

Claudia Contin

Chasing Arlecchino



I have often written about Arlecchino; his story, his future, his capacity to comment on theatre and on the stage behaviour of many cultures. But even after so many years of "living together" with Arlecchino on and off stage, still today it is not easy to talk about my "personal" meeting with him, especially when removed from a didactic context. Nevertheless it is true: Arlecchino has taught me many things that perhaps are not easily explained except through the particular path we have covered together. Indeed I think that the Arlecchino that accompanies me is an unusual, specific Arlecchino, built bit by bit on ancient archetypes as well as on future and even "hardly orthodox" visions of Commedia dell'Arte. To this I have to add the fact that my case is that of an actress who has to interpret this typically male character, an extravagance that I have never recognised as such, but that - I must be honest - has accompanied all the phases of my career with Arlecchino. Since the days of my apprenticeship, through the initial diffidence of those who observed my approach, and later the earning of trust and respect, up to the appreciation which is accompanied by always more frequent outbreaks of journalistic curiosity, the awareness of my being a woman has always been present.

What counts most is that when

Claudia Contin as Arlecchino
Photo: Héctor González

this Arlecchino goes on stage or improvises with the audience, he is recognised, called or applauded, in the masculine gender. Even today some new spectators do not recognise an actress under the mask, and remain convinced up to the end of the performance that they have seen an interpretation by a male actor. There has never been any excuse of "lightness" for me due to the fact of being a woman under the mask of my teacher Arlecchino.

The definition of "neutral actor"¹ - neither male nor female, but rather able to move with the same protean ability towards characters of either sex, has always been at the base of my wish to access the theatre craft. Time after time actors are able to change between building angelic or demonic characters, from the interpretation of a saint to that of a delinquent, from a beggar to a king. Why ever should they not be able to move between female and male characters? Of course to obtain really clear transpositions, the actors must always be available to make a carefully crafted work that will move them away from themselves and from the dangerous impasse of habit.

In my profession, I have had the fortune to meet many other male characters. In fact, recently I seem to interpret male characters more often than female, even beyond Commedia dell'Arte productions. Both in dealing with invented characters (like some in Brecht's *The Good Soul of Sezuan*), or with characters that have actually existed (like Artaud or Ungaretti), the process of interpretation happens through the building of new physical, vocal and reactive behaviour. The process eventually reaches the point when the character starts to live of its own accord through the actor, who becomes its medium and witness. The actor receives the memory and experience of having lived another life, different from her/his own. Rather than a process of identification between actor and character, the process on

stage is of a *transfer*. It is a privilege for the actor to be able to live thousands of different lives beside her/his own. I feel honoured at having lived some male lives. Some of these - and most of all Arlecchino - have kept me company for many years.

In reality this perspective is not at all strange for those who frequent the cross-dressing and "migration" of roles in Asian theatre, where the male and female characters are not strictly tied to the sex of the performer. In theatre research culture and literature, the male actors who interpret female roles of great refinement have become emblematic. Famous examples are the Japanese *onnagata* and the Chinese Opera *dan*.

But even Western theatre history is rich in cross-dressing of this kind. It is enough to think that in the 16th century Commedia dell'Arte some female roles of Servants or Courtesans were interpreted by male actors². We find in Europe - particularly in the 18th century - far fetched cases of men who knew how to dress in female attire with such conviction that they deceived even doctors and experts. Such was the case of Monsieur d'Eon who - after having lived half his life as a soldier and a diplomat, in France, Russia and Britain - declared himself a woman and lived as such until his death, fooling doctors, friends and confidants. Even the expert Giacomo Casanova after having met him proclaimed his undoubting and certain femininity. Only at his death did the doctors who composed his body for burial reveal that Mademoiselle D'Eon was effectively a man.³

Some time ago I gave these examples of cross-dressing to people who asked me about my experience. I heard myself answer that examples of the male actor who interprets a female role were common because of the male predominance in all ancient theatre. The opposite experiences - that of women confronting male roles - were considered more rare. But now this is a discredited prej-

udice. As Laura Mariani's research has revealed, there are many cases of women cross-dressing in male attire in past centuries, both in society and in the world of theatre.⁴

In the studies on women's cross-dressing, the discourse on the fleeting border between the sexes becomes even more varied. We can observe the seduction achieved through masculinity by disguised actresses, or on the contrary, the phenomena of sexual sublimation in androgynous figures. From the disturbing courtesan dressed up in male clothes, to the "woman warrior" or the "androgynous saint", for centuries the image of the actress seems to accompany the lively path of the sexual emancipation of women.

