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# Passing off Pantalone: Representations of Commedia dell'Arte in Aotearoa New Zealand

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## Abstract

This thesis explores the question of how the conventions of Commedia dell'Arte are reemployed in Aotearoa New Zealand theatre to make something new. The critical section, comprising half the project, includes four case studies of Aotearoa New Zealand plays in which aspects of the Commedia dell'Arte have been adapted and includes analysis of how the Commedia dell'Arte has allowed for the new exploration of dramatic themes and for the deconstruction of norms inherited from a traditional theatre which has colonisation as its backdrop. The thesis argues that the Commedia dell'Arte, with its capacity for commodification, has been culturally and commercially adapted in Aotearoa New Zealand, in Māori, migrant, and mainstream theatre, such that the use of its marque may no longer be considered to be within the scope of protection that would be afforded to a branded product in the commercial world by the legal tort known as passing off. Understanding how the Commedia dell'Arte methods are employed in the case studies acts as a springboard for discussing some of the practical challenges encountered trying to apply the learnings from the case study analysis to the writing of the creative component, an original playscript *Carnival Day*. This playscript employs various features of the Commedia dell'Arte, including stock characters, their masks, the lazzi, and grammelot in order to explore their comedic range in a modern Aotearoa New Zealand setting of disease and political uniformity.

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## Preface

My research in this thesis ranges across cultures, not least Italy, as the birthplace of *Commedia dell'Arte*, and Aotearoa New Zealand, as the setting within which I both appraise and apply *Commedia* techniques, so it is necessary that I begin with a positioning statement. A positioning statement provides self-reflection on how a researcher's personal identity, experiences, and perspectives, including their beliefs and moral values, may bear upon their research inquiries. It also helps to provide perspective on how, through the research process, these may consciously or unconsciously reinforce or change the foundations of the researcher's positionality. Ultimately a positioning statement provides a touchstone for the standpoint of observations and arguments made to support the conclusions of the research:

Reflecting on, fleshing out, interrogating, and conveying your positionality relative to a research orientation is critical to ensuring the validity of your research stance. After all, no one can be 100% objective. (Weingarten Learning Resources Centre, 2017)

My grandfather, a bootmaker, arrived in Aotearoa New Zealand from Italy with his two brothers in 1923 and, after working in his uncle's orchard, established his own orchard in Longlands, Hastings. My mother was half-Scottish, raised with horses on a farm that her family lost after her father absconded with his mistress to buy a pub in Dannevirke, the takings of which he subsequently gambled away.

My own father also left, having dissipated our savings and trust, and we were dutifully adopted by Birthright, a social service agency that supports the children of families who are, as they say, "led by one person". Growing up, my siblings and I spent many summers attending its charity picnics, acutely aware of our marginal status as children of solo parents. To formalise that status my mother joined the local solo parents' club and proceeded to date a string of men whose wives had left them for obvious reasons. I recall her trying to apologise after one of them had assaulted me, but by that time I had walled her off too.

As a teenager, I had a district court judge describe me in the local newspaper, the *Herald Tribune*, as an arrogant young man after having been convicted for poking a policeman in the stomach. It became my sobriquet. My adolescent beef was generally with those looking down from a greater moral height, the people who had two parents. Inside me a dour dispossessed Scot fought hand-to-

hand with a temperamental land-loving Italian peasant. Meanwhile my father had continued to hawk his brand of beguiling, and consequently I have a Māori half-brother and half-sister. I love them very much, but I am marginal to their hapū.

I write now as a middle-aged professional accountant half-ruing his responsible choices in life. From my island I have become a natural spectator who finds community in the belly laughs of carnival and the circus of solo-parent freaks. As an offspring of Neapolitan stock, I see a sibling spirit in the spontaneous street-theatre of Naples, in the orphan street vendors who display their stock of Pulcinella dolls in hinged cases, then slam them shut and sprint away when the carabinieri arrive to check their licences. What a delight to find the Commedia dell'Arte alive in Aotearoa New Zealand. What a surprise to see the conventions of an essentially foreign theatre tradition being adopted, celebrated, and used to critique our cultural hierarchy and colonialist history. Its displacement here seems a licence for the revival of a rebellious theatrical spirit that teems with the promise of regeneration. I became curious to see how it has settled here and what has become of its cultural DOC (Denominazione di Origine Controllata), the stamp of its origin. My research in this thesis thus arose, for me, naturally from the alloy of my own cultural contexts and my lifelong attraction to forms of irreverence that are comical at the same time as they poke the belly of established mores.

This study has critical and creative components. The critical section, comprising half the project, includes four case studies of Aotearoa New Zealand plays in which aspects of the Commedia dell'Arte have been adapted. Only one of these plays, *The Pickle King*, has a published script so I have also looked at reviews, interviews, and videos of the stage performances. I reflect upon the adaptations and challenges of using the Commedia dell'Arte in a contemporary theatre context where the scarcity of performance opportunities and funding means the needs of popular entertainment must be met. My central research question is:

How are the conventions of Commedia dell'Arte reemployed in Aotearoa New Zealand theatre to make something new?

The critical component of this thesis argues that the Commedia dell'Arte, with its capacity for commodification, has been culturally and commercially adapted in Aotearoa New Zealand, in Māori, migrant, and mainstream theatre, so as to now constitute a naturalised framework of theatrical practice. By naturalised, I mean settled to a degree that its materials can be found intermingled, bound up with, and enriching, rather than remaining distinct from, our own theatre practice, such that the use of its marque may no longer be considered to be within the scope of

protection that would be afforded to a branded product in the commercial world by the legal tort known as passing off. Rather, these works are autochthonous, growing in fresh forms from the distinctive bicultural theatre environs of Aotearoa New Zealand.

Understanding how the Commedia dell'Arte methods are employed in the case studies acts as a springboard for the creative portion of my project, a full-length play, *Carnival Day*, of around 15,000 words or 100 minutes run time. *Carnival Day* employs four features of the Commedia dell'Arte—the stock characters, their masks, the lazzi, and grammelot—to explore their comedic range in a modern Aotearoa New Zealand setting of disease and political uniformity.

While my play is set in the local landscape, I have also used Italian source references and various metatheatrical asides to emphasise the hybridity and self-awareness of contemporary Commedia dell'Arte.

The structure of my thesis is as follows:

- Chapter One describes how the Commedia dell'Arte, with its reproducible elements, was instrumental in the commodification of theatre. I then describe the distinctive features of the Commedia dell'Arte, including sections on the history and variety of masks and stock characters, lazzi and grammelot. This review serves as a reference for application to the case studies in the following chapter.
- Chapter Two presents analysis of four case studies. These are *The Pickle King* (2002), *White Elephant* (2014), *Hoki Mai Tama Mā* (2014), and *Leilani* (2017). My analysis is based on the published script and a video of *The Pickle King* (the latter kindly made available to me by Indian Ink), reviews and video footage of *White Elephant* (kindly made available to me by the director Jo Randerson), reviews of *Hoki Mai Tama Mā*, and reviews of *Leilani* supplemented by a published dialogue about the play between Mahuika Theatre Company members.

My analysis of these plays posits four key questions:

1. How have they been received by critics and audiences? What can this tell us about the acceptability of Commedia to audiences in the Aotearoa New Zealand context?
2. How have four Aotearoa New Zealand plays used the old European tradition of Commedia dell'Arte and what can we learn from it?
3. How do they depart from or continue the tradition?

4. In what way have the features of Commedia dell'Arte been adapted to emphasise aspects of Aotearoa New Zealand society and culture or to disrupt colonial tropes?
- Chapter Three considers more generally how the Commedia dell'Arte has attracted new audiences and allowed for the new exploration of dramatic themes and for the deconstruction of norms inherited from a traditional theatre which has colonisation as its backdrop. It concludes with a section that applies the findings of the thesis to my own creative work. I discuss some of the practical challenges I encountered as a playwright trying to apply the learnings from my analysis of the case studies in adapting the Commedia dell'Arte to write the original playscript, *Carnival Day*, that forms the creative component of this Master of Creative Writing thesis.

Overall, I arrive at the conclusion in the critical section that the improvisational methods and inventive spirit of the Commedia have been fused with 'Aotearoa-centric theatre' to create new forms of syncretic theatre that better reflect the lived experience of exploration associated with adapting to changes in the social and cultural landscape. In the final part of this thesis, the creative work, I experiment with crafting that syncretic form in my own playwriting. The critical and creative components are weighted at 50% each in terms of their proportion of the thesis as a whole.

## Acknowledgements

The scripting of my creative component, *Carnival Day*, has benefitted from peer workshops, one with my MCW cohort and several with my thesis supervisor, Professor Elspeth Tilley, and fellow Master of Creative Writing students Jessica Ramage and Jasmine Kaa. Professor Tilley has also provided extensive commentary on progressive drafts of my critical component. I thank them for their gracious and insightful feedback. I also thank my co-supervisor Stuart Hoar for his astute observations on the play's structure and language. The generous contributions of all these people have really made me stop to think about how to make theatre happen as well as to write it.

# Chapter One: The Commedia dell'Arte – Its history and features

## Origins

The term 'Commedia dell'Arte' was first used by playwright Carlo Goldoni towards the end of the 18th century in his play, *Il teatro comico*, which argues the need to reform the Italian theatre and replace the formulaic and vulgar *commedie dell'arte* with scenes and characters true to real life (Jordan, 2010, p. 207). Its initial usage was thus derogatory, although as Rudlin and Fava (2021, p. xiii) note “The word ‘commedia’ itself simply means ‘theatre’ – of all kinds, not just ‘comedy’, and the word ‘arte’ has nothing to do with ‘art’. The simplest translation would be ‘professional’”.<sup>1</sup>

As a professional theatre practice, the Commedia dell'Arte was instrumental in the commodification of theatre. Its performances were marketed and sold through ticketing and performances occurred at a single designated venue. They were also reproducible, hung on a familiar scaffolding constructed by the lazzi (standard comic routines), and the instantly recognisable masks of its serial characters. While this prolonged the life of its performability, ultimately it declined as a form of popular entertainment because it lost its freshness and dynamism. Jordan (2010, p. 22) explains:

As time went on and the profession established itself and even gained a modicum of respectability, a certain conservatism seems to have crept in. What had been a revolutionary leap forward in terms of performance techniques and the idea of theatre for theatre's sake, became a predictable and even hackneyed tradition by the time of Goldoni.

More pointedly, Taviani (2018, p. 20) observes that:

(T)here was a time in which the Commedia dell'Arte was in a state of decline, but then started to flourish again. As a matter of fact, what declined was the predominant use by professional troupes of the formula of improvisation. What flourished again was that same formula, but with its commercial context removed.

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<sup>1</sup> Taviani (2018, 22) supports this interpretation: “In fact, the term arte ... in the expression ‘Commedia dell'Arte’ only meant ‘job’ or ‘profession.’”

What Goldoni had done was to promote the idea that the Commedia dell'Arte as an authentic art form or genre could only survive by severing it from its function as a meal ticket for mercenary actors, a function that has been reinstated by its popularity with modern audiences.

The Commedia dell'Arte initially flourished in the second half of the sixteenth century and throughout the seventeenth century. It was performed by touring troupes of professional players often comprising regional native Italians who did not understand each other's dialects. The travels of these professional actors, the Italian *comici*, have been documented in France, Spain, Germany, England and, in the eighteenth century, Northern Europe and Russia. Their style grew out of and amalgamated earlier forms of popular theatre. According to Taviani these included the *commedia all'improvviso*, *commedia mercenaria*, *commedia delle maschere*, *commedia degli zanni*, and *commedia all'italiana*, each term reflecting the emphasis of the form respectively on improvisation, paying audiences, masks, stock characters, grotesque servant characters and, to a wider European audience, its quintessential Italianness. (Taviani, 2018, p. 19)

Taviani also writes that the concept of Commedia dell'Arte as a repertory of dramatic formulae using masks and improvisation stands in sharp contrast to the *commedia erudita*, professional theatre performances based on a literary text produced by an author. He notes, however, that the lines between the two were, in practice, blurred by commercial exigencies. Professional theatre actors, or *comici*, often performed and wrote *commedie erudite*. Moreover, the improvised *commedie* of free theatre associated with occasions such as festivals and carnivals often used materials from the professional theatre. (Taviani, 2018, pp. 19-20)

The actual degree of improvisation in the Commedia dell'Arte has been a matter of scholarly debate. Jordan concludes that "the surviving evidence is at best patchy" but cites Andrews' theory that dialogue in early Italian comedy was 'elastic': "It could be lengthened or shortened at will by the actors, who would have had a repertoire of memorised duologues and monologues at their disposal" (2010, p. 210).

Herrick writes that "No historian can accurately evaluate the inevitable compromise in actual production between the written word and action. He (sic) must assume, however, that the professionals of the *Commedia dell'Arte* excelled in acting and therefore put literature second, as indeed it should be put when a play is performed on a popular stage" (1960, p. 222).

Whatever the historical truth, improvisation, primarily through the use of *lazzi*, has become a key distinguishing feature of the *Commedia dell'Arte*. But we must naturally ask what other specific features constitute the *Commedia dell'Arte* as distinct from the *commedie erudite* and other theatrical forms, not only historically, but as it is recognised as a cultural practice today.

### **Cultural status - the *Commedia dell'Arte* as cultural heritage**

Balme (2018, pp. 311-319) documents an attempt to secure protected status for *Commedia dell'Arte* by registering it as an Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) under UNESCO-administered criteria which emphasised locally rooted performance forms and cultural practices. The application was complicated by its supporters' advocacy of the importance of *Commedia dell'Arte* to European culture in general. While never officially rejected, Balme suggests that the application was doomed to fail because it could not demonstrate an unbroken lineage consisting of "long chains of intergenerational, family-based performance practice" (p. 315). Rather, *Commedia dell'Arte* has been refashioned across borders, according to the attempts of its practitioners and teachers to try to recreate its original form. Even in respect of its trademark clowning, Balme says "the actual corporeal practice is a mixture of entangled devices which are, even for experts, difficult to pin down in terms of their provenance" (p. 315).

The hybridisation that has occurred with the transmission of *Commedia dell'Arte* through time is a characteristic of its cultural heritage, in which "It mixes elements rescued from the past with elements generated in the present, in order to ensure its future endurance" (Balme, 2018, p. 317).

Rudlin and Fava describe one example of cross-border hybridisation:

One finds an interesting example of this duality in the theatre of Domenico Biancolelli: his *Scenario* is a collection of *canovacci* that he played in Paris with his company, and in them, we find perfect examples of *Commedia* in its original form. But one can also study in his *Nouveau Théâtre Italien* some pieces from his repertoire which are written in alexandrine [sic] verse, in an elevated language where everyone speaks in the same style. Even *Arlequin* speaks in such a manner. The Doctor of the *Scenario*, however, is definitely ours: he participates in the *lazzi* and gets fully involved in the disasters

which the Commedia plots throw up. The Doctor of the ‘regular’ plays is a pedant, ponderous as you have to be when you inhabit the alexandrine world. In fact, the French Doctor called Le Pédant is much closer to the *commedia erudita* than to *Il Dottore* of the *Commedia dell’Arte*. (Rudlin & Fava, 2021, p. 19)

The key features of the stock characters are explored in more detail below, but the key point here is that hybridisation is almost inevitable, not just over time but wherever the *Commedia dell’Arte* crosses geographical and cultural borders.

