as I predicted. It was more to get me caught up in the blocking rather than creating. Still, I was able to allow myself to be free. At least, more so than in the past. I feel behind, as I feared. The language is more difficult than I anticipated in conjunction with the movement. I need to find the voice. I need to find the character. Why does Zerbinette exist, what does she want? How is she going to get it. How will the audience relate to her? Not quite in her skin yet.

2.10.05

JUGGLING: 2 ROTATIONS

I’m not called for rehearsal tonight, but my brain is racking. I know I want to incorporate that extraverted, sexual element I found in the improv workshop. Here’s what I’m nervous about: I have about a two page monologue that involves just me and Geronte. The monologue requires me to be hysterically laughing throughout. My problem is, I (the actor) do not find the story all that funny. Here is where the question of generation gap comes in and resonating to today’s audience. In the seventeenth century, yes, a lie about someone being abducted by Turks on a ship being held for ransom would be funny, because that might actually happen. Today, not a chance. How can I make this funny to me the actor, Zerbinette, and the audience?

In Chris’s movement class we ironically have been working on inclusion-eclosion. Basically, the extremes of emotion on a count of 1-10; 1 being the least intense, 10 being the most intense. I really think laughing (naturally) is harder than crying. To sound like you are really
laughing you have to find what you are laughing at honestly funny. Otherwise, it is completely unnatural, and unbelievable.

2.11.05

JUGGLING: 2 ROTATIONS

YES! What a fabulous rehearsal today! I found out so much. Chris worked my scene for about two hours one on one. First of all, right off the bat, Chris noticed my insecurity with the laughing. His first question was what I have already asked myself: what is funny about what you are saying? I don’t know! After he laughed, he had me put the script down and just improvise what I was saying, with one important piece of information-why am I telling this story. It started to click-why am I telling this story? Certainly not to just repeat the entire scenario of the first two acts. Even if that is the intention, based on the commedia dell’arte scenario structure, that certainly could not be the characters’ intention. Second, I got that I was telling this story to the one person I was not supposed to be telling the story to, but that is funny for the audience, not for me. If I rely on the information Molière gives in his text, Zerbinette basks in the glory of having this information. She’ll tell the first person that crosses her path just to boast that ‘she knows something you don’t know’. Now it started to get fun. If I take that aspect, of not actually finding the story itself funny, but loving every second of telling the story, of broadcasting this forbidden secret I was sworn to secrecy…that’s where the excitement and fun comes out of. As I explored this, especially through improv, the intention became much more clear, and the purpose for telling the story became clear, but I was still having a bit of trouble physically laughing. Not to mention by the end of the rehearsal I started to become hoarse. BUT, I felt a great sense of accomplishment in the development of my character, and a definite road to take.

2.12.05

JUGGLING: 2 ROTATIONS (so close to 2 ½)
After last night’s rehearsal, I was really anxious for today. I needed to start vocally developing my character; I just wasn’t sure how to approach it. Today gave me a really good idea not only where to start, but how to make Zerbinette relatable to our audience. We had our first official run through- which turned into a work through. I sat and watched for the four hours I was not working, and found myself back in the mindset I was in voice class. I just watched. Having a bit of confidence from the night before, I was able to set my mind free, and allow the energy and the impulses to take over. Needless to say, after four hours of observation, I was more than anxious to work. I went through it once and Chris gave me the simple instruction to speak directly to the audience, not to Geronte. This changed everything. Now that feeling of purpose I felt last night of telling this story, was enhanced by telling the entire audience. The stakes were raised. Because in my mind, I wasn’t only telling one person this humiliating story, I was now humiliating that one person in front of hundreds of people. Now that’s funny. Instead of pretending the existence of audience members, I used stage managers, Chris, and human body I could make eye contact. It was so much fun. The laughing quality seemed to morph into a self-gratifying laughter. Chris had noticed that I started to slip into a unidentifiable dialect, elongating my words and playing with them. He then directed me to tell the story as Niki, with bragging writes. Whatever impulse took over, and I began to speak with hints of an urban Hispanic dialect. Again, really geographically unidentifiable. Chris then said, I sounded like a version of Roseann Roseannadanna from SNL. He told me to explore that. I had a general idea of the character, but not so much for imitation. I came up with this New-York/ Spanish accent, with an air of self-indulgence and over confidence. As if everyone was an idiot but me. I had so much fun. Beyond that, with this voice came the body. That over-indulgence and self confidence made my body react as so. Like Columbine, I found myself using my best ‘qualities’: my head was up, my chest was out, and it was happening simultaneously. This is the beginning of my character. I have two weeks to explore the vocal qualities and ways I can play with this voice and body to create Zerbinette.
2.13.05 VOICE WORK