The fact that even in Europe (and particularly in Italy) theatre has been the privileged field of male actors, has induced some actresses to interpret male or ambiguous roles also in life. It is the case of some actress-singers of the 18th century who had to pretend to be castrates in order to work in the theatres of some towns where access by women was forbidden.⁵ Once again it is Casanova who informs us, thanks to his curiosity in observing the migration of sexes in this particularly animated century.⁶

But still not even this research on actresses' cross-dressing in the past seems able to give an exhaustive answer to the supposed anomaly of my meeting with Arlecchino. People have responded that Arlecchino has no such precedents, that this character could not be ambiguous, and that never before has a woman completely taken on his way of being.

The anomaly has to be accepted: no historical documentation has been found of prominent actresses in the role of Arlecchino. Perhaps in the 20th century some young female Arlecchino appeared here and there (remaining anonymous) in a French style ballet or an occasional role for

comedy that contemplated brief appearances of the character. Perhaps this is a perspective that will become more easily accomplished in the future. Some of my female pupils have in recent years risked learning and making brief interpretations of this Mask.

But still it is true that in order to play the role of Arlecchino seriously, the audience must recognise him as having been part of you for a long period of time, in different productions, practically a way of life and work, instead of just an occasional role. Arlecchino must be glued to you, almost beyond your will, in the same way that has happened for the Arlecchinos before. When this happens it is quite a responsibility - an actor's responsibility.

For what concerns me, as we have seen, I prefer to define myself as an "actor". The neutral gender helps me to refer to a total professional responsibility. Arlecchino has taught me this!

There is no substantial difference for me today in an actor's building attitude for a male or female role: both must have their objective and symbolic distance from what the performer is in private and daily life. A magnificent distance, that should be searched for with care and professionalism, and most of all with the due discipline.

Arlecchino has even tried to teach me a kind of "boys' fellowship" with regard to my colleagues, but of this I will perhaps talk later. Because Arlecchino has taken a long time to train me, it is perhaps precisely the training process that can be interesting to those who still ask themselves why there is a woman under a dark mask.

I have already written about the first teachers who entrusted Arlecchino to me, chosen amongst all the figures that they had passed on to me⁷, but I have never had the chance to describe how this transmission happened.

First I must clarify some key elements

which make it possible to pass on, re-invent and renovate Commedia dell'Arte with due caution and professional craftsmanship.

We have to take into account that in Commedia dell'Arte the entrusting of a particular Mask only happens after a long time and after the actors have also exercised around the construction of the specific Physical Masks of the majority of the other figures or known stock types. In this way the actors know not only what will become their main Mask, but the whole universe of reference in which they will have to move it, make it live and interact. Besides even after the initial entrusting of a specific Mask has happened, it will go through a series of continuous verifications, that will never leave the actors in peace, demanding a continuous learning process and a life long pursuance of the character.

In Commedia dell'Arte one cannot simply speak of the meeting between actor and character. Just in the brief paragraph above three terms have been used: Mask, Figure and Character.⁸ Perhaps this is precisely the succession of meetings through which the actor who pursues Arlecchino has to pass.

First of all, the young actor is given the responsibility of learning a Physical Mask, understood as a concrete entity to reconstruct on one's own body through postures, movement rhythms, jumps and behaviour stylisation. Subsequently, the actors who have sufficiently frequented the physical language of their Mask start to find its Figure. Detecting all its shades compiled over nearly five hundred years, they rediscover in it archetypal aspects of an even more ancient flavour than those that Commedia dell'Arte can pass on. The meeting with the Figure consists not only in an apprenticeship, but also in stage training, specific dramaturgical practice, and verification and imagination in front of an audience,

while the meeting or the building of the Character happens even later. This is determined by the particular choices of repertoire, by reinventing those missing links of behaviour that tradition or philology do not suggest to us, through a long history of the actors sharing their life on stage with their Mask.

We know that the late 16th century Arlecchino of Tristano Martinelli was not the same "character" as the 17th century Domenico Biancolelli's Arlecchino. Even the 18th century Arlecchino-like Truffaldino created by Antonio Sacchi - who inspired Carlo Goldoni in his final version of *The Servant of Two Masters* - was not the idea of character that Goldoni himself used for other Arlecchino-like appearances in others of his comedies. It is Goldoni himself who presents us with the opposition between Commedia dell'Arte's Figures and its Characters, considered to be more psychologically defined and put in the new bourgeois context of his comedies.

