Pee Jokes, the Italian Renaissance, Commedia Del'Arte: Crash Course Theater #12

Crash Course: Theater
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Hey there, I'm Mike Rugnetta. This is *Crash Course Theater*, and today we're going to be moving from the Middle Ages into the Renaissance, a time of discovery, innovation, beauty, sophistication... and comedy.

In this episode, we're going to take a trip to Italy, exploring the elegance of the Neoclassical revival and the invention of one of theater's best-loved popular forms, commedia dell'arte. That's right, the golden age of the poop joke has dawned.

[*Crash Course Theater* intro]

The Renaissance in Italy lasts from roughly 1300 to 1600. That earlier date overlaps pretty significantly with the Late Middle Ages, because no one really puts out press releases letting everyone know when a historical era has ended. Plus, cultural change takes time.

A lot of the forms we'll talk about today were in vogue at the same time as those cycle plays and their pageant wagons. But mystery plays and passion plays never really caught on in Italy, which may explain why other genres flourished.

The Middle Ages were about God—and yes, I am generalizing, because they were also about feudalism and crusades, itchy clothing and the plague—and the Renaissance was about people—and also, still, the plague.

The Renaissance introduced humanism, the idea that earthly life isn't just a vale of tears that might lead to heaven if you're good, but is maybe worthy in and of itself. This encouraged an upsurge in human achievement—music and medicine and visual arts and physics, and theater too. Hey, that's us!

Theater starts moving forward by looking backward. We know from our episode on Hrotsvitha that Roman drama never disappeared. The plays of Terence and Plautus and Seneca were read throughout the Middle Ages, but they weren't performed. They were enjoyed for their style, in the case of the comedies, and their moral lessons, in the case of the Senecan tragedies.

In the 1300s, Italian writers started trying to make these plays their own, but it took a while for them to come up with anything as distinctive as Hrotsvitha's work. Most early attempts were based on Roman tragedies, but by the late 1390s, Italians were writing Roman-style comedies too, with twins and mix-ups and, you know, all the good stuff you've come to expect.

For a while, these plays were written in Latin and they weren't intended for performance, but in 1429 a bunch of Plautus's plays were found, and when Constantinople fell a bunch of Greek manuscripts returned to Italy. By the late 1400s, some nobles wondered, "Hey, what if we turned the banquet hall into a theater and put on Plautus?"

And then a few years after that, they wondered, "Hey, wouldn't it be more fun if plays were written in the vernacular, rather than in Latin? And spoke to how we live now?" And then, presto: Neoclassical plays, so called because they are classical and also new.

At first, writers churned out Plautus-like comedies, with young lovers, mean parents, and cheating wives. Even Nicolo Machiavelli got in on the action with *The Mandrake*. These comedies were called commedia erudita, or "erudite comedies", because they were based on classical models that you had to be well read to know.

But were they all that classical? Yes and no. By 1498, Aristotle's *Poetics* was back in circulation, and people were actually reading it by 1550. But their takeaway was pretty different from Aristotle's.

Italian writers got rid of choruses, moved toward greater realism, and often wrote tragedies with happy endings, which we now call tragicomedies. Italians decided that tragedy had to teach useful moral lessons, an idea borrowed from the Roman critic Horace, and they really ran with it.

Almost all of these plays were privately produced by courts or schools. They were staged to honor some person or event. Nobles made up the audiences, and nobles usually made up the actors too. If you were a lower-class person, your chances of seeing commedia erudita in performance were slim. But luckily, commedia erudita wasn't the only theater game in town.

A lot of Italian Renaissance theater's innovation didn't have much to do with the plays themselves. Italians were wizards of stagecraft. They were like, "I'll see your trapdoor and your medieval hell mouth and I'll raise you crazy advances in perspective. And also rigging." Wassup. Always got somewhere to go, that guy.

The staging renaissance gets started when 15th-century Italians discover Vitruvius's teatise *De Architectura*, which was written around 15 BCE and is basically the *Poetics* of architecture, chockablock with set design protips.

The discovery of single-point perspective painting transformed theater sets, too, helping them look three-dimensional. Though it helps if you're the emperor or the duke or the count or whatever, because single-point perspective really only works if you're standing smack in the center, which is where the nobility were placed. Typical.

In the 17th century, we get shifting scenery, which is accomplished with wing panels that slide in and out on grooves in the floor, among other methods. When a scene changed, wing panels slid out. Each set of painted wings that disappeared revealed more, just behind.

In the late 1500s, gardens and banquet halls give way to permanent purpose-built theaters, possibly the first in Europe since Roman times. In Vicenza, the Olympic Academy built the Teatro Olimpico, which opened in 1585 and was designed by rockstar architect Andrea Palladio.

