

Introduction
Commedia dell'Arte: History, Myth, Reception

Daniele Vianello

Today, the *commedia dell'arte* is widely regarded as one of the most significant phenomena in the history of European theatre. Its famous stock characters, which have become an integral part of the collective imagination, are widely accepted as the very emblem of theatre.

From the second half of the twentieth century onwards, the *commedia dell'arte* has been the subject of substantial research, mostly by Italian scholars, who have re-evaluated its characteristic features and constitutive elements. These studies remain largely untranslated in English. Furthermore, there are no publications which provide a comprehensive overview of this complex phenomenon or which reconstruct not only its history but also its fortunes over time and space.

An historical overview was published by Kenneth and Laura Richards in 1990, but this is now considered dated. More recent studies are limited to the discussion of specific issues or to particular geographical areas or periods of time. For example, Robert Henke (2002), Anne MacNeil (2003) and M. A. Katritzky (2006) analyse individual aspects between the late Renaissance and the early seventeenth century. *The Routledge Companion to Commedia dell'Arte* (Chaffee and Crick 2015) has the practitioner rather than the scholar in focus. In Italy, Roberto Tessari (2013) and Siro Ferrone (2014), in their important recent contributions focus almost exclusively on the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

The main purpose of this book is to retrace the history of the *improvvisa* in light of its legendary past, with special focus on the theatrical practices and theoretical deliberations in the century which has just ended. This work aims to provide a thorough – albeit not necessarily exhaustive – reconstruction of a phenomenon that has significantly affected world theatre.

Scholars from various countries and with different backgrounds have been involved in this project. Each of them was asked to avoid summarising previous, rigidly monographic contributions, but rather to participate

in the implementation of a coherent concept in which themes and a problem-oriented approach are at the forefront.

Although most of the contributions are by Italian authors, the decision to publish the book in English highlights the international character of the team of scholars who have been enlisted. Their task is to reconstruct and analyse a phenomenon which has a unique place in the history of theatre – because of its extraordinary capability of moving and transforming itself through space and time. The influence of the *commedia dell'arte*, in fact, transcends national boundaries and narrow fields of study and can be regarded as one of the elements that characterise both twentieth-century and contemporary theatrical perceptions.

This book was born of the need, felt by many, to study the history of the *commedia dell'arte*, its fortunes and legendary past from a comparative European point of view. It is not by chance that Part II bears the title 'Commedia dell'Arte and Europe'. Ample space has been given to the reconstruction of the routes and paths along which this Italian-style theatre travelled, in the sense of a 'traveling invention', in order to become so widely accepted.

The theme of travel, typical of the professional Italian itinerant companies, goes hand in hand with the fortunes and myth of the *commedia dell'arte*. It is well known that this myth, for the most part, originated and developed in places outside Italy, particularly in France and in German-speaking regions. Here the performances of Italian comedians became a genre just like comedy, tragedy and melodrama. The legendary image of a theatre of stock characters, exuding a talent for boundless improvisation and spontaneity, is the one that was absorbed by the collective imagination and has survived until today. The most fruitful legacy of the *commedia dell'arte* is the manner in which its image was distorted retrospectively throughout Europe – so much so that, according to Ferdinando Taviani, the history of the *commedia* is, in essence, nothing but the history of its myth (Taviani 1980; 1982).

Hence, the core of the analysis is the relationship between *commedia dell'arte* and international theatre cultures. Just as fundamental is the movement in the other direction – which brought a more complex and articulated image of the *improvvisa* back to the Italian theatre scene. To retrace the history of the *commedia dell'arte* and its myth in Europe means not only to observe its presence in different geographical areas but also to highlight the mutual enrichment of the diverse theatrical experiences encountered in all these places.

