

Review Essay

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What is Commedia dell'Arte Today?

Christopher B. Balme, Piermario Vescovo, and Daniele Vianello, eds. *Commedia dell'Arte in Context*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018. Pp xvi, 358. Hardback £89.99. ISBN: 9781107028562.

Judith Chaffee and Oliver Crick, eds. *The Routledge Companion to Commedia dell'Arte*. London and New York: Routledge, 2014. Pp xxiv, 540. Paperback £39.99. ISBN: 9781138224995.

Andrea Fabiano. *La Comédie-Italienne de Paris et Carlo Goldoni: De la commedia dell'arte à l'opéra-comique, une dramaturgie de l'hybridation au XVIIIe siècle*. Paris: Presses de l'Université Paris-Sorbonne, 2018. Pp 256. Paperback €19.00. ISBN: 9791023105971.

Erith Jaffe-Berg. *Commedia dell'Arte and the Mediterranean: Charting Journeys and Mapping 'Others'*. London and New York: Routledge, 2016. Pp x, 184. Hardback £76.99. ISBN: 9781472418142.

Markus Kupferblum. *Die Geburt der Neugier aus dem Geist der Revolution. Die Commedia dell'Arte als politisches Volkstheater*. Vienna: Facultas Verlags und Buchhandels, 2013. Pp 176. Paperback €19.40. ISBN: 9783708907536.

Natalie Crohn Schmitt. *Befriending the Commedia dell'arte of Flaminio Scala: The Comic Scenarios*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2014. Pp xiv, 344. Hardback CAN \$84.00. ISBN: 9781442648999.

Emily Wilbourne. *Seventeenth-Century Opera and the Sound of the Commedia dell'Arte*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016. Pp x, 256. Hardback USD \$55.00. ISBN: 9780226401577.

2008 was a watershed year for international scholarship on the commedia dell'arte. The year saw the joint Italian-French effort at securing for the art form

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the UNESCO status of intangible cultural heritage (ICH), and while the motion was eventually unsuccessful, for the diverse parties (academics and practitioners) interested in the subject — as Christopher Balme puts it in his conclusion to *Commedia dell'Arte in Context* — the project served as ‘a rallying point to overcome old rivalries and speak as one group’ (317). That same year, a new journal was launched by Italian academics with an international advisory board: *Commedia dell'arte: annuario internazionale*.¹ Further afield, *Early Theatre*'s ‘Issues in Review’ section for 2008 (volume 11 issue 2), organized by contributing editor M.A. Katritzky, reflected on recent research into the phenomenon. In the same year, also, Richard Andrews published a translation of thirty scenarios of Scala's 1611 *Il teatro delle favole rappresentative*; and essays by several leading commedia scholars appeared in the first volume of the Theater Without Borders research collective, *Transnational Exchange in Early Modern Theater*.² This essay reflects on developments in the field since, focusing on selected book publications on the commedia of the last few years.

Among the volumes covered by Katritzky in her *Early Theatre* ‘Issues in Review’ essay was Alena Jakubcová's monumental Czech encyclopedia of early modern theatre in the Czech lands, *Starší divadlo v českých zemích* (2007).³ This invaluable resource was translated into German and newly edited by Jakubcová and Pernerstorfer as *Theater in Böhmen, Mähren und Schlesien*.⁴ The volume presented novel information on commedia practitioners operating in central Europe in the long early modernity. Another follow-up initiative to Francesco Cotticelli, Anne Goodrich Heck, and Thomas F. Heck's *A Treatise on Acting from Memory and by Improvisation (1699) by Andrea Perrucci* was a website containing facsimiles of Perrucci's treatise.⁵ The same editorial team had published the 176 Casamarciano scenarios.⁶ Together with the Correr scenarios, published by Alberti in 1996, a selection from other collections edited by Cesare Molinari (1999), a great number of commedia *canovacci* have now been made available, most recently the Corsini collection, *Scenari più scelti d'istrioni* (2014), published in a bilingual Italian-German edition prepared by a team of scholars (Elisabeth Büttner, Klemens Gruber, and Christian Schulte) from the University of Vienna led by Stefan Hulfeld.⁷ With a thorough introduction and annotation, this two-volume edition of the Corsini manuscript, with 102 colour plates reproducing the manuscript's drawings, makes a fundamental contribution to commedia scholarship and deserves to be much more widely known and used.

Several authors covered in this review reflect on the prominence of the myth around commedia dell'arte — almost growing to a cult in some circles. This mythologized commedia is a prominent presence; having taken on a life of its

own, it entered the common imagination, fuelled by an emotional attachment to its schematic characters, their masks, and to select iconography of the commedia, such as Jacques Callot's carnivalesque engravings of *Balli di Sfessania* (ca 1622). This popularity was nurtured greatly by nineteenth-century culture: from Romantic writers such as Maurice Sand, through Parisian theatre with the stellar Jean-Gaspard Debureau, to the widespread merchandise of porcelain figures. The early twentieth-century avant-garde found inspiration in this nostalgic myth, reviving Goldoni and Gozzi and renewing a scholarly interest in the entire theatrical phenomenon. The myth has lived on ever since, inspiring practitioners, from actors and directors through to playwrights and mask makers. It has become an integral part of comedy studies — a rigorous academic discipline in its own right focusing on comedic performance present and past. On a different front, in the course of the twentieth century, theatre historians started to demystify the professional itinerant Italian masked comedy of early modernity. This historic research, starting probably with Kathleen Lea's *Italian Popular Comedy: A Study in the Commedia dell'Arte, 1560–1620* (1934), has produced a rich body of critical commedia histories. Yet the live popular myth, so productive in the creative spheres, occasionally spills over into the two academic disciplines — comedy studies and theatre history — and vice versa, especially when ulterior motives come into play, such as anxieties of recognition and status, efforts to appeal to a general readership, or publishers' and authors' hopes of selling their publications better.