JUGGLING: 3 ROTATIONS

I’m in the middle of applying the Linklater technique to Zerbinette, and I feel a bit lost. There is a part of me that feels like analyzing the voice down to a letter goes against my challenge of creating this character organically. If I apply this technique to the character, weren’t I automatically shutting myself off to other possibilities? I have to ask Kate about this. In the meantime, I want to explore the NRG’s associated with structural and consonant sounds. Chris had said how I was already playing with the language. Have I begun to do this intuitively? With this new found dialect I have found for Zerbinette, it is so much fun playing with the sounds, and living in them, specifically the consonants. I find myself riding each consonant to its fullest. Exactly how Linklater has laid it out for us, as if an instrument. As I finish playing each instrument, I automatically glide into the next…I think I just answered my own question. By using the technique of Linklater, I’m not necessarily analyzing the character’s voice, rather I have the knowledge of this information, to allow my self to play, and create things organically. Am I making sense? Perhaps, two years of this work, has started to find a home in my body, and I am naturally exploring the work, without applying the brain to it. I know that so far I absolutely love playing the consonants, almost snake like, sneaky, gossipy. Quick natures…just like the description of Columbine, ready to escape at any moment. This is so fascinating. These things are falling into place without my pre-analyzing. I am, however going to look into the other NRG’s just for exploration sake….

2.14.05

JUGGLING: 3 ROTATIONS

I’ve neglected to mention some extreme personal circumstances that are going on in my life right now. No need for detail, but worth mentioning, because I feel like it is affecting my work. I keep finding bits and pieced of information about my character, which is extremely exciting, but I can’t
seem to fit them together to create one being. I feel distracted. I’m not memorized yet. I have got to find a way to tie these things together…

Things to think about:

- circus artist
- Rosanne Roseannadanna
- Consonants
- Audience
- Cartoon character?
- Why would the audience want to listen?
- Self-indulged
- Buxom
- What feature of my body do I want to highlight.

2.15.05

JUGGLING: 6 ROTATIONS!!!

I’m a little worried about the masks. We have not practiced with them at all. We were fitted for them, to specifically fit our facial features, but we have not practiced with any sort of mask to get the feeling of our face being covered. Question for Chris: why are the lovers masked in this show, when typically in commedia, the lovers are not masked.

I had a fun idea today while running through my scene. If I put this circus image together with the Rosanne Rosannadanna image, I get an over the top animalistic, bright, newscaster who thinks she knows everything, and can’t wait to tell anyone who will listen. Today, I felt almost like a crazed professor, or broadcaster. One who would slap your hand with a ruler if you didn’t have the correct answer, or if you were talking? There was a bit of anger and frustration that came out of me today. Especially when I went out into the audience asking a light guy (as if he were an audience member) what the name of the man who gave the money. He obviously
hadn’t been paying attention to the play, and I yelled at him. Well, not maliciously, but as Zerbinette. As if I was insulted that he hadn’t paid attention to the last hour and a half. I had great fun with it.