The great European success of 'Italian-style' theatre, crystallising in the stereotypes of the stock characters and their performing techniques – characterised by text improvisation and the 'vision' of a spontaneous, popular, folkloric and carnivalesque theatre – all tended to partially obscure the richness of the constituent elements and the complexity of cultural exchanges. In addition, the nineteenth- and twentieth-century myth of the *commedia dell'arte* revived interest in old Italian theatre, albeit often at the price of ignoring or inaccurately rewriting the history behind it.

One of the objectives of this book is to keep separate those areas which are often confused with one another. As already mentioned, relevant publications are frequently characterised on the one hand by specialised studies which break down a phenomenon into too many parts, making it difficult to grasp the subject in its entirety, and on the other by imaginative reconstructions involving a reinvention of the Italian comedians' past and a free use of experience – which are more typical of modern culture and theatre. In the former case, specialist research remains within the confines of academic studies; in the latter, history is 'flattened' by myth and conditioned by popular stereotypes.

History

The first part of this work aims to reconstruct a map of the history of the *commedia dell'arte* by exploring cross-thematic paths. The constitutive elements (stock characters, improvisation, actor specialisation, the novelty represented by the presence of actresses in the daily life of professional companies and the entrance ticket bought in some theatres) are analysed as distinctive features of the myth of the *commedia* itself. They describe a varied and extensive theatre experience which, between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries, crystallises in a stereotyped performance genre, corresponding to the conventional image of a professional theatre of itinerant companies with stock characters committed to improvisation.

The *commedia dell'arte* is known primarily for the structure of its professional companies, for the creation of roles (such as the first and second Zanni, the first and second Vecchi, the *Innamorati*), for the tradition of stock characters with their particular language and theatrical gesturing, and for the presence of both masked and non-masked characters. Even more significant, however, is another element, which represents an absolute novelty in the history of performance: the rise of the professional actress and her role in the world of theatre. Allowing women on

stage in the second half of the sixteenth century is probably one of the greatest legacies that the Italian theatre tradition was able to pass on to the rest of Europe.

Parallel to their organisation in professional companies and the appearance of actresses, the Italian *comici* inaugurated a kind of production that was new, both in the sense of drama and of spectacle. It was based on fixed stock characters and free interpretation of text. Especially the latter was revolutionary, given that professional European theatre at the time was limited to fixed roles and pre-defined parts. The myth of the stock characters, of specialisation and of improvisation is addressed by distinguishing between the actual practice of carefully orchestrated performance texts and the modern reinvention of the idea of improvisation, where it is considered mostly in terms of spontaneous extemporaneity.

Crucial for an understanding of the history of the commedia dell'arte are some key terms, starting with 'commedia dell'arte' itself. This term first appeared in the mid-eighteenth century. Compared to older and more widespread equivalents – such as *commedia all'improvviso*, *commedia mercenaria* and *commedia all'italiana* – commedia dell'arte is a later definition that comes from the jargon used by Italian professional companies. Evidence of this is provided by a few texts from the mid-eighteenth century, in particular in the works of Goldoni. The name always appears in its plural form – *le commedie dell'arte comica* – and refers to the *pièces*, the more common plays in the average repertoire of Italian theatre companies operating both in Italy and in other countries.

It is above all in Carlo Gozzi's theoretical and polemical works dating back to the early nineteenth century that we are able to witness a switch from the plural form (to indicate a repertoire of *pièces*) to the singular. The term is used to indicate a theatrical genre, a tradition considered close to extinction. However, as Taviani points out in Chapter 1, Gozzi's crusade in favour of the commedia dell'arte contributed not so much to its survival as a genre but more to its reincarnation in mythic form, in both the Romantic period and the twentieth century.

There are significant differences as well as some overlap between the writing practice which was widespread in Italy and Europe and the compositional techniques popularised by the *comici* for the construction of the 'backbone' and the 'oral part' of a drama. The 'provisional' and 'definitive' structures of a text created through improvisation are analysed, starting with a few technical terms which are typical of the literature of the *comici*: *soggetto*, *scenario* and *canovaccio*. These are textual forms whose meanings have often been confused. The analysis, therefore, focuses on the

forms of memory and dramaturgical transmission – which are related mainly to specific roles such as the ‘generic’ collections but also to conventional forms of ‘premeditated’ or ‘spontaneous’ text, highlighting the relationship that the *comici* established with the publishing world and the resulting sale of *commedia* plays in book form.