Arlecchino's roaming, his migrating between eras and the concepts of Mask-Figure-Character, make of him a mutable and simultaneously universal entity, able to stimulate and refine the mimetic tensions of an actor. The same can be said for similarly earnest work with other masks of Commedia dell'Arte.

My training surely started with an elementary handicap - that perhaps has revealed itself to be an advantage - since the attempts to overcome it have allowed me to encounter very interesting experiences of physical and mimetic transformation. This initial handicap consisted in the physical difference between a minute and juvenile female body, and the powerful body-Mask of Arlecchino.

I had finally met this powerful body-Mask live in the no longer young but still very nimble, mature body of the master

Renzo Fabris who trained me in Venice in all the Figures of Commedia dell'Arte, together with many other pupils. He taught us the different walks of each of the Masks, turning his back and executing all the movements we should learn. When Arlecchino's turn came, his body was deformed into something extraordinary that united muscular power with the promptness of a spring. In other Arlecchinos I had seen or met, I had not noticed this strange primordial energy, this very gentle roughness of the chest united with the untameable strength of the legs, this sensation of enormous weight that is able to defy all laws of gravity. I definitely wanted to discover how that small, short and strong man managed to illuminate all his movements in that way. So when Arlecchino's turn came, I concealed myself at his heels and desperately tried to keep up with him imitating every micro-movement, sweating like mad when he seemed to move effortlessly. This lasted for a long time, until one day the master executed a new Arlecchino pirouette turn so fast that I did not manage to imitate him in time. He saw me practically pouncing on him with a series of double steps that I was stubbornly reproducing behind him, with my head down and my eyes pointed at his calves. "You! You will do Arlecchino!" he told me.

I was dumb-founded. I was about to tell him it was a mistake: I was too thin, my body would betray the image of the Arlecchino I was learning to appreciate. But he had already started to rush up and down the space followed by all his other pupils. A little later he summoned me with a few others - some girls in the roles of Servants and some boys in the parts of Pantalone and the Doctor - for supplementary lessons to be done outside the usual hours. We spent evenings and afternoons building repertory scenes that were part of his theatrical baggage of experience: full sections taken

from the *The Servant of Two Masters* staged by Giorgio Strehler, fragments from the repertory of scenes gathered by Vito Pandolfi and staged in the past with Giovanni Poli. The other Masks still rotated around me, but I remained fixed in the role of Arlecchino. I found myself often confronting prosperous Servants, double my size in build. Renzo Fabris taught the parts, movement by movement, intonation by intonation, with a maniacal care for detail, even counting the number of steps that were needed to reach or go away from a prop on stage. I recognised that in choosing an Arlecchino he was not searching for a physique, but perhaps for the passion and understanding of the secrets of the movement, for loyalty to the life of the knowledgeable physical scores. And yet, allowing me to observe him from so close, despite himself, he was teaching me the secrets of a physique that was not my own and that I had to pursue.

Another of my masters - with whom I was taking my first steps in experimental theatre and the building of a particular pre-expressive physical training - assisted these encounters, invited by Fabris himself: Ferruccio Merisi.

In the same period, other masters reconfirmed the Mask of Arlecchino on me. So I had a way of experimenting with different interpretations and techniques depending on each master. But I continued to refer to Fabris' physique and primordial energy, so much so that I sometimes refused to work with other teachers whose Commedia dell'Arte seemed too light or folkloristic to me.

Some years later I asked Ferruccio Merisi to help me find an actor with whom I could attempt to build slowly a different Arlecchino from the 18th century one that we were used to from Goldoni plays, by now too "civilised" in character. I wished for an Arlecchino that could withstand the



Claudia Contin as Arlecchino

Photo: Héctor González

museum-like cliché that common opinion attributed to the Masks of Commedia dell'Arte. I knew that spectators as well as theatre scholars and researchers found it difficult still to see an operative vitality in this form of theatre. I hoped that it was possible to reconstruct a primitive and wild Arlecchino whose behaviour could be a kind of force of nature, able at the same time to renew himself continuously and approach contemporary theatre in an active way. Ferruccio answered: "Yes, but you do Arlecchino."

