Women of Commedia dell’Arte and Artists of Today

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The Women of Commedia dell’Arte and Artists of Today

Since the beginning of the human race, men have always overpowered women in social, economic, and even entertainment roles. The first known actor was Thespis, who first appeared as a character on stage in 6th century B.C. It was not until the summers of 1566 – 1568 that the first known actress appeared on stage in Mantua, Italy (Henke, *Performance*). In the 16th and 17th centuries, the theatre style of Commedia dell’Arte flourished in Italy and the art form soon spread to England, Spain, and beyond. Due to the social structure and religious beliefs of the time, it was uncommon and frowned upon for women to perform on stage. The courageous women who performed Commedia dell’Arte hundreds of years ago set the stage for women in the ever-evolving entertainment industry of today.

Commedia dell’Arte was the most popular form of entertainment in Italy during its heyday, and many female civilians in the cities flocked to the various troupes, wishing to take part and earn a living wage. Nowadays, countless people flock to the seemingly whimsical lands of Hollywood and New York City with hopes of becoming rich and famous. While the road to success is not easy for modern actors of either gender, it was rare for women back then to be accepted into a Commedia dell’Arte troupe and near impossible for them to be treated with respect. As Rosalind Kerr frankly states, “If the need to earn a living drove women to the stage, then a connection with prostitution seems likely, all the more so because unmarried women had little public status” (186). What a relief it is to know that in present day, at least in most developed and progressive
countries, that the majority of men have the evolved decency to not assume that women involved in the arts are prostitutes.

Gender inequality in the workforce is a particularly prevalent issue that has been evolving for centuries and is still relevant today in every corner of the world. Even in the modern United States, one of the world’s most developed and advanced countries, women who work full-time earn only seventy-seven cents to a dollar that men earn (Carter). Men currently outnumber women in the fields of government, athletics, construction, and even the film and television industry. In fact, according to Georg Szalai, out of the 4,342 speaking characters in the 100 top grossing movies of 2009, only 32.8 percent were female.

Even though women in present day still struggle with workplace discrimination and unequal wages, they at least have the right to the same artistic opportunities as men. Woman can be actors, directors, writers, producers, and the list goes on. For women in the 16th century, however, opportunities for advancement in the arts were limited. Katherine McGill explains it well by stating, “Although available as a private occupation, publishing and writing on a professional level were not open to the majority of women; earning a living through performances that relied on oral facility was a more feasible option.” (60). Men viewed themselves as superior to women and assumed that their female counterparts were incapable of writing material worthy of any proper recognition.

Slowly but surely, women are solidifying their role in the theatre world and are lessening the gap between the power levels with their male counterparts. Their progress was exemplified at the 67th annual Tony Awards when female nominees were honored with Tony’s over the male competition. For example, Pam MacKinnon’s Who’s Afraid
of Virginia Woolf? won for Best Revival of a Play and Diane Paulus accepted the award for Best Direction of a Musical for the stage revival of Pippin, beating out three male nominees. Additionally, Cindy Lauper was the first solo female to win the Tony for Best Original Score for the musical Kinky Boots. After accepting the award, Lauper humbly stated, “I guess I’m the first woman, so maybe I’d do it for my mother and my grandmother who could not have careers. And for all the women that’ll follow me, because there’ll be lots of them” (Blake). Lauper’s inspirational and personal words beautifully illustrate the struggles that female artists have faced throughout the years. She also affirms that women will continue to rise up the ladder of equality in the theatre industry, which is undoubtedly true.