Important topics which have influenced the literature of the *commedia dell’arte* include the relationship between professional and amateur theatre and the interaction between all forms of academic culture and aristocratic experimentation on the one hand and the vast range of professional performance on the other. An excellent example of this is the genre of the so-called *commedia ridicolosa*, made up exclusively of written texts meant to be recited by amateur actors, but whose actual protagonists are the famous stock characters (Mariti 1978).

On the subject of how the reputation of the *commedia dell’arte* spread, the works of Ludovico Zorzi (1977) and Siro Ferrone (1993b) are still fundamental. These two scholars have reconstructed a geography of early Italian theatre, starting from the territorial division of the peninsula with its several ‘theatre capitals’ and focusing their analysis on the ‘material’ aspects of theatre culture: theatre and city, theatre and celebration and the various functions of performance in the courts, in the republics, in the private theatres and in the first commercial theatres of the major cities – Venice, Naples, Ferrara, Mantua, Rome, Florence and so on. What is important in their view is the reconstruction of the process that led from the *spettacolo di palazzo* (lit. ‘theatre in grand houses’) to the birth of the commercial *stanze di commedia* (*commedia* halls).

Equally important is the (far from unequivocal) relationship that the *comici dell’arte* established, at different times and in different countries, with the various forms of modern auditoriums – starting with the birth of Italian-style theatre in the period between the second half of the sixteenth and the first half of the seventeenth century.

Moving between these many phenomena, this book aims to outline a concise picture of the paths along which the theatre of the *comici* travelled between the sixteenth and the eighteenth centuries, on its way to becoming widely known. In the interests of preserving the structure of the ‘*invenzione viaggiante*’ (traveling invention) – the term coined by Siro Ferrone (1993) – individual sections are devoted to the different situations in each country. The two main, well-known periods, when the Italian *comici* were in France (1680–1697 and 1716–1731), are reconstructed, and their travels in Spain are illustrated in particular by the activities of the company of Alberto Naselli (also known as Zan Ganassa) and that of

Abagaro Frescobaldi, also known as Stefanelo Bottarga. The sporadic presence of Italian actors on English soil became relevant in the light of the influence the *commedia dell'arte* had on Elizabethan theatre and dramatic writing. The influence of the Italian *commedia* in the German-speaking world is illustrated by performances held in the late sixteenth century at the court of Munich by the musicians Orlando di Lasso and Massimo Troiano and by the famous frescoes in Trausnitz Castle in Landshut. Furthermore, this influence is also evident in the work of famous actors and their companies at the court of Vienna and all over the Holy Roman Empire in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Testimony has been gathered which confirms that the phenomenon also spread to Northern Europe and to the Slavic countries, in particular to eighteenth-century Russia (where interesting hybrids between performances by Italian actors and local folkloristic and comic traditions emerged).

This work focuses, on the one hand, on the experiences which were characterised by continuity and stability (such as the case of the institutionalisation of the *Comédie Italienne* in Paris). On the other hand, it also places an emphasis on those – far more common – experiences which are characterised by discontinuity and instability.

Ample consideration is also given to a series of problems that assailed the world of the *commedia dell'arte* from outside. Its contentious relationship with religious authorities led to the imposition of censorship in Catholic countries and to prohibitions and restrictions in regions of Protestant persuasion. Not only is the condemnation of the theatre by religious institutions examined, but emphasis is also placed on their attempts at 'reforming' and 'moralising' it. The positions taken by the church varied between the issuance of vetoes and restrictions on the one hand and the recognition of the attraction of the theatre on the other (Taviani 1969). They are the subject of a broad literature which emphasises the constant, careful attention paid by the church to actors, actresses and their performances.

