

Master Class: Commedia dell'Arte

High School Students – 8 students

One 60-minute Lesson

Focus: To learn the history and basic physicality of Commedia dell'Arte

Key Vocabulary:

- Commedia dell'arte: a comedic theatre form from Italy between the 1300s-1700s consisting of masked slapstick and stock characters.
- Lazzi: short comedic gags from a longer Commedia play; singular Lazzo
- Zanni: the servant, who is often attempting to trick their masters
- Vecchi: the old men characters
- Pantalone: the old man, a miser who loves food, women, and money
- Il Dottore: the second old man, who is an intellectual and sometimes absent minded
- Il Capitano: the captain, a young soldier who boasts about his bravery but will run from the smallest fight
- Innamorati: the lovers, played by attractive actors, mainly without masks

Materials: Half-face character masks, list of Lazzi, laptop, slide show, projector, Bluetooth speaker

Warm Up (5): Game - What are you doing?

Focus (10): Gather together in view of the screen. Introduce a topic and ask for previous knowledge of the subject. Go through slide show explaining: what is Commedia and where/when it was created, five common stock characters (Innamorati, Pantalone, Il Dottore, Il Capitano, Zani), and what Lazzi are.

Activity 1 (15): Have students explore the physicality of stock characters. Re-establish concept of actor neutral. Walk through the room as each stock character. When all five are introduced, play game switching between the characters.

Activity 2 (5): Go over mask etiquette. Have students line up on one side of the room with the masks on the other side, hidden in bags. Each student will take a bag when they feel it call to them. Let them explore their character while in the mask.

Activity 3 (15): Pair up students with different stock characters and give each a Lazzi sheet. Each pair will pick a Lazzo and create a short 1-minute scene based on the prompt. It must have a beginning, middle, and end.

Performance (5): Share the Lazzi with the group.

Clean-up/Closing Circle (5): Shout outs and closing ritual

List of Lazzi

Lazzo of the Inside (2): To create the illusion of ferociousness, Zanni, hidden from the Captain by a door, speaks in several fake voices, such as servants begging him not to beat them anymore.

Illiteracy Lazzo (2): A zanni is given a letter and a basket of 12 figs by his master and told to deliver it to the Doctor. Zanni eats several of the figs before making the delivery. The Doctor reads how many figs should be in the delivery, and points out that the number is wrong, because "The letter says there should be 12." Zanni calls the letter a liar. Doctor commands the zanni to come back with the right number of figs. Zanni goes home, gets more figs. He proceeds to eat several again but makes a particular point of hiding the letter while he does so, so it won't witness the act this time.

Stupid Discovery Lazzo (2): The Doctor, seizing upon some trivial and well-known fact, pretends that he has made the discovery, which is of the utmost importance.

Harlequin Doctor Lazzo (2): A zanni disguises himself as a doctor and prescribes ridiculous and obviously lethal remedies to his patients.

Undead Lazzo (2-3): A zanni has either been mistaken for dead or has deliberately feigned death. When he gets up, other characters believe he's a zombie or a vampire and try to kill him.

Lying Lazzo (2-3): Zanni makes up lies and lies, each more stupid than the last. Optionally, the stupidest lie he thinks of is what convinces the others of his honesty.

Innocent Bystander Lazzo (3): Two Zanni meet each other face-to-face and are armed to the teeth. They heap abuse on each other, relying on others to hold them back physically. Finally, when the Captain seeks to separate them, they strike out at each other with the Captain receiving most of the blows.

Cowardice Lazzo (3): Pantalone and Zanni search for the man who has beaten them. They practice dueling. But when the Captain appears, they suddenly forget how to hold their swords in their fright. Pantalone and Zanni try to persuade each other to fight, pushing the other toward the Captain.