



Claudia Contini Arlecchino. Photo: Fausto Tagliabue

Claudia Contin Arlecchino

The Motherland of Arlecchino

Abstract: In this article the Italian performer Claudia Contin Arlecchino reflects on her personal and artistic experience with the masque of Arlecchino (Harlequin) acquired in 35 years of practice, teaching and research. Working on different “archetypes” of Commedia dell’Arte (Zanni, Pantalone, Balanzone, Arlecchino, Brighella, Lovers, Captains, Servants, Courtesans, Pulcinella), and interrogating fundamental aspects of her own techniques and training, the author offers an insight into several components of the performer’s craft, such as the body, gymnastics, acrobatics, dance, impulses, rhythm, and exercises. What is at stake is the reconstruction of an extra-daily behaviour, which allows to give new life to an acting technique based on tradition.

Keywords: Harlequin; Arlecchino; Commedia dell’arte; Actor’s training; Extra-daily techniques

Whatever I narrate about the amazing Land of Arlecchino (Harlequin) is concrete and realistic, tales truer than truth. They are so true that they do not correspond to ephemeral reality or the passing of time.

Commedia dell’Arte is not based exclusively on the masks and costumes that tradition has handed down to us, but also on actor’s work which puts the body with its movement and deformations at the centre of the attention. Actors must be willing to redesign their bodies according to non-naturalistic postures, movements and behaviours, strongly marked by anthropological and archetypal inspiration stemming from at least five centuries of selection and theatrical stylisation of very complex human behaviours.

I have been performing on stage as Arlecchino and as an expert in Commedia dell’Arte since 1987. The first question I ask myself is: “What is the basic training an actor must undergo to aspire to become an inhabitant of the amazing Land of Arlecchino?”

During my long teaching experience, I have elaborated a form of pre-warm-up and actor’s training. I have dealt with extra-daily body languages with strong components of physically deformed postures, as for example in Commedia dell’Arte.

The fundamental aim of this learning path is the actor’s “dilated body”, which is to say the rediscovery of an amplified body through stage presence. The training uses the reconstruction of a “grotesque-popular” behaviour inspired by the Commedia dell’Arte masks and the iconography of the multifaceted theatricality developed in Italy since the 16th century. The principles of gestural exaggeration and grotesque distortion of the postures characteristic of the ancient Commedia dell’Arte masks allow us, even today, to imagine and reconstruct distinct amplified characters with a strong physical impact.

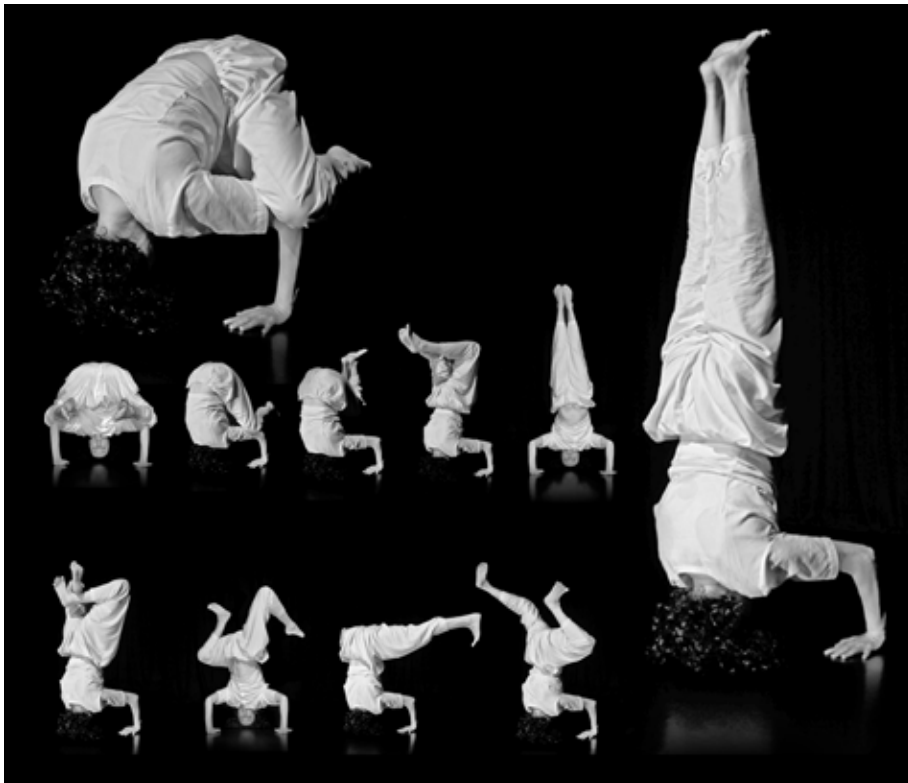


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The typology of the exercises included in my pre-warm-up come from different theatre, gymnastic, martial and circus codes. During the process, the forms and characteristics of the Italian tradition's masks are rediscovered and continuously reinvented in a timely dialogue with theatre anthropology's understanding. Specific exercises result from the comparison with theatre traditions of other cultures, such as kalarippayattu and kathakali from southern India, Beijing and Hebei Opera from China, topeng and baris from the island of Bali in Indonesia, the Egyptian belly-dance and more.