The rapid spread of the *commedia dell'arte* throughout Europe and beyond coincided with the parallel proliferation of poetical and polemic writings on theatre by humanists. Schools and academies became the seats of lively discussions on theatre architecture, rhetoric and classical drama. Simultaneously, a literature started to appear that dealt with the role of the actor in society and documented the tortuous path taken by the *comici* to overcome their initial position of marginality and attain general acceptance. This literature consists of writings in defence of the theatre against the prejudices that branded theatre professionals as mercenary and immoral.

These texts eventually led to the recognition and acceptance of theatre professionals over the course of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

In this volume we will not deal with the more obvious topics, such as the techniques of the comedians, the restrictive, misleading labels – often mutually contradictory – of theatre ‘amateurs’ and ‘professionals’ or the rise of the modern theatre industry. Similarly, certain important aspects regarding the history of the *improvvisa* (its demonic and carnivalesque origins, clowning), although often analysed in the course of *commedia* historiography and presented as phenomena that certainly gave rise to important (sometimes mutual) exchanges and influences, are of little assistance in reconstructing the rise of the *commedia dell’arte* and will not be dealt with here.

Conventional classifications designate clowning (*buffoneria*) as a phenomenon belonging to the court or the public square, typical of the so-called centuries without theatre, and see it as the precondition for other accomplishments (the professional performance of the *commedia dell’arte*, the circus) which are supposed to mark the limits of its historical importance. While there are undeniable similarities between the performances of the *commedia* actors and those of the Renaissance jesters, and evidence supports analogies between the two, there remain important differences as well (Vianello 2005).

The subject of the mask is linked to the theatrical appearance of the main ‘masked characters’ (especially Harlequin and the Zanni). The inputs from folklore and carnival refer to the demonic pedigree, the agrarian cults and the final theatrical establishment of the stock characters themselves. Parallel to the development in this direction, theatrical stock characters begin to influence the world of carnival. The analysis offered here is designed to demonstrate the existence of performance forms and content which do not exclude one another, but coexist in a state of mutual interplay and the confluence of the old with the new.

Chapter 18 offers an alternative to the customary way of dealing with what is often defined as the ‘illustrative adornment’ in many histories of the *commedia dell’arte*. In this book the figures are analysed rather than used merely as illustrations. The intention is to outline a visual history – above all through generic images – of the modern myth of the *commedia dell’arte*. Importance is attached both to those images that are more or less directly linked to the various characteristics of the individual actors and to those that can be classified as having created ‘eternal’ characters, independent of the historical period in which they originated. Space is also given to

the iconography that led to the reduction of the Italian comedians' performance to street theatre, typical of itinerant actors, strolling players and circus or street acrobats.

In retracing the history of the European iconography of the *improvvisa* – from the sixteenth-century images of the Zanni to Watteau's 'Italian genre' tradition – we see the gradual invention of conventional stereotypes in the creation of the modern myth. These stereotypes played a central, defining role in the process, more so in Europe than in Italy. One section is specifically devoted to the reinvention of the theatrical genre, brought about by the iconography of the *improvvisa* in the various cultures of the twentieth century.

Myth and Reception

The second part of the book is devoted to contextualising the legacy of the phenomenon in nineteenth- and twentieth-century European culture. It is certainly the most difficult to survey, but also the most innovative in the context of existing research. Ferdinando Taviani observed almost forty years ago:

It is very strange that the commedia dell'arte still survives. It is a good example of what we may understand when, in the history of the theatre, we talk of 'legacy' or 'influences' and mean an experience that appears to have successors. In reality, it is a phenomenon that has to do with those reverse derivations which lead to statements such as 'masterpieces create their own precursors, not vice versa'. The origin of the term 'influences' is linked to astrology. These constellations, it seems, subdivide time and structure human temperaments, whereas in reality it is human beings, in subdividing time and identifying characters and temperaments, who mentally link various stars, scattered across the sky, in unitary figures and constellations. In this sense – inasmuch as they are constellations – the commedia dell'arte does *influence* (Taviani 1980: 393).

