



ZANNIZINE

A QUARTERLY ON-LINE MAG DEVOTED TO COMMEDIA





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Contributions to the mag are welcome from all interested in things Commedia – please enquire or send material for consideration to either of the editors:

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INTRODUCING ISSUE 2 OF ZANNIZINE

Zannizine is intended to be a periodical carrying articles about various aspects of Commedia dell'Arte. These articles will be published in the form of a **pdf** document which may either be read on-screen or downloaded. Each issue will be collected under the heading Spring, Summer, Autumn, Winter. In this way the file will serve as a cumulative record of all the holdings.

This is the **Second issue** -- out in **Summer 2021**.

CommediaZannizine.co.uk is the website host for our magazine. Besides providing access to all issues of the magazine, it will carry short abstracts of articles that will appear in the next issue, along with announcements of events within the Commedia World, such as performances, festivals, films, book reviews, etc.

Introduction to this Issue

So Zanni with his Zannizine has set his foot upon the Cyber-scene; somewhat apprehensively for an ancient mask more at home on the streets of Venice than in such a vast auditorium. But his unseen audience have accepted him, treated him kindly, welcomed him with their applause and even shouts of 'Bravo, well done Zanni'.

All of which emboldens him for a second time to bow before you. He has gained in confidence and has filled his Zannizine with a wide range of items: amusing, informative, exploratory, critical and learned, which he hopes will meet again with your approval.

Our Cover Illustration

One of our interests in creating this Zannizine is to show the extraordinary variety of illustrations that have incorporated the commedia characters. Many, of course, are familiar, but many are quite obscure. They all tell an interesting story, yet often one that is difficult to penetrate at first glance. This is particularly true of our cover illustration, the mysteries of which are discussed at some length in Barry Grantham's article on the etchings of Daniel Chodowiecki.

“Zannizine is for the now – Gathering inspiration from the past, fostering experiment and collaboration in the present and securing a future for the Commedia dell'Arte”. Barry and Bill

LEARNING THROUGH COMMEDIA DELL'ARTE

Having worked with Commedia dell'Arte masks for nearly 30 years now - making, performing, teaching, coaching – I have to admit it: I'm addicted. Why? Here's just a few reasons:

- Commedia **connects me** with people at a primal level.
- Commedia **empowers me** to stand confidently before anyone.
- Commedia **liberates me** to speak truthfully and from my heart.
- Commedia **compels me** to commit myself utterly to 'the moment' leaving every other thought or worry at the door.
- Commedia **frees me** to play, to giggle, to laugh out loud.



I genuinely believe that I am a better person because Commedia dell'Arte is part of my life. I discovered Commedia in 1993 when I met John Rudlin in France at Centre Sèlavy and I became infected with the bug. Life has taken many turns for me, but it eventually brought me to teaching. From the moment I started training as a drama teacher, Commedia dell'Arte was on my curriculum. As we all know, there are many aspects of Commedia that are really *not* appropriate for kids, *but* there is so much value in learning from it. There's a very good reason it is on the syllabus at nearly every drama school – it connects performers with their bodies and raises their awareness of expressivity; it teaches performers how to play, how to connect with each other and an audience, and how to be truly present.



The beauty of Commedia is that characters come with a repertoire: moves, postures, rhythms that can be learnt - plus, of course, a rich history to dive into. This gives students something tangible to latch on to. Even if only experiencing the form for a few hours in a school class, progress can be made quickly: characters can come to life; students can experience instant transformation and receive immediate gratification from others laughing *with* them – not *at* them. The dichotomy of the mask is that it hides, yet also reveals; it covers the face, yet magnifies the body and every gesture. Stepping into hiding, students can find instant confidence, without risk of exposure. To be understood, they must be expressive with their body – something that can take years to achieve with other forms of theatre. Teachers watching their classes work, are frequently astonished by how bold and brave their students can be and recognise a potential in some, that had never been tapped.



It's a kind of magic

Something magic happens when we put on a mask and my greatest joys have come from witnessing others feeling that magic too. I recall one painfully shy lad who came up to me before a workshop and said, whilst looking at his feet, "I'm really sorry but I am not very good at this sort of thing". After refusing several times and watching others take to the stage with masks, he eventually felt brave and took on a zanni. He entered for a solo lazzo, launching into the space with the most enormous energy and a voice that boomed across the room. His physicality exuded confidence and he seemed a foot taller. We all laughed and applauded him. At the end, he took off the mask. There was a smile across his face. "Was that alright?" he nervously asked, "Alright?! What do you think? How did it feel to be up there in a mask?" I asked him. "Awesome! I loved it," he replied and at the end of the workshop he thanked me and left, walking tall, with a grin from ear to ear. He had felt the magic.

Commedia dell'Arte is a fantastic training regime for young actors, connecting them with their body, stretching them to know their extremes. From primary school kids right through to drama school students, I have seen students grow as a result of learning through Commedia dell'Arte. Whether worked at a higher level to achieve nuance, precision, timing, rhythm, complicité or at an introductory level to help overcome personal obstacles and inhibitions; to build confidence, trust and the ability to play again, the power of Commedia dell'Arte has kept me hooked.

Cheryl Stapleton



MANIFESTO!

'Dottore' Olly Crick

All I know in under 10 minutes about commedia (some kind of record)

OK, Zannizine readers, here's some facts disguised as opinions and opinions disguised as facts, and after that I'll try and put it together in some kind of sense as a manifesto which you can use, change, ignore, feel so incensed about that you go and write your own.

Let me get this one off my chest to start with: Commedia characters are not archetypes. Archetype was a term employed by post-Freudian philosopher Carl Jung to theorise how the deep structure of human consciousness operates and focuses on ways we can frame and understand our behaviour. Pantalone di Bisognosi, the seventeenth Venetian merchant is not, please God, part of your internal consciousness and cerebral deep structure. The child, the crone, the huntress, the warrior (m,f & lgbt varieties) etc. are archetypes, as are the Greek and Roman Gods if you follow post-Jungian psychologist James Hillman. Pantalone is not an archetype. NO. An actor, portraying the role of Pantalone, can maybe channel their inner archetypes as part of bringing a mask to life for an audience. If you insist (and you may) that archetypes are a thing, then I will agree, it is indeed productive in rehearsals, to see what Jungian archetypes bring a particular mask to life (and also which don't). Are we good, so far?