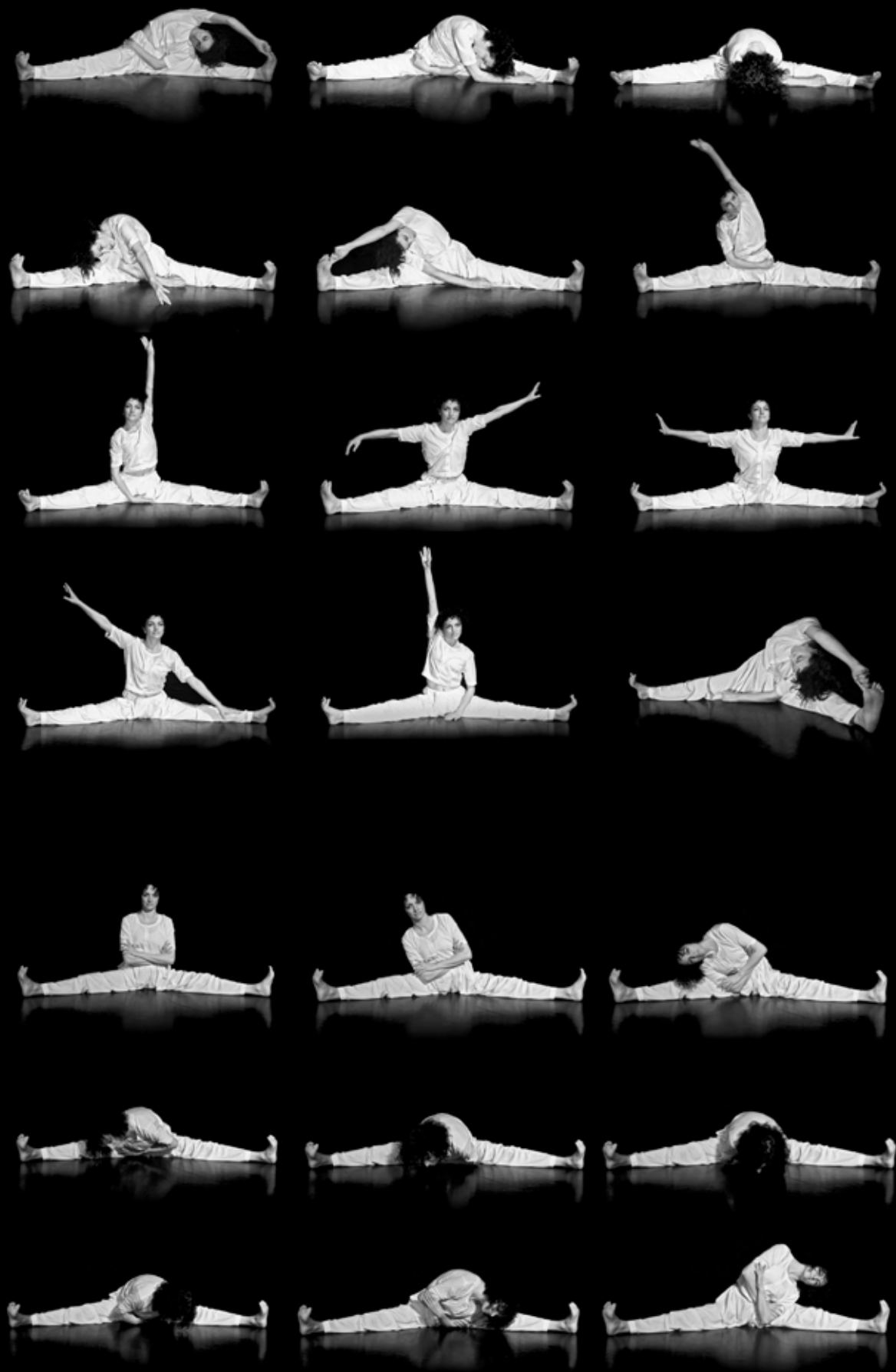
I call this warm-up and actor's physical preparation "contortionism of deformations". It takes place before confronting training, rehearsals or performance. A gradual work with the sequence of "contortionism of deformations" resumes and develops the functionality of forgotten muscles, for a healthy Commedia dell'arte restoration of possession" of the body. The sequence functions as preparation and safeguard of muscles and joints before facing gymnastic and acrobatic acts, as well as all the complex movements and postures of the art of the actor.