So, who was the first woman to appear on stage that paved the way for future generations of lovers of the performing arts? There is much debate among theatrical scholars and researchers about the exact date of the first known actress, but according to Kerr, the first known record in Italy of a theatrical contact signing a woman was in 1564. The woman’s name was Donna Lucrezia of Siena and she was signed to perform in a carnival show with six men. It is intriguing to contemplate how the men would have treated her. Was she disrespected or taken advantage of by the male company members? Was she regarded as inferior, both for her gender alone and her skills as an actress? Unfortunately, the answers to these questions are more than likely yes. Sadly, physical and verbal harassment still occurs in the workplace today. But luckily for the ladies, and even sometimes men as well, there are laws protecting against such crude treatment.
Figure 1: Three Mountebanks on a Trestle Stage

The figure above, retrieved from Kerr’s volume in the scholarly journal, is entitled *Three Mountebanks on a Trestle Stage* and it is dated from 1587 – 1594. It features two male actors and one actress on a simply constructed wooden stage. One of the actors dons a Commedia dell’Arte mask while playing a fiddle-like instrument. When women first became players in Commedia dell’Arte, they were obligated to play the female half of the “lovers” couple. Women who played the lover always had their face exposed, since the lover characters did not wear masks. Characters like Capitano, Pantalone, or Tartaglia, however, were always played by males and donned masks as part of their costume. It was also common for women to play lowly characters, such a maid. For the most part, women did not portray characters that held power or control in the story, which was a parallel situation to their roles in real life.

When the works of Terence and Plautus were performed in the late 15th century, female characters were often excluded from the script if they were not matronly or elderly. An Italian writer of the 16th century that was one of the first to introduce females
onto the stage was a man named Cinzio Giraldi, and this was considered to be a very bold move in the 1550s. He believed that women should be onstage only if they were by themselves, in order to avoid sultry temptation with the male actors. Giraldi was not the only male that held opinions about women in theatre that are considered very offensive and ignorant in modern day. For example, a dramaturg named Angelo Ingegneri stated that, “…‘innocent’ pastoral was by far the most appropriate genre for young women” (Tylus). Many male writers, managers, and even actors in that day and age viewed women as people without real talent other than to take care of the house and to be obedient and domestic wives. Considering the monumental changes of the role of women in the entertainment industry within the past four hundred years, it is intriguing to imagine what the balance between male and female roles will be in the future, both inside and outside the entertainment world.

Despite the general lack of respect for comediennes in Italy during the 1500s and 1600s, there was most certainly a collection of men who respected and even admired the work of some female performers. In the textbook *Music and Women of the Commedia dell’Arte*, author Anne MacNeil describes how a cleric named Tomaso Garzoni wrote an article that applauded the work of actress Vittoria Piisimi. He praised the refinement and nobility of her manner and enchantment. He also highlighted her exceptionally exquisite voice that he thought was sweet, soft, and penetrating. In *La Piazza Universale* in 1585, Garzoni wrote, “But above all, the divine Vittoria, who metamorphoses herself on stage, seems to me worthy of the highest honours…” (MacNeil). In the olden days of Italy’s gender inequality, it is a relief to know that some women’s work was rightfully respected and praised.
Vittoria Piissimi is indeed an influential and historical figure from the era of Italian Commedia dell’Arte. Countless women wished to take part in troupes, but only a select few were accepted, let alone excelled in the company. Piissimi, on the other hand, initially led the troupe called *I Comici Confidenti* (‘confident of pleasing’) around 1574. Along with being praised for her beautiful voice, Piissimi was also a skilled ballerina and was known as ‘the dancing actress’ (Crick). Seemingly, when women demonstrated exemplary talent and leadership skills, men found it difficult to ignore their work.

Not surprisingly, the Roman Catholic Church in Italy was extremely strict during the Commedia dell’Arte era and was disgusted and outraged at women who stepped outside of the traditional and conservative ways of the church. Kerr explains that the Christian faith viewed theatre as demonic and immoral and presumed that if it were to become accepted as a public institution, it would sway the public’s imagination in a way that the church could not control (185). In regards to women on the stage, Kerr elaborates that it violated church doctrine and the anti-theatricalists were disgustingly obsessed with the sexual performances of women on stage. Due to the economic and social upheaval that took place in Italy at the time, many women had to try to earn a living by performing in theatrical shows, for they had no other viable options (186). The women must have been so brave to partake in Commedia dell’Arte, knowing that they would face gender prejudice and criticism.