It's very busy and looks a lot like a Roman theater got shrunk and enclosed. It wasn't used very much, but it influenced later theaters. Its widened arch may have contributed to the proscenium arch, which you'll recognize in most Broadway theaters today, arches or rectangles that frame the stage from the audience's perspective.

In Renaissance Italy, how-to books also circulated detailing effects to make gods and clouds rise above the stage, or rocks and trees sink below it. Ocean scenes were common, as were fire effects and contraptions that mimicked the sound of wind and thunder. No electricity for a while still, so candles and oil lamps lit the action, which typically made the theater hot and hazy.

All this was pretty cool, but not as cool as the commedia dell'arte, which means "artful comedy" or "the comedy of players". It's the earthier, lustier counterpart to the commedia erudita, and it has an even more dramatic special effect, women.

That's right, from 1560 on, women were finally allowed on stage in Italy. They won't show up on stage in England for another century. More on that later.

Scholars can't really agree on the origins of the commedia dell'arte, but the most popular theory traces its lineage from our old lewd

friend, the Atellan farces. These had been preserved by strolling minstrels and jesters during the Middle Ages.

Like the Atellan farces, commedia dell'arte relies on stock characters and improvised situations that allow the actors to string together conveniently memorized lines in an array of prearranged comedic bits called *lazzi*.

Basically, a *lazzo* is a gag. There are books listing hundreds of *lazzi*, like hat *lazzi* and food *lazzi* and pee *lazzi* and, just, countless *lazzi* involving butts.

The mix of *lazzi* and improvisation meant that while most stories progressed along the usual Plautus/Terence/Menander-like lines, an audience never knew exactly which *lazzi* a stock character would throw into the mix, or how other stock characters would react.

Waaaah! That was a *lazzo* of fear. It was hilarious.

Stock characters were based on regional types, so each had a specific style of dress, a specific accent, and even a specific food associated with them. Each traveling troupe of 8-12 actors had a slightly different mix of types, but here are some of the main ones: masters, servants, and lovers.

"Lazzi" some more in the Thought Bubble.

There are usually three masters. The captain, or "capitano", he's a Spanish military guy with a mask and a cape and a sword and a mustache. He's swaggering and braggy until he actually gets near a fight, and then he's a coward.

Pantalone is a miserly merchant type from Venice, who wears a red vest and a long coat, plus a mask with a big nose and a grey beard. Even though he's old, he lusts after young women, and the young women are not psyched about it.

The doctor, or "il dottore", is—surprise!—a doctor from Bologna, masked and dressed like an academic. The doctor is a friend of Pantalone's, and he needs everyone to know how smart he is, so he uses a lot of Latin words and phrases. Some of the grosser urine *lazzi* involve him, and his wife is often cheating on him. Between the Latin and the urine, I mean, can you blame her?

And now, the servants, who are often called *zanni*. They're mostly men, although some troupes had women who played maids. Harlequin, or "Arlecchino", wears a green mask and a diamond suit. He carries a wooden sword that he hits people with. He's wily and acrobatic, but also kind of simple. And boy, is he hungry! He speaks in gibberish.

Pulcinello was a less defined type, but he's from Naples and dressed in a hunchback and a pointy hat. There was another servant, Brighella, who was mean and king of a lech, but he's really more of an 18th-century figure.

Finally, the lovers. They are nice and fresh faced and clean cut. Sometimes, they're a little stupid. They don't wear masks. They're kind of boring. Still, it's their love, often thwarted, that gets the plot going.

Thank you, Thought Bubble.

We still have books of *lazzi*, and even some commedia dell'arte scripts, though they're not that great. Later dramatists, like 18th-century writer Carlo Goldoni wrote plays based on commedia dell'arte, so you can check out a work like *The Servant of Two Masters* if you're curious.

What we do know is that these plays follow conventional narrative lines, but what happens in the middle is fast and gross. And apparently really, really funny, because the genre lasts for centuries, into today. Ever hear of slapstick? Yeah, that was a term for Arlecchino's wooden sword—a slap stick. Right? Oh, come on, you're no fun.

So the next time you see some rude physical comedy, amaze and delight your friends by telling them the wedgie they just saw derives from an Italian Renaissance form. And then hope that your friends still talk to you. Don't avoid eye contact with me. Where are you going?

Next time, we'll get serious, sort of, when we set sail for England and explore Elizabethan theater, before some bloke named Shakespeare shows up and hogs all the candle-powered spotlights. Until then, curtain.

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