I have summarised the main phases of the sequence in photographic tables:



Contorionism

P. 298: The world upside down. - P. 299: Water salutation. Photos: Vene Vieitez



Body dissection

The second question I ask myself is: “What is the process of identification that has helped me become one of the inhabitants of the Land of Arlecchino?”

Some techniques of Decroux’s corporeal mime make it possible to go through all the points of the body with a refined analytical dissection of the movements, as if our body were a tame and slouchy puppet.

The corporeal mime’s body image is based on particular ‘hinges’ situated in correspondence with some joints or fundamental movement centres. I imagine each single part of the body as autonomous from all the others. I don’t execute the movements in a soft and fluid way, but with swift and precise spurts, which become more and more powerful and explosive as the training progresses.

The first ‘hinge’ of the head is located at the nape of the neck, exactly at the point where the last cervical vertebra meets at the base of the skull. Keeping the whole body still, including the neck muscles, I execute small, sharp, rapid movements, like those of a bird’s head with small lateral bends to the right and left, small chin shifts up and down, small twists to the right and to the left.

The second ‘hinge’ of the neck is in an area that runs between the two clavicles, above the sternum, and exits on the back at the level of the seventh cervical vertebra. With the shoulders firmly held and the first ‘hinge’ locked I execute lateral slants to the right and left, tilts back and forth, and twists around the axis.

The third ‘hinge’ of the solar plexus is at the base of the sternum and is approximately aligned with the sixth or seventh dorsal vertebra on the spine. Keeping the whole lower part of the body still, I move the thorax in sharp movements: lateral tilts, forward and backward bends, twists on the axis.

The fourth ‘hinge’ crosses the belly by the navel to reach, on the spine, the fifth lumbar vertebra. Keeping the pelvis still, I move the full axis of the upper part of my body: lateral tilts, forward and backward bends, twists of the lumbar and abdominal muscles.

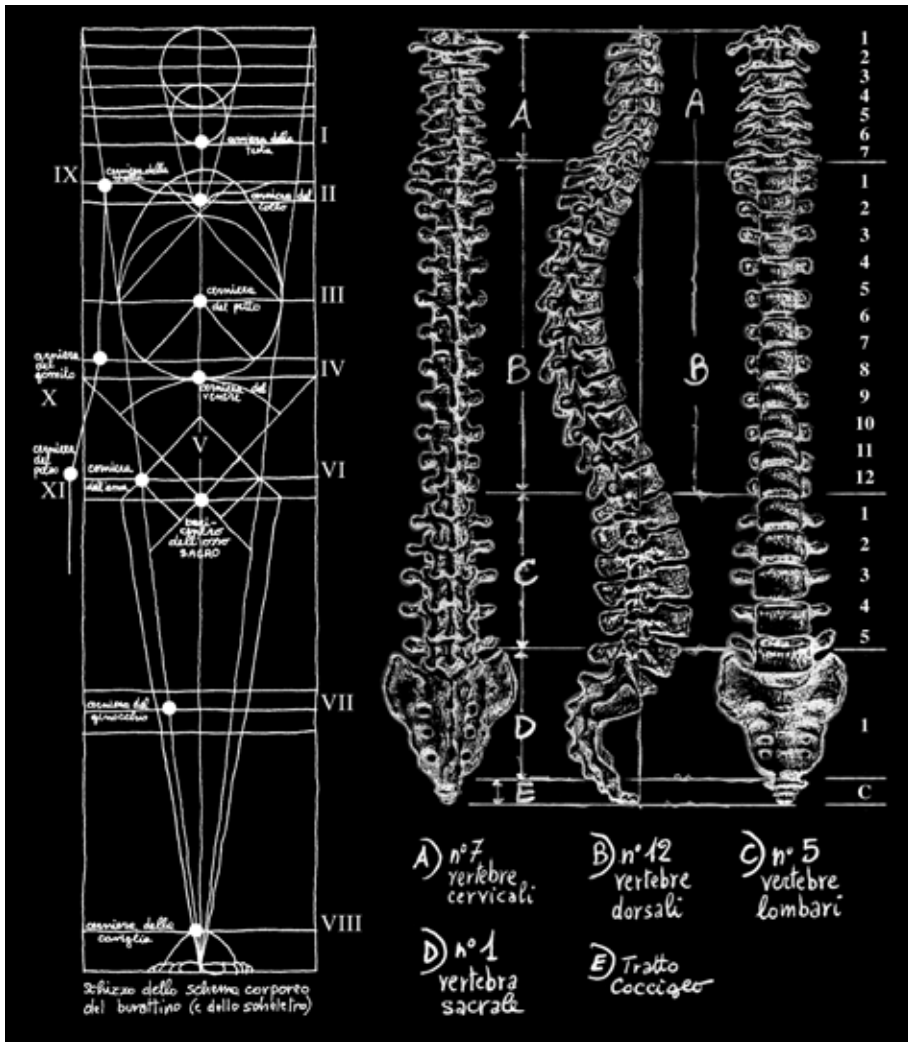
The fifth ‘hinge’ of the pelvis is the large sacral vertebra and it rotates and bends like the previous ‘hinge’, but the impulse and movement control are located in the coccyx. While moving this part back and forth or swinging it sideways, I keep the feet, knees and the entire upper body firmly in place. With the coccyx, I imagine drawing an arch, circles parallel or perpendicular to the ground, half turns to the right and to the left, and so on. I consider this ‘hinge’ as the actor’s main centre of gravity when working with masks.