A telling example of the live myth is Markus Kupferblum's ambitiously and alluringly titled *Die Geburt der Neugier aus dem Geist der Revolution: Die Commedia dell'Arte als politisches Volkstheater* (The Birth of Curiosity/Inquisitiveness from the Spirit of the Revolution: The Commedia dell'Arte as Political Popular Theatre). The oldest title in this review — it was published in 2013—this book promises more than it delivers. Kupferblum, who is an Austrian opera and theatre director, writer, and clown (as he announces), writes energetically, offering a number of interesting insights and making variously plausible observations about the commedia — most likely with a view to its performative potential. The clear underlying motivation for these contributions, however, is a wish to enhance the enthusiasm for the commedia as a myth, to penetrate into the theatrical potential that it offers, rather than a desire to trace its historic reality and factual basis. So, for instance, Kupferblum's own curiosity about the various clown names and their variations — such as Bertolino, Coviello, Brandino, Cola, Gabba, Lattanzio, Peppe-Nappa, Trappola, Fichetto, Tristitia, or Buffeto — is more important than chronology or discrete factography. Here, commedia dell'arte is one and the same thing, no matter if it is sixteenth-century Venice, Molière, Goldoni,

or Nestroy. Kupferblum's bibliography is correspondingly miscellaneous, mixing dated positivist histories with popular works and the occasional critical history. Symptomatically, perhaps, very few of his sources come from the present century. In short, Kupferblum's 160-page book, divided into seven chapters and many subchapters (mostly no longer than a single page), is a work of an enthusiastic and knowledgeable commedia fan, presenting its wide-ranging miscellanea as a kaleidoscope to wonder at rather than learn from. (I have puzzled over the book's Nietzschean title invoking the revolution and political popular theatre, but have no other answer than a cynical conclusion that it cashes in on marketable keywords and rubs shoulders with foundational works of theatre criticism.)

Published in 2014, Judith Chaffee and Oliver Crick's extensive *Routledge Companion to Commedia dell'Arte* introduces the commedia to the modern practitioner by means of its fifty-three erudite chapters. It also attempts to critically confront the overwhelming myth of the commedia from the two academic angles: comedy studies and theatre history. Interestingly, the volume's starting point is the sum of the commedia dell'arte myth, not a discrete treatment of its individual manifestations. Individual contributors approach their chapters from either of the disciplinary angles; and while the two disciplines have their own academic communities and publication platforms (with some overlap), the distinctive features between the two, I believe, have not been sufficiently acknowledged — a point that should be reflected in writings about the commedia. In Chaffee and Crick, the difference between the methodological approaches and the agendas of the two disciplines occasionally leads to confusion about the nature of the assertions made. For instance, comedy studies commonly treats Harlequin (or Arlecchino) as a comedic archetype, tracing its origins in a variety of comic personas while still referring to it with one name. Theatre historians, on the other hand, make meticulous distinctions between individual names and their variations while often ignoring the actantial principles that probably rendered the comic persona all the same to the early modern spectator — as testified, for instance, by the peculiar scene in Day, Rowley, and Wilkins's 1607 play *The Travels of the Three English Brothers* in which Will Kempe is made to encounter 'an Italian Harlaken', and like meets like.

While the other six volumes under review are critical publications by scholarly presses (with the exception of Kupferblum), one of them stands out as trying to nourish commedia dell'arte's myth too — and I suspect that this effort represents the tail end of the 2008 initiative to secure ICH status for the commedia, since many of the contributors of the discontinued Olschki journal are present here. Despite its numerous excellent contributions among its twenty-five chapters,

Commedia dell'Arte in Context is a problematic volume. Many of the volume's contributors speak critically about the commedia myth but many of them also profess it. Only frustratingly few of the volume's authors engage in methodological considerations or strictly distinguish between the amorphous myth of the commedia and traceable influence — a distinction that Robert Henke, for instance, establishes clearly when writing of:

the commedia dell'arte's 'influence' on Shakespeare [which] should be differentiated from traditional, source-to-target linear influence and should be seen in a more systemic and modular way, since actors' and playwrights' sources are mediated as often through oral, performative means as through written texts. (118)