I was convinced that the Arlecchino I had in mind needed a hardy, generous, male and mature body. "I am too light", I kept on repeating. "You will see that you will learn not to be light", said Ferruccio. He started to work with me every day. For six months we verified and corrected the whole collection of movements and postures that I had gathered from the various teachers. We added accents, challenging my build in a specific way, or we invented new forms there where

what I had learnt was not enough to define a precise and "distant" segment of behaviour. We repeated everything with patience until we reached a new language, deforming and changing my body into a new pattern.

In that period I met Enrico Bonavera's Arlecchino again. I had been his pupil before. Prior to working with him once more in a short workshop, I told him that we were trying to build a primitive and robust 16th century Arlecchino. He answered seriously: "But no Claudia, you are a woman, it is better for you to work on a light 'French type' Arlecchino, perhaps in the ballet field; you would get interesting results." But when we worked together on Arlecchino in the training room he changed his mind: "Okay, I understand what you mean, the energy is there, but if you are really convinced about changing your physique, you must at least do some body building." I took him so seriously that I went to a professional gym in Venice... and I was shocked. At that time the "gym boom" was still not so widespread as it is

today, nor was the use of contraptions belonging to the world of sports. The managers and the people who went there were mountains of muscle. The room of implements, behind the glass panel, looked like a torture chamber. In all that mass, in all that slow and solemn force, I was not able to perceive anything Arlecchino-like.

Years later I used machinery for therapeutic exercises towards muscular healing, but at that time it seemed absurd to search for Arlecchino in that way, as if someone had trained in the absence of gravity to learn to swim amongst the Pacific coral reefs. I had a mimetic conception of apprenticeship and I thought that really to learn to swim one should for example throw oneself in a turbulent mountain river, rather than perhaps enter a gravity free room.

I decided Arlecchino's training itself would change my body and I asked Ferruccio Merisi to follow and develop it. It was not only the movements and postures selected beforehand which became part of Arlecchino's daily training,⁹ but also that kind of "training grammar" that Ferruccio had gathered and elaborated in his research and from his participation in the theatre movement of the 70s.¹⁰ Arlecchino's daily training continued for about another year and a half enriching itself with new elements.¹¹ Ferruccio checked the work a couple of times a week and always gave me new tasks to work on.

One of the most difficult tasks was that of specifically redesigning a male way of walking for Arlecchino. My legs were too long and thin compared to my torso, my step was like that of a light mime; my double step was fast and sharp, but it did not have the power of a really *traccagnotto*¹² (small and sturdy) character like Arlecchino. Ferruccio asked me to maintain my centre of balance very low during the training, with bent legs in a kind of square position and the knees

well open. My master was pitiless. For a long time he called me *Arlecchin Gambesecche* (dry-legged Arlecchino), even when my way of walking settled into low and wild blows with the feet.

Ferruccio also accurately checked the processes of cross-dressing that would help the male deformation that my body was going through. With precise indications, he encouraged me to study and realise a suitable costume for the Arlecchino we were building. He made me make two masks in leather, following all the adaptation processes of the face lines on the wooden cast, before accepting the definitive result for the new Arlecchino. My costume was not tight-fitting like the 18th century Arlecchinos' costumes. It had a large top, cut on the model of an old cook's uniform, with ample inserts and internal pleats of cloth, to help make the figure larger around the ribs. A big belt tightened around my waist, cutting the body in two to make it seem shorter. The trousers, large around the thighs and tight at the bottom, stopped half way down the calf in order to shorten the leg. Even the colours were important. The white background helped to widen the figure. The squares - very distant from each other - were larger on the shirt and smaller on the trousers, in order to suggest a progressive geometric swelling from the bottom upwards. This last effect was accentuated by the dark brown colour of the shoes, the naked calves and the border of the trousers. Even the final leather mask - that I still use today - ended up having very wide features, which made my head seem rounder and even bigger. A dark brown colouring was adopted deliberately for my hands, to make them seem larger and chunkier. The neck got broader thanks to the particular training of head movements; the so-called "mask blows".

This accurate transformation accompanies me still today, and even if my body has

in fact changed its muscular structure, when I dress in his clothes and postures, Arlecchino seems to weigh twice as much as I do actually.

The most arduous task that Ferruccio designed for Arlecchino was the patient and long vocal training. Instead of putting an exterior male mask over the actress's female voice, by connecting the vocal and physical training tightly we aimed to develop in my voice a new kind of organicity and power for the new body-Mask of Arlecchino.