The sixth ‘hinge’ is double and consists of the articulation of the two hips. It requires a good balance on one leg, while the other leg is kept as rigid as possible and is swung back and forth or rotated around the joint between hip and femur. It is a very useful ‘hinge’ for the accurate expressive control of the different characters’ gaits.

Also the seventh ‘hinge’ is double, consisting in the articulation of the two knees. Without moving the pelvis and hips, I move the knees in small starts to the right and left, forward and backward; then, more fluidly, I trace small circles parallel to the ground. To allow these movements of the knees I keep the soles of my feet still, allowing margins of flexibility in the ankles.

The eighth 'hinge' is at the articulation of the two ankles. The impulse to move the feet in different directions with sharp steps or fluid twists starts here.

At this point I move back to the upper limbs to develop all the possibilities of flexion, fast movements and contortion of articulation of the shoulders, elbows and wrists to accentuate the expression of the hands and its gestural possibilities.



Body scheme with the main movement 'hinges' and division of the vertebrae and spine (Didactic notebook by Claudia Contin Arlecchino, 1999)

Going through the functioning of the body 'hinges' I realise how important it is to master the movements starting from the awareness of the spinal work.

One of the fundamental and most effective exercises is the one I call “the whip”.

I imagine standing in front of a wall, leaning one part of the body on it. I start from the knees that protrude and touch the imaginary wall. Then I let the thighs slowly slide forward until revealing the pelvis, while the knees straighten and retract. Then I push the abdominal muscles and the bottom ribs forward until showing the solar plexus, while the pelvis retracts at the same time. I continue to push forward the upper part of the chest and the base of the neck until placing the chin against the imaginary wall, while the chest retracts. Then I let the chin slide downwards, as if caressing the wall with the nose, the forehead and then the skull cap, until suddenly the knees snap forward again and the head relaxes backwards. From here I start another wave of the body repeating the passages more and more fluidly until obtaining only one wave movement that rises quickly from the bottom until the head springs forward. These curves that travel along the spine are like those that run along a whip when we make it snap.

Once the ability to “snap” the spine like a whip is obtained, I can try the opposite path, backwards, starting from the head until the wave is unloaded on the ground. Or I exercise lateral whips, which develop the ability of the spine to flex and wave laterally.

Hands and arms drawing in the air

In the techniques of corporeal mime, great importance is given to the movements of the hands, which become capable of drawing in the air non-existent objects, spaces and settings. I achieve this mimic ability through specific exercises.

For example, to place a hand on an imaginary surface I divide the movement in three basic phases: a *counterimpulse*, moving the open hand away from the chosen point of arrival, with the fingers straightened backwards; a *support*, with a quick forward movement of the hand that stops at the chosen point; a *relaxation*, which allows me to detach the hand from the support without losing the illusion of the surface being there. I obtain this by retracting the hand while the fingers relax instantly.

A useful exercise for the training of the mime’s hands is the “glass wall”. I imagine having a transparent glass wall in front of me and I search for the edges of the wall with my hands. The rest of the body can move a bit, but the palm and fingers of both hands must remain placed on the imaginary wall at the same point in space, otherwise the mimicry illusion vanishes. I can remove one hand and place it on a different point of the wall, then I move the other hand, and so on. The more plausible the illusion becomes, for the viewer or for the actor identifying in the action, the more the exercise is well done.

