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Steven was nominated for a Victorian Green Room Director's Award for his production of Roger Bennett's *Funerals and Circuses*, with music by Paul Kelly. This play had sell-out seasons at the 1992 Adelaide Festival of Arts, the 1993 Melbourne International Festival of Arts and the 1993 National Festival of Theatre, Canberra.

Nicky Peelgrane is a teaching artist, actor, director and producer of Drama for and by young people. Nicky holds a Bachelor of Arts and a Graduate Diploma in Secondary Education (Drama and English). Since beginning teaching in 1997, she has worked with students from Early Education Units and Years 1 to 12, as well as Continuing Education Drama for adult students. Nicky has worked with students from Middlemount (Queensland) to Muswellbrook (NSW) and many places in between. She has produced and directed countless performances, working with students to help them artistically articulate the issues they believe to be important.

Both Steven and Nicky have contributed to the writing of this book. Many of their experiences were shared when Nicky was cast in Steven's play, *Stardust*, in 2000, which toured schools in Brisbane, the Gold Coast and Sunshine Coast. Nicky and Steven have drawn upon their personal experiences and professional practice in their determination to assist students, teachers and performers in the study and playing of Commedia in an Australian context.

The illustrator, **Benjamin Drake**, was born in 1987 and raised in the pine forests of Queensland's Sunshine Coast hinterland by a pair of wild artists. These artists, wishing their children to have a good income later in life, made them promise never to go to art college. Although Benjamin devoted his studies to sciences in high school, his arty ways got the better of him and upon his graduation in 2004 he enrolled in the Bachelor of Animation course at Queensland College of Art, where he is currently studying and living in Brisbane.

COMMEDIA OZ

Playing Commedia in Contemporary Australia

Steven Gration and Nicky Peelgrane

includes STARDUST,
an Australian Commedia script
by Steven Gration

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CHAPTER 2

Spag Bol: Historical Perspectives and Transforming to Australian Landscapes and Contexts

AUSTRALIAN FLAVOURS

There are many different ways to make a pasta sauce. You can make a tomato sauce from scratch using fresh tomatoes, garlic, basil, oregano; or spoon a ready-made sauce from the jar straight onto your plate of spaghetti. And there is a huge range of variations in between. Similarly, there are many different ways of playing *Commedia dell'arte*. But if we are to serve our apprenticeship well, we first need to understand the principal ingredients that make up *Commedia*. Once we have learnt the basics, we can then create our own original recipes, as others have done before us.

Everything Changes

If we were to faithfully preserve its tradition in mothballs so that we could only examine it like a dusty butterfly pinned to a piece of styrofoam out of its natural environment, *Commedia* would quickly become boring, little more than an interesting study in history—a ‘dead’ language, like Latin.

But *Commedia dell'arte* is full of life. Like the humble spag bol, it has enjoyed numerous interpretations and incarnations throughout its history. And it is only natural that transporting the genre to Australia results in similar reinvention. The beauty of *Commedia* is that there is no right or wrong way to play the characters. Actors, writers and directors through the centuries have found new ways of interpreting *Commedia*; it is constantly evolving for new users and audiences as recipes and languages evolve to suit the times and the cultures in which they find themselves.

The beauty of *Commedia* as an art form is that it translates so well into other contexts and cultures. And its connection to Australian culture is a perfect fit.

Arlecchino possesses more than his fair share of the larrikinism for which we Australians are famous, and it's perhaps no small coincidence that Pantalone's eyebrows remind us of a certain past Australian Prime Minister! Our ability as a nation to be able to poke fun at ourselves provides a wonderful platform for endless Commedia possibilities.

THE COMMEDIA CHARACTERS

This Chapter provides a brief outline of the historical interpretation of the Commedia characters, as well as parallels to more contemporary characters. The historical information is by no means exhaustive nor is its interpretation sacrosanct. We would suggest that each Commedia student conducts his/her own research into the characters (see the poster exercise at the end of this Chapter); it is incredible how much information is actually available. This is an art form that has been around for five hundred years, and Commedia elements have existed in cultures around the world for eons before this. One thing to remember is that because this has largely been an improvised tradition, you will find huge variations in interpretations and apparent contradictions from one source to the next.

One reason for the contradictions in characters can be attributed to different actors over the ages finding differing character aspects to explore and make famous. Another reason can be attributed to the playwright, director and actors having to continually find the right balance between characters that both contrast and complement each other in status, plot function and context within any given scenario. For instance, in *Stardust* (see Chapter 7), the contemporary Australian Commedia play, it doesn't make sense for Brighella to be the stupid type because that is Arlecchino's function in this particular story.

It's All Good, Mate

What to do? Embrace the differences as possibilities for exploration. The modern interpretations should be treated in the same way as the traditional—everything is up for grabs. The character interpretations we have provided in this book explain and explore the timeless essence of the characters, and will help Commedia students find the 'keys' to the characters, before making them their own and running with them.

