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A Review of Natalie Crohn Schmitt, *Performing Commedia dell'Arte,* 1570–1630 (Routledge, 2019)

Much has been written about *commedia dell'arte* over the years, and Natalie Crohn Schmitt's 2019 publication provides evidence of that. What one could call an impressive bibliography occupies a large part of an otherwise not very comprehensive book. It would seem, then, that the primary purpose of *Performing Commedia dell'Arte, 1570–1630*, a book which received the 2020 Ennio Flaiano Award in Italian Culture, is to present the existing state of knowledge rather than to put forward new theses on one of the most widespread theatrical genres in Italian (and not only Italian) culture and, above all, in theatre studies worldwide.

This is not the first time that the author—an experienced researcher working at the University of Illinois, Chicago—has tackled *commedia dell'arte*. Published in 2014, Schmitt's *Befriending the Commedia dell'Arte of Flaminio Scala: The Comic Scenarios* was devoted to a collection of old prints documenting the title scenarios. She went on to present source material that is fundamental to understanding the genre, which she brilliantly analyzed. The book raised the interest of researchers and was discussed in the most important specialist journals.¹ It was undoubtedly a great contribution to the field of theatre studies.

It is difficult to discuss *Performing Commedia dell'Arte, 1570–1630* without referring to the author's previous book. It is a kind of an appendix to, or perhaps a more popular version of, her history of *dell'arte*, intended for less specialized readers. Although Schmitt also frequently refers to Flaminio Scala's scripts, she places her story of *dell'arte* in the broad context of cultural and literary studies. In fact, she has written a book about the contemporary establishment of *dell'arte* rather than the traditional historical narrative.

¹ See, for example, Kerr, Soleo-Shanks or Heck.

Schmitt makes this clear in the “Coda” of *Performing Commedia dell'Arte*, where she recalls a statement by Christopher B. Balme, who assumed that *commedia dell'arte* is not—as UNESCO wanted to acknowledge—a living heritage, since its practice lacks historical continuity; therefore, one could say, following Eric Hobsbawm, that the contemporary practice of *dell'arte* is an “invented tradition.” Thus, the last part of the book is devoted to contemporary troupes performing *dell'arte*, such as El Teatro Campesino, Le Théâtre du Soleil or The Improvised Shakespeare Company operating in Chicago (it is a pity that the author does not mention Dario Fo). Nevertheless, in my opinion, the last chapter sets the perspective for the whole book, which becomes the story of the establishment of *dell'arte* by twentieth- and twenty-first-century scholars: historians, anthropologists, as well as literary and theatre researchers.

Thus, from the very first chapter, the author places her discussion of improvisation in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century *dell'arte* in a context familiar to twentieth-century anthropologists—the oral tradition and the tensions it creates in the learned culture of writing (e.g., Ong). Obviously *dell'arte* was a popular genre; however—as Schmitt reminds—it originated from written comedy, that is *commedia erudite*. It was based on the script (researched once in her previous book), but during each performance, the actors and actresses had to be in close contact with the audience, reacting in real time and adapting the language to the dialect spoken in the area. The performance was essentially a medium between the culture of writing and orality.

Schmitt also analyzes the representations of *dell'arte* groups in the medieval and Renaissance rhetorical tradition context, which is also readily referenced by memory scholars (e.g., Carruthers). Memorization is the author's point of interest as an individual practice, as well as cultural mechanism: it is also a question of mediatization between the written and the oral in culture. The author analyzes techniques of memorization, and again she reaches contemporary acting practices. When she reflects on the degree of difficulty of multi-person improvisation, she recalls the words of a director from the Chicago school of improvisation, who stated that “it is no more difficult for a number of actors to improvise together than it is for them to engage in conversation at a dinner party” (18).

In the chapter devoted to acting, the author continues her reflections on the status of improvisation and the factors conditioning the performance of a role. Schmitt draws attention to the numerous dialects operating in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Italy, to which performers had to adapt when creating characters on stage. Also, the classical set of *dell'arte* characters and the way in which they spoke, took on a different meaning in different parts of the Apennine Peninsula. The presentation of plays by

roaming companies was, as the author shows, a constant manoeuvring not only between different social groups speaking different dialects, but also between the meanings produced in a certain context.

The reflections on voice are noteworthy. The author's guide here is Quintilian on the one hand, and the less obvious figure of Emily Wilbourne and her book *Seventeenth-Century Opera and the Sound of the Commedia dell'Arte* (2016), on the other (the juxtaposition of a classical author and a contemporary researcher is symptomatic of the perspective of Schmitt's work). At first, Schmitt patiently recounts the arguments of the Roman, only to later recall the brilliant analyses of the New York scholar, who, while researching the beginnings of opera, has devoted considerable attention to the aural dimension of dell'arte. From this perspective, the act of listening was as much a form of participation in the performances as watching them (the English term "audience" for participants in the performances confirms the researchers' assumptions in this regard). The voices heard from the stage evoked an emotional response, but also referred to the identities constructed in the performances—nationality, age, gender, health, education, social status, etc.

The author reconstructs the actors' gestures in a more conventional way. She cites scripts, other written sources, preserved visual records, and also applies a comparative perspective, reaching back to the performance traditions of the Elizabethan stage and Shakespeare's theatre. It becomes apparent that the author is genuinely engaged by this argument. In her reconstruction, she also draws on sources she has previously researched, and perhaps being overwhelmed by them prevents her from making a more generalizing interpretation—a diagnosis of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Italian culture, so to speak. One would have liked her to develop her thought—even, as she continually does, by recalling other scholars—on how the relationships between the stage characters are indicative of the social tensions of the period.

The author writes about similar tensions in the next chapter, devoted to masks. Examining their usefulness for scriptwriters, actors or audiences, the researcher poses important questions concerning social distinctions. Characters in masks belonging to the lower social strata have comic potential; at the same time, fantasies spun on stage have emancipatory potential (see e.g., Orgel), giving the oppressed in a patriarchal society an opportunity for self-expression. The mask does not so much cover the actors' faces as creates characters who are agents of social conflicts.

Performing Commedia dell'Arte, 1570–1630 presents important problems of commedia dell'arte, but primarily these are ones that scholars have raised in the last few decades. The questions they raise have often not been asked by the creators, actors or spectators of commedia dell'arte

performances, so for obvious reasons they are not answered in the sources. The story told by Natalie Crohn Schmitt touches upon the emergence of these questions (asked as much in the past as today) and the search for answers to them. The contemporary perspective—not only a research one, since the author also refers to her experiences of watching contemporary dell'arte performances—is very much present in her book. To repeat after Christopher B. Balme, there is no historical continuity of our times with the dell'arte. What remains, then, is the continual reinvention of this tradition.

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