Note: ship=sheep…ship=sheep

Chris says to explore this….hmmm

2.16.05

JUGGLING: 4 ROTATIONS

O.K. I found it. I found it. First of all, yes, ship=sheep, literally. That plays into the Rosanne Rosannadanna image. I literally, will misinterpret the part of the story that talks about a ship, and thing Scapin is talking about a sheep. Now the story becomes funny to me. Why in the world would Geronte believe a story about his son being held hostage on a sheep!? Chris enhanced this by adding a sheep noise every time I say the word. Now I have my own personal lazzi! It was so much fun. At the end of my monologue I keep repeating what Geronte repeats to Scapin, “Why the devil was he doing on that ship?!” Now I would say, “What the devil was he doing on that sheep”. How could I not find this funny…after that I started imitating my vision of Octave literally being stranded on a sheep in the middle of the ocean, which led to a five minute improv lazzi having to do with this poor sheep trying to swim, getting blind by the water, and ultimately drowning. It was really all in fun, until Chris said keep it. I love it! I have never felt freer, creatively free, as frivolous the content may be, I owned it. It was mine. And it felt great. The strings started to tie together. I found the story funny, so much so, I couldn’t stop laughing, the ultimate goal, the vocal came out of the physical and vise versa, and I created it organically. And what’s more, I really feel like I will relate to the audience. I think there are a lot of people out there who feel like they know everything, boast and brag about nothing, and in the end are wrong about everything. I also feel that my dialect, which I don’t think you can really classify as a dialect is a comment on society. I don’t think I reaching too far, when I say today’s society has become a
melting pot. Although I didn’t plan it as such, perhaps my mush-pot dialect signifies the language barrier we face today. It will also force people to listen to me a little more carefully.

2.19.05

JUGGLING: NONE

I haven’t been called the past two rehearsals, but I was eager to get back. TWO WEEKS until we open. Yikes! Still no masks…yikes! I absolutely love my costume. And I have to say, I really love my new found assets. I can not wait to get into it during a run. As I was trying it on, I was started doing my monologue in the dressing room. It fits perfect with everything I have created. I have to say I love my new found assets as well. Who would have thought…it’s perfect. Not so perfect…they want me to die my hair. I have never, ever put anything in my hair before. Not even highlights. I’m scared to death. I don’t think I’m willing to die it permanently, only because I just got headshots that went out to over a hundred companies looking for an internship. Chris is adamant about me having dark hair, which I agree with, but how about something temporary? We spent a while working on our clowns today. Brought in anyone who was willing. Being that everyone we brought in was someway or the other associated with theatre, needless to say, we had no problem getting them to participate. If anything we had a problem getting them to not participate. I don’t think we’ll have a good idea until we get people of all ages, occupations, and moods. I don’t think a room full of eager actors is the best test for us.

In general, we had a really good run-thru today. Everyone seemed to be really connected and excited. There was a lot of improv that was working even at this late point. Chris wasn’t too thrilled with our playfulness this late in the date. He expressed his concern of the improvis, taking over the action of the play, and mudding the actual plot. I have to agree. I know for myself, I don’t want the improvs and lazzis that have been established to get stale. I also think that that sense of healthy competition is coming back into play, with each actor trying to top each other. While I think it’s lots of fun, and bringing a great sense of playfulness to the stage, I can see
where the story is getting a bit overshadowed. I know we are using the element of improv and lazzi as means to incorporate today’s issues, but I think the one’s we have established are enough. We don’t want to make this a show about random political and social improves that aren’t connected to anything. That is what SNL is for. In fact, SNL could be the closest thing we have to commedia dell’arte today. The only thing missing is a plot line. Molière wrote a play. We have to still be able to carry out his intention. Otherwise we might as well just put on a sketch comedy show.

2.21.05

JUGGLING: 10 ROTATIONS! 10 ROTATIONS! (how do I go from zero to ten?)

So we got these floppy plastic masks to practice with, that are held together with a string no more think that a piece of floss. Needless to say, everyone’s was broken within five minutes of wearing theirs. That makes me nervous. It has got to add a whole new dynamic of having your face covered. Could it affect my breathing? My sight? My comfort level? Yes, yes, and yes. That is the only thing I am uncomfortable about at this point. It has got to effect the character, one way or the other, and we open in a week and a half.