Another useful exercise to develop the arms flexibility, based on imitation, is called “bird flight”. I should organise the work of my arms as if they were wings, involving the three ‘hinges’ of the upper limbs, all the pectoral and dorsal muscles, of the trapezium and neck. Initially, the exercise should be done by keeping each segment of the movement separate: I lift the shoulders as much as possible; I keep the shoulders up and lift the elbows to the same height; holding the elbows up I lower the shoulders rotating them slightly backwards, keeping the elbows still I lift the wrists; holding the wrists in place I rotate the elbows downwards, I unroll the hands along all the finger joints while

lowering the wrists. At this point I lower the hands with the fingers pointing upwards until the arms are almost resting on the hips; I execute everything with effort, as if the claw-like bent fingers were scratching two vertical side walls.

I obtain the effect of a flying body by jumping higher and higher at the same time as I lower the upper limbs energetically. Thus, I can build different flying styles: the broad and violent one of the eagle, the wide and quiet one of the seagull, the more clumsy and heavy one of the pigeon, the messy and jittery one of the chicken, the short and rapid one of the sparrow, and so on.

All these exercises are important for the comic actor who needs to develop the elasticity of the hands for the rich expressive and narrating gestures required by the characters of the *Commedia dell'Arte*.

I consider the body as an assortment of combinable elements, upon which it is possible to graft analytically a whole series of postures, figures, movements, forms of behaviour for a future character.

Before being able to construct a new theatre character with my body, I must free myself from the everyday person, from those behavioural habits that are naturally inscribed in me, which tell my story and present my private personality. To understand the meaning and expressiveness of a stage behaviour, I need to strip my body of all private attitudes that life has designed on us, to build a sort of neutral body, rich in energy and stage presence and ready to accept the many nuances of a future theatre character.

To produce this stage presence, I need a particular extra-daily tension in my body. I must always move on stage with a greater tension than what I need to act and move in everyday life. For this reason, I assume a basic neutral posture in my stage behaviour. The "neutral" body of the actor is not naturalistic but built on precise rules. It does not consist of a spontaneous position in space but must be carefully designed with a geometry of micro-positions and a balance of small internal tensions.

I obtain a good basic neutral posture by positioning my feet perfectly parallel, neither pointing out nor pointing in, neither too far apart nor too close together, the same distance apart as the distance between my two hips and aligned perfectly perpendicular beneath them. My pelvis must be well centred, the centre of gravity lowered, the knees slightly bent forward to be aligned perpendicularly with my toes; the leg muscles should be ready to leap, the buttocks contracted and solid. The upper part of my body should, instead, appear to be relaxed, particularly the shoulders and arms; the shoulders must be lowered, the arms parallel to the sides, the sternum slightly raised, the chest open, the neck straight with an upward tension in the nape of the neck, the chin slightly lowered, the eyes wide open, the face without tension.

The imperturbable stillness of an immobile mime artist is obtained by a knowledgeable balancing of internal tensions: the downward tension of the pelvis corresponds to an upward tension of the nape, as if the actor's spine was being pulled in two opposite directions; the contraction of the buttock muscles corresponds to a dilation of the pectoral muscles; the tension and power of the lower limbs correspond to the flexibility and softness of the upper limbs.

Similar principles of inner opposition between various parts of the body are used in a more apparent and amplified ways in the basic postures of other theatre and dance

techniques. The many ways in which the body can be used are perceptible not only to the eyes of the spectators, but also through the physical impact that the actor's body produces directly upon them.

In Commedia dell'Arte, as also in clown and corporeal mime techniques, the actor's body is divided into sections or fundamental "psychosomatic segments". Each one of these sections is linked to an emotional or personality feature of a character. The language of the body segments is extremely varied. I will make only a few examples: section of the head and neck, of the chest, shoulders, pelvis, legs, hands and feet.



Pelvis section: atavistic hunger. Photo: Orlando Sinibaldi

Zanni, Pantalone, Balanzone, Arlecchino, Brighella, Lovers, Captains, Servants, Courtesans and Pulcinella are like milestones for the reconstruction or reinvention of Commedia dell'Arte. These ten basic character archetypes, apart from having reached us through a selection that has made them more famous than others, have become so distilled through the centuries, that it is possible today to catch their essence and re-contextualise them. Through these archetypal behaviours we can construct the corresponding masks, which are understandable and useful, communicative and immediate not only in Europe, but also in relation to more distant cultures.

The appeal of the grotesque, the strong deformation of the body, movement and voice, the precise codes of behaviour and action, are all elements that contribute to a distillation of the ten archetypes.