Taviani condenses the profound meaning of the nineteenth- and twentieth-century myth of the *improvvisa* in the evocative image of the 'constellation of the commedia dell'arte'. It is the Romantics, the avant-garde experimenters of the early twentieth century, more generally the moderns, who project expectations on to the commedia dell'arte which go beyond its true history. They regard certain features and constitutive elements of the commedia dell'arte as actual opportunities for their imaginations to create a completely new kind of theatre and in this way

to reinvent the tradition. From this point of view, history and myth continually overlap and intertwine, forcing us to 'see double'.

As far as the legend of the *commedia dell'arte* in the nineteenth century is concerned, our analysis is concentrated on France and Germany. Keeping in mind the nostalgic revival attempted by Carlo Gozzi through the medium of the fable, which conjured up a universe dominated by fantasy and naivety, it is undeniable that there is an echo of the *commedia dell'arte* in the works of the great European writers, from Goethe via Hoffmann to Gautier.

At the same time – very evidently in the visual arts – the new forms of circus and pantomime performed by the Parisian *funambules* codified the tradition of the *comici dell'arte*. Performances of this kind can act as an interpretative (or distorting) lens, through which the overall image of the theatre performer and the artist generally, whether actor, writer or painter, appears as a 'mountebank'. The myth of the circus, as one of the most important developments of the *commedia dell'arte* phenomenon, is a crucial chapter in the story of its legacy from the nineteenth to the twentieth century. The influence of this myth – inhabited by clowns and jesters, acrobats and tightrope-walkers – goes well beyond the borders of the theatrical world and finds its way into literature, music and opera, classical ballet and dance, cinema and the visual arts. We may think of the portraits of Toulouse-Lautrec, Picasso, Klee and Chagall, or the colourful world to which Jean Starobinski devoted his famous essay (1970). Theatrical design, visual arts and literature interweave in a continual play of mutual influences.

The definition of the myth as 'tradition', comparable to certain experiences in Asian theatre, came about mainly in the twentieth century. If we look at the experimentation carried out by the European avant-garde at the time, we see the gradual acceptance of a new canon (not least in the didactic, introductory sense), a new legacy of Italian theatre, which shaped the theatre practice typical of the modern age.

The genre of *commedia dell'arte*, particularly in regions beyond its national borders, became a reference point for many theatre practitioners. In the history of those companies that had achieved professional status, they saw a source of inspiration in their struggle against the tyranny of the author and the dramatic text. It is in this context, which is typical of the avant-garde and of director's theatre, that the idea of a non-textual theatre of the imagination takes root. It is the idea of a non-verbal theatre, closely linked to miming and acrobatic skills, advocating a knowledge of the techniques of dramatic composition based on collective creation and

on improvisation and in which all these elements are considered crucial to the art of the actor.

The fortunes of the *commedia dell'arte* in the twentieth century can be retraced panoramically in the experimental workshops, performances and theoretical deliberations undertaken by the protagonists of international theatre, ranging from the pioneers of director's theatre, Gordon Craig, Jacques Copeau, Charles Dullin, Louis Jouvet, Nikolai Evreinov, Vsevolod Meyerhold, Konstantin S. Stanislavski, Aleksandr Tairov, Yevgeny Vakhtangov, Sergei Radlov and Max Reinhardt, to the great mimes Jean-Louis Barrault and Marcel Marceau and – more recently – to masters of the stage such as Jacques Lecoq, Ariane Mnouchkine, Eduardo de Filippo, Giorgio Strehler, Benno Besson, Giovanni Poli, Dario Fo and Eugenio Barba, to cite some of the most important figures.

In the early twentieth century, interest in the *commedia dell'arte* coincided with a general impetus towards change; it was an 'explosion' that led to the destruction of old canons and the creation of new ones. In the second half of the twentieth century, its persistent influence inspired many performances whose participants had links to the experimental and laboratory theatre at that time and prompted reflections on the most interesting features of the 'genre', all of which was a prelude to the rebuilding of an authentic 'tradition' of the *commedia dell'arte*.