2.23.05

Today was our first day at the Rep and on set. All I can say is scary! The rake on the stage is on such an extreme angle I literally feel like gravity is going to take its courts of nature and pull me down. Let alone the effort it takes just to walk up the rake. We can’t. And it’s not just me this time. Blocking had to be changed, for all of us to hold on to a pole to lift our own weight. It is extremely scary, and I have to say unsafe. We were told that no girls will be wearing character shoes. We will all wear jazz shoes with rubber treads on the bottom. I’m not exaggerating, it is that steep. It definitely added a new dynamic. If anything the importance of precise gesture and movement was that much more enhanced. We could not make any frivolous movement that was not fully supported by our own weight or the weight of others, or we would literally roll off the
stage. It’s also a lot smaller than any of us had imagined. We have a few days to get used to it, so I’m not that worried. I’m really more worried about the masks at this point. If the set threw us that much for a loop, I can only imagine adding the element of hindered sight.

After getting acquainted with the set, we had a run through. As anticipated, it did not go smoothly. New space, new set. Longer isles to run down, timing all off. That is the one thing that can not be off in this show. Timing. If the timing is off, the entire concept of everything being in motion is ruined. The comedic timing is ruined, and the interaction with the audience is ruined. There were a few people watching in the audience tonight, who never saw a rehearsal. The cast was a little disappointed to hear barely a half of a chuckle. Have we gotten too carried away with ourselves? Have we lost communication with the audience? From the looks of tonight we have.

Notes from Chris:

- Lost the precise movement
- Articulation/volume
- Heads down. The rep’s audience is raked, and with masks on they will only see your hairline
- Bodies are all too contemporary
- RHYTHM!
- Listen too each other. You are hearing this information for the first time. Allow yourself to be interrupted. Too much anticipation and not the good kind.

2.24.05

MASKS! MASKS! MASKS! We got our masks today. Our real ones. They are actually quite comfortable. They really do fit our face exactly. Other cast members are complaining about sight lines, but luckily for me, mine has huge eyes cut out. Even more exciting, I absolutely am in love with the colors of my mask, and the insinuated makeup. Bright red mask with big huge blue eye shadow. I absolutely love it. I feared once I put the mask on, a lot of my physical would be lost in
translation, but it had the opposite effect one me. For one, when I put the mask on, even though I couldn’t see it as a I wore it, obviously, I envisioned it. It completed my image of a circus artist. It literally looked like a circus lady, it is so extreme. After putting it on, I really took on the image and the physicality of the mask. I was so worried that the mask would intimidate me, but it had the opposite effect. I think it had much to do with the mask work I did with Chris in class. We really learned to respect the mask, and only put it on when we were ready to transform into the character. We had ample training in studying the features of the mask, then trying to create those features symmetrically in our bodies. If I didn’t have that mask work, perhaps I would have been lost. We did not spend any specific time during the rehearsal process working with masks. I have to assume because of lack of time. If Chris had it his way, we would have mastered every technique concerning commedia, but because of the short rehearsal process, his goal turned from mastering the actual technique, to mastering the theory behind the technique.

1.25.05 CREW VIEW

I HAVE DARK DARK BROWN HAIR! I LOVE IT!

Tonight was our first official run through, including the pre-show. We got our first sense of what the reaction would be during the pre-show. It was fabulously fun. For whatever reason, the crew members were not so anxious to participate, but their smiles never left their faces. For the first ten minutes or so, they just observed, and the cast had to use each other to play with. Once a game was established between two actors, we created a very non-intimidating way for the patron to participate. For instance, Brittany and I began to give each other makeovers. She did my hair, with a mimed over size hair brush, that was almost too heavy to hold up. Then when it came time for me to do her hair, I simple couldn’t hold up the weight of the oversized imaginary brush. I did not ask a patron to help, rather ask Chris taught us, I failed and failed again, dropping it to the floor. I would keep making eye contact with the patron standing by, as if ‘no problem, I got this’, but then I would fail again. After about the 6th time, the patron offered their own help, once they sensed a
safe non intimidating atmosphere. It was clear this is how we would have to approach the pre-
show. Your average patron, is not going to want to jump right into the spotlight, in fact, they will
probably do the opposite and run for cover in the bathroom. It would be our job, make it look like,
we were going about our business, and we did not need them to participate, unless they offered.
The only way they would offer is if they felt safe. Really good experience for what we need to do
for the pre-show.