Archetype examples



First archetype: Zanni
The gait of the Zanni-thief
Photo: Daniele Guidetti



Second archetype: Pantalone
Pantalone's gait: heel kick
Photo: Daniele Guidetti



Third archetype: Balanzone
Balanzone's gestures with lateral bending of the upper torso
Photo: Daniele Guidetti

Fourth archetype: Harlequin

Arlecchino's striking out with heels: counter-impulse for a throw

Photo: Daniele Guidetti



Fifth archetype: Brighella

Positioning and movement of Brighella's arms.

Photo: Daniele Guidetti



Sixth archetype: Lovers

Lover fainting

Photo: Gianluca Minuzzi



Seventh archetype: Captain
Cowardly Captain basic posture
Photo: Daniele Guidetti

Eighth archetype: Female servant
Servant exposes her butt
Photo: Enzo Mirone



Ninth archetype: Courtesan
Courtesan's elegance: ankle.
Photo: Hector González De Cunco



Tenth archetype: Pulcinella
Pulcinella sleeping on the ground
Photo: Daniele Guidetti

Codifying a new language for Arlecchino

In the reconstruction of an extra-daily behaviour, such as that of a Commedia dell'Arte mask, there are no gestures left to chance. This rule is not to mortify the immediate creativity of the actor, but rather to avoid inserting in the mask's behaviour daily, naturalistic or habitual gestures. A lot of time and training is necessary before the actors develop a reflex that allows them to invent on the spot new coherent gestures, for example, with Arlecchino's codified behaviour.



Arlecchino sleeping

Photo: Daniele Guidetti

It is said that the Arlecchino of the past had at least forty different ways of moving the head, just as many for the legs, and even more for the hands.

I must look for a precise way of using the double-step, and the various fast, gallant, angry and sad gaits, in which the quick movements of the feet and legs draw different trajectories each time: I need to define all of the ways of skipping, jumping, dancing, kicking, even of wagging my tail, choosing the torso's torsions, postures and

impulses; deliberately re-elaborating many acrobatic sequences for Arlecchino's body; reinterpreting different folk dances from all over Italy, the Mediterranean, or more distant parts of the world with the deformation of his body.



Examples of Arlecchino's dances: Brazilian frevo

Photo: Daniele Guidetti

Arlecchino's most characteristic feature is undoubtedly the double-step. Therefore most of the actor's training must focus on mastering the ease of feet and legs in this unusual and apparently unnatural way of walking.

Through training in Mediterranean folk dances and meeting ethnic groups from different cultures, I have codified different ways of using Arlecchino's double step, dividing it into various gaits.

Slow gaits are used not only to correctly learn the double-step, but also to know how to apply all the virtuosities of the harlequinesque strides during the agile and limping gait. The step is done in a 4/4 time, with three bars for the double-step and a pause in suspension for the foot change. The reference rhythm is from lively Hungarian dances. It is important to have a good heel support, while the toes are often lifted off the ground, as in the Balinese baris and topeng dances.

Fast gaits use a very fast double-step, which allows Arlecchino to run swiftly. To achieve the fast coordination, I must eliminate the dead pauses of the foot change every



Examples of Arlecchino's gaits. Photo: Daniele Guidetti

two steps. With speed, the reference rhythm is a $3/4$ beat. With a very high speed, the time is perceived as a $12/8$ beat and the rhythm switches to close triplets, as happens in the *ciceri* of the tambourines in the tarantella and in the pizzica from Salento.

Gallant gaits have a heavier, more primitive, flat and downwards step executed on a $4/4$ beat, characterised by typical strides of one leg in front of the other before the change of weight. Each elegant stride is matched by a small proud burst of the chest.

Angry gaits also use a $4/4$ beat but they are cruder and heavier. Arlecchino removes his hands from the hips, holds his fists downwards beside his body, with the elbows pointed upwards. The smile turns into a growl and the forehead lowers as if showing horns. The stride moves laterally to the body, with the knee lifted and the heel almost hitting the inner thigh of the same raised leg. Grunts accompany the aggressive gait of an upset Arlecchino.

Sad gaits are used when very rarely Arlecchino is sad, becoming a sort of lightweight puppet hanging from the strings of fate. The elbows are lifted above the shoulders and the hands open in a sign of surrender or surprise. The dancing gait of his sadness is characterised by the feet alternating and crossing quickly on half toes, while the body seems suspended and weightless. When stopping to run, the body returns to a low and heavy centre of gravity and the feet leaning on the heels first. In the shift of direction of these lateral runs, it is possible to include nervous leaps taken from the Brazilian frevo dance which produce joyful hops and trembling ankles, heels and half-toes.