Or do you use 'archetype' as a softer, nuanced and nicer way of saying 'stereotype'? Just accept you can use the 'S' word in context, as it really is just a short-hand way of describing behaviour. That latter definition was from Dr Pragyar Agarwal, a very feminist person on BBC Radio 4's Women's Hour ... my sources are impeccable. The Italians say 'fixed type' to describe the masks (tippo fiso), because, well...each mask is a type (old person, lover, military, servant, peasant) and it is fixed in a particular role...no dramatic arc of self-discovery and inner or social change for them!

So, what does this type represent? And now I'm going to get all Marxist on you. Think of your favourite commedia character and add in the details as I give you the list. A type represents a social class. A type represents economic power, or lack of it. A type also represents a specific locality. So, for example, the doctor is upper middle class, has economic power, and comes from (traditionally) Bologna. Let's dig into this a bit. The Upper middle class has no money worries, so is not starving and can employ people to do his dirty manual work. He also comes from Bologna. Well, in the seventeenth century Bologna had the first university in Italy ... hence the title Doctor or Dottore, and a reputation for good food, hence the Doctor's gluttony. How do we show this on stage? By his accent, by his love of academic jargon (or 'macaronic' in the textbooks, which simply means your native language mixed up with Latin ... think heavy jargon, Franglais or Spanglish) and by his shape: imposing, well-fed, and implacably and incomprehensibly knowledgeable. And why is all this funny?

Or more important, why is it funny to us in the 21st century? Two answers: the first being that the performer is skilful at being funny, and the second because the audience share a common belief about all people from Bologna. Unlike Italians, we in the UK, don't have an instinctive visceral reaction to the inhabitants of Bologna; American tourists maybe, but all we know about Bologna is the spaghetti sauce.

THE COMMEDIA MANIFESTO



'DOTTORE' OLLY CRICK

When the Doctor comes on stage, ideally, all you ever suspected about people from Bologna is brought to life, the good, the bad and the ugly. All the traditional/historical commedia characters were regionally based in Northern Italy (Ok, except Pulcinella), so represented rival regions all with 'attitude' about the others. This leads to a dynamic and fluid relationship with an audience as, depending on where you are geographically, the audiences' reaction to each character changes. In Venice, the Bergamese are idiots, but in Bergamo ... well I suggest that if you play the Bergamese servant Harlequin as an idiot in Bergamo, your audience may very well a) turn ugly and b) not fill your hat with silver after a show, which after all is the point of the exercise. I offer you, dear reader, the thought that Commedia originated in a time and place where adjacent geographical regions had 'beef' with each other, and cunning actors played it for laughs on stage.

Wherever you are in the world, though (except Northern Italy) these historical implicit rivalries between regions are not part of your visceral and slightly awkward inherent cultural capital. We do not laugh, sneer; look up to or revile people because of their accent or place of origin in C17th Italy. It is not part of our instinctive knowledge set. But when it comes to where we live ... well, what about Town vs Country, Town vs Gown, England vs Wales, The North vs the South, Stroud vs Painswick, Manchester vs Liverpool, Boris Johnson vs all normal people. There is, sadly, a place where we all really don't want to be seen dead in, as, well, darling, the people there are so awful. As someone famous whose name I can't recall once said 'Every nation has a Belgium'.

I propose that the commedia dell'arte in its heyday was successful because each actor could call on, for the benefit of the audience, class, economic power, and locality to raise a laugh, or at the very least a strong reaction. And why is class important? Because every commedia character comes from a different class, sometimes differentiated by gender, and so when a full troupe performs the audience will a) always have a way in (through the character or type who represents their class or locality) and b) see the entire hierarchy of the society they live in interacting through the 'comic' mechanisms of class and economic based inequality. And you thought it was just about being funny.

Oh, and politics isn't a dirty word, as politics (as apart from politicians) is the discussion about the best use and ownership of resources, which let's face it is just about every play you've seen. And every argument about the TV remote, too, but let's stick with our favourite performed human cartoon, commedia: -

Manifesto and Methodology for Local Commedia.

Commedia is not about trying to recreate C17th Venice, it is about the place where you live.

Your commedia masks should be mapped onto the different areas within your locality ... so, they are instantly recognised by the audience...who will be impressed that you are making a comedy just for them. Who is the Pantalone in your area?

Map local issues and items of concern onto each character.

Make a funny show about local issues and stuff: legitimise and popularise debate about issues by making shows about it. Entertain an audience with all the funny tricks you can, but also engage them with matters that may really have a concern. You do not necessarily have to have an opinion or reach a conclusion (as that would be ideological), simply let the class-based voices of each mask do the talking. And they will.

And have fun doing it ... keep it light!

Olly Crick

WUTHERING HEIST

A review of the comedy shown on Channel 4, May 10th 2021

Zannizine brings you the startling news (if you have not already heard it) that certain of the ancient Commedia Masks escaped the confines of the drama class and the fringe theatre to appear before an audience of thousands at the invitation of Channel 4. Rather sadly they took with them much of the worst of the drama class and little of the best of the fringe theatre. It should be explained that they appeared in an episode of 'Inside No 9' by Steve Pemberton and Reece Shearsmith, writers known for their dark humour and desire to shock. And to those who value the traditions of the Commedia dell'Arte there were shocks aplenty, but Zannizine is here to encourage experiment, new ways of doing things, and to use Commedia in a modern concept should be applauded. So what did we get?



The traditional costumes abandoned for contemporary attire, and why not? We are used to it in opera, ballet, drama, so why not Commedia? A diamond patterned woolly for Arlecchino (clever to find it - or was a quick knitter at work?) camouflage battle dress for Il Capitano - good thinking, shabby tweed and bow tie for Il Dottore and all seem to work for the characters as we know them. But then comes Pantalone in a great camelhair coat and fedora hat and driving a sports car. The alienation further confounding us by a mask with forward thrusting proboscis and forehead all in dark red donating power and not the old age of a Pantalone.



That brings us to the other masks; Arlecchino's changed from black to shades of yellow (better for television) but still on the Sartori mould. The Captain in a quarter mask (i.e. nose and forehead) spoilt by a joke shop moustache and finally The Doctor who had the traditional quarter mask, perfectly suiting the performance by Steve Pemberton co-author and the only member of the cast to present a believable character in Commedia terms.