Daniele Vianello, in his introduction, outlines the main purpose of the volume as an effort to reflect on the commedia's history and its legendary past, 'with special focus on the theatrical practices and theoretical deliberations in the century which has just ended' (1). This seems like a precarious balancing act and the tension is visible throughout the book. Despite its many historic chapters, the Italian comedigrapher giant Goldoni looms over the entire book — as if giving the individual studies their teleological anchoring. To be sure, this book is trying to marry the myth and the history, and the match does not work. Vianello foregrounds the international team of contributors — seventeen of its twenty-seven authors are Italian, though — yet despite its international ambition, the volume has been apparently conceived as an Italian national project of sorts, a kind of substitute for the failed UNESCO application. The individual essays speak of the Italian commedia dell'arte's influence on the world, without any sense of mutuality. The commedia is spoken of exclusively within a European context, with no inclusion of the Americas, Africa, Asia, or Oceania. The introduction and the chapters by most Italian contributors also work with dated literature and almost exclusively with that by Italian scholars: in the case of Vianello's introduction, Siro Ferrone's 1993 book is the most recent publication cited, with the exception of Vianello's own book of 2005. So Majorana's essay on 'Commedia dell'Arte and the Church' makes no recognition of non-Italian scholarship on anti-theatrical prejudice, particularly the French project at La Sorbonne led by François Lecercle and Clothilde Thouret, *La Haine du théâtre*, the international board of which includes some of this volume's contributors.⁸ The generic or dated assertions that several essays make reflect this overall bibliographic paucity. Similarly, when Vianello introduces 'modern theatremakers' influenced by the commedia, they are Italian and at best septuagenarians.

A majority of the essays in the volume shows many signs of what Karl Popper refers to as ‘a closed society’ — patriarchal, structured by seniority, and governed by exclusive orthodoxy. One such example is Sandra Pietrini’s chapter ‘The Circus and the Artists as Saltimbanco’ (195–207), which repeats known histories, some of them foreshortened beyond comprehensibility: another sign of a closed society which refines its own games of references and idioms that are eventually fully comprehensible only to the initiated few. In Pietrini, one paragraph, in its reductions to allusions to ‘known truths’, can even contain such diverse topics as circus, nineteenth-century ‘*mirabilia*’, Richard Tarlton’s career as the leader of an Elizabethan company, the emblem of the god Janus, and the white Pierrot (197–8). Like many other contributors to this volume, Pietrini ends where the grand historians of the late twentieth century ended. We find no attempt to bring the discussion into the current century, and the chapter becomes a reassertion of the old order. The amount of fundamental and ground-breaking research ignored here is truly shocking. For instance, Richard Andrews’s research (published both in English and Italian) has been ignored almost entirely, and many authors even ignore the work of the volume’s own contributors.

Ferdinando Taviani, the great scholar of the commedia who in the 1970s and 1980s played a key role in understanding its history, has contributed the opening chapter but does not give a single reference, so the rigour of this text is compromised. We read old truths, without acknowledgement of recent research. So, when Taviani writes (rather poetically) on early modern poverty, there is no recognition of recent work such as Robert Henke’s 2015 *Poverty and Charity in Early Modern Theater and Performance* (reviewed in *Early Theatre* 21.1, 2018), or even William Carroll’s *Fat King, Lean Beggar: Representations of Poverty in the Age of Shakespeare* (1996) or Bronisław Geremek’s influential *Poverty: A History* (1989, published also in Italian). Several of Taviani’s allusions are enigmatic (only for the closed society members?), such as his reference to ‘a vagabond character in a Baroque play who is forced to metamorphose’. Does he mean the prodigal son? Or the pícaro? Or the Lazarus of biblical plays?

Stefan Hulfeld’s opening sentence clearly strikes back, summarizing succinctly many of the shortcomings of the entire volume:

While ‘romantic’ ideas about the commedia dell’arte emphasized the dichotomy of a freely improvised comedy on the one hand, and a normative literary theatre on the other, research findings of the last decades have corrected such an oversimplifying perspective. (46)

Siro Ferrone's imaginative essay on 'Journeys' (67–75) opens Part II Commedia dell'Arte and Europe. It offers inspiring perspectives — such as when Ferrone considers 'the fruitful gap between the expectations of local audiences and these "foreign" actors with their alien linguistic, rhythmic and emotional expressions' (68). Notably, this was the topic of Susanne Wofford's 2013 essay 'Foreign'.⁹ Ferrone — like several other Italian scholars in the volume — operates with the concept of high and low cultures, an indelible legacy of Benedetto Croce and Hans Naumann's untenable theory of the *gesunkenes Kulturgut* (the submerged cultural value) that distinguishes the 'primitive' from the high-brow.

Scholars from outside of Italy contribute other chapters in Part II. Virginia Scott's essay manages to squeeze the commedia in France into thirteen pages (76–88)—a disproportionate length with a view to the significance of the commedia's second domicile. (The essay is also a testimony of the length that the volume was in the making. Scott passed away in March 2014, and this is probably her last, posthumous publication. The lengthy editorial process may also explain, if not excuse, the datedness of its bibliography.)