The run went surprisingly well. I think the adrenaline started to kick in, just having
that fresh breath of air with a new audience. There was laughter in places we were not use to, and
no laughter in places we thought there should be, or was used to. The only thing missing was
costumes. We got a chance to put them on in the space, but we didn’t get to do the run in them. I
think that is going to add a whole new energy and rejuvenation to the cast and the pace of the
show. Is it possible that I actually felt stronger with dark brown hair? I felt empowered, grounded.
I’m glad I agreed to it, I think that it really will have an influence on my character. As soon as I
get into my costume.

1.28.05 DRESS REHEARSAL

My character came alive tonight. I loved every second of it. I feel as if the closer opening gets, the
further away I want it to be, simply because I don’t want the rehearsal process to end. I have never
had so many highs and lows in one rehearsal process before, and it has been a complete growing
experience for me. When I put the costume on tonight (about three hours before my first entrance)
way before I took one step on stage, two days before opening night, I felt like I have achieved
something. For whatever reason, I’m getting sentimental, but I feel it, so I’ll write it. This
performance is the basically the culmination of all my graduate training. It doesn’t matter to me
that it’s not some brilliant, dramatic, emotional roller coaster of a role, it matters more to me that I
was, for the first time able to take my two years of training and apply it to a role. Not relying on
anything I have done in the past, any tricks up my sleeve, or mugging to the audience. I was
forced, through the style of *commedia dell’arte* to face my biggest challenges as an actress; connecting the physical, vocal, and spiritual nature of my body to create an organic character. This is what is most important to me. Now, I have to remember this on opening night, so I can remind myself not to care what anyone else thinks of the performance, only what I feel I have accomplished.

3.1.05 MY BIRTHDAY!!!!

JUGGLING: 10 ROTATIONS!

Well, wasn’t the best birthday. What was I saying about highs and lows earlier? Well, I think as a cast we hit our ultimate low. I don’t think there was one thing that went right tonight. We open in a day, and costumes were ripping, lines were dropped, scenes were skipped, masks were falling off, and I’m not kidding when I say sweat was blinding some of the cast members.

During my monologue tonight I felt weighted down. Stuck in quicksand. My feet felt heavy, my body felt heavy. I felt like I was talking in slow motion. I felt nothing. As if I was on auto pilot. Maybe because there are just so many times that I can interact with a pretend audience. This monologue depends on the interaction and the energy of the audience they are willing to give. But what if one night the audience is as good as an empty theatre? How can pull through without feeling like I have a ball and chain linked to my foot?

That’s the thing about this style show. At this point I think it’s a crap shoot. A lot of the cast members are brushing tonight off to ‘we need an audience’. But then we are assuming that this absurd style will resonate with the audience, and they will be willing to actively participate. If we don’t engage the audience from the start during the pre-show- then we are in big trouble. I fear this show is see-sawing between being a fabulous success, or a narcissistic self-gratifying outlet for the actors. Have we become too over the top?

3.3.05 OPENING NIGHT!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!
Sitting in the dressing room….nervous…a little …excited…. yeah…. anxious…. yes….ready…YES! We are packed. I can hear the audience piling in through the sound system in the dressing room. The energy of the cast is amazing. I'm trying my best to conserve mine, because I have to go out for the pre-show, then sit back for an hour and a half until my first entrance….by myself. I got hear so early that I put a full face of stage makeup on…we’re wearing masks. I’ve changed my hair five times, why is it so flat tonight? 10 minutes to places….time to put on my clown nose…. 