Such a shame that in dress and manner the Colombina was allowed none of the vivacity expected of the *Serveta*. The only one with a direct line to the viewer, with gags like knowing the future as she had read the script. I don't think she really deserved having her throat cut, which was shown in horror film gratuity (dark humour?). An ideal Innamorato, tall, dark, and handsome, is tricked by the letter *Lazzi* into falling for Il Capitano, while the Innamorata lingers and dies and turns into Cordelia, her father Pantalone, now Lear, carrying her in his arms and laying her on a 'Tomb' where Il Dottore mourns her and confesses that they had been lovers. Meanwhile the diamonds taken in the heist were found by Arlecchino in his sandwich bag and he at least ends happily. Re-reading this last paragraph I can't help thinking this might provide a good scenario for a Commedia performance. It's a pity that none of the performers were the trained, mime/actor/dancers needed for a performance of the Commedia al Improviso.

Barry Grantham

COMMEDIA AROUND THE WORLD



Salvete Omnes, wherever you are and whoever you are. **Salutations** to the greater worldwide **Commedia Family**. We'd like to hear from you, what you are doing, why your Commedia is fabulous, and how commedia works in your neck of the woods. So if you would like to share your practice, network, internationally promote your company, or suggest other ways and places in which Commedia could be done, then please get in touch with either the editors or myself Olly Crick (oldspottheatre@aol.com). Ideally we like articles under 1000 words, and our **Intention** is that this will be regular feature in the **Zannizine**, throwing the spotlight with **frivolous** abandon, Break a leg, or whatever you do before a show, and let us know how you do Commedia in Belgium or Brazil, Cuba or Canada, Texas or Thailand, Palestine or Peru

Olly Crick

Commedia dell'Arte in Boston

By Jay Cross and Chiara Durazzini

Metropolitan Boston Massachusetts is a wonderful region with a strong college atmosphere mixed with a long history (by New World standards). Over the last thirty years, it has also been a welcoming home to practitioners of Commedia dell'Arte. Currently there are two enduring troupes in the area (Pazzi Lazzi and i Sebastiani), plus Professor emeritus Judith Chaffee. Not too many years ago it was also home to the amazing Ian Thal (now in Washington DC).

Boston has several resources that make it a great place for learning and performing this art. Among them are Chiara Durazzini's semi-annual character movement workshops. Another is Boston's strong Early Music community, and the annual Boston Early Music Festival, which can be a great help for any Commedia troupe looking for a compelling and authentic sounding acoustic coloration of their shows. Both i Sebastiani and Pazzi Lazzi make excellent use of local musical genius.

Another thing that both of these troupes have in common is that they are both very friendly, with a lot of outreach to people interested in Commedia locally and world-wide. An example of this is a Zoom video play done for the Biden Inauguration called “**Malarchio**” by a one-time collaboration called “**La Scala di Giacoppa**”. This production had input from several members of i Sebastiani, Chiara Durazzini (Pazzi Lazzi), Olly Crick (Fabulous Old Spot Theatre Company), Jim and Marylin Letchworth (San Francisco Commedia Company), Stanley Allan Sherman (Mask Arts Company), and Cristy Salinas (Minority Report).

Pazzi Lazzi Troupe

Boston-based [Pazzi Lazzi Troupe](#) has always had a good time writing and performing shows, but its main goal has always been to educate its audience about Commedia dell’Arte and Renaissance music and dance.

Founded in 2013 by Chiara Durazzini (trained in Italy by Claudia Contin Arlecchino), Maya Ilana Attia (ex i Sebastiani) and Emanuele Capoano, the troupe has been teaching and performing in New England, New York, Washington DC and California for schools, universities, theater companies and cultural centers. Reaching out to a large variety of people - from kindergartners to college students, to Shakespearian actors - it has been particularly rewarding.



Pazzi Lazzi Troupe

The group has enjoyed numerous collaborations: with Renaissance musicians, writers and with various artists. In fact, the troupe has in its repertoire a few ongoing original shows: *Aria di Commedia – An Evening of Commedia dell’Arte and Renaissance Music*, a container of short scenarios intertwined with Renaissance musical pieces. *Isabella Unmasked – The Legacy of an Italian Renaissance Woman* co-written with Walter Valeri, Dario Fo’s former assistant, and *Pinocchio – A Commedia Adventure*, a children’s show with masks made by local artist Eric Bornstein. Pinocchio’s mask resembles Arlecchino’s mask!

Its shows are created to be easily accessible by every kind of audience (for example, shows often have modern references) that can at the same time be educated and informed about Commedia dell’Arte and how this art form was a multi-disciplinary event mixed with music, dance, and poetry.

Most recently, during the pandemic and the lockdown, the artistic director Chiara Durazzini and her longtime collaborator Emanuele Capoano, who now lives in NYC, had the idea of connecting not only with an audience, but with other Commedia practitioners – actors, directors, writers - and in their weekly online live event *La Commedia in Quarantena*. They invited a special guest on each episode for about an hour of conversation about their activities during the quarantine and their projects for the future. These 16 episodes (visible on YouTube) were an amazing opportunity to meet, connect, and exchange ideas with the “Commedia community” around the world.

i Sebastiani

Originally based at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, but now centered in Waltham Massachusetts, [i Sebastiani](#) was founded in 1990 by Jeff Hatalsky originally with the modest goal of keeping together a bunch of people who became friendly producing a Shakespearian comedy, but without forcing them to memorize lines. Jeff and Jay Cross (current Artistic Director) had both been exposed to Commedia dell'Arte years before by a group that was active briefly at Cornell University in Ithaca New York (gli Illuminati). Jeff proposed the idea and had many takers right away.



[i Sebastiani](#)

Currently i Sebastiani has a dozen active members, plus a few friends Zooming in from the Players' Patchwork Theatre Company (Jess Rudolph et al.). Catherine Crow is the Capo. Active members include Jay Cross, Jennifer & Andrew Kobayashi, Carl West, Chris Shannon, Naomi Hitchen, and others as schedules and commitments permit.

Unlike Pazzi Lazzi (above), at that time i Sebastiani had no one who was trained by a classical Commedia dell'Arte maestro. The group started with a copy of Salerno's translation of Flaminio Scala's 50 plays, a paper-back copy of DuChartre, and a lot of enthusiasm.