María del Valle Ojeda Calvo offers a fascinating though frustratingly short essay on 'The Iberian Peninsula' (89–97), in which she traces Zan Ganassa (Alberto Naseli) and his company *I gelosi* in Spain and reflects on the important influence the commedia had on modifying the structure of corrales (90–1). A passage Ojeda Calvo cites in one of the endnotes deserves greater attention: a 1580 inventory of Don Juan Hurtado de Mendoza mentions 'seis quadricos de Ganassa de figuras diferentes de ganase y arlequines en table con sus marcos que eran del dicho Duque Don Íñigo que se alló entre los demás vienes que dejó' (97; six little pictures of Ganassa showing different personas of *ganase* and *arlequines* on framed canvases that belonged to the aforementioned Duke Don Íñigo that were found among the remaining others). This passage from 1580 is almost too good to be true, but if it were, it would predate the earliest reference to *arlequines* by four years, revising the 1584 Parisian mention of the Harlequin in connection with Tristano Martinelli (Henke 2002).

M.A. Katritzky's chapter covers the German-speaking countries, and despite its shortness offers not only a solid foundation regarding the commedia in the region but also — as is common with Katritzky's publications — novel findings and perspectives, this time new perspectives on Stefanelo Botarga's appearance in a 1585 tournament in Düsseldorf. Bent Holm's very interesting essay on northern Europe includes fascinating details on the famous Danish playwright Ludvig Holberg, his harlequinades, inspirations from the *Théâtre Italien*, and his direct interactions with Italian comedians in Paris.

Anne MacNeil on ‘Commedia dell’Arte in Opera and Music 1550–1750’ (167–76) offers a fascinating contribution with attention to detail and reflection on the state of research. MacNeil even offers research opportunities, such as the scenario as

one of the most substantive points of interaction between the *commedia dell’arte* and opera ... Materials in this area encompass not only recent discoveries of manuscript collections of *commedia dell’arte* scenarios, but also a wide variety of textual sources, from the classical writing of Homer, Virgil and Ovid, to operas. (171)

This articulation of an outstanding research opportunity is a hint anticipating (rather than ignoring) Emily Wilbourne’s 2016 monograph, reviewed later in my essay.

The world-leading specialist on Goldoni, Andrea Fabiano, contributes, somewhat surprisingly, a chapter ‘From Mozart to Henze’ (177–85) on some of the notorious operatic inspirations from the *commedia*. Fabiano’s structural analysis of *lazzi* in Mozart’s *Don Giovanni* (179–81) offers an interesting taxonomy, although it tends to pare the opera down to a ‘game of references’ (as Fabiano calls it), sidestepping the creative genius of Mozart’s librettist Lorenzo Da Ponte. The essay is something of a disappointment in reformulating old news, without much fresh intervention.

Renzo Guardenti’s chapter on the ‘Iconography of the *Commedia dell’Arte*’ (208–26) is another frustrating essay. The volume does not include a single illustration, probably for production reasons; that would be understandable. In the case of this essay, however, the problems cut deeper. Apart from notoriously failing to date its referenced pictures, prints, and paintings and relying on general knowledge (i.e. closed society of learners), Guardenti also ignores foundational works in the subject, such as M.A. Katritzky’s *The Art of Commedia: the Study in the Commedia dell’Arte 1560–1620, with Special Reference to the Visual Records* (2006), and most non-Italian research on individual issues, particularly that by female academics — from Margaret Gowan’s 1963 *L’Art du ballet de cour en France, 1581–1643* to Anne MacNeil’s 2003 *Music and Women of the Commedia dell’Arte in the Late Sixteenth Century*. (This omission is all the more surprising given that both MacNeil and Katritzky have contributed to the volume.) I suspect that there might be some intentional politics here: without proper acknowledgement, Guardenti does rely on this foundational research and, ironically, he refers the reader to Katritzky’s 2015 essay for an image reproduction. Finally, all but one

of this chapter's endnotes consist only of URL links — without any additional bibliographical information.

The final Part V Commedia dell'Arte from the Avant-Garde to Contemporary Theatre is mostly old news again. Apart from Erika Fischer-Lichte's original critical reflection on Reinhardt's and Strehler's stagings of Goldoni, the essays are all informative in a merely summative way — offering texts somewhat in the style of a long dictionary entry but without a critical edge. The heavy lifting had all been done by Taviani four decades previously.

The volume closes with Christopher Balme's 'Conclusion: Commedia dell'Arte and Cultural Heritage' (311–19), which rather diplomatically throws some light on the dynamics and politics of the anxieties of influence that are at play when it comes to the commedia. By using the UNESCO's successful applicants for the ICH status as the points of comparison, Balme offers a plausible explanation as to why the Italian application was unsuccessful. This method also allows him to separate the living myth of the commedia from the historical practice that inspired it. By the same token, Balme gives the reader a vade-mecum through the volume as a whole: a critical razor to separate the cult from the fact.