### **Historical form and Carnival appeal**

Given its background of cross-border hybridisation and nostalgic recollection, it is difficult to nail the quintessence of *Commedia dell’Arte*. One can safely say, however, that its heart beats with the recycling of familiar materials. Unlike scripted theatre, the *Commedia dell’Arte* text is improvised from a given plot, using stock characters and masks which are largely unchanging from performance to performance. Similarly, the characteristic *lazzi*, or comic routines, are unchanging in their basic structures, albeit appearing in different combinations and contexts. They often employ grotesque and vulgar humour, which reflect the *Commedia dell’Arte*’s close affiliation with carnival theatre. Their physical violence and sexual/scatalogical references invoke the degradation of the body grotesque as theorised by Bakhtin (1941), but they also use upending of the body, for example through pratfalls, as a platform for comical metaphors of social upheaval and renewal.

This emphasis on physical comedy, incorporating music, mime, dance, and acrobatics, helps explain *Commedia dell’Arte*’s historical appeal to socioeconomically disadvantaged classes. Its targeting of common folk caricatures as the butt of that humour explains why at the same time it was also popular with the upper classes. Having such broad appeal, its repeatability as a form of mass entertainment meant that the companies of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries could rely on the promise of commercial success. As with Hollywood today, however, there was a limit to which serialisation, however ingeniously varied within the prescribed paradigms, could continue to engage audiences. Nonetheless, to understand the historical phenomenon, it is useful to look at how the features of the *Commedia dell’Arte* helped to sell it as a commodity.

## *The Rise of Ticketing*

While the myth of the Commedia dell'Arte conjures up images of carnival performances in open spaces, the emergence of fixed indoor theatre spaces (the *stanze delle commedie*), in the sixteenth century, initially in Venice, paved the way for the business of theatre. Guarino (2018, p. 151) describes the spread of paying theatre into Rome, Florence, and Naples, assisted by patronage from the courts and oligarchies, and notes the development of “the daily performance as a product to sell.” Given its dual sources of funding at this time, the social existence of professional theatre relied upon negotiating a course between the transgressive desires of its paying audiences and the limits of institutional tolerance.

Balme et al. (2018, p. 31) write that:

...the Commedia dell'Arte stood out because it consisted of theatrical enterprises which sold performances by persuading spectators to buy tickets. They were not specialist artisans, limited to a specific genre. Rather, they specialised in not specialising, producing a variety of performances almost on an assembly-line basis, increasing the supply and expanding the range on offer in accordance with demand.

## *Serialisation of performance*

One trademark of the Commedia dell'Arte was its stock characters, costumed with the masks that enabled re-enactment of favourite archetypes from one performance to another. Whatever subtle variations in behaviour might have been introduced in performance, they were recognised as belonging to the character the mask signified. The masks thereby facilitated the serial production of characters and situations which could be reassembled in many ways. Because of this, the theatrical compositions of the Commedia dell'Arte can be regarded as quintessentially modular, the construction of which Fava describes as follows:

The first and most evident manifestation of modular composition is the repetition of the same masks in all comedies, the application of the principle of fixed types, which are modules. The same masks, the same problems, the same developments. Two lovers in heated conflict due to jealousy constitute a module; wherever there are lovers there is jealousy. Thus, the module of conflict of jealousy is prefabricated and

can be inserted, with any necessary adjustments, into any commedia. (Fava, 2004, Modular Composition, paragraph 1)

This modularisation or commodification was embraced by professional actors. Rudlin and Fava argue that “For the 150 years that Commedia dell’Arte dominated the world stage, actors did not want changes or development in their costume: what was desired was instant recognition of their personal personage, the sort of recognition that we give today to serial cartoon characters such as Tom and Jerry or Wilee [sic] Coyote and the Roadrunner.” (2021, p. 9)

On the other hand, as Jordan (2010, p. 102) has observed, while the commercial risks and production costs of the time no less than today drove the serial perpetuation of successful characters, theatregoers in the early Venetian theatre put a high value on virtuosity in character-switching and there is evidence that the pre-eminent companies of the time employed performers noted for their ability to alternate between characters.

The playing of more than one character by a single actor did not diminish the audience enjoyment of individual character recognition, and this makes the Commedia dell’Arte a viable form of theatre for small modern companies with tight budgets. The play *Leilani*, discussed in the case-studies chapter, is a good example of such commercial economy, with two principal actors playing four characters each.

## **The masks and stock characters**

Riccardo Drusi credits George Sand and her son Maurice, who shared an interest in commedia, with highlighting the masks and the stock characters behind them as the “true distinctive traits of the Commedia dell’Arte” (Drusi, 2018, p. 36).

The comic appeal of these traits originally came from their being grounded in reality. Jordan (2014, p. 227) explains:

The very clarity and consistency of images from the pantheon of the Commedia dell’Arte seem to justify the notion that stylized stereotyping was its defining cornerstone. However, at least in the case of Pantalone's costume, we know that it came from real and actual apparel worn by the Venetian upper classes. The comic element stemmed rather from its inappropriately youthful detail, the figure-hugging *zipon* and *calza*, and the

occasionally exaggerated codpiece, all of which were nevertheless recognized accoutrements of their day.

The mask itself is not a distinctive feature of the Commedia dell'Arte. Masks were used everywhere in Italy between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries: in performances, at parties, at public and private meetings, in brothels and in convents, at Carnival, on walks, on stages, and in the upper-tier boxes reserved to high-rank spectators. (Taviani, 2018, p. 30)

What is distinctive is the Commedia's synthesis of body and mask. This was noted by Duchartre in his encyclopaedic study of the Commedia dell'Arte:

The mask presupposes, furthermore, a constant and perfected play of the body, which is an art in itself, requiring thorough study; in other words, the body must become a supplement to the mask—a new face, in fact. Nonnus of Panopolis said of the mimes of Theodosius' time that they 'had gestures that speak a language, hands that have a mouth, fingers that have voices.' It was by such art as this that Scaramouche, without uttering a word, was able to keep his audience in fits of laughter for more than half an hour in a scene in which he is frightened out of his wits. (1966, *The Masks*, paragraph 5)

This description of the body as being a complement to the mask differs from the process described by Antonio Fava, an internationally renowned modern Commedia dell'Arte practitioner which emphasises the wearer's activation of the mask's characteristics:

As soon as it is put on, the mask is put into action, made alive in the context of a ritualistic, staged, festive fiction. He or she who puts on the mask makes the *actio*, becomes an actor, *actualizes*. (Fava, 2004, Chapter 1, paragraph 2)

Regardless, it is clear there is a symbiotic relationship between the body and the mask. Moreover, the masks themselves were designed to exaggerate certain physical features that facilitated instant recognition of the character. Jordan (2010, p. 102) observes that the actor was likely to have had a physical characteristic like that of their mask so the two were indivisible, reinforcing the impression that what happened on stage could well have also happened in life, giving rise to a "paradoxical feeling of danger in a safe environment". This doubleness, or emotional distance, is a feature that makes Commedia dell'arte an ideal vehicle for the exploration of sensitive issues in a modern context, something I touch upon later in my analysis of the case studies.

In addition to aiding character recognition, the masks also afforded a degree of anonymity with which to perform the anti-authoritarian satire so appealing to working class audiences (Meehan, 2015).

Notwithstanding their fixed features, the masks provided for a wide range of emotions to be expressed:

The masks of the Commedia dell'Arte neither laughed, nor wept, nor, unlike most of the classic masks and those of China and Japan, did they express any particular emotion. They wore an indefinable expression as full of possibilities as of impossibilities, like the Mona Lisa, which every generation interprets differently. (Duchartre, 1966, Chapter IV, paragraph 3)

Thus, while fulfilling commercial exigencies of audience recognition, actors are still free to explore the possibilities of 'actualising' their masks using the safety of their doubleness to take their characters in new directions.

### *Historical changes in characters*

While the Commedia dell'Arte actors were eager to hold onto their instantly recognisable personalities, the names attached to the masks were less precious. Rudlin and Fava note:

What actors did change other than minor details, was the name of their personage, making it specific to their own interpretation. Brighella is simply the best known among hundreds of variations – Beltrame, Mezzetino, Flautino, Gradellino, Traccagnino, Finocchio, Bagolino, Scapino, etc. (2021, p. 9)

A discussion of the genesis of the characters behind the masks is beyond the scope of this thesis, but it is helpful background to understand how character names have been historically adapted to local circumstances and traditions. Jordan (2010), for example, examines how the character of Pantalone has evolved from the character Magnifico via the social context of the city of Venice. Crick has written of the masks as 'embodied locality' whereby:

A spectrum exists from a position where each Mask positively represents each region and its way of life, to that where the Mask is seen as an embodiment of all that is ridiculous about that particular region. (2018, p. 216)

The historical fact of local character adaptation, within the bounds of the general typology of character representation, makes the conferral of alternative names and local character traits

onto these characters part of the vital continuance of, rather than a departure from, the tradition.

### *Stock character types*

In his encyclopaedic history of the Commedia dell'Arte, Duchartre (1966) explains that while there is no end to the list of names, the Commedia dell'Arte characters can be reduced to a limited number of fundamental types, which he goes on to describe in detail. There is much debate about the origins of the names and details of character types but the following descriptions, drawn primarily from Duchartre, are an attempt to sketch their key characteristics, with reference to how some of these stock character types have appeared in my own play, *Carnival Day*:

- Pulcinella, perhaps the most complex in origin, is dressed in large white shirt and trousers with a black mask and belt. He is humpbacked with a pot belly, hooked nose, and long, spindly legs, which along with his shrill peeping give him the look of a top-heavy chicken. He embodies the desire for revenge of the lower classes against the aristocracy. He is lazy, sneaky, and deceitful, exploiting every situation, often by pretending to be what he is not. He can be cruel but also outrageously funny with his effusive speech and gestures. He is unreliable and cannot keep a secret, a trait which has given rise to an Italian expression *Il segreto di Pulcinella* (the secret of Pulcinella) which translates as 'an open secret.' According to Duchartre he has two versions: "The 'upper' Pulcinella is intelligent, sensual, sly, keen; in him the blood of Bucco predominates. The 'lower' Pulcinella is a dull and coarse bumpkin" (Duchartre, 1966, Chapter XVI). This duality produced strange variations of behaviour.
- Il Capitano (the Captain), with his splendid uniform, large bristling moustache, and long nose symbolising virility is a parody of the vainglorious military mercenary. He is bombastic and tedious in speech. While often reduced to a cowardly braggard, Perlman (2015, p. 82) notes "Yet there is something deeply moving in the character's need for approval and, when faced with rejection, the refuge he takes in self-aggrandizement. More than any of his fellow mask-characters, the Captain is his mask; the very fact of masking itself describes the essence of the Captain's personality".

- Pantalone or Pantaloon, along with Il Dottore, is one of the two old man types. He derives from the figure of a Venetian merchant, often wealthy and respected, but who can also be in a state of ruination. He is avaricious and miserly. He has long red legs, a loose black cape, Turkish slippers, and a red woollen bonnet. His mask has prominent eyebrows and is gaunt and swarthy with a large, hooked nose and an untidy grey goatee. Jordan (2010, p. 211) writes that “he is more usually portrayed as a manipulative parent attempting to obstruct his children’s amorous liaisons, by seeking to marry them off to people they don’t want to marry, and often having lustful designs of his own on the younger generation.” He forms the basis of the character of Amilcare in *Carnival Day*.
- Il Dottore (the Doctor) is a friend of Pantalone and his comic foil. Dressed all in black with a black gown and ruff and a large felt hat, he is a caricature of the professional man of science or letters. He is learned but speaks nonsense, often spouting ersatz Latin or Greek. Sand’s description of him, cited by Duchartre, is:

He wears a black or flesh-coloured mask which covers only his forehead and his nose, while his cheeks are smeared with red, which, Duchartre notes, replicates a birthmark which disfigured the face of a jurisconsult of those days (1966, Chapter XV).

Il Dottore is the source for The Plague Doctor in *Carnival Day*, although I have also amalgamated features of the medieval plague doctor, including his name and beaked mask, which contains aromatics. The Plague Doctor’s contract with Amilcare replicates archived agreements between a town’s administrators and the doctor to treat bubonic plague patients, as recorded by Miskimin (1977).

- The two Zanni (valet-buffoons), Arlecchino (Harlequin) and Brighella (also known as Francatrippa and various other names):
  - Arlecchino, the youngest of the family, wears a black mask and motley. Duchartre cites an excellent summary of him from the *Calendrier historique des théâtres (1751)*: “His character is that of an ignorant valet, fundamentally naïve, but nevertheless making every effort to be intelligent, even to the extent of seeming malicious. He is a glutton and a poltroon, but faithful and energetic. Through motives of fear or cupidity he is always ready to undertake

any sort of rascality and deceit. He is a chameleon which takes on every colour. He must excel in impromptu, and the first thing that the public always asks of a new Harlequin is that he be agile, and that he jump well, dance, and turn somersaults” (Duchartre, 1966, Chapter XII).

- Brighella. Duchartre writes: “The bizarre, half-cynical, half-mawkish expression of his olive-tinted mask once seen is never forgotten. It is distinguished by a pair of sloe eyes, a hook nose, thick and sensual lips, a brutal chin bristling with a sparse beard, and finally the moustache of a fop, thick and twirled up at the ends in such a fashion as to give him an offensive, swaggering air” (1966, Chapter XIII). Duchartre also notes that while originally he was quarrelsome and murderous, he became mellow and less likely to draw his dagger after the Renaissance, settling into his role as valet. He wears a white jacket and trousers adorned with a braid of green material along the seams, and a toque with a green border. He prowls rather than walks and always carries a large leather purse and his trusty dagger at his side.

The role of River in *Carnival Day* is based on Arlecchino, incorporating his childish playfulness and ability to change colours or to cross boundaries while playing his secondary role as an *Innamorata* (see note on the *Innamorati* (lovers) below).

These fixed roles were supplemented by various female roles which were not clearly defined but were adapted to each dramatic situation. Duchartre (1966, Chapter I) notes that “Women appeared late in the Italian comedy,” about which Vianello (2018, pp. 3-4) has commented: “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.”

The women did not wear masks but instead wore a black velvet loup (a cloth mask, often of silk or velvet, that covers only half the face) which allowed the audiences a glimpse of their beauty and sexual appeal. They were assigned generic roles as *Innamoratas* (lovers), servants, ingénues, mistresses, wantons, and matrons. The most well-known *Donna Innamorata*, Isabella, derives her name from Isabella Andreini, a celebrated 16<sup>th</sup> century actress in the Gelosi theatre company. (Duchartre, 1966, Chapter XIX, Isabella)

The Lovers, whom Duchartre and Weaver treat as a separate category of characters, included men, but the female and male lovers are now generally collectively known as *innamorati*. They write that “the lovers and wooers of the commedia dell'arte were always dapper and

engaging and just a trifle ridiculous” (Duchartre, 1966, Chapter XX). Their sole character trait was that of being in love. They did not wear masks and dressed in the latest fashion of the time.