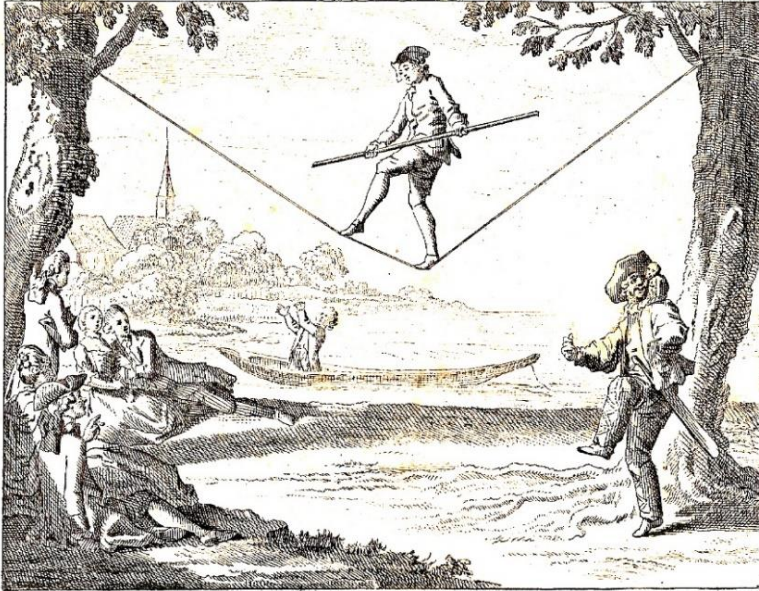
The troupe quickly developed a goal of trying to perform shows that were consistent with the sense of Sixteenth Century Commedia dell'Arte, and to present it in a way that might sometimes allow the audience to imagine that they were back in that time. This initially largely meant learning more about institutions and relations between people of that time and trying to present something that would help the audience understand more about that time and place. Most of the shows were based on scenarios that mimicked Scala's scenarios, but had a few more female characters and perhaps some plot points and stories related to some new flashy idea for the climax. At their peak of performance activity (1998-2005), the group was doing several performances each of about eight shows per year, though practicality has limited this in recent years to one or two performances of about four shows per year. These shows are generally in parks or campgrounds, or in schools or other theaters. It has never been a major money-making operation.

While other troupes have a lot of focus on the stylistic movements of the characters, i Sebastiani has generally kept more of a focus on storytelling, acting, and authentic looking costumes, props and lazzi. During the pandemic shutdown, the troupe has been exploring some of the lesser-known Scala plays, and trying to find ways to make them playable to modern audiences.

Final Note

If you love Commedia, and you are planning to visit Boston, look up these groups and enjoy yourself.

A LITTLE-KNOWN ENGRAVER AND A 'NEW' HARLEQUIN?



Daniel Nikolaus Chodowiecki was born on the 16 October 1726, in Danzig, Poland and died on the 7 February 1801, in Berlin, Prussia.

He was a noted genre painter and engraver who developed a particular talent for recording the life and manners of the German middle classes. Largely self-taught, Chodowiecki, began his professional engraving career in 1758. Following on from engraving several subjects from the story of the Seven Years' War, Chodowiecki established his reputation with an illustrated *History of the Life of Jesus Christ*.

HOW IT HAPPENED by Barry Grantham

Having had an interest in the Commedia dell'Arte over many years, I naturally acquired, without any particular intention to collect, a large amount of material dealing with the subject, including nearly all the early books in one edition or another and many prints and engravings from the 17th and 18th centuries. A few days ago, while searching for something else, I discovered, tucked away in a file marked '*Look into these when I have time*', an early 18th century engraving. It was foxed and stained, about 6"x4" in size and showed four engravings of unrelated subjects, only one of any theatrical interest. I recalled the dealer telling me it was by a Polish engraver 'Chadoveski' or something like that. With a powerful glass I found a signature *D. Chodowiecki* at the base of the print. Then with a little help from Photoshop I was able to enhance it to the picture you see above. That it represents a performance is evident from the elegant figure on the slack-wire, though if the reclining figures on the left constitute an audience they are certainly a laid back one. And before we mention the main figure on the right; is the chap on the boat waving or drowning?

Now this other performer, is he Arlecchino? He has certainly borrowed Arlecchino's trousers and slapstick, but he has no mask and the jacket with the puffed sleeves is hardly typical. There is a monkey on his shoulder with whom he seems to be sharing a joke. He's a nice fellow, warm and likeably Italian. Is he the engraver's idea of Alecchino? No he isn't.





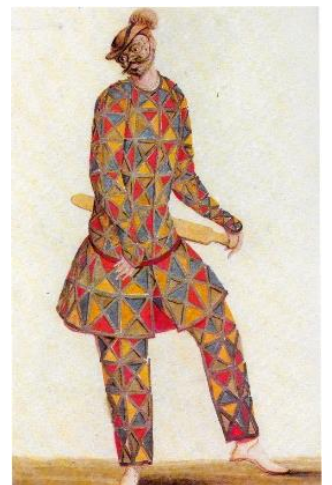
Chodowiecki can show us an unmistakable Arlecchino (under the name of Harlekin) when he chooses. A surly, brooding, Germanic rather than Italian fellow, in black mask, and wearing a complete triangular patch costume from neck to foot. We first see him in the company of two rather pretty ladies. And they do seem to be ladies, well anyway, ladylike and they have quite an elegant apartment. They are not *servette*, nor indeed *Innamorate*. They seem to be, that innovation of the time, the middle class. Here is the scene Chodowiecki depicts for us. (See our Zannizine cover for the full engraving)

Harlekin is not good company. He sits there brooding with his arms crossed and head bent forward. Leaving him to his dark thoughts, let us put our attention to the two ladies. They are working, or at least the lady to the right is working, busy at a curious loom or embroidery frame; and it does seem to be work, not just a pastime that a lady of leisure would indulge in. She is embroidering the edge, the button holes side of the left section of a gentleman's waistcoat. Note the pocket already worked on, and worked on at a pitiful remuneration. The girl to the left is looking at us and pointing at the worker; with the other hand she holds a tape with a few indecipherable words written on it: the name of the gentleman who has ordered the garment? or 'Up the workers'?



Returning to the figure of Harlekin we see the upper edge of his mask clearly enough, then there are very large circular eye openings. The lower edge is undefined. The lips are free and the nose is unlikely to be part of the mask. In fact it seems just a domino or party mask. The costume is interesting. I don't know if anyone has made a detailed study of Harlequin's motley. Diamonds and triangles, elongated or shortened over the years. Chodowiecki has chosen a pattern very similar to that in the watercolour of Arlecchino by Lodovico Ottavio Burnacini (1636-1707).