Parade gaits are very slow and majestic walks, which move Arlecchino's body as if he were a huge king puppet of the carnival. When Arlecchino cannot trigger his quicksilver energy and must adapt to the rhythms of the other masks on stage, he increases the complicated composition of his contortionist skills. The strides become wide drawings of the leg in the air, with small kicks or final accents; the chest makes circular, ellipsoidal or upside-down figure of eight movements; the hands and the head draw in the air with curved movements as in Chinese tai chi. The orchestration of all these movements of the various parts of the body comes from the techniques and choreography of the kathakali dance-theatre of Kerala in south India. These triumphal parade gaits can be very useful when Arlecchino disguises himself as a host, ceremonial officer or magician, sorcerer's apprentice and charlatan.

I have tried to reconstruct the codes of such a refined art through a patient work of definition and recodification: for example, fixing the gestures of the arms and the hands of Arlecchino in supports, squashes, grabs, torsions, jerks, etc.

Supports: elaborated from exercises of corporeal mime, the supports are actions of the hands and arms in relation to invisible surfaces in space; while doing the exercises, the hands push with the palms outwards, as if to lean on the surfaces, in different directions, frontally, laterally, upwards, downwards, diagonally, vertically, sideways or horizontally; following the torso torsions to the right and left, the supports are shown first at mask height, then at the chest middle height level and at the pelvis lower height level. These exercises done at an accelerated speed develop Arlecchino's gestures when, for example, he wants to direct his stories as a leader-comedian and reassure the spectators that everything is going well.

Squashes: here it is no longer Arlecchino who leans on invisible surfaces in space, but rather those surfaces that lean against his hands and forearms, squashing them onto



Examples of Arlecchino's arm movements: the squashing. Photo: Daniele Guidetti

his body; the squashes can come from all sides and angles, so the arms and hands must almost do a work of contortion around the torso. The rhythmic execution of all the possibilities teaches Arlecchino to shelter himself from the (real or imaginary) beatings of life.

Grabs: are characterised by asymmetric arm movements like hugging the air in different sizes, being careful to keep the elbows slightly bent outward and to move the forearms towards the centre as if wanting to squeeze something with the hands. The hands are open, with the fingers

wide as petals, like in the Indian dance mudra of the Alapadma lotus flower. This kind of gesture is used by Arlecchino when he tells of exaggerated dreams, epic feats, grotesque situations and fantastic, lush countries.

Torsions: the position of the hands remains that of the dilated Indian mudra Alapadma, but the arms are more angular and shrunk into the body, with sharp angles at the elbows and wrists. The joints perform snap reverse twists opposite to each other. It is a particular gesticulation like a wooden puppet, dry and nervous, that Arlecchino uses when his reasoning becomes more twisted and tortuous.

Jerks: it is the most complex system of Arlecchino's gesticulation, since it combines the looseness of the joints in the torsions with the contortionism of the arms in the squashes, adding sudden jerks and exasperated bending of the wrists. This time, the hands have the fingers closed, as if they were glued together, like in the wooden hands of glove puppets. This gesticulation is used by Arlecchino in all scenes of evocative, shamanic, magical, illusionistic characters, in which he is transformed into a tarot's fool, a dancing jester, a frantic, funny devil. These coordinated sudden movements of the hands have anthropological reference in many African dances, particularly those of Senegalese culture.

All of these codified items are like the words of a new vocabulary, of a new physical language: "Arlecchinese" (Harlequinese). When learning a new language, it is not enough to learn the vocabulary by heart; one must also know its grammar, in our case composed of physical actions and phrases, of a character's rhythm and speed, of pauses and progressions in movement, of accents and weight.

For the actor the possibility of often discussing in Arlecchinese (Harlequinese) is the training, that is, a particular kind of daily routine that is not exclusively gymnastic. It is rather a free composition where all the physical, codified and learned words, are composed by the actor into a sort of dance that is always different, but that is still coherent with the physical language of the mask.

It is a physical improvisation in which the sequences of movement are not fixed, but



Arlecchino's training. Photo: Tony D'Urso

the single elements that compose them are. The actors speak Harlequinese linking one to another actions and postures that they know and reproduce in infinite possibilities of composition.