In the Renaissance, the *innamorati* were usually the star attraction, but as the *zanni* (servants) became more popular around the beginning of the 18<sup>th</sup> century they began to fulfil *innamorati* roles. The romances of Harlequin and Columbine, for example, were very popular.

The character of Brook in *Carnival Day* is that of the Innamorata Isabella, the daughter of Pantalone, who typically seeks to marry her off to his advantage. The character of River is part-Innamorata, a hybrid role often played by Arlecchino.

Collectively these character types can be gathered under three broad categories: *vecchi* (old men), *zanni* (servants) and *innamorati* (lovers). Andrews (2008, p. xx) describes the composition of a normal company as including “two old men (*Vecchi*); four lovers (*Innamorati*), two male and two female; a braggart *Capitano*; and as many low-life or Servant masks (*Servi*) [*Zanni*] as could be afforded”.

Another character, the Neapolitan Tartaglia, is only mentioned by Duchartre as one of a constant proliferation of characters from the middle of the sixteenth century onward (1966, Chapter I). I include him here because I have incorporated his character into *Carnival Day*. Tartaglia (from *tartagliare* meaning to stutter) wears thick-lensed glasses and has a minor stutter. According to Fava (2004, p. 30) he is a notary and usually classed as one of the central group of old characters (*vecchi*), substituting for Pantalone or Il Dottore. A character of the same name was presented by dramatist Carlo Gozzi as a prime minister in his 1762 play *Il Re Cervo* (The King Stag), but Fava disputes that characterisation as having nothing to do with the traditional mask. Fava also notes that his stammering is often scatological, and his servant Pulcinella is often on hand to force a word out with his cudgel to finish the *bisguizzo* (verbal *lazzi*) (2004, p. 31). He does not appear to have standard costume, but he is pictured by Maurice Sand in a green and yellow striped clown outfit.<sup>2</sup>

Using these characters today invites complaints that the original mannerisms and dress of the *Commedia dell'Arte* stock types incorporated features intended to ridicule or demonise certain races or cultures. Various studies have investigated the racial stereotyping of the

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<sup>2</sup> See, for example, <https://www.bridgemanimages.com/en-US/sand/tartaglia-in-1620-by-maurice-sand-1823-1889-1860-engraving/nomedium/asset/767073>

Commedia dell'Arte and the implications of its treatment of cultural, gender, and language communities for power and cultural exchange. One such study, *After the Laughter Dies Down: Middle Eastern "Foreigners" in the Commedia dell'Arte* (Jaffe-Berg, 2016), examines the treatment of Mediterranean minority groups such as Arabs, Armenians, Jews, and Turks. In another study, a discussion of the otherness of Pulcinella notes that in the stereotyping of Jews the most conspicuous marker of ethnicity was exaggerated nasality, likely derived from the Hebrew art of cantillation (Pietropaolo, 2022).

The mask colours themselves can also be problematic. Il Dottore, Arlecchino, and Columbina have traditionally worn black masks, a colour which over time has gathered diabolical and racist overtones. This is particularly so if the masks of other characters are dyed in other colours (for example Brighella's mask is often green), although in the view of Fava (2004), the black has been overly symbolised and is simply the result of the natural darkening of brown leather over time.

The negative aspects of Commedia stereotyping can be dealt with in two ways. Either a playwright can take care in adapting the features to the perceived sensitivities of an audience or use the stereotypes as a platform for audiences to confront complex and contentious political issues. The latter strategy is employed by the San Francisco Mime Troupe:

Ironically, in appropriating popular forms like the minstrel show and Commedia dell'Arte, the Mime Troupe, a progressive theatre company, invests in unsubtle, often problematic, familiar stereotypes. Sometimes they deconstruct or question them, but, through stylized acting and exaggerated costume, they always make them large and apparent, such that the audience cannot ignore them, or take them as natural, but must confront and consider, or reconsider, them. (Orenstein, 2015, p. 439)

In the case studies examined in Chapter Two, the more cautious approach seems to have been favoured, that is, to try to mould the characters to the sensitivities of the audience, although not always successfully.

## The Lazzi

### *The lazzi and development of formulaic comedy*

The origin of the word *lazzi* is unclear. Duchartre (1966, *The Lazzi*) claims that it means ‘turn’ or ‘trick’ or ‘Italian business’ and derives from the Lombardian expression for the Tuscan *lacci*, meaning knot. Gordon (2015) attributes this explanation to Luigi Riccoboni in his *Histoire du Théâtre Italien* (1728) but notes that, while Riccoboni reasoned this was because they tied together the performance, in practice *lazzi* operated as standalone routines that tended to disrupt or obscure the *Commedia dell’Arte* story or performance unity. Gordon also notes other etymological propositions that the word was a simple corruption of *l’azione* (the action) or was derived from the Hebrew *latzon* (trick), the Swedish *lat* (gesture), and the Latin *lax* (fraud). The modern Italian meaning of the word *lazzo* (singular of *lazzi*) is ‘joke,’ ‘jest,’ or ‘quip’ (“HarperCollins Sansoni Italian Unabridged Dictionary,” 2005).

The *lazzi* were an important part of the *Commedia dell’Arte* entertainment, keeping the audience amused while the troupe took a break, acting as a comic diversion when an actor missed their lines or cues and being used to enliven the action whenever audience attention appeared to flag. They thus had both premeditated and improvisational functions. But as Gordon (1983) notes, *lazzi* also served as an expected high point of the performances, eagerly anticipated by audiences.

The way in which their repetition as formulaic comedy operated is exemplified by Louise Peacock’s description of the effect of the physical slapstick or *batocchio* as Arlecchino traditionally wielded it in the *Commedia dell’Arte* (2015). Audience anticipation is fulfilled by a build-up of repetitive tension as the initially harmless blows, made ominous by the loud, if harmless, sound effect of the slapstick, are repeated, often intensifying in violence. Because the blows are inflicted without true malice, and the reactions to them on stage are comical, the audience is free to laugh at them. A similar repetitive tension occurs in the ‘counting *lazzo*,’ in one example of which the Capitano is told to beat Arlecchino ten times but keeps losing count. Each time he does so, Arlecchino shouts ‘ten’ only for the Capitano to begin again at one. In this *lazzo*, the audience’s response can be incorporated, or not, into the Capitano’s count, creating additional tension. It is by virtue of this tension and its capacity to hold audience attention, which was also exploited in non-violent scenarios, that the *lazzi* were able to become episodic despite their formulaic nature. They thus provided a model for the ways in which slapstick comedy in general repeats and exploits its familiar comic tropes.

Despite their popularity, historical records of lazzi are sparse and lists of those that have survived have been largely pulled together from performance notes and marginalia never intended for publication. Gordon (1983) offers three possible reasons for this lack of documentation: first, a reluctance to have ‘trademark’ routines copied; second, possible fear of having printed details of their obscenities used as evidence by legal authorities; third, it may simply not have occurred to the performing troupes to preserve their routines in writing. Another reason may be that the physicality of Commedia dell’Arte, important for its comprehensibility and commercial success in a multi-lingual performance arena, diminished the importance of an overarching written text. As Fava explains:

Two fundamental motives, among others, furnish the guarantee of comprehensibility. The first rests in the chance to have at least one character use the language of the audience, or the language closest to that of the audience, thus assuring their understanding of the story. The second motive rests in the verbal gestuality of the dialects, tongues strong in sonority and expressions, languages that need to employ the whole body in order to be best pronounced, accented, and interpreted. Because the dialects were not literary languages (at least, they were not received as such), the words never arrive at the formation of complete concepts. Because the words are not “self-sufficient,” they must be completed by gesture, action, and physical signals to the audience. (2004, Multilingualism)

Again, contemporary commercial considerations seem to have outweighed considerations of artistic posterity. Particular concerns about retaining the social licence to perform are hardly surprising given some of the lazzi humour included in the following catalogue of Fabiano’s lazzi types.

### *Catalogue of lazzi types*

In analysing Mozart’s opera *Don Giovanni*, Fabiano (2018) categorises the lazzi into three types, noting that the categorisation is characteristic of the Commedia dell’Arte:

1. Lazzi of a verbal nature
  - The ironical comments of the servant to the audience, while a ‘serious’ character is speaking;

- Serialisation, or cataloguing of names (Fabiano gives an example of Arlecchino reading from a scroll being unrolled onto the heads of the audience below and asking them whether their wives' names were in Don Giovanni's list of conquests);
- Nonsensical expressions;
- Lewd double entendre;
- Counterfeiting, i.e., the imitation of voice and expression;
- Parodic references to mythological comic characters.

2. Topical lazzi of a gestural nature (mime):

- Beatings;
- Characters touching each other's bodies on stage, with a more or less lustful, sensual, or comic intent;
- Characters dressing up to create ambiguities;
- Mimed lazzi of terror.

3. Topical lazzi of a thematic nature:

- Monologues about a master's selfishness, avarice, and wealth which the Master character, typically Arlecchino, is unwilling to share with anybody;
- The Servant of Two Masters;
- The servant mocking his master;
- The talking and moving statue which, because perceived as unlikely, becomes funny.

While there are many lists of lazzi categorised by humorous topic (for example, food, acrobatics, stupidity etc.) this list provides a particularly useful framework, I think, for analysing the range of lazzi adaptations, and I will return to it in the next chapter.

## **The Grammelot**

### *Origin and revival*

It is arguable that the use of grammelot, an ad hoc gibberish used to convey emotional and satirical meaning, does not originate from the Commedia dell'Arte, but has been given its

dramatic licence by the popular theatre of practitioners such as Dario Fo and Jacques Copeau.<sup>3</sup>

Rudlin has examined the etymology of the word grammelot, concluding that grommelot is a better term:

The earliest recorded instances given are from 1547. The Oxford English Dictionary also has 'to gromme' as being to growl like a beast, probably from the Dutch grommelen. Either 'grumelot' or 'grommelot' would seem to be etymologically correct, therefore, if we admit that sounds can be sprinkled as if on food or muttered between the teeth or growled. Zanni's ever grumbling stomach would argue for the former, the animal origins of individual Masks for the latter. I think we may discount 'grammelot' as a misnomer based on the supposition that a language must have something to do with grammar. (2015, p. 156)

Jaffe-Berg concedes that "it is difficult to conclude which is the correct etymological background of the term grammelot" but puts the case for the term as used by Dario Fo:

I have found grammelot to be a term with a possible root similarity to the seventeenth-century term grammellotte, as well as to the words esgrumeler and the location Grumello dei Zanchi, all of which have significant association with the term as it is known today. Most promising, the link root of gram associates the practice with the word we know of in English as to grumble, which had counterparts in various languages and is evident in Shakespeare. Because grumble connotes inarticulation, discontent, and an animal-like sound, it is closely linked with grammelot as a performance technique. (2001, p. 12)

I have used the term grammelot in this thesis simply because that appears to be consistent with popular usage in the modern theatre. Whatever its true etymological origin the term denotes a comedic practice that Rudlin (2015) suggests may reach back as far as the dispersion through Europe of the Roman mimes in the 4<sup>th</sup> century AD. Its appearance in the *Commedia dell'Arte*, cobbled together primarily from the mixed dialects of the Italian players, an invented jargon resembling low Latin, and the use of mime, seems to have arisen as a means of circumventing the strictures regarding onstage satirical or obscene references to

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<sup>3</sup> See Jaffe-Berg (2001, pp. 4-5) for a description of Grammelot as an historic practice.

prominent contemporary personages or events in French theatres in the early 18<sup>th</sup> century after the ascension to the throne of Louis XIV.<sup>4</sup>

Grammelot came to be applied as a technique for ridiculing certain regions or professions and so became attached to particular characters. Pantalone speaks the Venetian dialect as a parody of a Venetian merchant, while the Doctor is known for his *sproloquio*, or learned nonsense, a tongue that originally mocked the difficulty of the Bolognese dialect. (Rudlin, 2015; Rudlin & Fava, 2021)

Dario Fo (1926-2016) used grammelot as an oppositional strategy in his plays, employing utterances, intonations, and gestures conceived in the moment. Dhillon (2017, p. 203) cites Joylynn Wing's view that Fo uses grammelot as "interruption, as oscillation, as explication to counter the literary, cultivated language of the foregrounded figures and to disrupt both the linearity and the propriety of the normative discourse. The gibberish of the clown upstages the cultured language of the court."

### *Use of Grammelot with mime and mimicry*

With its sound effects, grammelot allows actors to create sense and dramatic imagery out of a stream of tenuously connected utterances, which may consist of linguistic units in a variety of languages and non-linguistic expressions such as animal sounds. But, as Jaffe-Berg (2001, p. 8) observes, "it also allows the actor to impersonate things or people through the performance of 'their' language. In this manner, it is a mimetic device incorporated within an already representational field that highlights the performativity implicit in imitation." Thus, it is often accompanied by mime and mimicry, a common example of which includes the imitation of animals, whose squawks or barks are intended to convey some paralinguistic critique or subtext.

On another level Rudlin (2015) notes the meta-linguistic game that is played between the performer and the audience as the latter tries to guess the meaning of the grammelot signification, taking pleasure from the inventiveness of the performer as they parse the differences between the words they would have used and their grammelot cognates.

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<sup>4</sup> Rudlin also notes the use of other evasive devices such as marionettes miming obscenities or scrolls tossed for the audience to read.

## Summary

Sketching out the features of the Commedia dell'Arte reveals its fundamental modularity, with prefabricated materials that include the cornerstone characters and masks, the boilerplate comic situations, the lazzi cornices designed to bridge the gaps, and the grammelot pointing used to disrupt linear articulation. In returning to my central thesis question as to how these have been used to make something new in Aotearoa New Zealand theatre, and before moving on to examine the local case studies in the next chapter, I think it helps to understand how these materials have developed traditionally in response to market exigencies to be better able to understand how they work as building blocks in the market conditions that shape our theatre today.

First of these exigencies was the relegation of the literary text in favour of improvised physical comedy and the often grotesque and vulgar humour associated with Carnival. Second, the sitcom serialisation of performances was made possible using stock characters and masks, with variation provided by a store of preformed scenarios. This left some potential to take the masks and costumes in new directions, to embody the features of real living people of note and the reality of current social and political circumstances so as to remain topical and sharp-edged as a foil to authority. Third, the lazzi were inherently commercial in function, providing capsules of tonic to keep the audience amused throughout the performance. Finally, the grammelot added vicarious pleasure through its subversive communication with a code-reading audience. With the passage of time, none of these building blocks has lost its function. But, to be naturalised as a framework of theatrical practice, the incorporation of Commedia materials needs to be practically seamless.

Each of the case studies I have selected in the next chapter for analysis uses one or more of the Commedia building block materials. My discussions focus, however, on those materials that are most integral to the construction of the plays examined.

