



High School  
Theatre

# Unmasking the Past: Exploring Commedia dell'Arte

Italian Renaissance Subunit

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# Vocabulary/Input

<b>Italian Renaissance</b>	"Rebirth." Period of time between the 14 <sup>th</sup> -17 <sup>th</sup> Century. Opened ideas for art, text, design, and theatre.
<b>Commedia dell'arte</b>	"Comedy of art." Improvised, comedic scenarios present during the Italian Renaissance.
<b>Improvisation</b>	The art of acting without anything planned beforehand.
<b>Masks</b>	Commonly worn by Commedia dell'arte characters and made of leather.
<b>Stock Characters</b>	Characters that were commonly known to appear in a Commedia dell'arte scenario. Usually separated into three categories: Master, Lovers, Slaves. There are several variations of each category that appear that have their own characteristics and traits.
<b>Physicalization</b>	Expression or gestures using the body; to give shape to in physical terms.

# History

## Introduction

Popular art form in the 16<sup>th</sup>-18<sup>th</sup> Century during the Italian Renaissance. Origins are debated. Present throughout Europe.

## Stock Characters

Each character was recognizable based on their mannerisms, costume, and masks. Each character played a role in the story.

## Improvisation

Improvised skits based on various formulated storylines led to comical and somewhat predictable outcomes.

## Actors

Actors got used to playing a role and developed acting techniques based on their character.

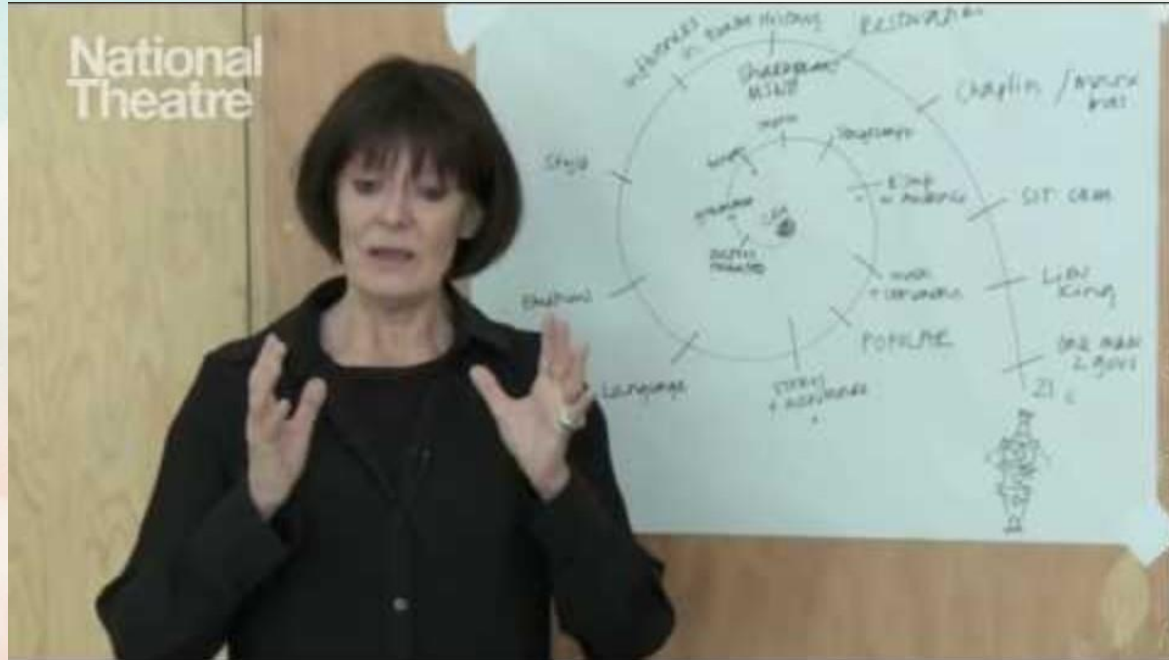
## Possible Origins

Roman Atellan Farce  
Byzantine Mimes  
Medieval Jugglers

## Modern Commedia

Commedia dell'arte is a foundation for many modern adaptations of theatre and television.

# Bell-Ringer:





# Discussion:

- What are your first impressions of Commedia dell'arte?
- How were the stories structured?
- What is the purpose of Commedia dell'arte? How is it the "key for modern texts"?