3.5.05 continued

It’s late. Really late. I just got home. Let me start from the beginning:

With our clown noses on, Brittany, myself and Lisa linked arm an arm skipping on out to a lobby full of people having know idea what they were in for. As we entered the lobby, we heard a grand applause for Aaron and Mike as they entertained the patrons with an impromptu song with Mike on Aaron’s back. We had stations set up through out the lobby: a portrait making station, a juggling station, a garden, etc. with all of the people filling the lobby, the atmosphere truly felt like a festival, a playground or market place. For about ten minutes, as predicted, the patrons just watched us and our antics together. Soon, all of us had two or three patrons participating in all areas of the lobby. Two male patrons were helping little Mike from getting ‘beat up’ by big Sam. The smiles and laughter throughout the lobby were unanimous, and contagious. Nobody wanted to go to their seats. We literally had to escort hand and hand the patrons to their seat. I think in a sense we became the warm up act of a comedy show, now they’ll laugh at anything. We set the mood of safety, boundaries, frivolousness, and participation. Before we escorted the patrons to their seats, we had our juggling contest…The people gathered round so intensely watching as if we were announcing the winner of a million dollars…It was a juggling contest between clowns. But at this point in the pre-show, the patrons were eager to be involved in any way that they could; some patrons took the liberty to play judge. Though there were a lot of friends and family there of
the cast, ironically, the friends and family are the ones who stood back. It was the complete
strangers that were so willing to participate. The energy was set, the audience was sat, and we
were ready to begin the show.

I took my usual position in the dressing room, pacing back and forth. I specifically
did not want to go into the green room to watch the monitor. I didn’t want to be an audience
member. After my paces got faster and I started to pick my nails, I decided to do something that I
confess I have never done before. I tool the position of the snake tremor position. I was alone in
the dressing room, and I just got down on the floor and put all of the excess energy into the
position. It felt so good. After a few deep breaths, I heard an explosion of laughter and applause
from the audience. I gave in, and went into the green room to watch. As I was watching and
listening to the audience’s reactions, I found myself hearing lines that I hadn’t heard before. I’m
not talking about new improvisations, in referring to Molière’s text. The lines had always been
said, but a lot of them became clear for the first time. The action the became a lot more clear. The
reason for the antics became clear, and from the sound and reaction of the audience the action, plot
and characters were clear to them as well.

As I made my first entrance, I was a little intimidated. My character is so
exaggerated, but isn’t that the point of this style. Commedia’s characters are not supposed to
represent someone, rather everyone. I had confidence that my character was a conglomeration of
every girl, woman, and even man in that audience, and with that I took the stage. I felt as light as a
feather. The energy was flowing, the rhythm was non-stop. I had a dream audience for audience
participation, offering me things that I could have never predicted. By the end of my improved
sheep monologue and my ‘failure’ of not knowing what I was talking about, the audience broke
out into a full applause including bravo’s and all. They understood. My reaction to that is there is:
no way the audience would have reacted that way, if they did not see a part of themselves in the
character and the situation. Yes, it’s silly comedy, but it is the style. I cannot explain the feeling I
felt went I walked off stage and I realized that for ten minutes I had the complete attention of 250 people. They were hanging on my every word, they understood my dialect, and their need to be involved never ended. It was unbelievable.
CHAPTER SIX: CONCLUSION

I chose to write this thesis for two specific reasons. Number one, the role of Zerbinette offered me an opportunity to challenge myself as an actress. For the past two years of my graduate studies, I have struggled physically and vocally, propelling me to create a role applying the physical and vocal techniques I have studied, culminating in a character that would be reached organically. Number two: I specifically chose to do a research based thesis, exploring the art of commedia dell’arte and its place in today’s American pop culture, to challenge and push the academic side of me that I know exists. Both challenges have required me to search deep within myself to find the confidence and ability as an acting student as well as an academic. My graduate education at the University of Central Florida Conservatory Theatre offered me the ability and resources to create the role of Zerbinette in an honest, organic nature and apply that role as research in the exploration of commedia dell’arte’s existence today, using Molière’s The Trickeries of Scapin.