## Chapter Two: Four case studies

*And so, Commedia came to Oceania, with one foot still in its country of origin, wearing the venerable vestments of the Vecchio, Innamorati and Zanni, and the other, stepping audaciously into new lands, picking up new habits and stylings to help it fit in.*

(Crick, 2021, p. xxiii)

In this chapter I look at how the features outlined above (masks, grammelot, stock characters, and lazzi) have been co-opted or adapted in four plays written or devised in Aotearoa New Zealand. Not every play that I discuss uses all four Commedia features, and the uses are diverse. Nor are these the only examples of Commedia adaptation in this country, but together these four plays give a snapshot of how Commedia has settled. In three quite different Aotearoa New Zealand plays new forms of masks specific to local Aotearoa New Zealand archetypes have appeared this century. The plays are *The Pickle King* (2002) (which together with *Krishnan's Dairy* (1997) and *The Candlestick Maker* (2000) are collectively known as the Indian Ink Trilogy), *Hoki Mai Tama Mā* (2014) and *Leilani* (2017). My final case study, *White Elephant* (2014) uses masks in a more conventional way but is interesting for its adaptations of physical comedy and grammelot in the context of our colonial past.

### The Pickle King 2002

#### *First performance*

*The Pickle King*, written and directed by Jacob Rajan and Justin Lewis for the Indian Ink Theatre Company, premiered at Clarence Street Theatre in Hamilton.

The play is set in the Empire Hotel in Wellington and introduces Indian hotelier and widow Ammachy and her niece, Sasha, whom she is attempting to marry off. Sasha, who is going blind because of a chemical storage accident twenty-one years ago that killed her parents, has fallen in love with the night porter Jojo, who lives in a broom cupboard at the hotel and is studying for accreditation as a cardio-thoracic surgeon in New Zealand. Sasha, however, marries the Pickle King, alias G (George) Reaper whom she believes is an incarnation of death. This is to prevent him carrying off Jojo, a fear that stems from her belief that everything she loves dies. Mr Reaper, a mysterious world-weary traveller who can preserve anything worth preserving with his holy trinity of vinegar, oil, and salt, turns out to be

George Farnsworth, the owner of the chemical factory, whose negligence caused the accident that maimed Sasha. Because of his guilt he has not been able to sleep since.

The play was updated in 2017 for Indian Ink's twentieth anniversary, with the character of the porter Jojo changed from male to female (to Jeena).<sup>5</sup> In respect of its queer revision Smith writes:

Interestingly, the queerness is readily accepted by the other characters. Writer and director Justin Lewis notes that 'if we had staged a love story between two women 15 years ago that would have been the story', and it's encouraging to see that the main focus of the story is about the trials of love regardless of gender. (2017)

The performance of same-sex love in earnest would not have been wholly out of place in the historical Commedia dell'Arte. Scott (2018) notes that in the first half of the 17<sup>th</sup> century Giovan Battista Andreini, the son of famous commedia actress Isabella Andreini, wrote a comedy depicting a lesbian love affair in which he, his wife, and his mistress played the leading parts. Typically, however, homosexuality was presented as a joke on the sexual appetite of the *vecchi*.<sup>6</sup> This was a practical reality of the licence to perform, as the moral climate in which the Commedia dell'Arte existed at its height in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries was still very much governed by the Church.<sup>7</sup>

## *Reception*

Rajan and Lewis (2005) note that between the play's premiere in 2002 in Hamilton and its first performance that year in Wellington, it lost a number of scenes and characters that had necessitated impossible costume changes. Audience and critical reception of the play was rapturous. It won Production of the Year at the Chapman Tripp Theatre Awards and sold out in the 700 to 800 seat venues in which it played. In August 2003 it went to the Edinburgh Fringe Festival and won a Fringe First award. To date it is Indian Ink's most awarded play (Indian Ink Theatre Company, 2017a).

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<sup>5</sup> Hereafter any references to Jojo also apply to Jeena.

<sup>6</sup> For example, the direction in Flaminio Scala's "La Creduta Morta" (Scala, 1989, p. 58) reads "the Captain arrives, and, thinking Pedrolino is a woman, begins to make love to him. Going along with the pretense, Pedrolino responds amorously to his love-making."

<sup>7</sup> See Vianello (2018) for a discussion of the Commedia dell'Arte's contentious relationship with religious authorities.

The premise of Indian Ink's theatre practice, which has made its plays so successful, is to elucidate through laughter, a practice that affiliates their work with the comic tradition of the Commedia dell'Arte. As Rajan and Lewis note, "Open their mouths with laughter and then slip something serious in. It's a central tenet of our philosophy. Laughter is our Trojan Horse" (2005, p. 10).

### *The masks and stock characters*

The masks in Indian Ink's *The Pickle King* portray an array of immigrant types. As in the Commedia dell'Arte, they have been used as a platform for serialisation of the company's works, but initially at least in a different way. In *Krishnan's Dairy*, first performed in 1997 at Bats Theatre in Wellington, the masks are used to facilitate rapid transitions between multiple characters played by a single actor, a practice first defined by Tilley (2012) using the term monodramatic polycharacterization.<sup>8</sup> This is of course a more economical theatrical practice for a fledgling company than the one-actor-to-one mask practice associated with the established companies of the Commedia dell'Arte.

*The Pickle King*, however, differs from its predecessors in the Indian Ink trilogy in that, like the Commedia dell'Arte, it provides for the employment of a troupe of actors, albeit small. This marks a change in the way that masks are used. Rajan and Lewis comment: "We decided that Jacob [Rajan] would be joined on stage by more actors. Gone were the rapid mask changes of a single character playing many parts" (2005, p. 22).

As Rajan and Lewis (2005) have also noted, *Krishnan's Dairy* had provided the capital base by which to develop the principle of repertoire that gave rise to the development of the trilogy. The use of masks throughout the trilogy, and the commercial success of each of the plays, has made the masks an integral part of the established brand of the Indian Ink company, something which, being stamped to various other plays in this company's expanding repertoire, has helped to generate instant audience appeal.<sup>9</sup>

The fundamental purpose of the masks, according to Lewis, is to signal to the audience that they are about to engage in an imaginative act, so rather than wondering about how much of

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<sup>8</sup> See (Tilley, 2012) for a discussion of the significance of its use in *Krishnan's Dairy*.

<sup>9</sup> These include *The Dentist's Chair* (2008), *Kiss the Fish* (2013), and *The Elephant Thief* (2015). Other plays which revert to the monodramatic polycharacterization of *Krishnan's Dairy* but without the use of masks include *The Guru of Chai* (2008), in which 17 characters are portrayed by Rajan and *Paradise or the Impermanence of Icecream* (2020), in which Rajan portrays 7 characters.

the performance is pretence they can simply relax and “get into the spirit of the thing.” The masks therefore establish the fabulous nature of the dramatic story and its allegiance to archetype. (Indian Ink Theatre Company, 2017b)

The masks used in *The Pickle King* are an adaptation to contemporary practical dramaturgy. Rajan and Lewis explain:

One of the drawbacks of the Commedia style half-masks we had been using was their need for a particular kind of lighting. When the eyes of the performer are thrown into shadow the mask becomes dead to the audience. But the flat horizontal light employed to catch the eyes also limits the lighting design. Justin [Lewis] started moulding masks that would make the eyes more available to the light. For the characters of Sasha and Jojo the mask was reduced to just a nose. For the character of George, a forehead linked to nose and cheeks, but again the eyes [were] completely available. (2005, p. 22)

In addition to these changes, full-face Swiss Basle masks with fixed expressions were adopted to explore their “exquisite, sad poetry” (Rajan & Lewis, 2005, p. 22). They are used to depict the hotel guests as shuffling inhabitants of a strange other world orbiting the main action.

The most conventional commedia-style mask, worn by the character of Mr Reaper, replicates the greying whiskers and bulbous cheeks and nose of Il Dottore.<sup>10</sup> Borrowed, too, is the pompous *sproloquio*, or learned nonsense, first expressed in Reaper’s exposition of why the piano should be considered a percussion instrument, but more generally expressed in the posturing of his cultivated British accent. Like Il Dottore he is a self-serving lecher. His sexual appetite is betrayed in his description of himself as “a prancing buck antelope on the fertile plains of India” (Rajan & Lewis, 2005, p. 124). He displays extraordinary insensitivity in his duplicitous pursuit of Sasha, particularly when advising how to preserve her true lover’s heart: “Break it, rub salt into it. Put in in a jar on a high shelf. It’ll keep like that for years” (Rajan & Lewis, 2005, p. 44). He cares only for his own desires, regardless of what misery he brings to others. His past actions have been despicable—hiding chemicals in a school to avoid them being inspected—and his primary concern now about the consequences

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<sup>10</sup> Lewis (Indian Ink Theatre Company, 2016) comments on its likeness to the Commedia dell’Arte Il Dottore mask.

of the ensuing chemical accident that disfigured Sasha and killed her parents is the disruption it has caused to his sleep. He also exhibits the characteristic *vecchi* hunger for wealth; he is a former businessman who avoids paying for anything (including his sins). When Ammachy says he will take over the running of the hotel after he and Sasha are married, he immediately responds: “The Reaper Empire. I think it has a certain ring to it” (Rajan & Lewis, 2005, p. 144). The depravity of his behaviour reaches its nadir when he blackmails Jojo to have his way with Sasha then announces to a heart-broken Jojo that “the conjugal bed calls” while imitating the sound of a creaking bed choreographed with sexual thrusting movements (Rajan & Lewis, 2005, p. 150). All in all, he is an exemplary Commedia dell’Arte villain.

The characters of Sasha and Jojo are the *innamorati* of the Commedia dell’Arte theatre. As much as being in love with each other they are in love with love itself. Sasha clings to the memory of her marriage to a dog, while Jojo spends his spare time mending a pig’s heart. They are characters who cannot be taken seriously. Sasha has a gypsy upbringing and believes in Tarot while Jojo sleeps in a cleaning cupboard.

In the Commedia dell’Arte the *innamorati* are often the sons and daughters of Pantalone and Il Dottore. According to Andrews:

The genre was built to a great extent around contrasting pairs of characters, whose antagonisms were developed into comic dialogue routines (*contrasti*) which sometimes had the air of formal sporting contests: fathers against sons or daughters; employers against servants, *Capitani* against anyone who got in their way. Even dialogues between lovers contained antagonism (through jealousy, misunderstanding, or unreciprocated desire) at least as often as they expressed desire or emotional harmony. (2008, p. xx )

Here, too, we see the battle lines drawn between the *innamorati* and their parents and the employer (Sasha’s aunt, Ammachy) and her servants. Mr Reaper as Il Dottore is a patronising figure to Jojo while Ammachy is a female version of Pantalone. She has the same tenacious appetite for money, exclaiming in response to news that Mr Reaper has absconded without paying his bill “If he’s gone, I’ll track the bastard down myself” (Rajan & Lewis, 2005, p. 130). This is second only to her desire to see her daughter married off profitably. Jordan (2010, p. 211) notes that Pantalone “is more usually portrayed as a manipulative parent attempting to obstruct his children’s amorous liaisons, by seeking to marry them off to people they don’t want to marry.”

Ammachy's mask is a half mask, in keeping with her status as one of the *vecchi* but the masks of Sasha and Jojo have been stripped back to little more than prosthetic ornaments. While Rajan and Lewis have explained their technical reasons for stripping back these masks, it is also perfectly in keeping with Commedia dell'Arte practice where the *innamorati* frequently wore no masks. As minimal prostheses the masks are reduced to their fabulizing function, marking the characters as fairy-tale lovers. As Rajan and Lewis (2005, p. 23) explain, "the play's pulse is really a fairy story – a princess locked in a tower of her own making, a prince in disguise in a foreign land, the triumph of love over death."

Given its footing in fairy tale, the question arises as to how important contemporary Aotearoa New Zealand circumstances and culture are to the play and its sense of place. Of the two lovers, Sasha has a sentimental desire to return to India that sees her exoticising her present circumstances. She expresses herself physically through Bharatha Natyam (Indian classical dance) and her first line of dialogue on answering the hotel phone is "Empire Hotel, your taste of the orient on Oriental Parade" (Rajan & Lewis, 2005, p. 108). Indeed, the Empire Hotel is a synecdoche for the Empire. It is a colonial outpost where Mr Reaper can reminisce with Ammachy about the good old days of the Raj. Like the sad ghostly figures of the hotel guests, he is displaced; for the past 21 years condemned to slinking in and out of hotels as an international itinerant. The only person who seems to be grounded is Jojo, who is committed to practising medicine in Aotearoa New Zealand, despite his overseas training being invisible to the New Zealand Medical Council. His predicament provides the only real element of social satire, with its commentary on contemporary Aotearoa New Zealand immigration policy and professional exclusionism or, worse, racism. This is because he is the only one close enough to the texture of ordinary life outside the hotel to provide any substantial reflection of it.

The fairy tale ends of course with everyone and everything in its rightful place. The flowers and the pet mouse of Raoul, the hotel chef, that had both died because of the arrival of Mr Reaper are magically restored to life. Sasha has come to terms with her dread of death ("of course you are going to die, but you are going to die loved" (Rajan & Lewis, 2005, p. 156)) and Mr Reaper has announced his intention to return to India to straighten out his affairs.

The closing action of the play is the release of the globe from its cradle on the piano by Quince, a lonely hotel guest who is fascinated and intoxicated by it. It floats off into the air,

perhaps as a metaphor for the freedom that is realised upon relinquishing romantic attachments to place, a lesson for all living in the shadow of a colonial past.

### *The lazzi humour*

The humour of the play employs the characteristic punning or ambiguity of the verbal Commedia dell'Arte lazzi, with its comedy arising from the off-track interpretation or double entendre of particular words or phrases. For example, when Jojo says, "You stole my heart," referring to his pig's heart, Mr Reaper replies "Obviously I'm touched but I don't feel the same way about you" (Rajan & Lewis, 2005, p. 128). In another scene Jojo says, "Hey look. One of your cards is stuck to my shoe." Sasha then asks, "Which one?" and Jojo replies "Ah, left shoe," whereupon Sasha corrects the course of the dialogue with "Which card?" (Rajan & Lewis, 2005, p. 120). An example of the double entendre verbal lazzi occurs when Sasha threatens to stab Mr Reaper in the throat with a pencil. Jojo says "Here's your pencil, Sasha... Are you going to kill him?" and Sasha replies "No, it's a bit pointless." There is no trace, however, of the lewdness or subversive malice that so often accompanies this type of humour in the Commedia dell'Arte lazzi. It has been adapted to the hygiene of its fairy tale context.

Also absent is the actual comic violence of the Commedia dell'Arte. Instead, there are a few occurrences when it is merely threatened. At the beginning of the play, Ammachy says "Stop mumbling girl. You're going to get a good whack" (Rajan & Lewis, 2005, p. 109). Later, after saying she would rather stab herself in the throat with a pencil than marry a middle-aged IBM worker (p. 112), Sasha threatens to stab Mr Reaper in the throat with a pencil (p. 156). The pencil, used also as an instrument of oppression, first by the registration requirements of the New Zealand Medical Council and then ironically by Jojo (he threatens to register Mr Reaper's details in the hotel's security logbook), assumes the role of the slapstick in the exercise of violence.