Natalie Crohn Schmitt's *Befriending the Commedia dell'Arte of Flaminio Scala* (2014) presents detailed analysis of the comic scenarios from the most famous of the *canovacci* collections. Her reading of Scala is very particular and attempts at 'befriending' the commedia by providing it with a rich contextual framing. Schmitt does useful work collecting the contextual data that have bearing on the events in the scenarios. While her method has its strengths (such as close attention to the textual details), it also has significant weaknesses. Schmitt purports to:

see the comic scenarios in the collection in relationship to early modern life in Italy, to consider their value as works of art, and to establish the extent to which their performance can be reconstructed. (5)

Methodologically, these are highly problematic aims: we must question to what extent early modern Italy is the appropriate frame of reference; the concept of art is anachronistic; and scenarios were pre-texts for an improvised performance, so they likely did not serve to 'reconstruct' performance — and probably 'reconstruct' is not the right word here. Schmitt acknowledges that her prism is a literary one, and she purports 'to develop a vision of what the world is and how to live that rises from the author's work' (6). But the appropriateness of such a literary approach and of empathic engagement with historical early modern subjects is questionable when reading a text printed in 1611 that, as Richard Andrews and

Stefan Hulfeld have observed, was clearly pursuing a number of agendas.¹⁰ In an early modern print text of this kind, can we assume any such modern notion of subjectivity and build upon it? And while Scala is the named authority in the *Il teatro delle favole*, can we speak of ‘his world’ as documented in the book? There is a fundamental difference between a work of literature — which is an articulation of a particular world with its own modality, and these are part of the writer’s original creation — and a work of drama or theatre. A work of drama is existentially dependent on the theatre practices (traditions and conventions, professions, cultures, and economies) that produced it, and that to an extent incomparable to a work of literature. Scala is not the author of the scenarios he edited and published; neither was he the originator of the practices that produced the scenarios. The notion of the ‘world’ of Scala’s scenarios, moreover, is highly figurative. Schmitt’s methodology conflates the many degrees of separation between the highly stylized and conventionalized routines, plots, and signs of a commedia scenario on the one hand, and the early modern world on the other. This world-viewing impulse is probably a cultural and ideological legacy of the nineteenth century — a likely descendant of the Idealists’ *Weltanschauung*: an ideologically charged, pre-phenomenological synoptic view of existence from the perspective of a chosen and prominent (mostly elite) individual and ‘his’ values as imposed upon the world. Schmitt seems to be working in one other interpretive tradition as well: the radical Lutheran biblical exegesis *sola scriptura* — knowing God and reaching salvation solely by reading the scripture. Theologically, this approach might have its justification in a literary ‘creation’, but hardly so in a work hinging upon a live theatre culture.

Schmitt establishes a few orthodoxies, such as that of marriage and domestic life (relying on Ruggiero), or social hierarchies (Martin), and from this conceptual basis interprets Scala.¹¹ Both Ruggiero and Martin (who wrote for Ruggiero’s *Companion* volume) formulate generic, normative behaviours that were allegedly the most commonly held ‘mainstream’ practices. Should theatre — and the carnivalesque commedia dell’arte especially — be read in this normative way? Given the ubiquity and profusion of attacks against early modern theatre, one could readily argue the opposite: commedia provoked so many critics because it was showing objectionable behaviour — that is, the exact opposite of what Ruggiero and Martin were asserting. Scala’s particular position in this contentious issue is ever more complex: on the one hand, carnivalesque ‘wildness’ is the very heart of comedy (and commedia); on the other hand, one of Scala’s agendas for the publication of the *Il teatro delle favole* was public esteem and recognition of his company as well as the genre itself, on a par with the efforts of early modern Italian

academies.¹² In the end, it does not really matter if the scenarios confirm or subvert the normative practice. Even more problematically, this pre-defined (prejudiced) reading of Scala is a self-fulfilling prophecy of sorts: given that commedia works with abstracted stereotypes, and given that Ruggiero and Martin formulate abstractions of behavioural stereotypes, the two will necessarily coincide, but any coincidence is based on false similarities.

Throughout the book Schmitt consistently applies the same interpretive pattern: taking Scala's scenarios, in their abstraction and indeterminacy, and filling those aporias of indeterminate meaning with knowledge about early modern social reality as documented in prints or extrapolated by historians. This approach rests on a reductive binary of theatre versus life, such as when Schmitt argues that Scala's scenarios are not merely 'pure manifestations of the theatre than of life' (12). I am unsure I understand this binary or find it plausible. Its starting point is a misguided assumption that commedia is 'pure theatre', without a referential function to the world, and Schmitt sets out to counter and correct this misconception. But that is a very literal and reductive reading of Scala's word *rappresentazione* in regards to audience engagement with theatre *as play*.

In short, the method is flawed: while at its heart it offers a hand-holding guide through the beautiful comedic chaos of Scala's world — a kind of safe route through — it also uses its cross-references at face value, reading them in a positivist manner, as if they were reliable imprints and testimonies of their world. This latent singularity of 'Scala's world' that Schmitt is trying to uncover is at odds with the diverse and often contradictory nature of early modern reality (or rather reality *tout court*).