Only after this long period of training did Ferruccio consider Arlecchino ready to face a real performance. Eight more months passed before *Il Mondologo di Arlecchino** had its premiere.¹³ Meanwhile, during the many initiatives around the Commedia dell'Arte - the work exchanges and didactic activities - I slowly earned myself the acceptance of other actors who played Arlecchino, as they looked upon the newly born little brother condescendingly. But we were still not sure how the rest of the stage world would react - organisers, critics and most of all the audience - to receiving an Arlecchino played by an actress. So for a couple of years we presented and distributed the performance as if there was a male actor under the mask. On the posters, the name of the performer doing Arlecchino was transformed to the masculine: Claudio Contin. I was still very young and practically unknown; as I never took my mask off - not even during the final applause - the audience left convinced that there was a young male actor under that new Arlecchino.

Still today - out of fondness and in memory of those times when I had to work incognito, hiding the fact that a woman was under the mask - in some of *Il Mondologo di*

Arlecchino's promotion material we have kept the nickname Claudio beside the real name of the performer. It seems a nostalgic formality, but in fact it is a small public declaration of my journey with Arlecchino towards a male way of being.

After the first performance had been produced and toured, I had another chance to modify my body towards a male energy and a corresponding, radical muscular transformation, finding a better substitute for the work I had not wanted to face with the body-building machinery. The direct experience with the Kathakali dance-theatre form from the South of India (a technique traditionally transmitted exclusively to male actors even for female roles) changed my physical structure deeply.¹⁴ In the beginning the work was so hard and the mutation so fast that I risked injuring myself, because I was beyond the age of development and the suppleness of a growing body. Besides the hard martial-art like training and learning the complex choreographies, I underwent deforming massages that are usually given by Indian gurus to child pupils, pressing some parts under the feet to open the groin and realign the conformity of knees and ankles.

When I returned from my first trip to India I had to go to physiotherapy sessions to be able to walk again without pain. But when Ferruccio saw me on stage with Arlecchino he was surprised: in India I had lost my "dry legs" and I had finally brought back two solid *Traccagnotto* Arlecchino legs. Also the neck - too thin before - became larger and more muscular under tension. The hands and feet seemed bigger because of the forms learnt from Kathakali. My way of dealing with weight had changed most of all: without losing elasticity, Arlecchino seemed to have absorbed the primordial relationship with the ground that in Kathakali shows itself with a heavy lowered centre of balance with the strong beating of

**Arlecchino's Mondologo*: *Mondologo* - close to *monologo* (monologue) - is a word composed of *mondo* (world) and *logos*.

the feet on the floor.

With Ferruccio's help, from that moment Kathakali not only became part of Arlecchino's basic training, but of all the Commedia dell'Arte that we were codifying. Still today different elements taken from the Kathakali training are distributed - not distinguishable to non-expert eyes - throughout the didactic course that we propose to pupils. Many other techniques that Arlecchino later met up with around the world have gone through this same process of incorporation, becoming part of a personal physical "vocabulary": Baris and Topeng from the island of Bali in Indonesia, the Brazilian Frevo and Maculelé, dances from Senegal, elements of Peking Opera, and so on.

What Kathakali introduced to me most of all has been not only an exquisitely theatrical and mimetic dimension of mutation of the body by learning new languages; it has introduced me to a new extraordinary cultural and anthropological journey towards a "masculine" way of being. The Kathakali masters, dancers, musicians and singers whom I met in India have always treated me exactly like all the other male pupils. They applied the same relentless discipline, the same complicity of shared life, even when sharing meals and sleeping quarters, while travelling to the sacred locations of the Kathakali presentations which are performed through the night. This fact is even stranger if one considers that in Indian society the separation of contact in relationships between men and women is very accentuated.¹⁵ The relationship between Guru and pupil is a unique experience, practically a sublimated father-son relationship and, in the case of Kathakali, it is of a deeply male character. It develops as a solid fellowship and at the same time a system of structures of ritual respect, that I have rarely seen in a female world. Arlecchino has made this

lesson one of his most supportive secrets.