So who is this surly brooding Harlequin? He is Harlekin Patriot, the creation of Johannes Ewald, a Danish playwright and poet who's published play *Harlekin Patriot*, was illustrated by Chodowiecki. We have kept back two of his engravings to illustrate the second instalment of this article, that will be devoted to Ewald's play and to his colourful life. You will perhaps notice that I use the plural 'we'. It is not to assert my royal status but to tell you that my co-editor Mr Bill Tuck is closely involved in the research on this project.



Arlecchino
by Ottavio Burnacini

DANCE AND THE MUSE OF COMEDY

The following article is based on a talk given to the Early Dance Circle Conference in 2016. The theme of the conference, appropriately, was "Terpsichore and her Sisters", Terpsichore of course being the muse of Dance. Her sister Thalia was the eighth born of the Nine Muses and is recognised as the Muse of 'Comedy and Bucolic Poetry'. Below is a 2nd century AD Roman copy of a 4th century BC Hellenistic statue. She characteristically holds a shepherd's staff in one hand, a tambourine in the other and is seated beside a comic mask.



Thalia, Muse of Comedy, with tambourine and comic mask.

This gets us neatly from the Greek tradition of comedy in 4th century BC to 2nd century AD Italy. Comedy over this 600-year period may have taken many forms, but the closest to the Commedia dell'Arte, which did not emerge until the mid-16th century, may well be the genre known as Atellan comedy which appeared in southern Italy around 300 BC, then migrated north towards Rome, and persisted in some form for another 500 years.

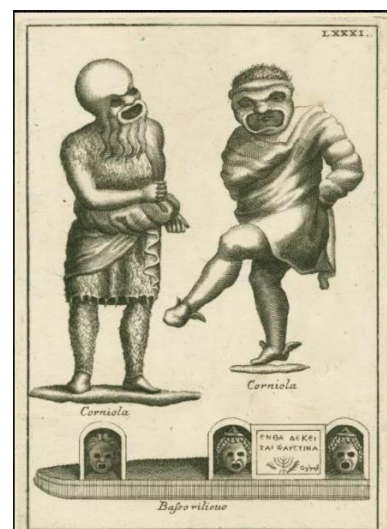
Atellan comedy was defined by its use of improvisation, general bucolic character, rustic charm and occasional claims against it of inordinate use of obscenity, along with political satire. It also employed stock characters identifiable by their individual costumes and masks. We have few scripts or other written records, but from various descriptions in text and depictions on vases we can assume it was a physical improvisatory form of comedy, much like Commedia dell'Arte. The presence of the tambourine suggests that dance -- no doubt of a comic or rustic kind -- was an important ingredient of the

performance. On all these grounds one might reasonably claim Thalia as the true Muse of Commedia dell'Arte (which is probably more deserving of this honour than most other forms of modern comedy).



Melpomene, Muse of Tragedy with tragic mask

Comic dance, therefore, we may safely assume, falls well within Thalia's domain -- unlike the more 'serious' forms of dance represented by her sister muse, Terpsichore, or of 'tragic' drama, the domain of Melpomene, shown here with the mask of Tragedy. An indication of what form this comic dance may have taken, however, can only be guessed at from the few remaining graphic representations or illustrations on decorative vases.



Masked Roman comedians performing a 'rustic' dance.

While we have extensive knowledge from instruction manuals of the court dance that flourished in Italy from the mid-15th century onwards, we can only guess at the form that dance in Commedia dell'Arte may have taken at its foundation in the mid-16th century. It

is safe to assume, however, that it would have included a satirical take on the fashionable court dance of that period.

Not until the publication of Gregorio Lambranzi's *New & Curious Theatrical Dance School* (Nuremberg 1716) do we have any explicit description of 'comic' dance of the kind that is likely to have been part of the Commedia dell'Arte repertoire. This is taken as the source for much of our understanding of what 'comic' dance meant in the 18th century. But, of course, the tradition of comic dance goes back much further than that. English comedians, such as Will Kemp, Richard Tarlton, and the travelling troupes that went abroad to Europe, were well-versed in dance as part of their basic skill set.

Tom Slye & Will Kemp

15th century Morisco dancer

Earlier still, we have accounts of morisco dancers entertaining with displays of virtuosic skill in movement.

What is the thread that links all these different manifestations of 'comic' dance? Can we define it in such a way as to make sense of the very idea of dance and comedy? The following will explore this notion in broad detail and will bring forward some suggestions as to what it means as a performance style and how it relates to more 'serious' forms of dance. This begs the obvious question "What exactly do we mean by 'comedy' and how might dance be related to it?"

Comedy and the Grotesque

The one feature that seems to link all the examples that immediately spring to mind of comic dance, whether 15th century morisco, 17th century commedia, the stock comic characters of classical ballet (such as the old woman in *La Fille Mal Gardée*) and modern manifestations such as the dances of Max Wall or Laurel and Hardy, is this idea of the 'grotesque'.

While it may be the case that not all humour is about the grotesque, it does seem to be an element in much of it, whether or not it involves dancing (think of Roald Dahl and his farting giants or Giles's cartoon grannies, for example). The dictionary definition of grotesque as "comically or repulsively ugly or distorted" is a useful guide to what is meant by this style of representation (synonyms: malformed · deformed · misshapen · miss-proportioned – (the opposite being suggested by the antonyms: ordinary and normal). Thus, any very ugly or comically distorted figure or image may be defined as grotesque. It might also be applied to behaviour that is incongruous or inappropriate to a shocking degree (synonyms: outrageous · monstrous · shocking · astonishing). The farts of Dahl's BFG or the non-PC outbursts of Giles's Granny, for example, would clearly fall into this category.

But the misshapened and deformed are not in themselves funny. Something else must be added to transform the pathetic into the humorous. The first factor is, of course, that the deformity must not be 'real', it is a creation of the actor or dancer and can be undone at any time. The second factor I believe is that the context in which the deformity is created must contain some contrasting element of 'beauty' or 'elegance' by which the deformity can be measured.

An example of this is the 15th century morisco in which the deformed characters of the dancers surround the stationary 'lady' figure, in an act of homage or supplication.

Classical ballet offers a similar contrast, for invariably the grotesques (witches, old women, monsters) are featured in the context of elegant ballerinas.