Schmitt relies quite heavily on the notion of the *theatergram*, without theorizing it in detail. The term was coined by Louise George Clubb as an attempt to counter the proliferation of structuralist jargon in the 1970s and 80s. Elsewhere, Schmitt reflects on Clubb's term *theatergram*, but ignores the critical work that has been done on the concept since then, especially by the Theater Without Borders scholars. The *theatergram* has been used as an effective analytical tool with some descriptive potency, with limitations, and it would be anachronistic to turn it into a standard, let alone normative concept of early modernity or even present-day theory. Crucially missing here is reflection on early modern theatre within the *oral* (or *residually oral*) culture of its age. Walter Ong's theorization of orality and its qualities in performance is crucial in this context. Interestingly Schmitt's 2010 essay cites Henke as relying on Ong, but appears not to have adopted or come to terms with this foundational theory.¹³

Schmitt outlines a number of historical practices and contexts in which Scala's theatre operates. A major omission in the historical context, however, is trade, and more specifically the medical trade, including cosmetics and perfumes. Theatre's connection to trade is long-established: one of its names was *commedia mercenaria*, and Scala himself traded in perfumes and had a shop in Venice.¹⁴ Unsurprisingly, and far from fortuitously, several of the scenarios are prominently obsessed with smells (bad breath, rotten teeth). The acknowledgement of *comici dell'arte* as *mercatori* (to cite Ferrone) is a major lacuna in the contexts Schmitt summons. This omission is all the more striking given that Schmitt has Katritzky's two fundamental books on the topic of medicine and early modern performance in her bibliography, as well as Henke's publications (but not Ferrone).¹⁵ Similarly, the book presents little contextual awareness of recent research in Mediterranean Studies (Horden, Abulafia, Jaffe-Berg), surely of significance for the Venetian branch of the *commedia*.

As a catalogue that increases the density of our understanding, Schmitt's collected information is a valuable contribution. I believe the book should have stayed that way: a contextual anthology for the readers of Scala. Schmitt's painstaking yoking of the scenarios with the contextual information is somewhat mechanical and feels like filling in a crossword puzzle, turning the critical engagement with the scenarios into a ticking off exercise. More significantly, by providing contextual, literal explanations, Schmitt pins down the interpretation to a singular reading — a perfect anathema to *commedia all'improvviso*.

Erith Jaffe-Berg's *Commedia dell'Arte and the Mediterranean: Charting Journeys and Mapping 'Others'* (2016) also offers historical contexts for early modern *commedia* but takes a radically different approach. Her book refocuses the attention to a broader region, inclusive of the entire Mediterranean and its multicultural communities. The many cultures appearing in the world of the *commedia*, Jaffe-Berg argues, are no literary constructions but everyday realities with their own concerns, reputations, prejudices, and stereotypes — all of which not only had their own performance practices but also entered the theatre of the *commedia*. The portrayals of these cultures were not realistic but inflected and often skewed by the medium: 'Arabs, Armenians, Jews, Turks, Greeks and Romani people cannot be ignored but should instead be recognized as an important element of *commedia dell'arte*' (8).

In this meticulously researched book, Jaffe-Berg places on the early modern map a rich variety of 'other' realities — such as the Middle Eastern communities present in Italy or the fascinating documents of Jewish performance in Mantua and Venice. Interestingly, Jaffe-Berg draws on the available scenarios — predominantly

the Correr collection and Scala, while also considering the Corsini. Rather than matching individual dramatic moments to corresponding realities, Jaffe-Berg uses the metaphor of the map as a tool of painting the physical world on the one hand, and correlating it to its imaginary representations, on the other. She firmly roots individual interstices in both archival research of an impressive depth, and in the available criticism — from the annotated editions of scenarios, through historical investigations, to the interdisciplinary work in Mediterranean Studies. Jaffe-Berg's is a major contribution to the field and charts new territories for *commedia dell'arte* researchers.

Emily Wilbourne starts her monograph *Seventeenth-Century Opera and the Sound of the Commedia dell'Arte* with a discussion of terminology that would be very welcome in several of the other volumes reviewed in this essay. Her discrete clarification of the term *commedia dell'arte*, citing Vincenzo Galilei's 1581 treatise, is worth quoting at length:

In the absence of an umbrella term describing Italian theatrical practice, Galilei refers to the 'tragedies and comedies recited by the *zanni*', deploying a word with no direct translation into English [...] In Galilei's usage the synecdoche is repeated on a larger scale, utilizing a memorable and popular character to stand in for the entire edifice of the professional theater. Over the last 150 years, it has become common to refer to this theater as the *commedia dell'arte*. While this term was not in common use until the late Settecento, modern usage applies it to the entire history of the phenomenon it describes, beginning around 1550, when the documentation of professional troupes and of female performers begins in earnest. (2)

Similarly, her introduction is a welcome corrective to the myth-making found in older as well as recent *commedia* literature. The critical research Wilbourne cites has not only questioned the rigid system of *commedia* positivists, it has also opened up numerous research opportunities, such as the interaction between the *commedia*, music, dance, and opera — artistic disciplines that recent centuries have kept apart with a view to professional specialization and generic purity. The borders between these forms of performance in the early modern age were not only porous but often non-existent, as evidenced by the *comici* who successfully practised several of them — such as I gelosi's 'Florinda' Virginia Ramponi-Andreini. While Riccardo Drusi in his essay for *The Commedia dell'Arte in Context* asserts a clear separation between the historic *commedia* and music, Wilbourne's starting point — plausibly rooted in Galilei's treatise cited above — is that the *commedia dell'arte* was in several ways a fundamental inspiration for the emerging genre of

the opera. In this premise, she follows not only Anne MacNeil and other notable musicologists, but also the leading commedia scholars, Siro Ferrone in particular. It is from Ferrone that she derives her principal position: the overlaps between the commedia and early opera in genre, situations, and performers.