Furthermore, the presence of actresses in Italian theatre, whether on a professional stage or performing on the streets in marketplaces, made theatre critics quite anxious. Critics, such as Archbishop Carlo Borromeo from Milan, believed that beautiful stage actresses had a corrupting effect on audiences. Professional Italian actors were viewed as
quite scandalous in general, but it was the presence of actresses, the sexual nature of the scripts, and the carnivalesque representations of the human body that put the critics in such an uproar. Borromeo and his counterparts viewed the actors, particularly the women, and their work to be offensive, vulgar, and incredibly immoral (Henke, *Representations*).

The most notable Commedia dell’Arte troupe of the 16th century was *I Gelosi*, or ‘The Zealous,’ and it was formed in Italy in the year 1569. After the troupe leader named Francesco Andreini married sixteen-year-old Isabella Canali in 1578, *I Gelosi* gained extraordinary success. Francesco was not only a talented actor, but also an established poet, musician, and linguist. However, the troupe would not have gained such attention had it not been for the contributions of his female counterpart. Isabella was beautiful, witty, and scholarly all rolled into one and she played the female lover, or *innamorata*, during her early performances (Goldfarb).

![Figure 2: Compagnia dei Comici Gelosi](image)

The above painting is a representation of the famed Isabella Andreini in the middle of a performance. Her fellow Commedia actors surround her, which includes a maid and masked stock character. The delicate positioning of Isabella’s arms and the tilt of her head suggest she is playing the role of a lover, which she was well-known for.
Francesco and Isabella were the so-called “power couple” of their time. By performing together and managing *Compagnia dei Gelosi*, they garnered the attention of nobility and royalty in Italy and France. Their work was so impressive that they performed for Henri IV at his wedding in 1600. Because of their impeccable chemistry and work ethic, the two set the stage, so to speak, for men and women to work creatively together on theatrical projects (Goldfarb). One can only hope that Isabella would have been a successful actress even if she had not married Francesco, since wit and intelligence should have the power to take women far in life, not just their physical appearance.

The story of Isabella Andreini’s impressive success in the field of Commedia dell’Arte has parallels to many famous actresses of present day, such as comedic film actress Leslie Mann. Thanks to her natural beauty and great comedic skills, Mann earned early success in the film and television industry. When she was eighteen, her career began with some commercial work and she also booked a guest appearance on the television show *Birdland* in 1994. Like Andreini, Mann’s career skyrocketed after she married an established industry professional. Since being married to writer and director Judd Apatow and collaborating professionally, Mann has been widely recognized for her hysterically wonderful work in films such as *40-Year-Old Virgin* (2005), *Knocked Up* (2007), and *This Is 40* (2012). Mann and Apatow live happily together with their two daughters and have an incredibly admirable working relationship, like that of Isabella and Francesco Andreini. Nobility and royalty recognized Andreini’s talents and Mann’s talents have been recognized by numerous industry nomination and honors.
Long before Leslie Mann’s successful ride in Hollywood, a woman named Virginia (Ramponi) Andreini was popular in Italy in the early 1600s. Virginia was the wife of Giovan Battista Andreini, who was a successful son of Francesco and Isabella Andreini. After Isabella died in 1604 and the Compagnia dei Gelosi was temporarily disbanded, Giovan and Virginia continued the family tradition of Commedia dell’Arte and founded the Compagnia dei Fedeli, which was also quite popular among nobility. Virginia followed in her mother-in-law’s footsteps and was the prima donna of the Compagnia dei Fedeli, just as Isabella was the prima donna of the Compagnia dei Andreini. Like Isabella, Virginia was also very beautiful and an exceptionally skilled musician. Not only did she entertain crowds with Commedia dell’Arte performances, but she was also a talented singer and virtuoso with the Spanish five-stringed guitar (MacNeil). Considering the most well known musicians from the 17th century are male, it is a comfort to learn that there were women hundreds of years ago that were praised for their artistic and musical talents.