In the 18th century world, it was the contrast between the elegant performers of the 'belle danse' and the grotesque creations of the 'grotesco' dancers that provided the humour, along with much of the intrinsic drama – just as in 'beauty and the beast'.



Morisco dance (Israel van Meckenem c.1500)



The Grandmother's dance in *La Fille Mal Gardée*

This pattern is most apparent in the creation of 18th century pantomime, where the antics of the commedia sections are rendered humorous largely because of their juxtaposition alongside the serious drama and dance of the 'classical' section: Perseus and Andromeda act out the classic dramatic tale (virgins to be devoured by sea monsters to appease the gods – beauty and the beast once again) only to be interrupted by the actions of Harlequin and Columbine as they seek to

avoid the clutches of the elderly Spanish nobleman (grotesque) to whom she has been promised. The novelist Henry Fielding made frequent satirical and derogatory comments about pantomime at the time:

"The comic part of the English Pantomimes being duller than anything before shown on the stage could only be set off by the superlative dullness of the serious portion, in which the gods and goddesses were so insufferably tedious, that Harlequin was always a relief from still worse company."

"The Serious [part] exhibited a certain Number of Heathen Gods and Heroes, who were certainly the worst and dullest Company into which an Audience was ever introduced; and – which was a Secret known to few – were actually intended so to be, in order to contrast the Comic Part of the Entertainment, and to display the Tricks of Harlequin to the better Advantage."

In all these cases it is the juxtaposition of beauty and ugliness that creates the humour, transforming the 'grotesque' into the 'comic'. The role of dance is to animate the grotesque, bringing the static deformed image – whether of sea monster, or decrepit nobleman -- to life, and to enhance the elegance of the opposite 'beautiful' figure.

That comedy can arise from such a juxtaposition is born out in the author's personal experience by theatre company [Chalemie's](#) reconstruction of one of the more famous scenes from the 18th century pantomime *Perseus and Andromeda*, in which the heroine Andromeda is "tied to a rock with iron bands / the destined prey of a monster foul / that from yon' cave doth e'en now growl". The audience

invariably laughed at the improbable juxtaposition of beautiful maiden with grotesque but hapless monster.

The role of the *innamorati* in Commedia dell'Arte is similar. Just as the **action** of the play always revolves around these two characters -- Flavio and Isabella, say -- so must their performance and deportment reflect their role as the 'straight characters' in the piece, including how they might dance: not in a comic fashion, but in a way to make that of the 'grotesques' more humorous. An 18th century Isabella, for example, would dance in the French 'belle danse' fashion of the time (generally known as 'baroque dance') not in comic mode.

Comedy and the Whimsical

While a number of the dances described in Lambranzi, along with the examples shown above, might properly be described as 'grotesque', others are of a style that might be more appropriately described as 'whimsical'.

According to the dictionary, the term describes things that are "playful, quaint or fanciful, especially in an appealing and amusing way or of acting or behaving in a capricious manner (synonyms: volatile · capricious · temperamental · impulsive)".

The majority of the scenarios in Lambranzi's collection could be considered to fall within this category: farmers and their wives bumping their belly's, fat peasant girls catching kisses in their aprons or cooks quarrelling with wooden platters. Such actions do not really count as 'grotesque' but are simply 'whimsical'. But again, what exactly is it that makes them humorous?

My argument once again is that it is the explicit or implicit contrasting of these 'base' characters with the more 'refined' characters of the 'ordinary' world that creates the humour.

Following Fairfax in *The Styles of Eighteenth Century Ballet* -- and based on the descriptions of authors such as Angiolini, Noverre and Gallini -- one can distinguish four broad styles of theatre dance (or ballet) cultivated in the eighteenth century (and even into the nineteenth) and these "characters", as they were sometimes called, were distinct "not only in the kinds of personages portrayed or the sorts of costumes typically used but also in the choice of steps, ports de bras, and attitudes, and even in the manner of executing these movements or positions."

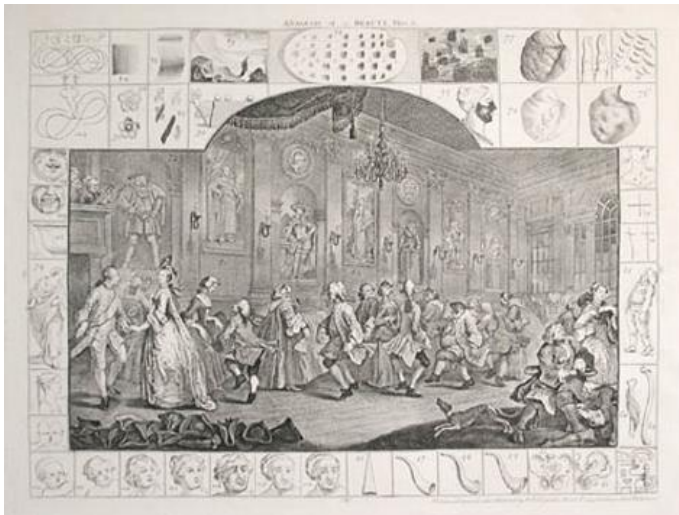
According to Gallini (1762) these four types may be listed as:

- the 'serious' or heroic (and identified with the 'belle danse' style of dance)
- the 'half-serious', demi-caractère or galant
- the comic
- the grotesque

Other contemporary writers (including Noverre) often merged these last two classes into one, the 'grotesque'. My own subdivision into the grotesque and the whimsical seems more in line with modern language usage and allows us to view comedy (and the comic) as a separate phenomenon that arises out of the interactions **between** these four divisions.

Comedy, Dance and Social Class

One form of interaction between our four basic groups is that between the 'elegant' (read: 'heroic', 'serious') and the grotesque, which has already been touched on above. Another, and more subtle form of interaction, is that between the whimsical and the 'galant'. The best example I can find of this is Hogarth's well-known illustration of dancers at a ball. Here he shows both the 'whimsical' dancers (sometimes verging on the 'grotesque') interacting with more practiced, elegant, or 'galant' dancers at a grand social ball. The whole is framed by representations of Hogarth's own attempt to formalise the components of the 'beautiful', reduced to its essence in his idea of the 'line of beauty'.



Dancers at a Ball in Bath (by William Hogarth)

Much of Hogarth's humour is in fact derived from just this sort of interaction between the whimsical and the galant – though he does on occasion move to include the heroic and grotesque, such as in his illustration of country virgins and decrepit old men.