Throughout her carefully researched and elegantly argued book, she reconstructs ‘a theatrical epistemology of sound that characterizes not only the established medium of the commedia dell’arte stage, but also early Italian opera’ (9). Her focus in the opera literature is Claudio Monteverdi — a well-researched composer. Yet Wilbourne’s approach offers novel insights that focus on actantial models, agencies of individual characters, and dramatic situations that have clear parallels across the two performance forms. So her chapter 3 traces ‘The Serious Elements of Early Comic Opera’ on the example of Giovan Battista Andreini’s *La Ferinda* (1622), ‘a deliberate amalgamation of comedy and opera’ (92), comparing it to the 1637 opera *L’Egisto over chi soffre speri* and tracing ‘the sonic parameters of commedia dell’arte theater, and ... an epistemology of sound as shared by opera and the commedia dell’arte alike’ (93). The following chapter analyzes Monteverdi’s diva characters ‘Penelope and Poppea as Stock Figure of the Commedia dell’Arte’—a daring claim, but plausibly corroborated and meticulously documented in the scripts and musical material.

Wilbourne’s book is a phenomenal intervention into the soundscapes of early modern Italian performance and offers an inspirational methodology. Transformed and sublimated into the new art form, commedia was given a new realm of activity, influencing the history of the opera perhaps even more than the history of spoken drama. Wilbourne articulates this lasting legacy of the affinities between the two art forms in its aural aspects, in their stock characters and plot situations, as well as in their stylized expressive communication.

The last volume under review is Andrea Fabiano’s fine monograph *La Comédie-Italienne de Paris et Carlo Goldoni* (The Comédie Italienne of Paris and Carlo Goldoni: From the Commedia dell’Arte to the Opéra Comique, a Hybrid Theatre Style of the Eighteenth Century, 2018). Fabiano adopts the concept of hybridization which he places at the heart of his analysis of Goldoni’s Parisian era from the 1760s to the early 1790s.

The key theme running through the study is the linguistic volatility of the Comédie Italienne. Negotiating comprehension — intellectual and affective — in the company’s bilingual practice, Fabiano adopts a very modern prism — that of single-language cultures. While the discontents of the stage language were clearly important points of its time, the concept of a single-language culture that Fabiano uses was in many ways only a later by-product of modern state nations

that defined themselves linguistically. Assuming this feature throughout the long and tumultuous three decades that Fabiano covers may be a little precocious or anachronistic. While working with fascinating new material, Fabiano presents Goldoni somewhat conventionally as an experimenter. I would argue that Goldoni, operating in both Italian and French, was less of an experiment or difficulty for the Parisian stage (as Fabiano asserts) than the tail end of the plurilingual early modernity — a world that was coming to an end exactly in Goldoni's generation, with the advent of the French Revolution and other national movements. Fabiano tends to downplay the similarities not only between the French and Italian languages, but also between Italian and Latin, which was still standard on the school curriculum. So comprehension was probably less of an issue; it was the rising nationalism that created artificial barriers in the audience's willingness to comprehend.

Fabiano argues that Goldoni's era brought experimental hybrid genres, combining Italian comedy, opera, and opéra comique in a mixture that was novel in the context of Comédie Italienne in the 1770s. This is certainly a fascinating investigation into the company's history and its developing dramaturgy. I would be less certain about the novelty of the mixed genre, but rather see this Goldonian dramaturgy in many ways as a retrograde move — although this hypothesis contradicts the received status that Goldoni holds as the innovator of the commedia. In the context of the Comédie Italienne, Goldoni may have been original with that particular mixture of genres; in the context of Parisian theatre, this was a revival of the mode of the early eighteenth-century, as practised at the Opéra Comique. Goldoni's dramaturgy not only looked back to that tradition, but probably also incorporated its offshoots from elsewhere in Europe. Between the 1730s and 1750s, Johann Felix von Kurz, known as Bernardon, was active throughout Germany, Bohemia, and particularly in Vienna; his medley productions (Bernardoniads) engaged in the same kind of mélange, inspired not only by the German Haupt- and Staats-aktionen, the live tradition of Hanswurstiads, which stemmed from the seventeenth-century Italian commedia dell'arte and the English comedy, but also from the popular Italian opera, which thrived in early eighteenth-century central Europe. Kurz was also inspired by the Parisian stage, even naming his 1766 medley *Le Mercure Gallante* after the Parisian theatre journal.¹⁶ Goldoni may well have been capitalizing on the popularity of an earlier Italian (or rather Italianate) genre and trying to give it and the Comédie-Italienne a new lease on life through this dramaturgical intervention. Fabiano points out that the new style did not start with Goldoni, but was anticipated by Jean Galli de Bibiena's 'comédie héroïco-comique' called *La Nouvelle Italie* (1762), which Goldoni was

drawing upon. Notably, Jean belonged to the influential Galli-Bibiena family of theatre architects and opera scenographers, who were instrumental in the popularity of Italian operas in central Europe the first half of the century. In other words, Goldoni's hybrid genre was probably less of a theatrical experiment, as Fabiano argues, and more of a reassertion of the then traditional, 'old school' influence of Italian performance (commedia, opera, scenography) in the context of the patriotic movement in France. Apart from that, the 1780s also saw a new influx of operatic influence and reform — especially with the novelties introduced by Christoph Willibald Gluck, but also with the undeservedly neglected operas by the great Antonio Salieri, who worked with librettists of the first order: Lorenzo da Ponte or Beaumarchais. It was in this turbulent context that Goldoni's Parisian era found itself and tried to thrive.