From the look of box office successes, high ratings, and comedy award nominations, modern society is proving to be quite accepting and loving of comedienues. A recent example of a standout hit with a female-dominated cast is the film Bridesmaids (2011) that grossed nearly $170,000,000 at the box office. The cast, which included Kristen Wiig, Maya Rudolph, and Melissa McCarthy, delivered impressive and fearless performances that brought the script to life with unique physical comedy. Sex and the City, a comedic television show with four female leads that ran from 1998 to 2004, drew over 10.6 million viewers for its season finale. Such a large viewing audience is proof of the popularity the show gained, thanks to the talented female writing team and actresses.
Also, Kathy Griffin is a popular stand-up comedienne, actress, and author who headlines sold-out comedy shows and is a five-time Grammy nominated artist for Best Comedy Album. Furthermore, the worldwide musical smash *Wicked* features two female lead characters and the original Broadway production was nominated for ten Tony awards in 2004. The varied actresses that play Elphaba and Galinda, paired with the impeccable music score and scenic design, keep audiences rushing into theatre seats year after year.

As stated by Goldfarb and Wilson in *Living Theatre: A History*, most Commedia dell’Arte companies were based on a profit-sharing plan. Through this practice, members of the company shared in its profits, as well as its expenses and losses (161). In general, most company members earned a livable wage, but were certainly not well off enough to be considered wealthy. In fact, comedic actors used the influence of poverty in the Italian medieval period to fuel their storylines and characters. The audiences most enjoyed a comic protagonist that was socially and morally inferior to their own life, so the themes of poverty and degradation were common in performances. Isabella Andreini of the *I Gelosi* fame even tried to put an end to actors that claimed to be better off than others (Henke, *Representations*). Clearly, she did not care for actors who were spiteful or hatefully competitive, which is a highly respectable quality of her work ethic.

Female working professionals do not earn equal wages in present day and women are still advocating for equal treatment in the workplace. Even though women in America can be teachers, senators, and award-winning theatre artists, they still struggle with discrimination and the seemingly never-ending sexist remarks from media outlets. Considering the documented evidence of female Commedia artists and their struggle to avoid gender prejudice, it can rightfully be assumed that they did not earn the same
wages as the male actors. In the 16th and 17th centuries during the prime years of Commedia dell’Arte in Europe, it was the status quo for men to be the power players. Since they did not respect women’s talents or contributions, they certainly would not have felt the obligation to pay them fair wages.

In the world of modern professional theatre, actors and all crewmembers should be thankful to work under a specific and consistent contract. The reputable Actors Equity Association (AEA) sets strict guidelines, rules, and regulations in contracts that help ensure the safety and well being of the actors and crew. Members are given numerous breaks throughout the long rehearsals to focus and regroup. Also, people can trust that they will be paid on time with the amount they are due. The existence of thousands of members of the AEA (theatre) and also the SAG-AFTRA union (television, film, and radio) reveals how prevalent professional and passionate actors and theatre artists are in current times.

Even though women of Commedia dell’Arte dealt with discrimination and unfair opportunities, their presence did inspire Spanish women to pursue the theatre. Writer Amy L. Tigner explored the work of Spanish actresses of the early 1600s and learned that women challenged patriarchal norms and would even experiment in cross-dressing on stage. Impressively, the women used the theatre space to explore their capabilities and to transform the Spanish stage. Had Italian Commedia dell’Arte women not come along first, it can be assumed that Spanish actresses would have found their own way in their own time.

Commedia dell’Arte began with only male actors, but women spared no time in finding their own voice in the theatre. Despite the criticism and discrimination they
faced, women persevered in Commedia dell’Arte not only to earn money, but also to engage in an exciting and fun event that filled their lives with artistic expression and creativity. Thanks to the women of Commedia dell’Arte and the countless women who followed in their footsteps, women of today can carry on their legacy of taking chances and creating theatre and art for everyone to enjoy.