In summary, dance is used to delineate character, and each character thus defined can be assigned to one of the four primary classes. Comedy follows largely from the interaction – whether

explicit or implicit – between these classes. While they do not need to both be present at the same time or location, this often serves to heighten the comedy. For example, Max Wall creates a wonderful grotesque in the impersonation of [Professor Wallofski](#), but I often think it would be even funnier if it were danced alongside a ballerina such as Debora Bull!



Max Wall as *Professor Wallofski*

Thus, I would argue, mixing the sublime and the ridiculous is a primary means of achieving a comic effect. Even in the muted form of whimsical versus gallant, the effect is generally humorous.



Resortes and Joan Page dancing in the film
Al son de mambo (1950)

The final example of this kind of juxtaposition leading to a wonderfully comic sequence is a short video of the Cuban dancers [Adalberto Martinez](#) (known as "Resortes" – which roughly translates as "Rubberlegs") and his partner, the American actress and dancer Joan Page. They are dancing to one of the great 'Cuban' hits of the late 1950s by Perez Prado (who by then had moved to Mexico) *Mambo No. 8*. As humour on so many different levels: social satire (both intentional and unintentional), masterly comic timing from both dancers and band leader, and pretend enthusiasm from quaintly dressed musicians. Brilliant!

Bill Tuck

THE MAGIC OF SANDS

Behind the walls of a non-descript nineteenth century warehouse by the river Thames in Rotherhithe lies a magical space. You enter, appropriately, through a bright green door, into a theatrical wonderland. Tardis-like, the interior expands to encompass an entire world of strange and beautiful objects: a vast print collection of pictorial representations of past times; rail upon rail of meticulously created historical costumes; a full working cinema; arriving finally at a toybox theatre, a gem-like reconstruction of the sort of performance space that would have been familiar to those 16th century players who first created the Commedia dell'Arte. Built originally as a stage set for the filming of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, this little theatre encapsulates all the intimacy, fantasy and make-do improvisation that must have been a feature of those early performance spaces.



Nowadays, of course, it includes a sophisticated array of cameras for catching a performance on video from all angles, for broadcast distribution via the Internet, thus enabling the audience to be magnified from the 70 or so seated in the theatre itself, to a potentially world-wide population of thousands. This may even be seen as the real future of theatre: not in the direction of increasingly vast auditoriums seating thousands, accompanied by a comparably great array of complex technical stage machinery designed to create the illusion of magical transformations; but towards small, intimate spaces in which the nuance of performance can be viewed by thousands through the magic of direct broadcast. The Tardis image is again appropriate, for though Sands Theatre seems tiny from the outside, on the inside it is a huge global space.

For the past four years -- from 2017 to 2020 -- [Sands Studios](#) has been the home for a Mini-Festival of Commedia, mounted annually at some point near to the 25 February, the designated date of World Commedia dell'Arte Day. Many of the performances at these festivals have been captured on video and the process of curating this collection of material is ongoing. A selection of clips is available for viewing on our YouTube channel ([links](#)). Future plans -- once this bothersome pandemic is over -- will include a programme of performance workshops in commedia, along with an annual mini-festival featuring well-known groups working in the area of Commedia dell'Arte. To this end, Sands Studio has agreed to act as host for the London Commedia Centre. Alongside live performance, continuing experiments in direct broadcast should lead us towards the ultimate goal of enabling a global audience to experience the delight of intimate theatre provided by the magic of Sands.



ENDS AND ODDS

THE ZANNIZINE ON-LINE DISCUSSION

SUMMER ISSUE -JULY 2021

SUBJECT: 'THE PROBLEM OF IL MAGNIFICO'

In our opening Spring issue, I raised the question of '*Indecency in the Historic Commedia*' and invited a debate on the subject (see Bill's related article). The word 'Debate' implies two strongly held opposing viewpoints. For this issue I have retitled the feature as a 'Discussion'. The subject for this 'Summer' issue was raised by fellow columnist Cheryl Stapleton in response to queries from a drama teacher. I have given my first thoughts and invite your comments.

In my *Playing Commedia*¹ I dismiss the problem by saying that Il Magnifico was a Pantalone variant or on occasion a separate mask, without giving any indication of how he should be played. I felt that including speculation would 'muddy the water' for our so clear picture of Pantalone. I have only used the term on one occasion, when the casting of an actor was so at variance with the Pantalone persona as we understood it, that we dubbed him Il Magnifico, which suited him well.

John Rudlin mentions that the original appellation might have been 'Munificent' rather than Magnificent - a more apt sarcasm.² One thing I would like to draw your attention to, is the series of early engravings to be found in Duchatre,³ and also in Cesare Molinari's *La Commedia dell'Arte*⁴ who gives the principal character as Il Magnifico - a pre-Pantalone of true dramatic possibilities. In fact, fingers crossed, if we do get back to Sands for the 2022 Mini-Festival I hope to attempt a dramatized version of Il Magnifico and his two Zanni.

More please on 'Il Magnifico'

1 Barry Grantham, *Playing Commedia*, Nick Hern 2000

2 John Rudlin, *Commedia dell'Arte*, Routledge 1994

3 Pierre Duchatre, *The Italian Comedy*, Dover 1966

4 Cesare Molinari, *La Commedia dell'Arte*, Mondadori 1985

Barry Grantham

THE ZANNIZINE ON-LINE DEBATE

SUMMER ISSUE -- 2021

INDECENCY AND THE COMMEDIA DELL'ARTE'

One of the more interesting features of the recent BAFTA awards ceremony was the prominence given to the role of **Intimacy Coordinator**. That such a role should now be considered essential in plays and movies is a measure of just how far current theatrical conventions have moved on from the more restrained practices of earlier times. It is the quest for ever more 'realistic' presentations of sexual intimacy that drives this need for actors to be protected from discomfort or embarrassment.

The same pressure does not appear to have ever arisen in commedia performance. This is only partly to be explained by the fact that -- as stated by Barry Grantham in posing the original question -- commedia never has been all that indecent. But a more important factor is that commedia has never pretended to be 'real life'. The characters in commedia -- as expounded by Olly Crick in his recent manifesto -- are not to be confused with real persons, but should simply be regarded as ciphers, as 'characters'. That, in short, is why we wear masks -- to prevent the audience from seeing us as -- and confusing us with -- real individuals.