This book devotes much space to the way theatre was reinvented, starting from the rediscovery of the centrality of the actor. The importance of body, gesture and movement are explored from three different perspectives: laboratory theatre, actor training and theatrical theories.

At the same time, we investigate the relationship between the *commedia dell'arte* and director's theatre (from the era of the avant-garde to contemporary theatre), distinguishing in the process two divergent approaches to dramatic literature. In the twentieth century, the decision to stage either Goldoni or Gozzi indicated adherence to one of two fundamentally different and distinctive conceptions of the *commedia dell'arte* and the very idea of its *mise en scène*. The phenomenon of director's theatre is therefore investigated according to two precisely defined principles: on the one hand, how Gozzi is to be approached via Meyerhold, Vakhtangov, Brecht and Besson; on the other, how Goldoni is to be approached via Reinhardt and Strehler, with particular reference to the respective stagings of *The Servant of Two Masters*. For many, Strehler's direction was by far the best example of a reconstruction of the *commedia dell'arte*.

It has already been emphasised that the influence of the myth goes well beyond the boundaries of modern theatre. For this reason, special attention

has been paid to the various discoveries of supposed realities or 'secrets' of the *commedia dell'arte*, which are to be found in dance, in mime and in the visual arts, or in comparison with the various forms of Asian theatre. They are also to be found in certain forms of political theatre produced in the second half of the twentieth century.

The fortunes of the phenomenon of *commedia dell'arte* in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries are dealt with in two extensive chapters, one covering music and opera (Chapter 16), the other dance and mime (Chapter 17). The imaginative use of masks had enormous success in the field of opera, so much so that a true 'aesthetic of the mask' emerged. Soon a series of subjects and motifs arose that ultimately came to mark an important moment in modern and contemporary musical theatre.

Similarly, there is a chapter dealing with the techniques devised for the 'return' of the movement of the masks and other elements. With constant reference to the available iconography, how the body is to be handled or disciplined, is expressed in a didactic and educational framework for the actor, but also as an independent aesthetic language that permeates the experience of pantomime, classical ballet and dance. The explicit influence of pictorial images of the masks on the techniques directing the bodily movement of the dancer-actor varied a great deal throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. It was at times subtle, at times well defined.

In the second half of the twentieth century, certain elements, especially improvisation and stock characters, were used as instruments to further a cause in political theatre. The typically Romantic idea of the early twentieth century as lost time later recovered gave way to the opposite idea, namely a modern mix of elements of theatrical tradition. The *commedia dell'arte*, originally a popular genre, was used satirically and polemically as a possible way to renew contemporary theatre. In this sense, the experiences of the 1960s and early 1970s – from Dario Fo to the Théâtre du Soleil to Bread and Puppet – were the most important developments.

If the influence of the *commedia dell'arte* is to be found in certain important forms of twentieth-century political theatre, in a more general sense it may also be traced to the encounter between Western and Asian theatre. Both Asian theatre and the *commedia dell'arte* attracted many of the pioneers of twentieth-century theatre. They recognized that the study of both of these convention-based, traditional theatres would make it possible to trace the possible premises of a science of acting, on which many men and women of the theatre were to concentrate their interest in the following decades.

As Mirella Schino writes in Chapter 25

The great masters of the late twentieth century would follow the same road. They would propagate a behaviour which is normally not encountered in everyday life. It would consist in a way of holding one's shoulders, of stiffening one's neck and back, of walking and resting one's feet on the ground. Eugenio Barba would later call all of this 'pre-expressive'. It would include a series of tense poses that makes the actor's body come alive, appear interesting.