To the continuing journalistic curiosity in an Arlecchino performed by an actress, is added the interest around the sheer strength of character of this Figure, its capacity to migrate, choose and train its performers with the strict law of the archetype pertinent to the mask - and this is all received and understood the world over as a peculiar characteristic of Commedia dell'Arte.¹⁶

In China, for example, the fact that Arlecchino is played by a woman does not cause much surprise.¹⁷ In Chinese theatre tradition female roles played by male actors are much more numerous and usual than in our Western tradition. After the Revolution, women conquered the stages with all the great styles of Chinese opera. They did so not only because the company needed females, but as theatre workers, as equals. In this sense our meeting in China with the great actress Pei Yan Ling, expert in the male roles of the Hebei Opera style, has made even more evident the mental openness with which the contemporary Chinese theatre perceives experiences of cross-dressing even for actresses.¹⁸

In India, Arlecchino is confidently accepted from an actress who has already trained and danced Kathakali in the male role of Krishna. Krishna was indeed the role that my teacher in India suggested as the main character on which I should concentrate. Even if I have danced some brief dances as Minuku, a female character, more often I performed in the role of the vivacious Krishna, often beside male actors playing the refined and poetic character of Minuku.

I owe the honour of having played Krishna, in a temple close to New Delhi, to the generosity and patience of my Italian teacher Beppe Chierichetti, expert in some outstanding female performances of Minuku. We performed a first opening dance, when I was still unprepared and learning the first

rudiments of Kathakali. Our inversion of male and female roles, as Italian guests of a great Asian tradition, was perhaps the first timid sharing and understanding - for my friend Beppe and I - of the migrational possibilities of the neutral actor between two interpretative universes, no longer so separated, even in the West.

So Arlecchino has accompanied me around the world while training, and still does so today. He keeps me at his service in order to witness his desire to "hand himself over", to ride time and space limitlessly... and also to "ride" those actors who are available to extend to him all the personal abnegation that he relentlessly demands.

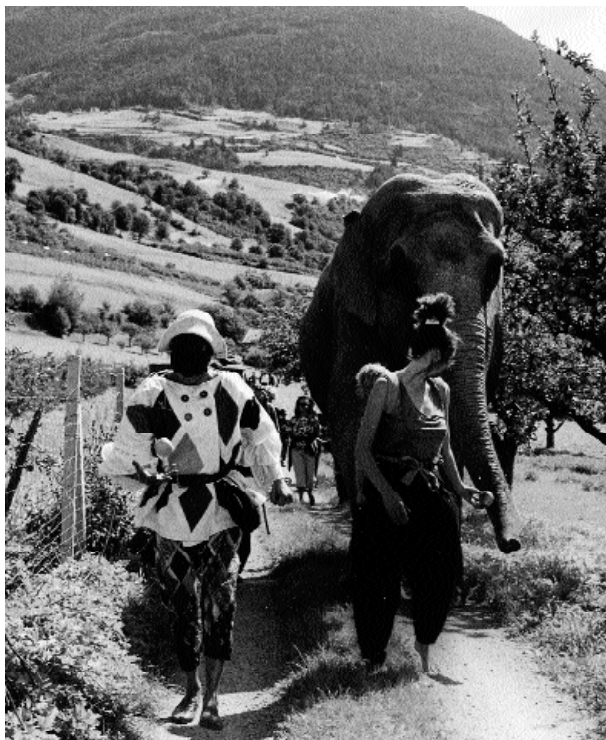
But in exchange Arlecchino offers a lot. As a theatre worker I must be honest: with his innocent and jester-like ability to defy typically feminine phenomena - *primadonna* fights, mechanisms of rivalry, small envies, which are the spice of company life - Arlecchino has instead managed to teach me a solid male work fellowship with my colleagues, both men and women. He has saved me many times from remaining caught in interpersonal psychological mechanisms not useful for the work. Arlecchino has represented the way out from pack laws and provides an extra gear with which to build a group. The aim is always theatre - not the group - but the group is surely the best instrument to make theatre, be it a fixed company or a serious temporary conspiracy to make a performance.

To conclude, after having confessed my debt towards Arlecchino for my journey towards the male world, I cannot remain silent about some small clues about Arlecchino's mysterious ability with regard to the female world.