The non-confrontational use of Commedia-based humour is in keeping with the fairy tale family entertainment paradigm that Indian Ink has created. In Chapter Five I will comment further on how Commedia has generally been incorporated into Aotearoa New Zealand theatre. For an immediate comparison, my next case study is an example of an attempt to apply Commedia to a story that is unequivocally grounded in Aotearoa New Zealand.

## **Hoki Mai Tama Mā 2014**

### *First performance*

*Hoki Mai Tama Mā*, directed by Gerald Urquhart for the Māori theatre company Te Rēhia Theatre, was first performed at the Mangere Arts Centre, Auckland. It takes its title from a song written to welcome back the survivors of the 28th Māori Battalion from World War II which translates as ‘come back, boys’ (Archer, 2001).

The play crosses the divide between the Matariki (Māori New Year) celebrations in modern day rural Aotearoa New Zealand and WWII Italy, from where the titular character Tama has just returned home to an angry girlfriend and cousin with the war diary of his Koro (grandfather) Piri. The mystery of why Piri went to Italy after the death of his wife, Puhī, is at the core of the story and Piri’s war diary becomes the vehicle for explaining Piri’s motivations, bringing to life the events that have led to the present day.

The play was remarkable for its inaugural presentation of Te Mata Kōkako O Rēhia, a theatrical practice blending Māori tikanga and Commedia dell’Arte. Features adapted from the Commedia dell’Arte include wooden masks stylised to represent Māori, with features such as Tā moko and the use of lazzi. One of the lead actors, Regan Taylor, described the genesis of the Māori masks:

When I was training as an actor at The Ucol Theatre School in 1999, I was introduced to Commedia Del Arte [sic] Masks. I became infatuated with the mask of Allechino [sic]. The more I wore this mask the more I realised ‘Hey this is like Maui Tikitiki Ataranga.’ So I started to play this particular mask in my then, limited Te Reo, it translated beautifully. The question for me then was ‘Did Maori use masks at all?’ This was the start of practical ways to approach this new artform. Using the rules of Commedia and the behaviour of stock characters within the form became the platform to research how archetypal Maori characters could be portrayed through mask. (Liang, 2014)

### *Reception*

The theatrical and critical reception of the play’s Mangere Arts Centre debut in 2014 was generally positive, with reviewers welcoming the novel use of masks and the fusion of

cultural forms. John Smythe (2014) referred to “the enchantment of this fledgling art form” while Simey-Barton wrote:

In *Hoki Mai Tama Ma* [sic] they have pulled off an extraordinary fusion that sees kapa haka combined with the Italian clowning tradition of Commedia dell’Arte and the hard-case humour of contemporary Maori story-telling.  
(2014)

In the same review Simey-Barton went on to say that “The exquisite wooden masks created by carver Tristan Marler bring an eerie, otherworldly quality to the familiar gestures of the powhiri.”

This observation suggests that rather than simply being assimilated into local culture, the masks made strange, in a Brechtian *Verfremdungseffekt* fashion, the local Māori culture, such that it radiated the ‘otherness’ of the imported culture. With the masks being used by the four central actors to alternate between characters, stories, and cultures an imbalance between the parts of the narrative made exotic through the masks and the parts expressed naturalistically without masks appears to have manifested itself in performance. Wenley (2014b) explained, “Part of the difficulty in *Hoki Mai Tama Mā* is how to balance the two worlds of the play. The world of Mata Kōkako, perhaps because of both theatricality and novelty, is generally more engaging than the naturalistic world.” Wilson (2014) concurred: “So I don’t need any convincing about the concept of Maori masked theatre, it is not the form that concerns me with *Hoki Mai Tama Ma*, but rather the execution of it, because it seems divorced from the naturalistic, present-day play we have been watching.”

The play does, in the end, appear to have achieved a satisfying synthesis. According to Wenley (2014b): “The way the production merges the two worlds together for the play’s ending is unexpected, brilliant, and incredibly resonant.”

### *The masks and stock characters*

Both Māori and Commedia dell’Arte masks were used. The two Māori men, Piri and his fellow prisoner of war, Morehu, had half-masks with moko. Tama’s Kuia Puhi’s mask was a full-face mask, with a chin moko. Smythe (2014) noted, “The elegantly carved half-masks with stylised moko speak in simplistic Reo and communicating as much if not more so in mime.” Wenley described their effect in performance:

The masks, masterfully crafted with aroha by maker Tristan Marler, are exquisite. The etched mokos glimmer with detail under the stage light. The performers tongue flicks out from under the half mask. It's as if the ancestors, carved on the beams of the wharehau, have jumped off and sprung into fresh and blood life. (2014a)

This made for a powerful cultural reification, that mirrored the strong assertions of tikanga and whakapapa reportedly expressed by the central character, Bella:

No such questions bother Bella, for my money the central character of the work. Bella is confident and secure in herself and in her bloodlines, her lineage, her genealogy her place: her whakapapa. Bella knows who she is and the shock to her (and to us) at the climax of the play is that she isn't who she believes herself to be. (Stevens, 2014)

The Italian officer in charge of Piri and Morehu as prisoners of war, wore what reviewers appear to agree was a Capitano mask with an exceptionally elongated nose while his camp guard compatriot also had a long-nosed mask that one reviewer (Ross, 2014) compared, "perhaps", to that of the commedia character Cucurucu and another likened to "a long-nosed pantaloone mask" (Simey-Barton, 2014).<sup>11</sup> A third reviewer applauded the introduction of the "the Pulcinella /Punchinello [sic]" mask (Stevens, 2014) while a fourth simply described them all as "more authentic Commedia dell'Arte masks" (N. Smythe, 2014)

From the varying descriptions of the Commedia dell'Arte masks it seems that the depiction of specific Commedia dell'Arte characters and their relevance to the war backstory was less important than their use as a generic representation of fixed identity. As Wenley noted:

There's no 'in-story' reason as to why these flashback sequences are told through commedia. Perhaps it's how Tama initially sees the entries, unable to grasp the gravity of the war sequences, or do the entries themselves understate the severity? Certainly, we can make some readings of our own. (2014b)

The idea of fixed identity is undermined in the course of the play, with the alternation between the Commedia dell'Arte and Māori masks, according to Wenley (2014a), suggesting

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<sup>11</sup> Duchartre (Duchartre, 1966, *The Costume of Pulcinella*) notes that Cucurucu is the brother of Pulcinella. His name is derived from the cock's crow.

“a fluidity of cultural identity – Maybury playing both a Maori wahine and an Italian. Do they point to the outward construction of identity? Do you choose the mask, or does the mask choose you?”

For some spectators, like the character of Bella, the shifting of cultural identity could be confronting. Wilson argued that:

Those masks, for all that they liberate the actors, involve risk. Has tapu been trodden on here? Tukiwaho told Metro last month he doesn't even know. But whatever the risk with those masks, the play takes a far bigger one with the things it has to say about who we are. No spoiler here, but the revelation at the climax of Hoki Mai carries a remarkable provocation on the theme of how we define ourselves and value our cultural identities. (2014)

The ways in which the masks were used in this play do not reflect a simple transferral of foreign archetypes. Rather, they coupled the delight of making something new with curiosity in trying to understand how it connected with both our own past and with the past that provided the creative inspiration. As a mode of theatre praxis, with Māori playing Italians in Commedia masks, or playing themselves unmasked or with Māori masks while expressing themselves both in Te Reo and in the gestural language of Commedia, it inextricably bound the two histories and cultures behind the masks such that they couldn't be picked apart. The Māori mask, although not traditional, is brought to life as if it had the cultural authority of tradition.

### *The lazzi*

In addition to their thematic function of foregrounding questions of identity, the Commedia dell'Arte masks in Hoki Mai Tama Mā also served to frame the theatre paradigm that governed the ensuing lazzi-like comic exchanges. Repeated attempts by Piri and Morehu to escape operated to lampoon the abilities of the Italian guards to contain their prisoners, variations upon the thematic lazzi in which the servant mocks the master. Appreciative comments by reviewers indicate that the comic highlight of these exchanges was a detailed explanation by the prisoners to their Italian guards of the hongī, hilarious in the face of the long nasal constructions of the Commedia dell'Arte masks. This is a good example of the comic gestural lazzi type.

The ways in which the lazzi-like sequences were used in this play created a bridge between the anarchic clowning of the Commedia dell'Arte and the “the hard-case humour of contemporary Māori story-telling” (Simei-Barton, 2014). At the same time, they created a bridge between the two cultures and their respective expressions of identity. Like the lazzi of the Commedia dell'Arte they were not integral to the story being told but, more than offering an entertaining diversion, they reinforced the thematic boundary-crossing.

### *The shared nature of Aotearoa New Zealand and Commedia dell'Arte humour*

Aotearoa New Zealand humour and the humour of the Commedia dell'Arte draw their lifeblood from a common vein. On the general topic of Aotearoa New Zealand humour, *Te Ara, The Encyclopaedia of New Zealand* has this entry: “Out of the country’s migrant population and egalitarian tradition evolved a broad, self-mocking, anti-authoritarian strain of humour” (Harker, p. 1).

The same authority credits Roger Hall, our most celebrated dramatist, with having brought a wry irony to Aotearoa New Zealand culture with his plays *Glide Time* (1976) and its spin-off television series *Gliding On* (1981-1986), and *Middle Age Spread* (1977) which became a feature film in 1979.

More recently one of our most successful Hollywood directors, Taika Waititi, has diagnosed this type of humour in his feature film *Boy* (2010):

It’s colonial outpost humour: you’ve just got to laugh at awkward, crazy, painful stuff when you’ve been banished to the nether regions of the globe. Māori humour is quite self-deprecating ... It is more true to life to see humour among really upsetting situations – laughing and crying at the same time – dealing with things by trying to see the flipside. (Lancashire, 2010) cited by (Harker, p. 4)

The anti-authoritarian, wry, self-deprecating vein of humour which is outlined here I would argue is well-disposed to the invention of lazzi, with their characteristic inversion of class and cultural mores. It allied well with the buffoonery of the Commedia dell'Arte in forming a cross-cultural comic offensive in the prisoner of war sequences in *Hoki Mai Tama Mā*.

Of course, there has been a cultural affiliation between Māori and Italy since the 28<sup>th</sup> (Māori) Battalion was sent into action in Orsogna in December 1943. In another Aotearoa New Zealand play, *Strange Resting Places* (Rotondo & Mokoraka, 2012), based on the Māori

engagement at Cassino, rapid-fire substitutions of Māori and Italian language and song and a series of comic exchanges between a Māori soldier, Anaru, and an Italian deserter, Salvatore, serve to amalgamate the characters' utterances into a shared experience of war. In that play the cultural commerce, which helps to create a common position of resistance against the German oppressor, suggests that an alliance with the Commedia dell'Arte is not an impediment to Māori attempts to 'decolonialise' theatre in Aotearoa New Zealand.

As a contrast to the community spirit of *Hoki Mai Tama Mā*, the next case study, *Leilani*, offers an example of Commedia humour deployed to give a voice to those whose communities have been ruptured and who share their experiences of being displaced.

## **Leilani 2016**

### *First performance*

*Leilani*, directed by Pedro Ilgenfritz for the Mahuika Theatre Company, first played at the Q Theatre Loft, Auckland, as part of Q Theatre's 2016 Matchbox Season. This was a first production for the company, whose script, which was 18 months in development, was collectively written by its members, all but one of whom (the director) is female. Their mission was encapsulated in the statement: "We collectively wanted to develop authentic New Zealand characters, turn them into half masks and then see what would happen when we put them on all the stage together" (Ilgenfritz, 2022, p. 81).

The play tells a story about the street experiences of a young Samoan girl who has been dumped by her boyfriend and is pregnant and homeless. She eventually has a miscarriage after being attacked and the show ends with her being escorted by a nurse back to her seat in the theatre, whereupon it is revealed that everything that happened before was an enactment of her response to the news of being dumped while she and her boyfriend, Junior, were waiting for the play to start. For the purposes of this thesis, it is notable for its commedia-style presentation of nine stock characters based on Kiwi (Aotearoa New Zealand) stereotypes. The script has not been published to date. I requested a copy through the Mahuika Theatre Company email address but did not receive a response.

### *Reception*

On debut, the play received mixed reviews. It was criticised for its flat, stereotypical characters, with one reviewer writing:

On its debut, *Mahuika* aims to present timeless ‘archetypes’ but they seem like old-fashioned flat clichés: the ‘clingy, stifling’ girlfriend, the harridan, the homeless man with a heart of gold. (McAllister, 2016)

It was also criticised for its poorly targeted humour:

Instead of targeting those who misuse and abuse power (a grand tradition of clowning), *Leilani* offers fat jokes, crafty beggars and excruciating sexual harassment slapstick. (McAllister, 2016)

This provides a warning, perhaps, for theatre practitioners on the need to stay true to the spirit of *Commedia dell’Arte* in ‘punching upwards’ at authority or at hegemonic narratives rather than taking cheap shots aimed at marginalising sections of the same social echelon. At the same time observations by critics about what is appropriate ground to turn over need to be weighed up in the light of their own cultural landscape.<sup>12</sup>

In another review credit was given for the honesty of the play’s intent to portray real people. In reviewing for *Theatreview*, Nick Smythe (2016) wrote, “The considerable heart and soul of *Leilani* lies in the truth of its characters.” Shawn Moodie (2016) concurred, “These characters were well-formed, distinct, and layered – the sorts of people who you might expect to meet on a night out on Auckland’s K Rd or Queen Street.” Jess Holly Bates (2016) suggested that its central character, *Leilani*, presented a corrective alternative to the media stereotype of a street-sleeper:

We follow the tale of the loveable and ‘sad-faced’ *Leilani*, a young Samoan girl dumped by her boyfriend, pregnant and homeless. As I write that sentence, I am aware that our national media are fond of this story – this is well rehearsed character in our public rhetoric. This is why *Leilani* is such a charming and welcome antidote to the boorish and frankly incoherent narratives around street-sleeping we are usually subject to.