# Hierarchy



Masters



Venetian merchants;  
strong motives



Lovers



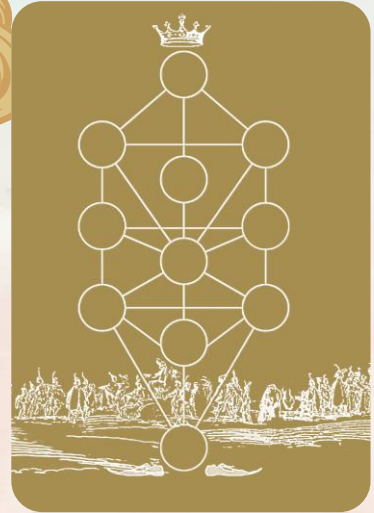
"Innamorati:"  
Unmasked characters  
of interest; storyline



Servants



"Zanni;" mostly  
mischievous



# Activity

Video Worksheet - Hierarchy

# Masters

## Pantalone

- Old Venetian Merchant
- Rich & greedy
- Gullible
- Money-driven



## Il Dottore

- Lawyer, philosopher-type
  - Diagnoses are often incorrect
- Talks nonsense
  - Chatterbox!





# Lovers – Innamorati

- Lovestruck & love obsessed
- No critical thinking skills due to love being their main concern
- Love each other and love themselves
- Way over the top; dramatic



# Servants - Zanni

## Arlecchino (Aka Harlequin)

- Food-driven
- Clown and acrobat
- Comic relief
- Absent-minded
- Silly & witty



## Columbina

- Non-virtuous
- Mischievous maid
  - Vain
- Female version of Arlecchino, often friends

## Pulcinella

- Inspired by a chicken
- Lazy
- Acrobat
- Squeaky voice



## Brighella

- Arrogant
- Tough servant
  - Trickster
  - musician



# The Mask



# Mask Examples

Masks were often worn by characters on the top half of a face. Characteristics of the masks differentiated between characters.



Pantalone



Arlecchino

# Project – Commedia Case Study

You & a partner will pick a Commedia dell'arte Character to do a deep-dive study on!

REQUIREMENTS	
<b>Role/Description</b>	<i>What role/hierarchy is your character?</i>
<b>Given Name</b>	<i>Have you given your character a name?</i>
<b>Physical Characteristics/ Movement</b>	<i>What does your character look like? What kind of clothing do they wear? How do they act?</i>
<b>Storyline</b>	<i>What dynamic do they bring to the story?</i>
<b>Mask</b>	<i>What are the characteristics of the mask? How does it add to the character's traits? If they don't wear a mask, how can this character's traits be portrayed?</i>
<b>Interaction</b>	<i>What is the relationship between your character and others?</i>
<b>Motivation</b>	<i>What is driving them?</i>
<b>Modern Examples</b>	<i>What modern day characters may resemble these character archetypes?</i>