It's remarkable how the same 'types' of people surface and resurface across ages, cultures and boundaries. What does this say about humanity? Carl Jung, one of the founding fathers of psychoanalysis, posed the idea that people across cultures generally share common instincts and basic drives. He called this phenomenon the 'collective unconscious'. Perhaps this is one of the reasons why Commedia characters have enjoyed such a long history.

[Commedia characters] never become extinct, and will only die when the last man on the planet expires. Their host is humanity. They are as much life as breath and heartbeats.

(Tasca: 1992)

The Commedia Ingredients for our Spag Bol

The mix of characters that make up the Commedia reflects the ingredients that constitute the recipe for a good spag bol, in substance, proportion and picancy:

Tomatoes (our most basic ingredient)	Arlecchino
Onions	Pantalone
Minced meat	Brighella
Pepper and parmesan	Pulcinella
Oregano	Columbina
Garlic	Capitano
A dash of red wine	Dottore
A sprig of basil for garnish	The Lovers
The recipe note-taker	Tartaglia

THE SERVANT CHARACTERS

Arlecchino



Arlecchino mask by Meghann Montgomery
Photograph by Lucas Dawson

Arlecchino is the quintessential mischievous servant—a larrikin and petty thief, who loves playing tricks on people. His mask is often very dark with high cheeks and cat-like eyes. Traditionally a black strap was worn under the chin of the actor wearing this character mask. While he likes to play tricks, he is often

more than a little stupid, but possessing a good deal of cunning in his exploits. He is usually the central character who holds the plot together, the person the audience wants most to succeed, the loveable everyman character. He is innately curious about the lives of others, and a gossip, although not usually a malicious one. Arlecchino is an enthusiastic participant of any plot, always ready for a new adventure. While he is full of quicksilver energy, he is mentally slow and tends to be the last to grasp even the most basic concepts—a delightful contrast that allows for much comic exploration. Offshoots of Arlecchino can be found in France and England where he is referred to as Harlequin. The traditional French unmasked valet, Pierrot, seems to be a combination of Arlecchino, an *inamorato* with a pinch of Pulcinella's simplicity and a sprinkling of the Captain's bravado.

Obsessions

In love, hungry, in trouble.

Countermask

A brilliant idea when it is least expected reached through illogical logic; extreme sadness. (For more on countermask see Chapter 4, p.87)

Relationships

He usually is in love with Columbina but is not quite as smart as her. Servant to either or both of the old men (Pantalone or Dottore) and usually underpaid, which gives him licence to play tricks on and cheat his master/s out of money. Often friends with—or a lower status servant than—Brighella.

Movement

A low centre of gravity; ready for action of any description. Agile, playful, moves quickly, ability to mimic, dance, juggle or tumble. He often leads with his hands and eyes. However, Arlecchino is extremely slothful when it comes to work and will do anything to avoid hard labour.

Animal Characteristics

Blue heeler dog, feral cat, monkey.

Voice

Often high-pitched like Mickey Mouse; light and playful.

Costume

Traditionally, he wore a suit of multicoloured diamonds which evolved out of a costume of rags. In *Stardust*, Arlecchino wore board shorts and a garish Hawaiian shirt.

Modern Day Character Resonances

Film:

David Gulpilil's character Neville Bell in *Crocodile Dundee* (Oz).

Shane Jacobson's character Kenny in *Kenny* (Oz).

Jackie Chan in *Rush Hour*, *Shanghai Noon* and *Shanghai Knights* (US).

Johnny Depp's character Captain Sparrow in *Pirates of the Caribbean* (series of US/UK films).

Mike, the eyeball character, from *Monsters Inc.* (US animation).

Donkey in *Shrek* (US animation).

Television:

Ahn Do, comedian, actor, 'Dancing with the Stars' contestant (Oz program).

Trevor Marmalade on the 'AFL Footy Show'—always ready for a visual gag or joke (Oz program).

The late Steve Irwin for his high energy and enthusiasm levels in 'Crocodile Hunter' (Oz series)

Bart Simpson, especially with his flair for mischief, rebellion and childish behaviour, in 'The Simpsons' (US animated series).

Bob Denver's character Gilligan in 'Gilligan's Island' (US series).

Other:

Warwick Capper, ex-AFL footballer, entertainer, TV presenter and metermaid.

Mickey Mouse (animated character from US cartoons).

Monkey, the traditional Chinese character (theatre, TV series and film).

Asterix in the *Asterix* stories (French comic books).

Tigger in *Winnie the Pooh* (children's literature, by A. A. Milne).

Oz Names

Alex, Trevor, Warren or Wozza or Wooza, Gazza, Dazza, Kenny.