This situation points up an interesting difference between conventional theatre and commedia: where the former has moved inexorably towards making the audience believe that what is taking place on the stage or screen is 'real' -- or even towards a kind of 'hyper-reality' (c.f. *Game of Thrones*) -- the commedia performer has always distanced themselves from trying to create this illusion.

It takes great skill, of course, to be able to act in a way that makes an audience believe that your creation is a real person -- a skill quite properly recognised by ceremonies such as BAFTA. But this is a very different kind of skill from that of the commedia player, whose real persona must always be subservient to the mask!

Bill Tuck

Harlequin's indelicacies
Another contribution to the debate:

"The indelicacies I mean, are the frequent and significant wriggings of Harlequin's tail, and the affront that Pierrot is apt to put upon the modesty of Columbine, by sometime supposing, in his search for her lover, that she has hid him under her petticoats... Another impurity that gives me almost equal offense is Harlequin's tapping the neck or bosom of his mistress, and then kissing his fingers".

In: "Adam Fitz-Adam" writing in *The World*, October 1753. Quoted in Paul Sawyer - *The Popularity of Pantomime on the London Stage, 1720-1760*. In *Restoration & 18th C Theatre Research*, 1990, 5,2ck

Barbara Segal

AN ANECDOTE CONCERNING DR OLIVER CRICK

In the world of Commedia, Dr Oliver Crick needs no introduction; but exercising my prerogative as co-editor, I have insisted on relating an anecdote from the early days, when I started giving mime classes at the then recently opened Pineapple Studios. The classes proved very popular and attracted many talented and eager students. Among them, especially talented and eager, was the young Olly Crick. He attended regularly and after a couple weeks boldly approached me (ever bold was Oliver) and told me how he enjoyed the class but added:

"It's not mime you know?"

"Not mime? Well what is it then?"

"It's Commedia"

"Commedia, Eh?"

And that's what it's been ever since.

Barry Grantham

BIOGRAPHIES OF THE CONTRIBUTORS

Cheryl Stapleton

Cheryl Stapleton started out as a dancer and actress, training in movement and physical expression at École Philippe Gaulier, and specialising in Commedia dell'Arte with John Rudlin, Dr Olly Crick, Mike Chase and Antonio Fava. Cheryl founded **Learning Through Theatre** in 2013 as an education theatre company, specialising in Commedia dell'Arte, delivering workshops and performing, under the name of **The Troupe**. She has taught at over 200 schools including RADA, Fourth Monkey Acting Training, Circomedia, UCL, The Actors' Workshop, University of Gloucestershire, Berlin Metropolitan School and International School of Amsterdam.



Olly Crick

Olly Crick has been a commedia enthusiast since classes with Barry Grantham in the 1980s, has performed with the Unfortunati, The Medicine Show, Venice Carneval in 1990 and ran The Fabulous Old Spot Theatre Company. He publishes on Commedia, likes to talk about it a lot and even has a PhD in it. Superpower: commedia dramaturgy.



Jay Cross

Jay Cross is the Artistic Director for i Sebastiani, performing for over 30 years, usually as the Dottore. Starting off as an amateur, he has used his physics and engineering background and fortunate friendship with several like-minded scholars of diverse backgrounds to deconstruct and understand as much of Sixteenth Century Commedia dell'Arte as possible and has used that understanding to teach and spread the art to other amateurs across all North America.



Chiara Durazzini

Chiara Durazzini is a native of Florence, Italy, and moved to Boston in 2000. She is the co-founder and artistic director of the Commedia dell'Arte troupe *Pazzi Lazzi* for which she performs, teaches and directs, and of the amateur Italian theatre company *All'italiana – Boston Italian Theatre Company* which involves expats and Italian speakers in staging shows by Italian playwrights. With these two companies, Chiara has acted and directed original shows like "Aria di Commedia" (2014), "Isabella Unmasked – The Legacy of an Italian Renaissance Woman" (2017) and "Pinocchio – A Commedia Adventure" (2020), and renowned plays like "Questi Fantasmi" (2018) by Eduardo De Filippo and "La Giara" (2019) by Luigi Pirandello. She has also acted for several local Boston companies: some of her favorite roles include Tinker Bell in "Pan" (Company One) and the Virgin Mary in "Anger Box" (Apollinaire Theatre Company). A dance and



physical theater lover and practitioner, she has trained with the Commedia dell'Arte master Claudia Contin Arlecchino and with Tina Nielsen, former Odin Teatret. She obtained her Master's degree in Art, Music and Theatre from the University of Bologna, Italy.

Barry Grantham

Barry Grantham is a performer, director, and teacher of Commedia and related physical theatre. His background is professional theatre; his maternal grandfather was a Music Hall artiste and his father a classical actor, who first aroused an interest in the Commedia dell'Arte in his son who, as a teenager, worked as a mime artist and dancer.

He has performed and given master classes in Norway, Sweden, Holland, Germany, and in Italy itself at the **Theatro Municipali, Reggio Emilia**. He currently writes, directs and appears as a guest artist with various companies as well as running the Intention Commedia Company.

His books *Playing Commedia* and *Commedia Plays* (featuring some of his plays that will be familiar to some of you: *The False Turk*, *Home from the Wars*, and *Pantalone Goes a Wooing*) are published by Nick Hern Books.



Bill Tuck

After early studies on the flute with Stephen Preston at the Guildhall School of Music in London he developed an interest in the problems of staging eighteenth-century music theatre, particularly dance and pantomime. He is a founder member of **Chalemie** and performs in Commedia with Barry Grantham's **Intention Commedia Company**. His principal interest is as a writer and deviser of eighteenth-century style pantomimes. With Chalemie he has created and performed in shows in Berlin, Ghent, Moscow and Krakow, as well as touring throughout the UK. With Barry Grantham he organized the series of mini-commedia festivals at Sands Film Studios, beginning in 2017.



As a musician he has played and taught pipe & tabor for many years and developed a particular interest in the 15th century dance repertoire. As accompanist he has worked with a number of dance groups and dance teachers on courses and performances of early dance. He is also an enthusiastic performer upon the sackbut (or early trombone) and other brass, both early and modern.



Thank you for reading our Zannizine. Yes, it is 'our' Zannizine, but we hope it will also become your 'ZanniScene'. We need your articles, your suggestions, your experiences, your ideas, and your point of view. In the meantime, we're working on the Autumn Edition

The End!