Creating the character of Zerbinette began three years ago when I entered the program. At the age of twenty-two, an age that felt so old and seems so young now, I entered the UCF graduate acting program immediately after my undergraduate studies. Having grown up in children’s theatre, which advocates big smiles and jazz hands, one could not begin to make me understand the true art and satisfaction of creating a character such as Zerbinette through intense exploration of body, voice and spirit. Techniques such as Laban’s effort shapes, attraction-repulsion and Lessac’s musical orchestra were inconceivable to me, let alone familiar. These techniques and others would ultimately be the foundation in which I would create Zerbinette.

In an over-ambitious attempt to simultaneously focus on Zerbinette as an actress and as a researcher proved overwhelming. If I wanted to successfully get into the mind, body and spirit
of Zerbinette, I knew, for me, I could not cloud my mind with analytical information concerning the research portion of my thesis, considering that analysis has stifled my ability as an actress time and time again. I wanted to explore the character physically and vocally, I wanted impulses to take over, I wanted to let others effect me, I wanted to listen. I came to the conclusion very early on in the process, that I would put aside my question (does *commedia dell’arte* resonate today?) concentrating only on the style of commedia, the information regarding my character, and Molière’s play. The application of the play itself, would serve as its own resource in determining an audiences capacity to relate to the seventeenth century humor.

After a successful run of eight performances, it was time to apply my performance to research. I was confident that *commedia dell’arte* does resonate today through an original seventeenth century text, but could not base this entirely on one production. In one of my venting sessions to long time friend and UCF alumni, Ryan Gilreath, I was reminded of our high school production of a *commedia dell’arte* play. I could not believe that I had not thought of this earlier. Our very ambitious high school drama teacher, Byrann Phoebus, had his troupe of inexperienced drama want-to-be’s, compete in a one-act festival using a *commedia dell’arte* script. While other schools were giving their best impressions of Neil Simon, Christopher Durang, and your usual Romeo and Juliet’s, we tackled the bawdy style of commedia: masks, sexuality, traveling wagon and all. What Ryan reminded me of was the fact that unlike UCF’s production of *The Trickeries of Scapin*, our high school production did not attempt in any way to contemporize the text to resonate to a rowdy bunch of hormonal teenagers. Why is this amateur high school production significant? For one very simple reason; using the original text, and commedia’s original elements, making no effort whatsoever in identifying our audience, the style resonated. Teenagers, teachers and judges were laughing, applauding and participating. While other one-act presentations served as nap time, our unknown little high school raised eyebrows and voices. At the time, we thought we were ‘just
that funny’ but of course we weren’t. It was the style that was funny. All of this being said to solidify commedia’s timeless effect on audiences due to its focus on human nature. No matter if it is a high school, university, professional or nursery home audience, people of all generations can relate to the characters of commedia dell’arte because they were representations of everyone, in every time.

At this point in my research, I realized that commedia dell’arte does in fact resonate today, but how does it exist? How has it evolved? Late one night, trapped in a zone of procrastination, I came across an E! True Hollywood Story highlighting the life of Brittany Spears. Yes, this is mindless television, right up until the segment justifying Spears’ gig on “Saturday Night Live.” Knowing that “Saturday Night Live” features skits and guests, satirizing current affairs, I was intrigued to find out how many guest stars host the show to satirize themselves: either to beat someone else to it, or end the discussion of their personal affairs altogether. It is a fact that today’s society is obsessed with the fantasy of celebrity, and the reality of that celebrity’s life. Spears has been poked at, laughed at, materialized, merchandised, the ‘it’ girl and the ‘not-so-it’ girl. When she hosted SNL in the Spring of 2002, Spears appeared on the show not representing herself, but the stereotype of herself that society had made her out to be. Spears went on television, rumored body enhancements and all, and exaggerated herself to the fullest capacity. Perhaps, one could say that the stock characters of commedia, their stereotypical representations and exaggeration of human condition have morphed into today’s need for boxing in celebrities as a certain type, building them up when they live up to our concept of what they should be, and knocking them down when they don’t. Can today’s celebrities be thought of as a modern day commedia dell’arte troupe; Jim Carrey as the trickster Scapin, Katie Homes, Tom Cruise, Demi Moore, and Ashton Kutcher filling in for the dumb lovers, perhaps Donald Trump representing money hungry Pantalone, how about Dr. Phil as the Il Dottore from Bologna (knowing a whole lot about a whole lot of nothing), might I be politically incorrect in comparing
President Bush to the politic, over-confident, courageous/cowardice qualities of Il Capitano-- all of these thoughts stemming from a mindless viewing of the life of Brittany Spears. People today feel the need to box celebrities into a type. Isn’t that how the actors of commedia dell’arte troupes conceptualized their stock characters; by representing political and social images in an exaggerated way as a means to glorify the ridiculousness of their status and exposure?