The mixed reception of the authenticity of *Leilani*’s characterisations was, however, reflected by the same reviewer:

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<sup>12</sup> In 2020 in Canada some North American Indigenous theatre artists requested that only BIPOC (Black, Indigenous and People of Colour) theatre critics be hired to review their play. See <https://institute.aljazeera.net/en/ajr/article/1930>

Not all characters, however, are so lucidly portrayed. The trouble with a form that self-proclaims to work in stereotypes is that the currency can be somewhat flawed. While the show seems to effortlessly rewrite the intentions, agency, and circumstances of our two homeless protagonists, it does less well with providing complex characters to buttress this tale. (Holly Bates, 2016)

With the exception of Wenley, who criticised the play's failure to grasp an opportunity to "take apart the New Zealand egalitarian myth" (2016), the reviewers seem to be focused on a non-Commedia imperative for characters to be well-rounded, overlooking the primary emphasis that the Commedia dell'Arte places on social relationships and hierarchies. This presents a challenge for the new-world dramatist but is perhaps less of a problem in cultures whose social relationships are more codified. Peter Jordan for example describes his experience in teaching Commedia dell'Arte to Hong Kong students:

To a student steeped in the naturalistic tradition, such schema may seem overly prescriptive and unnatural, but I noted with some relief that the Hong Kong students not only had a strong sense of status relationships, buttressed by a culture of giving, saving and losing 'face' but were also instinctively aware of the symbolic meanings of positioning on stage. (2021)

This kind of criticism about the lack of character complexity has also been applied to another Commedia dell'arte-inspired Aotearoa New Zealand play, Lisa Brickell's *Mockingbird – a Black Comedy about Motherhood and Mental Health* (2016). For example, one reviewer commented of the *Mockingbird* production at The Basement Theatre in October 2016, in which Brickell played all the characters, that:

Unfortunately, the rest of the show is populated by jokes that have very little to do with the discomfort or truth of motherhood, relying instead on well-worn clichés (a character with a stereotypical Maori bro accent and recreational marijuana use, for example). (Joe, 2016)

Although these criticisms suggest that some local Commedia-inspired productions have struggled to balance the expectations of contemporary audiences and reviewers for individual characters with depth and complexity with the social signification purpose of the traditional stock character type, there seems to be no insurmountable reason why the essence of

Commedia dell'arte characters cannot be successfully transported. In the context of Neo-Commedia production in the Asia-Pacific region, Tim Ferguson has argued that the basic recipe of Commedia dell'arte, which can be tweaked to suit all tastes, is what makes it fresh and contemporary, and a staple for modern sit-coms and romantic comedies. (2022, pp. xxi-xxii)

The problem with *Leilani* may have been that some of the local characters chosen to reflect Commedia dell'arte archetypes were already stereotypes to a local audience, and not suited to a fresh contemporary theme such as homelessness. Speaking of how comedic scenarios are built on the conflicts that arise between Commedia archetypes, Di Niro (2022, p. 21) observes: "What makes this appealing to local cultures is that audiences can connect to the main plot of the performance, which is a universal theme, by seeing how that plot relates to their own sociocultural context." In the same text she goes on to describe how the success of her own show, *The Marriage of Flavio and Isabella* (2011) in Adelaide was built upon localising not just the characters but also the jokes and insinuations.

Of course, the socio-cultural context itself is continually changing. With regard to *Leilani* McAllister touches upon the issue of continuing relevance:

The sexy narcissist is more successful, but it's hard for a hen-pecked husband to be topsy-turvy funny when women are no longer expected to be subservient and men are no longer expected to rule the roost. (2016)

These reviews highlight a general problem for Aotearoa New Zealand directors seeking to employ Commedia dell'Arte conventions of mask and stock character. That is, how to translate them into an Aotearoa New Zealand contemporary context in such a way as to make them relevant, to bring our own culture to life in new and refreshing ways. Merely simplifying or accentuating character traits to fit them to familiar faces risks limiting the potential for empathy from audiences adapted to a complex moral worldview which eschews generalising.

Whatever the results, the players certainly intended to try to find topical Aotearoa New Zealand references for the characters of *Leilani*:

One of my characters, Trev, was an older homeless man who became the mentor and support person for the character of Leilani when she found herself in the street. He is essentially our Gandalf. Trev represents the wise

old man full of love, but not quite Pantalone. He was not creepy at all, and perhaps a bit like Dottore, but he was not arrogant. He was more mystical. We didn't create our characters directly from Commedia dell'Arte. (Ilgenfritz, 2022, p. 79)

Of course, no-one can directly recreate the stock characters of Commedia dell'Arte in any pure sense because of the hybridisation that has occurred historically, and which continues to occur when the character types are conscripted to the expressive needs of the present. But in *Leilani*, the recreations have an especially local flavour:

Junior is relatable. He is everywhere in New Zealand. That mask is closer to my culture, it is a caricature of my family, of how my cousins would act, so I put that on. Junior makes people laugh all the time, but he does it because humour is his way to get through things. Junior is a Māori trickster, a Māori Arlecchino. (Ilgenfritz, 2022, p. 79)

These reflections suggest there was an awareness of the need to find engaging contemporary Aotearoa New Zealand models for the Commedia dell'Arte stock characters, that nonetheless can be recognised as having roots in the Commedia dell'Arte. It is interesting here that the trickster is specifically associated with Arlecchino, given that the archetype appears as an unmasked figure of mischief in many indigenous cultures (well-known examples are the Norse god Loki and the North American Coyote). This homage, and the apparent contradiction of having characters who are rooted in Commedia dell'Arte and yet are not directly from Commedia dell'Arte, can perhaps be explained in terms of a practice which is primarily focused on repurposing the functional utility of the mask, as described below.

### *Why Commedia?*

In the same published interview with members of the Mahuika Theatre Company, the director posed the question: "What is the point of creating and performing a theatre work influenced by Commedia dell'Arte in New Zealand in the 21st century?" (Ilgenfritz, 2022, p. 75)

His own response to this question reflects a desire to use Commedia dell'Arte for social change:

I think the use of masks, like puppets and cartoons, creates a bit of distance between the world of the mask and our world, which, strangely, gives us the

ability to comment on our world to greater effect. You can do things with mask work and Commedia that you potentially couldn't get away with in realism. (2022, p. 75)

Another part of his response echoes the 'clear pretence' contract with audiences which is considered by Indian Ink to be the primary utility of the masks, as noted in the discussion of *The Pickle King* above:

Commedia is a way to laugh at something rude, grotesque, or outrageous. Masked theatre can sometimes feel like watching a live cartoon. There is a space between the actor and the mask, a space that allows both the actor and the audience to feel safe. The games with masks are simple, which means the audience is never sitting there wondering what's going on. The game is always clear, which is why I think audiences respond well to it. (Ilgenfritz, 2022, p. 76)

Yet another reason appears to be that using Commedia dell'Arte is a digestible way of introducing masked and physical theatre to an Aotearoa New Zealand audience:

It was a show clearly influenced by Commedia. Still, it was definitely crafted in a way that a New Zealand audience, likely new to masked theatre and physical theatre, could digest. *Leilani* did not delve into the realm of grotesque, nor did it go too far into the absurd for that reason. (Ilgenfritz, 2022, p. 77)

Taken together, these suggest that what is most valuable about the Commedia dell'Arte for local theatre practice is its recognisability as an established theatre paradigm that enables the stage to be set for a safely distanced frame of reception. We can see this emphasis on the utility of using the Commedia dell'Arte's methods in the work of such established experimental theatre companies as the Théâtre du Soleil. For example, in an interview with Denis Bablet, Ariane Mnouchkine pre-empted the Mahuika Theatre Company's statement, quoted above, that they didn't create their characters directly from Commedia dell'Arte:

We did not go steal a character. In the case of *commedia dell'arte* we went back to take up a kind of work which seemed to us to have been interrupted, and we have attempted to take it to the limit. (Bablet, 1999, p. 55)

In the same interview, about the creation of *L'Age d'Or*, Mnouchkine explained that using the platform of the Commedia dell'arte provided a necessary distance for actors to perform a contemporary event where the actors “found it impossible to set about performing it directly as if it were distant from them” (Bablet, 1999, p. 56). So, the masks may work equally well to create an emotional distance of performance as well as of reception.

### *The masks and stock characters*

Nine “Aotearoa Dell'Arte” masks were created by Mahuika Theatre Company for *Leilani*, to reflect specifically Aotearoa New Zealand character types. Ilgenfritz (2022) notes that the idea of these was inspired by the marketing research book *8 Tribes: The Hidden Classes of New Zealand* (Caldwell & Brown, 2007).

Four characters were played by Aymee Karaitiana-Jones with another four being played by Natasha Daniel. The title role was played throughout by Irasa Siave. The masks were half-masks (leaving the mouth and lower jaws exposed) which were simple in design but carried essential identifying features such as the bucked teeth of the socially awkward Tim. They can be seen on Mahuika Theatre Company's Facebook page at <https://www.facebook.com/MahuikaTheatre/photos>.

There was little commentary on the design of the masks by reviewers, but Smythe described them as follows:

Kate Lang's mask designs, made with assistance from Ilgenfritz, are less exaggerated than the classical Commedia style. Nonetheless, comparatively subtle features provide clear distinctions between their respective personae, augmented in no small part by equally distinct characterisations. (2016)

Functionally, the masks guided, and provided boundaries for, the development of the characters:

I initially found Tim in the mask with the teeth, but at the time, we were using that mask for the teenage boy character Irasa just described, so we had a different mask made specifically for Tim. However, when I wore the new mask, I couldn't find Tim. He was gone. It didn't work because Tim was created from the teeth mask, and all his mannerisms and physicality stemmed from that mask. (Ilgenfritz, 2022, p. 80)

In the absence of a pre-determined script the masks also provided the structural framework for the story:

Junior's text at the end was a structure I had to stick to no matter what. I could use it the way I wanted, but there was a structure to follow. It was like Junior writing himself the script with his body, voice, and ideas. A day-to-day process of refining the text. (Ilgenfritz, 2022, p. 83)

Wenley expressed one criticism regarding the integration of mask design with the story which provokes thinking about the essential comic nature of *Commedia dell'Arte*:

We're told again and again that Leilani has a sad face, but this is not what the mask, with its full cheeks, nor Irasa Siave's eternally optimistic performance communicates. There is definite potential to break out of the form and play against comedy. These masks are yearning to be real, wanting to become more human than stereotype. But they have not managed to find the sweet spot between bathos and pathos, and neither is satisfactory on its own. (2016)

The sadness at the heart of *Commedia dell'Arte* was notably commented on by George Sand around the mid-nineteenth century:

The *commedia dell' arte* is not only a study of the grotesque and facetious . . . but also a portrayal of real characters traced from remote antiquity down to the present day, in an uninterrupted tradition of fantastic humour which is in essence quite serious and, one might almost say, even sad, like every satire which lays bare the spiritual poverty of mankind. (Duchartre, 1966, Ch.1, paragraph 4)

Nonetheless, on the surface the *Commedia dell'Arte* formula resolves to a happy conclusion, with lovers reconciled and oppressors upended. Based on his study of extant scenarios, Jordan (2014, p. 2) writes, "The simple and often highly derivative comic plot tended to revolve around various love intrigues with attendant complications and subsequent happy resolutions."

What is more, the happiness of the ending should be the resonant note. Writing of the place of death in *Commedia dell'Arte*, Fava (2004, Chapter 3, Death) asserts that the immortality of the character types must persist for the duration of a show and that as a consequence

“Commedia does not allow for traces of suffering after the happy ending.” The upshot of this is that Commedia dell’Arte is unlikely to be a suitable vehicle for what is essentially tragic content demanding the last word, a fact that may limit the scope of its capacity to convey serious messages about topical issues.

Certainly, with *Leilani*, leaving the right endnote seems to have been a challenge. Moodie (2016) described it as “a comedic melodrama that explores Auckland’s homelessness issue and asks audiences to take a long hard look at society.” Wenley (2016) wrote that it is “never sure if it wants to be a hopeful triumph against adversity or a tragic fable” and that the ending (the play ended on a punchline) is “a cop-out to this question”. He concluded that “Its treatment of homelessness comes off as vague and ill-informed”.

Further comments by Wenley highlight the difficulty of credibly translating the cultural dynamics of the source conventions but working them into a local idiom:

Mahuika Theatre Company claim to be the pioneers of a new fusion style of theatre, Aotearoa Dell’arte, localising and updating the 16<sup>th</sup> Century Italian Comedia [sic] Dell’arte form. More accurately, they are just the latest in a long line of practitioners, from the alternative companies of the 1970s, to Indian Ink theatre, who have explored how mask can be used to tell stories from Aotearoa. Te Rehia used the story of the Maori Battalion in Italy to create an indigenous response to Comedia [sic] in Hoki Mai Tama Ma (which played Auckland in 2014) through their development of Matarua (Maori mask). It is disappointing that Mahuika have focused on Italian theatre history at the neglect of New Zealand’s. (2016)

To be fair to Mahuika Theatre Company, they admit that “There is no novelty in what Mahuika Theatre Company did” and that they are another in a line of theatre companies and practitioners bringing the Commedia dell’Arte theatre tradition to Aotearoa New Zealand (Ilgenfritz, 2022, p. 73).

The director has explained that the heart of their ‘fusion’ style is a local theatre practice which “did not intend to reconstruct the style of Commedia dell’Arte or to offer a translation of Italian types in Aotearoa.” Rather, it looked to initiate new forms of theatre practice:

The company’s unique approach towards developing theatre masks with distinct local characteristics represents a departure from the pure forms of

Commedia and the development of a research field based on hybrid forms of theatre. Being and not being Commedia recognises both the distance and the proximity of the source. (Ilgenfritz, 2022, p. 86)

A key point about the way this works is that rather than simply dressing the Commedia dell'Arte in new world clothes, a whole new set of physical characteristics and actions were devised in improvisation from the raw material of character types already located in Aotearoa New Zealand:

Our version of Commedia was quite different from what I saw in Pordenone, but many aspects were similar too. Their Commedia is based on a physical score, and then you improvise on top. We worked like that too, but backward. We improvised with the masks to develop a unique set of physical traits – walks, posture, gestures – for each character. (Ilgenfritz, 2022, p. 85)

What is essentially preserved of the Commedia dell'Arte, then, is a way of navigating fresh territory, driven by the spirit of exploration. This mode of practice is wholly within the bounds of the domain of Neo-Commedia, which, as Crick (2021, p. xxvi) notes, is now the customary term used for distinguishing the Commedia dell'Arte's modern reinventions from its historical performance.

## **White Elephant 2014**

### *First performance*

Jo Randerson's *White Elephant* premiered at the Hannah Playhouse in Wellington in November 2014. It depicts the decadent reign of the 'one per cent' (the haves) over the '99 per cent' (the have-nots) which leads to an inevitable rebellion.<sup>13</sup> According to the production information it constituted "a response to the gross inequality of income and privilege that is such a defining factor of our age. We wanted to try to find a theatrical embodiment of these power structures and to play out some of the tensions and vulnerabilities that are implicit within them" (Barbarian Productions, 2014).

The play is not scripted but primarily relies on physical performance and clowning, driven forward by a series of grunted utterances interspersed with occasionally recognisable

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<sup>13</sup> They are described as the 99 per cent and the one percent in the production information (Barbarian Productions, 2014). Atkinson (2014) notes the 99 percent were referred to in the programme as the 'have-nots'. I have adopted this terminology for consistency and ease of reference.

commands or exclamations. The origin of these utterances in grammelot was acknowledged by the show's Dramaturg and Marketing designer:

As for the "gabbled speech taken at top speed" - this is also a known form called Grammelot, a device originating from the Commedia and used extensively in satirical theatre, clown and mime productions. (LaHood, 2014)

There is also extensive symbolic use of theatre props to frame the very different worlds of the two opposing factions. I am indebted to the director, Jo Randerson, for having made a video of a Hannah Playhouse performance available to me, which has enabled me to describe further detail below of the play as staged.

