**History of Commedia**

**Taken from the websites:** [**http://www.answers.com/topic/commedia-dell-arte**](http://www.answers.com/topic/commedia-dell-arte)

**& http://www.american.edu/IRVINE/jenn/home.html**

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Commedia dell'Arte, Italian for *play of professional artists*, was a popular form of entertainment in Italy during the Renaissance (the height of its popularity was from 1550 to 1750).  From Italy, Commedia gained great popularity in other European countries, especially in France.  Commedia companies usually included ten actors--seven men and three women.  (It should be noted that this is at the same time as William Shakespeare is writing his plays for an all male cast.)  These performers played for the public in open town squares.  There were no scripts, only written ***scenarios*** (in Italian, *canovaccios*) which outlined the action.  Using these sketches, the actors improvised the dialogue and action, tailoring the show to that day's audience.

      The actors in a Commedia troupe each focus on one character, who they play for the rest of their lives.  These characters were ***stock*** types, meaning that the same characters appeared in every show. Each character had its own bit of *lazzi*, or business, which the audience would instantly recognize.  Focusing on one character allows an actor to fuse his or her own personality with that of the individual they are playing.  And, since the actors worked in close quarters for an extended period of time, they grew used to each others' portrayals.  This allowed for easy improvisation and skillful comic interaction on the spur of the moment.

      Commedia dell'Arte has had a distinct influence on comedy since its beginning.  After its adoption in France, the effect was obvious in many plays, most notably those of ***Moliere***.  In his comedy *Tartuffe*, Moliere included the classic Commedia scenario involving a father arranging his daughter in a marriage to a man much older than she is.  The daughter is, of course, already in love with a man her own age.  Several of Commedia's stock characters are also present in *Tartuffe*, including the innocent lovers and the smart, wise-talking servant.  These characters have also been adapted in other countries.  One example of this is the still popular ***Punch and Judy*** show in England.

        More recently, Commedia's influence can be seen in the Marx Brothers movies, where much of the action and dialogue is improvised.  The brothers used standard *lazzi* and costumes, and fused them with their versions of the stock characters.  Mainstream audiences of today can certainly recognize many of Commedia's stock characters in the cartoon *The Simpsons*.  Homer, Bart, and Mr. Burns are all examples of these characters.

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Commedia dell'arte (kōm-mā**'**dēä dĕl-lär**'**tā) , popular form of comedy employing improvised dialogue and masked characters that flourished in Italy from the 16th to the 18th cent.

**Influence**

The impact of commedia dell'arte on European drama can be seen in French pantomime and the English harlequinade. The ensemble companies generally performed in Italy, although a company called the *comédie-italienne* was established in Paris in 1661. The commedia dell'arte survived the early 18th cent. only by means of its vast influence on written dramatic forms.

The *commedia dell'arte*, with its stock situations, [stock characters](http://www.answers.com/topic/stock-character) and improvised dialogue spawned many other forms of drama, including [pantomime](http://www.answers.com/topic/pantomime-theatre) and [Punch and Judy](http://www.answers.com/topic/punch-and-judy).

Quite notably, many if not the majority of comic plays from roughly the 16th-19th centuries have clear influences from the commedia dell'arte, including spinoffs from the traditional characters. Some examples include [Shakespeare](http://www.answers.com/topic/william-shakespeare)'s [The Tempest (play)](http://www.answers.com/topic/the-tempest), with a fairly traditional commedia plot structure and Prospero matching up to the part of Il Dottore, and Ferdanand and Miranda as innamorati; [Beaumarchais](http://www.answers.com/topic/pierre-beaumarchais)' [Le Barbier de Séville](http://www.answers.com/topic/le-barbier-de-s-ville), which features a traditional plot, innamorati (The Count and Rosine) the zanni Brighella (Figaro) and the vecchio Dottore (Doctor Bartholo); and [Rostand](http://www.answers.com/topic/edmond-rostand)'s [Cyrano de Bergerac](http://www.answers.com/topic/cyrano-de-bergerac), with Roxanne as innamorata and Cyrano as Il Capitano/innamorato.

[Molière](http://www.answers.com/topic/moli-re) was strongly influenced by *commedia,* as he had come in contact with travelling Italian actors in the provinces and worked alongside a troupe in Paris for two years. Harpagon in *The Miser* (1668) was modeled on Pantalone, and there are traces of other stock characters in Élise, Frosine, Valère, and La Flèche. The playwright was also a lead actor, and performed in the commedic style, with a love for physical humor.

Aspects of *commedia dell'arte* also passed into the silent tradition of [mime](http://www.answers.com/topic/mime-artist). The Bohemian actor [Jean-Gaspard Deburau](http://www.answers.com/topic/jean-gaspard-deburau) (1796 -1846) brought the new forms of mime to Paris in the 1830s. He standardized the French image of [Pierrot](http://www.answers.com/topic/pierrot).

Bibliography

See K. M. Lea, The Italian Popular Comedy (2 vol., 1934, repr. 1962); W. Smith, Commedia Dell'arte (rev. ed. 1964); P. L. Duchartre, The Italian Comedy (tr. 1928, repr. 1965); A. Nicoll, The World of Harlequin: A Critical Study of the Commedia dell'Arte (1987).