Nonetheless, Fabiano's monograph is a valuable contribution to the understanding of French theatre of the late eighteenth century as well as one particular chapter of commedia's legacy. It is also a fascinating analysis of theatrical hybridity — especially in its final chapter, dedicated to Nicolas-Étienne Framery (1745–1810), the first theorist of opera translation, conceiving it as a form of non-derogatory parody.

The publications reviewed in this essay cover an impressive range of topics, all brought together under the umbrella of 'commedia dell'arte' — however amorphous and even empty that term turns out to be. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the most incisive contributions to the research on the commedia are those that question the term itself, inflecting, expanding, and eventually redefining it. Commedia dell'arte is clearly more honoured in the breach than in the observance, and the most inspirational publications within this rich body of work topple the status quo of the commedia's myth, rather than make their obeisance to its nostalgic glory.

Notes

- 1 Published by Olschki (<https://www.olschki.it/riviste/5>), the journal was discontinued in 2011 after four volumes; for their contents, see <https://www.olschki.it/static/data/riviste/commart/indici/indici.pdf>.
- 2 Robert Henke and Eric Nicholson, eds, *Transnational Exchange in Early Modern Theater* (Aldershot, 2008), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315549880>. This volume was followed by the same editors' *Transnational Mobilities in Early Modern Theater* (Farnham, 2014), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315549811>.
- 3 M.A. Katritzky, 'The Commedia dell'Arte: New Perspectives and New Documents', *Early Theatre* 11.2 (2008), 141, <https://doi.org/10.12745/et.11.2.788>.
- 4 Alena Jakubcová and Matthias J. Pernerstorfer, eds, *Theater in Böhmen, Mähren und Schlesien. Von den Anfängen bis zum Ausgang des 18. Jahrhunderts. Ein Lexikon* (Prague and Vienna, 2014).
- 5 Francesco Cotticelli, Anne Goodrich Heck, and Thomas F. Heck, eds, *A Treatise on Acting from Memory and by Improvisation (1699) by Andrea Perrucci: A Bilingual Edition in English and Italian* (Lanham, 2007). For the website, see <http://vecchiosito.bnonline.it/biblvir/perrucci/indice.htm>.
- 6 Francesco Cotticelli, Anne Goodrich Heck, and Thomas F. Heck, eds, *The Commedia dell'Arte in Naples: A Bilingual Edition of the 176 Casamarciano Scenarios* (Lanham, 2001).
- 7 Stefan Hulfeld et. al., eds, *Scenari più scelti d'istrioni: italienisch-deutsche edition der einhundert commedia all'improvviso-szenarien aus der sammlung corsiniana* (Göttingen, 2014).
- 8 For this project, see <http://obvil.sorbonne-universite.site/projets/la-haine-du-theatre>.
- 9 Susanne Wofford, 'Foreign', in *Early Modern Theatricality*, ed. Henry S. Turner (Oxford, 2013), 478–92, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199641352.013.25>.
- 10 Richard Andrews, 'How — and Why — Does One Print Scenarios? Flaminio Scala, 1611', *Italian Studies* 61.1 (2006), 36, <https://doi.org/10.1179/007516306X96674>.
- 11 Guido Ruggiero, *Binding Passions: Tales of Magic, Marriage, and Power at the End of the Renaissance* (New York, 1993); J.J. Martin, 'The Myth of Renaissance Individualism' in *A Companion to the Worlds of the Renaissance*, ed. Guido Ruggiero (Oxford, 2002), 208–24, <https://doi.org/10.1002/9780470751626.ch13>.
- 12 *Ibid.*, 42ff.
- 13 Natalie Crohn Schmitt, 'Improvisation in the Commedia dell'Arte in its Golden Age: Why, What, How', *Renaissance Drama* 38 (2010), 225–49, <https://doi.org/10.1086/rd.38.41917476>.

- 14 Jean-Christophe Agnew, *Worlds Apart: The Market and the Theater in Anglo-American Thought, 1550–1750* (Cambridge, 1986), <https://doi.org/10.1017/cb09780511571404>; Siro Ferrone, *Attori, mercanti, corsari: la commedia dell'arte in Europa tra Cinque e Seicento* (Turin, 1993).
- 15 M.A. Katritzky, *Women, Medicine, and Theatre, 1500–1750* (Aldershot, 2007), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315233604>; *Healing, Performance, and Ceremony in the Writings of Three Early Modern Physicians: Hippolytus Guarinonius and the Brothers Felix and Thomas Platter* (Farnham, 2012), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315253572>.
- 16 Friedemann Kreuder, 'The Re-Inspired and Revived Bernardon: Metamorphoses of Early Modern Comedy in Eighteenth-Century Bourgeois Theatre', in M.A. Katritzky and Pavel Drábek, eds, *Transnational Connections in Early Modern Theatre* (Manchester, 2019), 162–78.