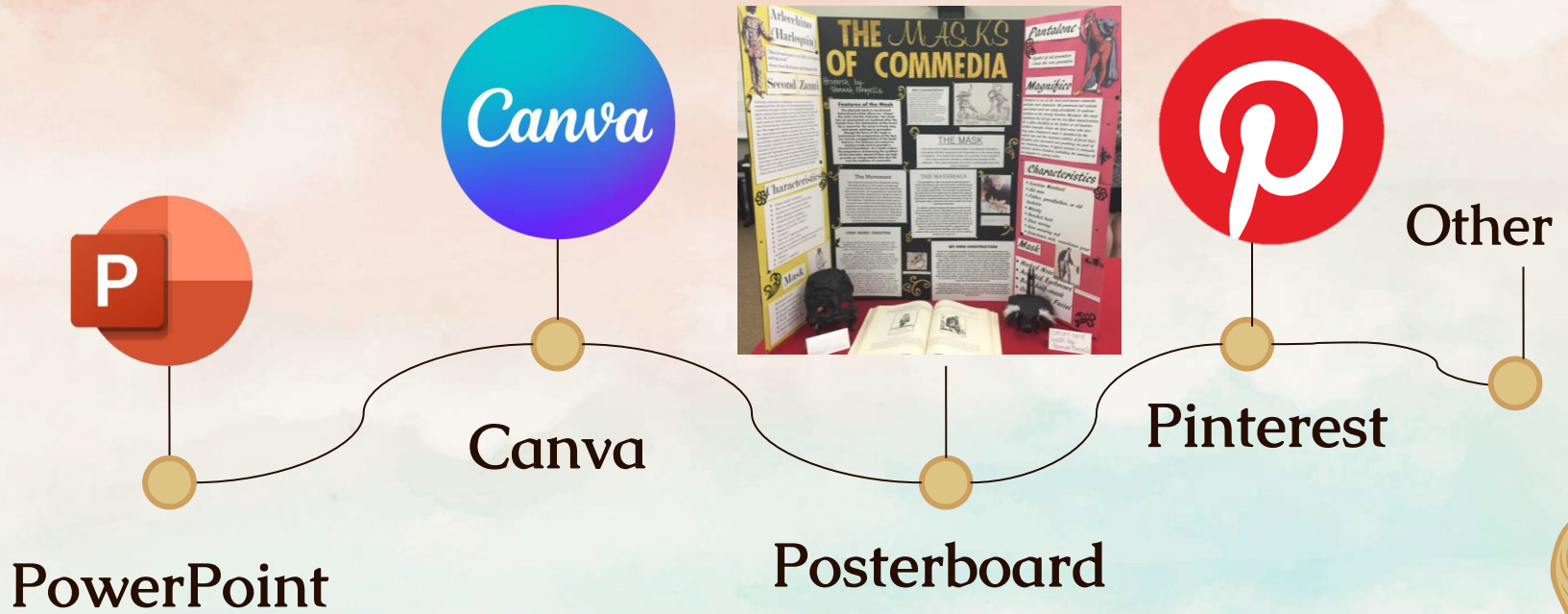
# Create Your Own Mask OR Design Your Own Costume for Your Character

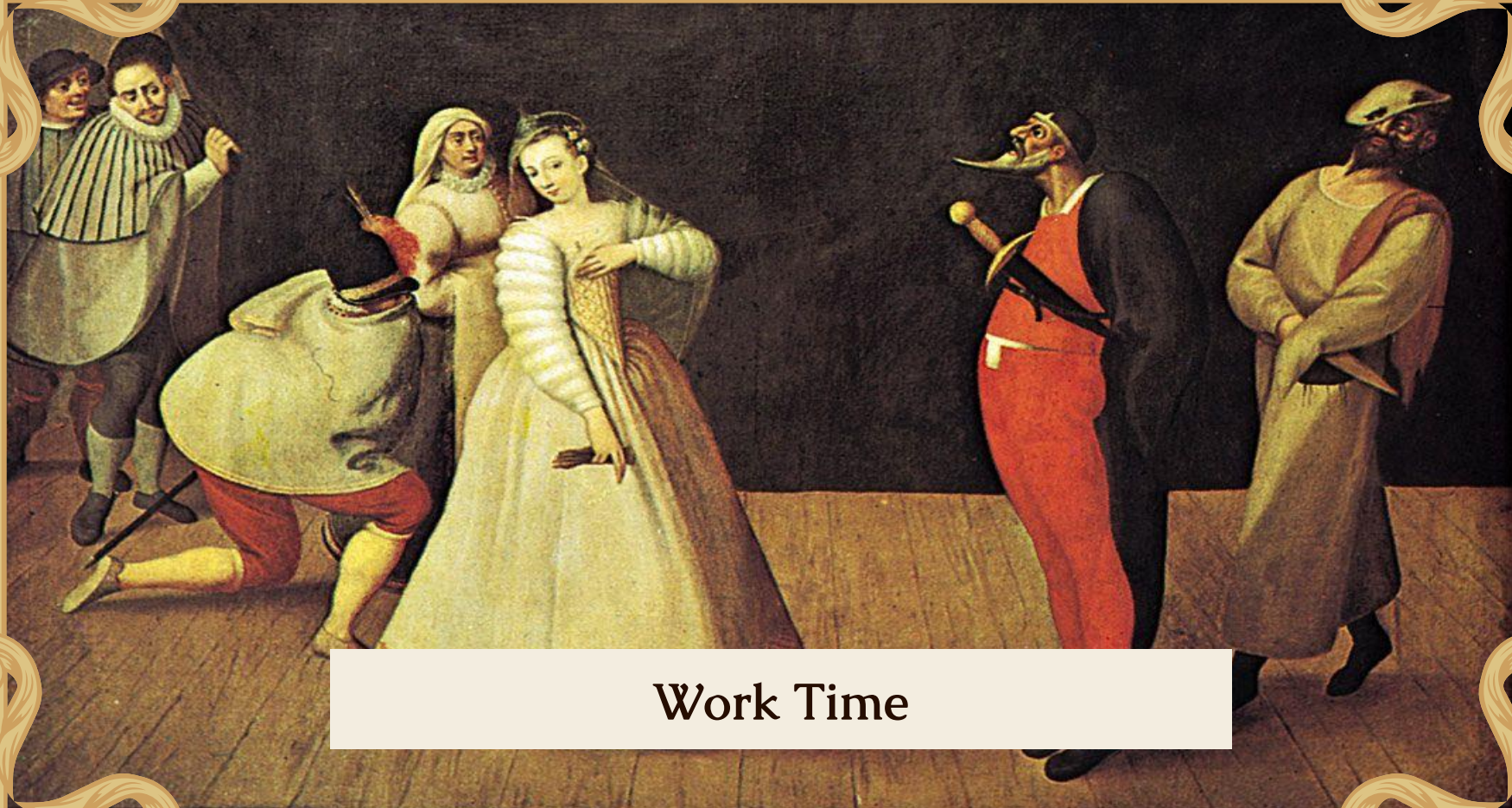
For this part of the case study, explore what it means to wear either a mask or clothing for your character. You get to design it!