A press note of the 17th century tells us of an androgynous kind of Arlecchino-Diana, with female clothing under the dark and primitive mask, solidly planted on his legs in a

vaguely provocative attitude, holding bow and arrow like an Amazon.¹⁹ Researching iconography for the most ancient origins of Arlecchino, Ambrogio Artoni has discovered various elements of a complex mythic plot of ambiguous parenthood that "in the opinion of qualified scholars ties the famous *avatar* of our theatre mask to primordial, nightly female divinities, of which Harlequin represents indeed the male version".²⁰ Just as for previous buffoon, jester and Zanni colleagues, or for the accomplice Pulcinella - of which we find portraits in brooding attitudes, giving birth over nests of eggs and baby masks - even Arlecchino seems to have a lot of confidence with maternity. In 16th to 18th century iconography, we find him from time to time intent on carrying baskets full of masked infants, as kinds of wandering nests, or more explicitly nesting, giving milk and looking after infants with the real dedication of a Mother-Arlecchino. Some images show Arlecchino, as well as Pulcinella, involved in actual "anal birth-giving".²¹ These are strongly grotesque elements that connect these masks with a kind of precious capacity for self-procreation. In none of these images (or in none of his accomplices'), Arlecchino's

masculinity seems to be truly denied in the essence of his body or character. Rather they present a utopian opening to the female powers first denied to masculinity, a kind of sexual emancipation of the male. This desire for emancipation - even in the masks' grotesque, ironic and pitiless language - nobly balances the mirroring female emancipation that *Commedia dell'Arte* seems to have encouraged, not only for the first actresses, but for the concept itself of woman in performance in the 16th and successive centuries.²² Two mirroring requirements for meeting and sharing, are achieved through a kind of availability of the mutation of the body... and therefore of sensibility. Thus, among



Claudia Contin improvising with Arlecchino
Photo: Alessandra Cusinato

Arlecchino's many revolts there has been - and continues to be - the revolt against the separation of the sexes.

Translated from Italian by Julia Varley

NOTES:

1. The definition has been often expressively codified in Jacques Lecoq's pedagogy in relation to the necessary procedure of learning of the use of the masks (also in reference to Commedia dell'Arte): see for example the paragraphs "Neutral mask" and "Neutrality" in Jacques Lecoq's *The Poetic Body*, original edition by Actes Sud, 1997. "Neutral actor" is in reality a definition often used in many techniques that require the actors to release their own daily (often unconscious) behaviour habits to be able to learn other more universal body languages. Many indications of this kind of spoliation or personal simplification are contained, for example, in the intercultural experiences of the Japanese actor Yoshi Oida, in *Hiyu-Hyôrû* (The Floating Actor), Goryu Shoin Edition, Tokyo, 1992.

2. For example we learn from the first written description of an improvised performance of 1568, that "the Courtesan in love with Polidoro called Camilla, was played by the Marquis of Malaspina; and her Servant was Ercole Trezo". Male actors specialised in the roles

of the Servants competing for the parts with their new colleagues, comic actresses. Such is the case of Carlo De Vecchi, known by the artistic name of Franceschina, who in 1591 and in 1597-98 worked with the Martinelli Company in the role of Servant.

3. Before confronting the second part of his life as a woman (even showing feminist views in his autobiographical writings), Charles d'Eon de Beaumont (1728-1810), much decorated military hero of the Imperial Dragons, had diplomatic tasks in the courts of Elizabeth of Russia and George III of England. He frequented Marie Antoinette and Benjamin Franklin, and was part of the spy organisation directed by Louis XV.

4. See the *Preface* and *Introduction* to the art of cross-dressing in Laura Mariani, *Sarah Bernhardt, Colette e l'arte del travestimento*, Il Mulino, Bologna 1996, pp. 7-79.

5. Except for a few interruptions during the Napoleonic wars, from the 16th to the 19th century in the papal states female roles were given to castrates because women were forbidden to appear on stage.

6. I refer in particular to the vicissitudes of the young Angiola Calori, from Bologna, known by the artistic name of Bellino (Pretty Boy), protected by Casanova with the name of Teresa, who had learnt from her famous teacher Salimbeni all the tricks of being a castrate. See G. Casanova, *Story of My Life*, pp. 304-346.

7. See the chapter "Travel among Teachers" in Claudia Contin *Voyage of an actor in Commedia dell'Arte* in the journal *Prove di drammaturgia*, n.1/2fi, September 1995, Cimes, Università degli Studi di Bologna, Ed. Carattere, Bologna 1995, pp. 29-36.

8. All studies of Commedia dell'Arte have dwelt a great deal upon the definition of terms like "character", "stock type", "fixed role".