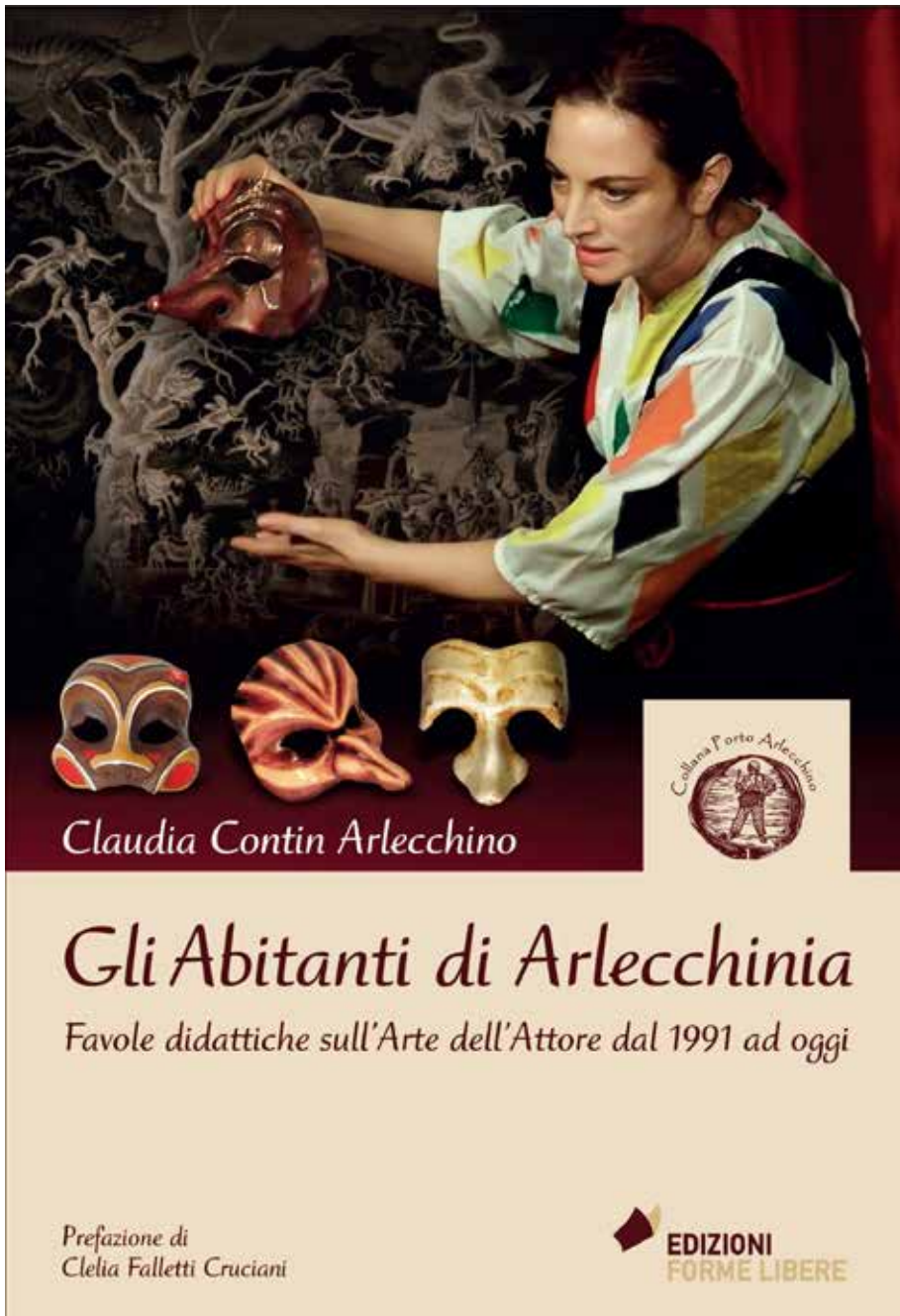
As my teachers told me in the '80s: "Commedia dell'Arte is not for everyone! Only those who are willing to serve it for the rest of their lives and honour it with a death worthy of being remembered, can approach it." They meant that Commedia dell'Arte requires dedication, attention and a deep sense of belonging to the tiny Fraternal Companies spread all over the world in all times.

The Land of Arlecchino is not for everyone, but it addresses everyone with healthy and vivifying energy like that of the didactic tales of our grandparents and ancestors, capable of awakening a joyful and cathartic dance between vices and virtues, in equal dignity between the best and the most fragile sides of humanity.

In short, in the Land of Arlecchino natural selection seems not to choose the strongest but the most cheerful.■

Footnote

JTA thanks the publishing house Edizioni Forme Libera (Trento, Italy), for the authorisation to translate and publish this text which takes up themes and contents from the book by Claudia Contin Arlecchino, *Gli abitanti di Arlecchinia* (2019). The translation from the original Italian was by Luca Fantinutti, subsequently revised by Julia Varley, in dialogue with the author.



Cover of Claudia Contin Arlecchino's book