### *Reception*

I have been able to find only two published mainstream reviews of the production, one of which engendered an unusual rebuke from the production company in response to the reviewer's leading statement, "It's back to 1960s experimental theatre with White Elephant with its clowns and circus-like setting" (Atkinson, 2014). Endorsing comments made on the same webpage by an anonymous contributor calling themselves "Il Dottore", Thomas LaHood (2014), for Barbarian Productions, replied that, rather than simply presenting a "60s flashback", the show was drawing on a long line of populist forms in the history of theatre, including a rich tradition of political theatre in Wellington, whose revival from generation to generation continues to challenge the political status quo and repopularise theatre where it has become elitist ("as evidenced by our effort to make ticket prices reflect our desire for ANYONE and EVERYONE to have access to the work, whatever their income"). LaHood also noted that the production had attracted some 550 attendees over the four shows in the season.

On the other hand, the other published review of the production immediately recognised the characters as timeless archetypes, seeing the have-nots as Zanni and the haves, described as a General, Mayor and Banker, as bouffons while explaining, "The essence of Bouffon is to mock elements of his or her society in an amplified way." (Rea, 2014)

It is possible that the broad stereotyping of the haves may have contributed to Atkinson's perception that the production was simply re-serving old material. A web-post by Il Dottore makes the following observation:

I did find myself wondering how it might be if the 'haves' were characterised in more Kiwi terms – rather than as Soviet Generalissimo, European Businessman, Dickensian Plutocrat (Maori and Pacifica practitioners have explored such archetypes within their own cultures) – but I guess it is fair to say that White Elephant represents the ancestry of NZ's white ruling class. (2014)

Thus, while the depiction of the haves as relics of colonial society (the White Elephant of the title) was a defensible thematic choice, it does raise the issue of temporal specificity. Looking at the video performance, there seems to be little in the activities over which the haves preside to suggest that the rising tension and inevitable revolt are topically relevant or important to its contemporary audience. This is because the activities - playing golf, clay-shooting, ballet, opening exhibits, presenting awards, signing contracts, gourmandising, participating in orgies – are intended to represent the cultural products of white middle-class colonialism. Looking from the windows of the inherited culture they may seem unremarkable and ethically unchallenging, so that the play may have come across to some as the '60s flashback' as charged by Atkinson, a parable passed down from previous generations but as yet unlinked to the present experience that makes it vividly meaningful. However, in the context of Commedia and its structural integrity, there is more to be seen than from a simple reading of its characters' local authenticity. I comment further below, for instance, on how the audience is ethically engaged in the play by its use of grammelot.

### *The masks and stock characters*

The costuming of the have-nots emphasises their sensuality. The leading male player is dressed up as a faun, a visual pun on fawning, with pronounced genitalia, thighs of suitably mythical musculature and naked torso. The leading female player is endowed with a flaming orange afro and unusually large buttocks with bare legs and midriff. As if to implicate the audience in the colonial perspective of the haves, all the have-nots wear white Basle-style masks in a collective display of vacuous sameness.

The have-nots are presented in a way that continues the physical puns. One is dressed as a toff with an Imperial-style moustache, tuxedo, padded waistcoat made from sofa seating (depicting stuffiness perhaps), and yellow gumboots that mark him as landed gentry. Another is a businessman with a hunchback (making him literally bent), Pinocchio nose and briefcase.

The third is an obese military officer with a chevron moustache wearing a dress uniform with medals, ceremonial sword, and a red cape.

The physical athleticism of the have-nots as they perform to order is vigorously deployed in a wide range of figurative roles from ballet dancer to circus acrobat to leashed beast. Against their half-naked instinctual energy, the over-dressed mannerisms of the haves, almost always exercising their decisions in committee, seems to portray an inbred impotence. The three-level dais occupied by the haves, and continually defended against the upward ambitions of the have-nots, operates as the key marker of position, a symbol of the prevailing societal power structure.

The directionless perpetuation of the exercise of power is depicted by the wheeling of the dais around the stage between activities, pulled by the have-nots under the direction of the haves. Their paternalism is demonstrated by various lessons given to the have-nots including an initial golf lesson, clay shooting and instructions on how to serve food and drinks. The hunger that is characteristic of the repressed zanni in *Commedia dell'Arte* is used to control the have-nots, who are literally thrown the crumbs from the feasting of the haves. Tellingly, when the revolution comes its climax is a food fight. A prominent scene enacting the rich feeding on the poor has the entrails being pulled from a have-not and presented to a have on a plate with knife and fork. This involves the clever use of long red ribbon employed previously to signify a formal ribbon-cutting ceremony.

### *The use of Grammelot*

There is little intelligible dialogue, if any, in the play. Instead, the communication between the haves consists of grunting in plummy voices interspersed with short exclamations when language is used as an instrument of power either in ridiculing or approving certain behaviours proper to the station of the have-nots or in injunctioning them when they try to copy the behaviours of the haves.

Examples of such phrases are: "Boring," "This is rubbish" (ridicule); "Well done," "Oh that's very clever," "That's a soldier;" (approval) and "No, no," "Off, off" and "Stop it" (injunction).

The use of grammelot was defended in LaHood's response to Atkinson's review:

As for the "gabbled speech taken at top speed" - this is also a known form called Grammelot, a device originating from the Commedia and used extensively in satirical theatre, clown, and mime productions. (LaHood, 2014)

It is arguable whether grammelot is employed in a way that is typical of satirical theatre. Unlike the haves the have-nots do not possess language. They express themselves through their gestures, supported by a grammelot of animal sound effects including the barking of a dog, growling of a bear, gibbering of apes, and clucking of chickens. In effect they are a bestial underclass and are treated as such by the haves.

Because the have-nots do not express these sounds themselves, their grammelot seems less a counter to or circumvention of the normative discourse of the haves and more a third party reinforcing of the perspective of the haves, continuing to implicate the audience in their worldview.

The grammelot, then, seems potentially to operate counter to its historical oppositional function. When uttered by the haves it serves to condense the normative language. When played as an accompaniment to the actions of the have-nots, it operates as a paralinguistic extension of the class attitudes of the haves, which the have-nots reinforce with their actions. In one scene, for example, the orange afro wig is transferred to the back of its have-not owner to represent a clutch of feathers which the military officer reaches out to pluck.

This is simply a matter of strategy, however. While not being employed in a way that is directly oppositional, with zanni-like interlocutions and deconstructions, the grammelot's effect is nonetheless oppositional. The audience, having been implicated from the start in this colonial construct, is progressively wound up by its prolongation through various displays of cruel and degenerate behaviour to such a level of discomfort that they feel moved to participate in its repudiation, as demonstrated by their enthusiastic engagement in the climactic food fight.

While there is a temporary victory by the haves in battle, it leads to an over-reaching of behaviour in terms of the limits that social morality will bear. There is a reckless shooting and real death, disavowal of responsibility, a state-sanctioned sweeping away of the evidence and orgiastic celebration (perhaps an orgy of blood given the symbolic red boa worn by the female have-not). In the end the haves have debased themselves to such an extent that as the military officer defiantly swings his overblown testicles up and down in the dark centre-stage

the have-nots silently take over the dais. The reversal of status has little to do with the interrogation of moral complexity associated with current debates. Instead, a sense of general moral outrage hangs in the air.

The play ends with the entry of a male choir and collective singing of the song *Hafan Gobaith* (Another Day), a Welsh song that promises a haven of hope until the dawn.<sup>14</sup> Thus, the hostilities are temporarily suspended, in keeping with the Commedia dell'Arte's promise of another episode.

*White Elephant* excoriates our foundational class system by peeling back the layers of its administrative processes to reveal a corrupt and morally shocking core. It enacts colonialism, with all its arrogant disregard for the colonised peoples, treating them as livestock to be made into objects of entertainment and of service. But its failure to provide contemporary points of reference means it come across emotionally as a parable, and is difficult to read as intended, as an incitement to action to address prevailing inequities of wealth and privilege. To borrow terminology from Bakhtin, it lacks chronotopic relevance, the chronotope being a generic form which fuses time and space such that "Time, as it were, thickens, takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible; likewise space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot and history" (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 84).

## Summary

As I have mentioned, a key feature taken from the traditional Commedia dell'Arte is its spirit of exploration. But applying its practice involves tensions of distance as well as tensions of time – the challenge of making its origins both familiar and yet strangely new. The theatre of Indian Ink transports us to the exoticism of the Orient and of fairy tale. In *Hoki Mai Tama Mā* exoticism is achieved through the innovation of Māori masks but absent such innovation, the discovery of new perspectives must be sought in the turning over of themes that have been freshly dug from the local soil, using recognisable place markers to trigger localised emotional resonance. Moreover, a fine act of balancing is required to employ a form that is essentially comedic to sound out serious and tragic notes. *Leilani* deals with serious contemporary themes of homelessness and mental health but was accused by reviewers of too

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<sup>14</sup> As Rea (2014) notes, the song was written by Eleri Richards and Delyth Richards and recorded by Bryn Terfel for the Hope House Appeal to raise funding for terminally ill children in hospice care.

easily tying them off, its looping daydream ending avoiding any tragic resonance. *Leilani* was not alone in this regard, with the earnest endeavour of Lisa Brickell to present issues of maternal mental health in *The Mockingbird* earning a similar rebuke:

The ending, especially, feels pat and contrived to bring a smile on our faces without showing us a real journey. (Joe, 2016)

In other words, when it comes to seeking emotions other than laughter the modern spectator needs to be engaged to be convinced. It is not simply that Commedia and serious or traumatic material are fundamentally incompatible. Mirella Schino (2018, p. 300) describes the dualism of comedy and tragedy that Edward Craig argued is the essence of Commedia dell'Arte and adds, in respect of its application to contemporary experimental theatre, that "The genre has become grotesque, political, acrobatic and surreal, colourful and cruel."

As an example of such change, Schino points to Mnouchkine's *L'Age d'Or*:

Mnouchkine portrayed a cruel, contemporary hunger, not the ancient hunger of the seventeenth century, which had been sweetened by the passage of time. Hers was the contemporary hunger felt by the outcasts of our times. (2018, p. 302)

So, there is an element of topical or chronotopic intensity that is needed to shake modern audiences. Schino (2018, p. 300) also notes that the restoration of the Commedia dell'Arte's darker side has brought with it a surge of violence which makes for a difficult pairing with laughter, and which raises questions about which characteristics should be regarded as "central to the phenomenon of commedia dell'arte".

Earlier in this essay I noted that the doubleness of Commedia dell'arte, its threat of danger wrapped in the safety of an absurd environment, makes it an ideal vehicle for exploring sensitive contemporary issues. It does seem however, that to stir up corrective action, rather than simply presenting a model of change, and tumbling off stage-left, a modern Commedia-based production needs to score its themes heavily such that the laughter it evokes can scarcely mask the sickness beneath.

In the next chapter I briefly reflect on how Commedia dell'Arte has been used as a vehicle of change to try to create an authentic vision of modern Aotearoa New Zealand, packing away its colonial baggage. I then turn to consider what the explorations and discoveries contained

in this chapter mean for myself as a practitioner, trying to write engaging Commedia-based theatre.

## Chapter Three: The process of importation, and its implications for playwrights

### The History of Commedia dell'Arte in Aotearoa New Zealand

A little over a year after I started writing this thesis a collection of essays about the practice and performance of Commedia dell'Arte in the Asia-Pacific region was published under the title *Commedia dell'Arte for the 21st Century: Practice and Performance in the Asia-Pacific* (Di Niro & Crick, 2021). This included a brief chapter on the history of Commedia dell'Arte in Aotearoa New Zealand by prominent dramaturge, academic, and theatre critic Murray Edmond (Edmond, 2021). His history charts an “initial radical-anarchistic political phase” which included the novel and shocking productions of the Living Theatre troupe performed between 1970 and 1975, then identifies a move from protest to pedagogy (“a training and research phase”) as post-modernity set in and the retreat into simulacra meant “Originality transformed into quotation, and authenticity into spectacle” (2021, p. 245). Edmond observes that “So long as it didn't get hung up on the ‘authentic Commedia,’ Neo-Commedia could be accommodated to the post-modern dispensation” (2021, p. 246). He also reflects that in invoking an historical model, an essential question for Neo-Commedia at the time, one which I had proposed for the case studies in this thesis, was:

“How can you make theatre that lives by holding up the mirror to show the very form and pressure of the times?” (2021, p. 246)

To avoid the colonialist vision that simply replaces the old with the new, as if it were still populating empty territory, Edmond argues that theatre in Aotearoa New Zealand was forced to re-examine its roots, giving rise to local movements and identity, including a Māori theatre movement, that also echoed the politics of the time:

Assertions of identity politics were coeval with neoliberal globalist economics and theatre too was caught up in this. (2021, p. 247)

Another potential trap in using the Commedia dell'Arte to frame the present is the affliction of what Edmond calls “Italian-itis” – the importation of references that are awkwardly rendered in English or come across as clichéd borrowings.

Avoiding this affliction, two distinctively local characters stepped out on stage, Harris, “a gruff soft-hearted bushman, in swandri,” invented by Tim Denton, and Hermoine, “a sherry-

swilling culture vulture from Taupo,” invented by Anne Hunt. They were the product of Commedia-style entertainments devised by two companies from The Half Mask Comedy Workshop, an initiative funded by the government’s Temporary Employment Programme in the Summer of 1978-1979. One of the companies (unnamed by Edmond) staged a season of *Masks-a-rading* at Circa Theatre while the other, Mask Theatre, put on *The Million Dollar Bash*, a summer ‘romp’ for the city parks and beaches which included newly invented mask characters (Edmond, 2021, p. 246). The success of these characters enabled their mobilisation as versions of the solo masked clown at events and on the streets for several years in Wellington.

Another new direction was carved out by the branded theatre of Indian Ink, which, as Edmond notes, was at the same time a response to the stifling effects of a funding administration whose short-term contract focus created the ‘gig’ economy:

Indian Ink’s identity and the comedic masks were the heart of the company, but they were also survival strategies in the neoliberal jungle. (2021, p. 250)

The use of masks, making them an integral part of the established brand of the Indian Ink company, is a point I touch upon above in my case study of *The Pickle King*. Edmond also makes the point that Indian Ink also created original works, so that rather than being another Commedia-branded commodity on the shelf they were a truly differentiated product, a niche mode of theatre consumption that guaranteed an audience of its own:

There was no longer one universal thing called ‘theatre.’ Different theatres belonged to different belongers. (2021, p. 250)

The theatre of Indian Ink is not a distinctively Aotearoa New Zealand product, however. Like its double-entendre lazzi humour that relies for its effect on the space between two readings of the world, it occupies the space between reality and fairy tale. Indian Ink have asserted that their primary focus is on storytelling and the story of their first play *Krishnan’s Dairy* is not about the experience of ‘being Indian in New Zealand’ (Rajan & Lewis, 2005, p. 15).

Nor are the masks of *Hoki Mai Tama Mā* attempting to reproduce an authentic vision of Māori. Rather, it uses the exoticism associated with the masks to create a fresh perspective of reality, a sense of wonder from seeing things in a new light. The lazzi of *Hoki Mai Tama Mā* are thematically associated with the inversion of servant and master and highlight the need for inventiveness when the long nose of one tradition must engage with the hongi of another.