9. For a specific definition of the Arlecchino training see the chapter "The codification of a new body language" in Claudia Contin *Gli Abitanti di Arlecchinia - Favole didattiche sull'Arte dell'Attore*, Campanotto, Pasion di Prato, Udine, 1999, pp. 179-197.

10. In those years Ferruccio Merisi trained with Jerzy Grotowski, Peter Schumann, Eugenio Barba and Odin Teatret; he founded Teatro di Ventura, one of the first groups belonging to the Third Theatre movement in Italy. In that context of autonomous learning he started research on Commedia dell'Arte and on physical interpretations and expressions that are characteristic of the Experimental Actor's School founded in 1985.

11. Expansive and detailed studies on the development of our Arlecchino exist. Among the most advanced: Rossella Mazzaglia, *L'espressività del corpo nella*

Commedia dell'Arte: l'Arlecchino di Claudia Contin; Enrica Provasi, Tecniche dell'attore e deformazione del corpo nel lavoro della compagnia Attori & Cantori: Commedia dell'Arte, Kathakali e Progetto Schiele.

12. A dialect term used also in many comedies to define the short and sturdy aspect of the male servants from the Bergamo region.

13. See Claudia Contin, *Il Mondologo di Arlecchino*, Campanotto, Pasian di Prato, Udine 2001.

14. I had already previously practised other forms of Indian dance, like the Baratha Natyam and Orissi, but Kathakali remained a firm point of reference because of the intense training designed appositely for men's bodies. In 1991, I met Kathakali in Italy through the lessons of the Indian master Kalamandalam K.M. John and with the help of Beppe Chierichetti, actor of Teatro Tascabile of Bergamo. The following year I left to deepen this experience directly in India. Subsequently, I regularly travelled to India for several years. Even if there are many studies available now, the most exhaustive volume on this form of representation remains for me the manual by Philip Zarrilli *The Kathakali Complex - Actor, Performance and Structure*, Abhinav Publications, New Delhi, 1984.

15. Even if now there are some cases of Indian girls training in Kathakali.

16. "... but even Claudia Contin as one of the great Arlecchinos that Italy has given us together with Ferruccio Soleri, tells us that actors don't have gender, as an actress can be Arlecchino and an actor Colombina", in the foreword of Etelvino Vasquez to Claudia Contin, *Viaje de un actor por la Comedia del Arte*, Spanish translation by Moisés González, Sobre Escena-cajAstur, Gijón 2001, p. 12.

17. Our Experimental Actor's School is frequently invited to China for tours and workshops for exchanges between Commedia dell'Arte and Chinese Theatre. Based on the same research, in 2000, the 4th session of *Arlecchino Errante* was organised, an international meeting of Dell'Arte Actors, inviting to Italy masters from the Beijing Opera Corporation.

18. See *Interview with Pei Yan Ling on Chinese Opera*, Shijiazhuang, Hebei, China 18.04.1999, by Ferruccio Merisi, translation by Patrizia Liberati, in *Progetto Sciamano 2001*, by Claudia Contin, ed. Provincia di Pordenone, Pordenone 2001, pp. 54-68.

19. *Arlecchino-Diana* by J. Mariette (1660-1742), Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris.

20. "... among them Abundia, Bensozia, Holda, Perchta, Satia, folkloric tradition figures, but also Erodiade, expressively mentioned in *Canon Episcopi* together with Dinan, moon goddess and wild hunter",

see Ambrogio Artoni, *Il teatro degli Zanni - Rapsodie dell'Arte e dintorni*, Ed. Costa & Nolan, Genova, 1996, p. 37.

21. See Ambrogio Artoni, *Il teatro degli Zanni - Rapsodie dell'Arte e dintorni*, the famous collection of images proposed on pages 74-90 and the corresponding analytical reading at pages 44-47.

22. For an exposition on aspects of the actresses' emancipation in the first Commedia dell'Arte, see the clues given in the chapter "La corona, la croce e la nudità" in Roberto Tessari, *Commedia dell'Arte: la Maschera e l'Ombra*, Ed. Mursia, Milano 1981-1989, pages 15-30.

CLAUDIA CONTIN (Italy) was born in 1965. After studying art, architecture and theatre, she completed her actor's training in the Attori & Cantori Company of Pordenone. In 1990 she founded with Ferruccio Merisi the Experimental Actor's School particularly dedicated to researching Commedia dell'Arte. Claudia has toured the world with her Arlecchino, and is known as both actor and teacher.