My mind began to race as I continued my research exploring ‘types’. I couldn’t help but notice today’s situational comedies. Shows such as “Friends” and “Seinfeld”, concentrating on the trials and tribulations of human emotions and communication rather than content, each representing commedia’s stock types-- the ‘poor one’ (Kramer, Joey, Phoebe), the ‘star-crossed lovers’ (Ross and Rachael, Seinfeld and Karen), the ‘manipulated parents’ (the Gellers, the Seinfeld’s), the ‘trickster servants’ (Rosario). I then explored the structure, plots, and characteristics of a situational comedy, in comparison with that of commedia dell’arte. The similarities in plot structure, ensemble casting, and archetype characters became obvious.

Basically, a sitcom or situational comedy is a genre of comedy performance, consisting of recurring characters in a format in which there are one or more humorous story lines centred on a common environment, such as a family home or workplace. Many sitcoms reuse a common mixture of character archetypes to achieve reliable comedic situations from week to week. My observations stated in my initial recognition of stock characters in sitcoms can be justified by the archetypes associated with sitcoms: the naïve fool (Fez in That 70’s Show, Gilligan in Gilligan’s Island), the sage, or problem solver (Ross Geller in Friends, Debra Baroon in Everybody Loves Raymond), the comic relief (Phoebe in Friends, Jack McFarland in Will and Grace), etc. There are numerous archetypes that represent the universal element of commedia dell’arte that is needed in any genre of comedy to be successful. I came to the conclusion that commedia dell’arte may not exist today in its original form, but the element of universality that is the driving force of commedia dell’arte and Molière’s success has remained the same throughout
all generations, and will continue to be foundation of all genres of comedy. It is very simple; *commedia dell’arte* consisted of universal stock types representing the people of that era, a universal setting allowing the audience to laugh at the familiar, and universal plots raising the audience awareness of society. Molière’s use of universality mirrors this same intention of *commedia*, therefore one can say that situational comedies today consist of the universal elements in plot, function and character, keeping *commedia dell’arte* alive and will continue to change and evolve, but ultimately may always be traced back to the *commedia dell’arte* style.

Having no past experience in an academic project of this nature, I found the process of research and organization extremely challenging. In classes such as Research Methods and Theory and Practice with Dr. Julia Listengarten, I was able to learn the necessary resources available to me in the organizational process, but the application of those resources continued to be an ongoing struggle. Personally, the best learning experience I can possibly receive is going through the actual process, failing, learning from my mistakes, and recovering. Similar to my acting process, classes such as Voice for the Shakespeare Actor, Movement, and Scene Study, offered me the tools necessary to stretch my abilities and explore the depths of my voice and body; but applying the practice of these tools to actual performance proved to be the biggest influence in my growth as an actress. My graduate studies not only taught me the tools and resources needed to challenge myself, but taught me the process that personally works for me. For me, this conclusion not only offers the culmination of my acting and research process, it serves as the conclusion of my graduate studies. When interviewing Chris Niess as a major source in the application of *commedia dell’arte* today, the tables quickly turned on me when he asked me a very important question; “What have you gained from graduate school?” I exit the University of Central Florida satisfied with my answer, “I’ve gained a better sense of who I am as an actress, an educator, and most importantly, who I am as a person.”


Niess, Christopher. Personal interview. 17 February 2006.