There are art materials for you to use, or design your costume digitally.



# Case Study Media Options





Work Time



# Homework

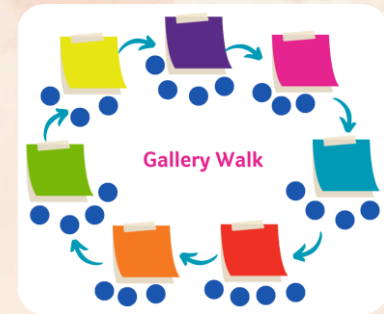
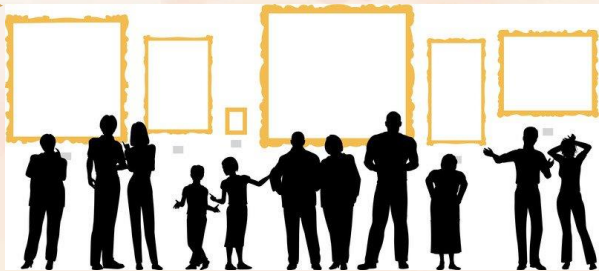
To get ready for our Guest Speaker, research how Commedia dell'arte is still used and implemented today. Come up with 3 questions to ask our guest, Ben Formella after next class.

Guided Prompts:

- Academia dell'arte
- Ben's experience at Academia dell'arte
- Dell'Arte International
- Modern Commedia dell'arte depictions
- Mask symbolism
- Character development



# Presentations via Gallery Walk



As you watch presentations, fill out the Modified Lehrman Look Worksheet for each group

**Statement(s) of Meaning:** *Student states what was interesting, exciting, and what stood out to them.*

**Respectful Questions:** *What questions do you have for the group that presented that they may not have answered?*

**Neutral Questions:** *Student groups ask neutral questions about the work – there is no opinion. Such as: “Tell me more about...” “What guided your choices about...”*

**Opinion Time:** *With permission from the presenting groups, groups*

# Next Class: Guest Speaker

Ben Formella (BFA CalArts '24) has experience in training with the Academia dell'arte in Italy in Commedia and clowning.

He will share with us his experience in this area!



## Ben Formella



Please prepare your 3 questions for Ben for the next class.

# Guest Speaker



Ben Formella

# Closing – Think Pair Share

- What do you think are the key elements that make Commedia dell'arte timeless and relevant today?
- What techniques in Commedia dell'arte can you incorporate into your future (acting, jobs, adventures)?
- What insights did you gain about improvisation and Commedia dell'arte?



# Resources

- [Commedia dell'arte Characteristics](#)
- [Wisconsin Academic Standards for Theatre Education](#)
- [Theatrefolk](#)
- [National Theatre](#)
- [Leon Theatre](#)
- ["Commedia dell'arte: A Historical Overview"](#)
- ["The World of Commedia dell'arte"](#)
- [Italian Renaissance Music](#)
- [Commedia dell'arte - Britannica](#)
- [Brown University](#)