

Clelia Falletti

The Inaccessible Mountain

Florinda, a young lover, disguises herself as a boy in order to find her beloved who has betrayed her. She roams the world in the company of Rondone, and stops at the different squares to sell medicines and remedies, oils, creams, antidotes to poison, musk water and perfumes. She attracts the people with the sweetness of her song, side by side with charlatans and thieves with whom she shares the spaces where she performs and the taverns where she stops to rest.

In her travels she follows the paths taken by tumblers and acrobats, by those who live by the art of performance. She faces countless dangers, her sole protection being the male clothing which turns her into a *schiavetto* (slave-boy) and a charlatan.

All this happens in a comedy which dates back to four centuries ago, called *Lo Schiavetto*. The author, Giovan Battista Andreini, is an actor and playwright of the Commedia dell'Arte tradition. The comedy shows what happened to the roaming Italian companies of the Commedia dell'Arte from the mid-sixteenth century onwards.

Andreini headed the Compagnia dei Fedeli (Company of the Faithful), one of the most prestigious theatrical companies of the first part of the 17th century. Virginia Ramponi, who acted the part of Florinda in the comedy (her stage name was also Florinda) was the company's leading actress, besides being Andreini's wife. She had already won acclaim as the singer who, in 1608, sang *Arianna's Lament* in the opera by Claudio Monteverdi and made the aria famous.

The play *Lo Schiavetto* contains a short and vivid description of a journey, where Florinda narrates the risks and trials she has had to face in her long and difficult travels. These are not only part of the vicissitudes the character in the comedy has to confront, but also form an integral part of her life as an actress. In the Commedia dell'Arte, an actor's life cannot be dissociated from his or her profession, even with regard to travel. Each year in the lives of the Commedia actors is filled with travelling adventures. Today we are able to document the number of miles covered by the average company of Commedia dell'Arte actors and the countries it crossed in the

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space of a few months. These companies not only moved from one state of the Italian peninsula to another - from Venice to Milan, from Mantova to Florence, Rome, Naples, Sicily - they also pushed on into France, Spain, England and Russia.

The perils the actors had to face were therefore many and diverse, particularly for a young and beautiful actress whose only protection was the fragile company of her fellow performers. The bad reputation that surrounded the actors presented a further threat. Actors and charlatans were both regarded very negatively by the censors - not without cause, as in reality they formed a single group and there was constant exchange between the two categories.

The leading actors of the Commedia dell'Arte struggled hard to show that the bad reputation surrounding them was unfounded, as were the accusations of infamy, lax morals and promiscuity. They tried to dissociate themselves from charlatans and other vagrants by showing that they led an immaculate moral life, were very good citizens, and cultivated the arts assiduously; because as actors, a refined culture was essential.

One of the best and most renowned examples is that of the famous couple, Giovan Battista's parents, Francesco and Isabella Andreini. These two led an exemplary family life: all their eleven children were educated in convents, and ten of them took their religious vows. Only their first-born followed in their steps, after having had a classical university education however. Francesco Andreini was famous for his role as the Capitano. He published the material he had created for his character, *Il Capitan Spaventa della Valle Inferna* (Captain Fearsome of the Infernal Vale). He promoted and edited the publication of the famous collection of fifty scenarios, *Il Teatro delle Favole Rappresentative*, published in 1611, by the actor-author Flaminio Scala. Isabella,

famed for her role as lover in the Commedia dell'Arte, was received in the Academies among the poets who worshipped her as an actress and appreciated her talents as a poet. She was the author of a pastoral, *Mirtilla*, and in particular wrote refined and passionate rhetorical works, which supported her role on stage. Many of these works have come down to us through her husband, who had them published as *Letters* (just like the *Heroides* by Ovid). Through their literary works, they both remind us that the actors of the Commedia dell'Arte are the authors of what they show on stage, on both the verbal and performative levels.

By 1612, when *Lo Schiavetto* was published, Isabella had been dead for eight years - having died in childbirth, in 1604 in Lyon, France. She was passing through the city on one of the uncomfortable journeys she had to make for work. She had seen many countries and given birth to many children while travelling. Her death was so lamented that the echo of the tears shed for her can still be heard today. Her companions minted gold and silver coins with her profile, poets immortalised her in their verses, the tenuous threads of memory were never broken, indeed they remain vivid to the present day.

Going back to our comedy: the speech about the journey comes from the last act of *Lo Schiavetto*, as an outburst, reproach and justification from the young woman, when she finally tries to explain her actions to her lover, who she had found after he had run away. Florinda has found Orazio, but she has also discovered that he is about to marry Prudenza. After having faced so many dangers, her disappointment and desire for vengeance are such that in the public square, the *schiaivetto* convinces Orazio to try out the positive effects of an elixir which is poisoned. The *schiaivetto* only escapes prison and death because the elixir is not really poisonous. As

she loosens her long golden locks on her shoulders, Florinda loudly accuses the traitor who has been brought to her incredulous and ashamed. In a long speech, she rebukes him for having taken her love and then trampled upon it, as well as the riches she bestowed on him and the honour she had entrusted to him and which he did not guard. She accuses him of having abandoned her and having betrayed his promise to marry her. She confesses that she hates herself, disdains her dishonour, and that this led her to take the decision to dress up as a man and leave the safety of her home to follow him. She lists the fears and the trials she has had to undergo; she tells of her dismay when faced by a mountain which was impossible to cross; she describes the incessant rain, the blinding hail and the wind that chilled her bones; she recounts how she jumped in fright at the sound of thunder and how her heart beat fast at the sight of lightning; she speaks of the necessity to go on in the dark with the sinking fear of falling prey to bandits or wolves or ending up in the gushing torrent.

Now consider how many tears I shed as I dressed myself as a slave-boy... consider... how many sighs I heaved when I chose to abandon the paternal home. Consider how I finally abandoned it, how many times (alas!) I turned my face to it, hardly able to utter goodbye to it. Think, just think, of how many calamities a woman was exposed to in her long and obscure wanderings, when because of her very nature, she should not adventure beyond the narrow confines of her home. Oh, how many times I came across (Oh unfeeling man) an inaccessible mountain, how I despaired, how I remained gazing at it from top to bottom as though I had turned into stone, how miserably I felt that I would never be able to take my infirm life over it. Think, think of how I was hit by the soft rain, by the hail, how I was pierced by the wind, blinded by the lightning, deafened by the

thunder, obscured by the darkness, how often the miserable wanderer Florinda, in such unfortunate circumstances, had to take shelter under a leafy tree. Think, think, oh heedless man, how she feared the anger of thieves, the howling of wolves, the course of the rapid torrents, how her hair stood on end, and how she trembled from head to toe!

(Act V, scene 8).

Within the context of the comedy, this passage (built as a Lenten sermon) is a rhetorical outlet of the suffering lover Florinda; but, on another level the text reveals the real dangers that the travelling actors encountered, because it will be recalled that in order to find the lover who has betrayed her, Florinda wanders around and performs in the squares by singing (Virginia Ramponi was renowned for her singing).

The text allows us to appreciate the style and dramaturgical reasoning, but it also demonstrates the everyday reality of the extraordinary and dangerous life of people who chose the freedom of the profession of wandering actors.

Translated from Italian by Vicki Ann Cremona

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