



BEYOND THE STAGE

Dramaturgy Notes for the Illinois Shakespeare Festival

THE MASK BENEATH THE FACE: CARLO GOLDONI AND *COMMEDIA DELL'ARTE*

In the published script for *One Man, Two Guvnors*, each character description is followed by a fancy-sounding Italian name. These are stock character types from *commedia dell'arte*, an Italian form of improvised comedy that flourished from the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries. How does Richard Bean's modern comedy adapt this tradition? What exactly is the relationship between Francis Henshall and Truffaldino?

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To answer that question, we must look at the life and career of one Carlo Goldoni, a Venetian playwright who lived in the eighteenth century. His most famous play, *The Servant of Two Masters* (1753) was about a foolish tramp who tries to serve two aristocrats at the same time. Goldoni borrowed heavily from *commedia*

characters and comic routines, which were popular during his time. In turn, Bean adapted Goldoni's comedy in 2011, setting the play in the seedy underworld of 1960s Brighton. In other words, Goldoni is the middleman in the story of how a style of popular masked theatre in Renaissance Italy transformed into a modern smash-hit on West End and Broadway.

Goldoni's parents sent him to school to become a lawyer, but the theatre bug bit him hard. He studied ancient Greek and Roman plays, idolized the great comic playwright Molière, and joined a traveling theatre troupe in his twenties. However, Goldoni eventually grew dissatisfied with *commedia dell'arte*, which could be inconsistent and haphazard because the performers relied so much on improv and slapstick. He called for a reformed Italian theatre in which actors would stick to pre-written scripts. Ultimately, Goldoni wanted to elevate popular comedy to a respectable artform. His ideas clashed with those of his contemporary Carlo Gozzi, who condemned Goldoni for tampering with Italy's proud folk tradition. Angry and frustrated, Goldoni left Venice for Paris, where he worked as the manager of the Comédie-Italienne, the home base for Italian-style theatre in France.

Goldoni's attempt to refine *commedia dell'arte* into literary drama had several important effects. First, it preserved these stock characters and comic scenarios in writing so that they could survive after the performance style faded away. But Goldoni was not content with simply writing *commedia* down. He fleshed out the characters, imbuing these cardboard cutouts with human complexity. He gave them poetry to speak, rather than the crude lines that actors ad

libbed. Most importantly, Goldoni unmasked these characters. Traditionally, *commedia* performers wore masks made out of wood or leather that represented various caricatures such as Pantalone, the greedy old man, and Brighella, the roguish innkeeper. Goldoni still uses these character names in his plays, but now they have human faces, able to change their expressions and have subtle reactions to one another. It is these revamped characters that later turn into the scheming Charlie Clench (Pantalone) and the mischievous Lloyd (Brighella) in *One Man, Two Guvnors*.



Despite these revisions, there are still traces of traditional *commedia dell'arte* in the modern play. Francis is instantly attracted to Dolly, one of Charlie's employees, as soon as he meets her. There is no romantic build-up, no time for them to get to know one another. This subplot can feel forced (or even a little creepy), except for the fact that Francis and Dolly are based on Truffaldino and Smeraldina, two servant roles that always ended up together in *commedia*. So you could say that their love affair is part of their DNA as stock characters. Francis and Dolly are meant to be—thanks to Goldoni, who envisioned a new form of comedy that mixes the best elements of improvised performance and written drama.



Pantalone & Brighella
(Source: Wikimedia Commons)