The book ends with reflections on the cultural heritage bequeathed by the myth of the *commedia dell'arte* as well as the intercultural impulses it activated. Special reference is also made to the unsuccessful attempts to 'institutionalize' it in Italy itself as a national performance genre worthy of recognition as part of the country's intangible cultural heritage. Looking at it in this way, the myth of the *commedia dell'arte* is enlarged further, finding its place between tradition, creative renewal and worldwide dissemination.

Undoubtedly, questions meriting further study emerge from the treatment of certain topics. For example, we may well ask whether Luca Ronconi's productions based on texts by Giovan Battista Andreini should be considered part of the retrospective myth. Andreini was a renowned *commedia* actor, son of the most famous couple of seventeenth-century comedians and the author of some of the theatrical works that are the most difficult to stage. The Andreini-inspired productions by Ronconi do not reflect any of the usual features of the genre. The character of Don Giovanni, who has an important place in the scenarios of the comedians, is problematic too. In the same vein, there are those who maintain that even Molière should be seen in the context of the history of the *improvvisa* and regarded as a *comedian dell'arte*, possibly the greatest of all time, despite his French nationality.

Some of the remarks made by Luigi Pirandello in the preface to *Storia del teatro italiano* (D'Amico 1936) make it possible to relate his theatre also to the *commedia dell'arte*. Rereading the famous 'play-within-the-play' trilogy, especially *Sei personaggi in cerca d'autore* (*Six Characters in Search of an Author*) and *Questa sera si recita a soggetto* (*Tonight We Improvise*), where the title already seems to echo the tradition and the myth of the *commedia a soggetto* – improvised comedy – we recognise it as comedy written by the actors in constant dialectical relation with the universe of authors (Taviani 1980: 33–5 and 77–81).

There are also a number of unexpected analyses of the myth of the *commedia* in Part V. The reader may be surprised not to find more reflection on Meyerhold, for whom the *commedia dell'arte* and the 'schemes of

movements' were an essential reference, providing affirmation of the centrality of the actor, independent of text and dramatist and a vital element in the twentieth-century battle to 'retheatricalize the theatre'. Instead, there is an extended discussion of Stanislavsky's workshop activity. In his first studio and in rehearsal for the 1912 production of Molière's *Malade Imaginaire* Stanislavsky tried out a new method of working with the actors. It was suggested to him by his friend Maxim Gorky and was based on the improvisation of the text, leading to the 'collective creation' of the *pièce* starting from the basic outline.

Gorky wrote about Stanislavsky's first studio and related how the idea of a *collective* play became a new variation on the old Italian tradition of the *commedia dell'arte*. Stanislavsky was perhaps most influenced by the 'constellation of the *commedia dell'arte*' and seems to have adopted an actual 'method of improvisation'. This was the outcome of his collaboration with Gorky and is even more interesting because he seems to have taken over the 'secret' of the comedians, not so much the most ostentatious features of the *improvvisa* (masks, gags and improvisation) but rather the techniques and the processes of composition of the action. Stanislavsky is given prominence in this book along with Meyerhold, Vakhtangov, Tairov, Craig, Copeau, Reinhardt and Strehler, all of them protagonists of the myth of the *commedia dell'arte* in twentieth-century European theatre.

In the light of the broader socio-cultural context within which the *commedia dell'arte* phenomenon took on form and meaning, the book offers a comparison of the results of research and enquiry in various fields – from insights accrued through theatrical practice to the theories formulated in academic scholarship – which have contributed to a profound revision of many precepts in this field of studies in the past few decades. The most important theoretical deliberations are – and it is not by accident – the result of close collaboration between 'stage people' and 'book people'. We may think of the practical-theoretical work of Vsevolod Meyerhold and Nikolai Evreinov in collaboration with Vladimir Soloviev and Konstantin Miklasevskij and, more recently, research on the dramaturgy of the actor of the *improvvisa* carried out by Dario Fo and Ferruccio Marotti. Also of significance are the artistic and scientific contributions of Eugenio Barba and the Odin Teatret, realised in collaboration with the scholars of the International School of Theatre Anthropology (ISTA).