On the other hand, the masks of *Leilani*, are an attempt to portray authentic analogies to the Commedia dell'Arte characters that connect with audiences through their recognition of the underlying tradition. Yet at the same time they create a distancing that, as with the 'classical' Commedia dell'arte, provides greater emphasis on the dynamics of the social relationships and hierarchies that are in play in the here and now. Commenting on McClean's (2016) claim that *Leilani* constituted a 'local renaissance of the classical form', Edmond observes:

Looking back over five decades, it is possible to see *Leilani*, not as a repetition, but as another attempt to achieve two things at the same time by putting the Commedia dell'Arte machinery to work: to revivify an old form, and also to invigorate 'Aotearoa-centric theatre' (2021, p. 251).

Alongside the masks, the improvisational methods and inventive spirit of the Commedia have been put to work in the quest for new forms of syncretic theatre that better reflect the lived experience of exploration associated with adapting to changes in the social and cultural landscape. This is at the heart of the appeal of Commedia dell'Arte to global theatrical practice today:

In this sense, the Commedia dell'Arte, exactly because it is 'export theatre', born for the market, opens the pedagogical space for adaptability, eliminating barriers and boundaries and looking for a common understanding – through the masks as universal characters; the modular dramaturgical structure; the linguistic versatility; the importance given to non-verbal communication based on the need to understand and be understood, typical of a theatrical form devoted to export since its origins (Italy is a country with an enormous linguistic variety). (Mangolini, 2022, p. 264)

Of course, as with *White Elephant*, nothing relaxes the grip of our colonial past like an old-fashioned dust-up. Its use of grammalet conveys an elemental struggle for the power of language which gives domain over the colonised landscape. Indeed, the play could be seen to portray the indigenous landscape as irrepressible.

But there are more subtle ways to use Commedia dell'Arte to disrupt or deconstruct colonial tropes. For example, from beneath the iconoclastic gaze of its Māori masks, *Hoki Mai Tama Mā* attempts to create a more authentic version of history in a Māori theatre context, by challenging our too-easily received versions of it and questioning the fluidity of identity

itself. The prevalent use of lazzi of a verbal or gestural type in our Commedia-based plays, as opposed to those containing the more conventional slapstick violence, suggests we are a nation less concerned with violent confrontation than with identity deconstruction, assisted by our own naturally occurring vein of wry, anti-authoritarian humour.

All of these local attempts to explore and confront our identity using Commedia methods demonstrate that they are seen by theatre practitioners as providing a natural framework for the development of ‘Aotearoa-centric’ theatre, not in the least because of their underlying commercial appeal, a mortar of instant product recognisability and the promise of spectacle.

### **A note on the direct importation of Commedia dell’Arte**

The story of Commedia dell’Arte in Aotearoa New Zealand is not complete without acknowledging its recognition as a direct import with its own tradition. Brickell (2022) describes her work teaching Commedia dell’Arte through the achievement standards in *Te Kete Ipurangi* – the NZ Drama Curriculum but concludes:

Given Commedia is not mainstream in Aotearoa, it presents as a barrier to younger audiences, who gravitate more towards immediate and bite-sized forms of comedy found on social media. Therefore, a way to reach this audience type is to find everyday situations that are embedded in the contemporary culture of the audience and reflect it back to them in comical ways.

Brickell notes her decision to promote a student production of the 16<sup>th</sup> century Flaminio Scala Commedia canovaccio called *La Creduta Morta* (The Lady Believed to be Dead) as more of a Shakespearean play, given its plot similarities with *Romeo and Juliet*:

As such, we created a hybrid of the two – a fusion of the rich textual energy of Shakespeare mixed with the vibrant, physical energy of Commedia.  
(2022, p. 156)

The BATS Theatre run was warmly reviewed by John Smythe (2006), who was able to identify the Commedia dell’Arte counterparts for each of the Shakespearian characters.

A similar Anglicisation was applied to *A Servant to Two Masters* by Carlo Goldoni, adapted by Lee Hall and directed by Ross Jolly at the Circa Theatre in Wellington in 2015. It was played without masks and was reviewed by Laurie Atkinson who said:

Lee Hall's snappy colloquial translation (with such 20th century cultural references as “dead as a parrot” and “I could have been a contender”) has slyly turned Goldoni's comedy into what is in effect an English pantomime with lots of panto humour (e.g., spotted dick). (2015)

It seems that in directly importing Commedia, commercial concerns also prevail. For mainstream popular consumption, it is better sold watered down or with its labels translated into English.

### **Creative considerations for the theatre practitioner**

As a practising creative writer, I have reflected upon some of the challenges I encountered using Commedia dell'Arte as a framework in scripting *Carnival Day*, the creative component of this thesis. The play incorporates masks, stock characters, lazzi, and grammelot. It also includes meta-theatrical references to the Commedia dell'Arte, for example when a recollection by the Student of a previous performance role as Il Dottore occasions his transformation into the Plague Doctor.

The play describes the events that occur on a day's journey into the city by the central character, Brook (Isabella), and her father Amilcare (Pantalone) to attend a carnival. Brook is mask-bound by a lupus-like disease and yearns to be free of its constraints. The events include her father being elected as president of the street-dwellers, his prohibition of begging, the arrival of a pandemic along with the Plague Doctor, Amilcare's death due to the Plague Doctor's scheming, and Brook's ascendance to become Carnival Queen, attended by her would-be lover, River (Arlecchino) and political adviser, the Deputy of the Grammelot party (Tartaglia). The political background to the events is loosely based on Aotearoa New Zealand's Covid-19 experiences, culminating in the occupation of parliament grounds in February 2022.

### ***The selection and naturalisation or updating of stock characters and traits***

A key consideration emerging from the case studies has been the need to make stock characters interesting by making them topically relevant. This is a commercial imperative, even for plays that have already been successful but that may be approaching their best-by date. The updating of *The Pickle King*'s heterosexual love with same-sex love is a good example of the exercise of sales acumen. In respect of my own characters, I have similarly tried to purvey the fluidity of self that marks much of our current media discourse. As an

Innamorata, River's future in love is fixed but the fascination Brook has for River's apparent freewheeling carnival lifestyle, incorporating sexual and social boundary-crossing, encourages her to explore, at least temporarily, a more fluid sexuality. By helping to combat the disease that afflicts others, Brook, a subservient daughter of an overbearing parent, overcomes the social isolation brought about by her own disease. For the audience to be interested in Brook's desire however, which having been updated no longer intrigues just for being transgressive, the character of River must be truly fascinating. Like her archetype, Arlecchino, she must shine like quicksilver. I have therefore attempted to endow her with mythic qualities, including her antiquity and the inability of others to hear her warnings.

Similarly, in introducing other new strands of the old, I have adapted Il Dottore, whose lust for power, characteristic of a Vecchio, fits him out for being a wannabe Carnival King. This traditional figure at the centre of the European carnival rules over the festivities that mark the suspension of social order. As the Lord of Misrule, he is responsible for the sins and trespasses of the community, and at the end of the carnival period is "executed" as a scapegoat.

Also, as I noted above, the negative aspects of stereotyping must be dealt with. For example, how can one incorporate the character of Tartaglia without losing his key stock feature, a stutter, which could be seen by contemporary audiences to be mocking speech abnormalities? The solution I have chosen is to portray his stutter in a meritorious light as a feature of his far-sightedness (itself a twist on his ocular weakness). He stutters only because of his extraordinary ability to race his thoughts forward into language much faster than you or I.

For ethical reasons I also removed a joke where party officials struggle to remember all the gender variants of LGBTQ+. For the same reasons I have tried not to pigeonhole River's gender fluidity with any specific gender terms. Nor have I assigned any of the characters a skin colour.

### *The contextual use of costumes and masks*

With the updating of characters comes a need to update their dress. River is an amalgam of Arlecchino and an Innamorata. She is introduced wearing a clown's mask but un.masks herself at the end of scene five when she is playing amorously with Brook. She wears a white mask during the election and aftermath but dons full motley for the final carnival scenes. Brook is Isabella, the daughter of Pantalone and another Innamorata. She wears a loup but

then dons a white mask and a carnival mask in sync with River's changes. The key to Brook's behaviour is her longing to divest herself of the loup to become a true Innamorata. Amilcare is an authentic Pantalone, with only the nature of his money-making activities needing to be updated. Il Dottore, however, has been adapted. He is still the medical academic (becoming Vice-Chancellor of the University) and Master of *sproloquio*, but as the pandemic advances he grows into this role from being a student. Indeed, River reminds him of his role as Il Dottore in another Commedia performance. In keeping with the pandemic theme, I have deliberately conflated his character with that of the medieval Plague Doctor, so that he wears a beaked mask rather than the traditional mask covering only his forehead and nose. As with each of his forebears, he is dressed entirely in black.

Following Gozzi (1762), I have made Tartaglia a statesman rather than a notary, his traditional role. This is in keeping with his position as a sage advisor both to the Grammelot leader and Brook. Rather than a sword, he carries an oversized pen, an improvisation which provides for a vulgar pun.

### *The effective incorporation of Lazzi*

There are various challenges in trying to devise authentic yet entertaining lazzi. Most do not have recorded dialogue and many rely on feats of athleticism. They are often vulgar and may offend modern audiences. Avner Eisenberg, a world-renowned clown, juggler, teacher, and performer, has said that Commedia was about elemental survival instincts and was "as bawdy and raucous, as alive, and immediate as any theatre ever was" (2015, p. xiii). The lazzi in *Carnival Day* are largely adapted from Gordon's inventory (Gordon, 1983). But in selecting and adapting them I have thought it wise to moderate their humour of the body grotesque.

I have also had to be particularly mindful in ensuring any degrading remarks or humour are aimed at authority rather than reinforcing marginalisation (punching up rather than down). To make the point I have included a cautionary scenario within the play where a disabled beggar rebukes a politician for using ablest language. More challenging, however, was the equitable presentation of the beggars whom I considered essential to the plot. In the beggar lazzi I have attempted to portray them without approbation but as real people who have lost their independence in the face of adversity (and who can be forgiven for resorting to certain tricks, and alcohol at times, in order to survive). Similarly, I have removed some dialogue because of its echoes of tone-policing. One such example was an exclamation (in an earlier draft, now

revised) by the Grammelot leader, “They say we too easily take offence but taking offence is a duty, a pleasure. Our shrillness signals the depth of our feeling.”

I have resisted the temptation to make the lazzi subservient to the plot, as was suggested by some early script feedback. At heart they are extempore entertainments, designed to fill flagging moments. But of course, in being scripted rather than improvised, their placement must be chosen *ex ante* rather than by properly waiting to fill the gaps in an audience’s reactions. This means they tend to fulfil more of a scene-linking function.

### *Writing meaningful grammelot*

As Jaffe-Berg (2001) observes, the written scenarios of Commedia dell'Arte that have survived indicate the incorporation of nonsense communication including incoherent verbal articulation, mis-spoken dialects, and non sequiturs with the lazzi and scenes was commonplace. However, there are no recorded examples of the practice. It was effectively reinvented by Dario Fo, who has given little attention to referencing his methods to instances of historical practice. It is most famously used by him in scenarios such as *The Starving Zanni*, in which the grammelot is simply given by variants of the theatrical direction *onomatopoeic sounds* (Fo, 1991, pp. 43-44). Jaffe-Berg gives the following example from a videotaped performance of the same scenario which gives a flavour of how it is constructed:

"Oi! Che fame! [ . . . ] bloup, bloup, bloup, ou, bloup!" (2001, p. 3)

With my own use of grammelot I have tried to use a similar mix of languages and onomatopoeic sounds. For example, “Growl doggerel la luna.” But to have constructed a similar grammelot traversing the whole play would have required more time and ingenuity than I had. I was also mindful of Rudlin’s cautionary note:

Grommelot should, however, be used sparingly, kept in reserve even, for moments of disaster, otherwise, like Tartaglia’s stammering, it can hold up the action and become too much of a good thing. (2015, p. 164)

Therefore, I have incorporated grammelot thematically as a quest for a universal political language which can appeal to all voters. Ironically the Grammelot Party leader only achieves mastery of this form of expression upon losing the election, whereupon he descends into the madness of which leaking speech is often seen as a symptom.

### *Knowing where to draw the line*

There is a fundamental conundrum in writing a Commedia play which is funny, but which incorporates unfolding events in which many things that happened weren't funny at the time. The occupation of Parliament grounds during our own Covid-19 pandemic was a serious breach of civil order that threatened to split the nation. Just how do you write about events such as this and yet still appeal to a wide audience in a country that is quite politically divided? This is unlike the original Commedia social context in which performers had to draw a line between ridiculing authority in an entertaining way and risking offence, but where there was a clear line between the ruling class and the lower classes. Now the audience constitutes a wide spread of the middle class and to mock only one party or politician will risk alienating some part of your audience, although it is a problem that is to some extent ameliorated by MMP and the proliferation of parties between which to split the offence.

With all the possible factions to offend it may be just as well to follow the words of Ross Fitzgerald citing the maxim of the stand-up comedian Mort Sahl: "that nothing is off-limits to the true satirist, who should have a go at everything and everyone" (Fitzgerald & McFadyen, 2022, p. 104). One way to do this without alienating entire audiences is to employ the distancing strategies Commedia dell'Arte offers. Its masks immediately provide distancing from real identities, while its fancifulness can be used to satirise political behaviour generally without making attributions obvious. By taking real situations and making them so ridiculous they couldn't possibly happen, the behaviours they depict are magnified while their source stays floating, like a rumour that no-one wants to protest for fear of making it seem grounded. Often the grounding will take care of itself. As Fitzgerald has observed: "Ian and I find it fascinating that however fanciful our satire, it often gets gazumped by political (and academic) reality" (Fitzgerald & McFadyen, 2022, p. 103).

### *Making a folkloric paradigm resonate with the real*

A writer can't wait, however, for reality to catch up with the parodied behaviour. How then do you make the Commedia's farcical behaviour, in what is essentially a folkloric paradigm, seem as though it is always only one step removed from the real world? In my play *Carnival Day*, the political speeches are at times too ridiculous to be true but at times intended to be redolent of something a political economist might have said, for example the student's explanation of third world banking and trickle down. The world I have presented is itself both

ridiculous yet at the same time intended to invoke parallels with our own very genuine experiences during the Covid-19 pandemic. The parallel frame of reference makes the artificiality of all political expression in the play suspect. There are specific references to real events. For example, the Grammelot deputy's reference to dancing with the stars is a reference to the popularity achieved by the participation of the ACT party Leader, David Seymour, in a celebrity dance show called *Dancing with the Stars*. Crossing to the other side of the parliamentary floor, Amilcare's refusal to state a position on the decriminalisation of cannabis reflects the response of our then Labour party Prime Minister when pressed to declare her position on the 2020 cannabis referendum. These are the sprinklings of political stardust that I hope help to bring the fantasy to life.

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Carnival Day  
Paolo Caccioppoli

## Cast of Characters

<u>AMILCARE DAMMI:</u>	An elderly businessman (Pantalone)
<u>BROOK:</u>	Amilcare's daughter (Isabella)
<u>RIVER:</u>	A carnival director (Arlecchino)
<u>STUDENT:</u>	An entrepreneur
<u>GRAMMELOT LEADER:</u>	A visionary
<u>DEPUTY:</u>	A statesman (Tartaglia - from the Italian 'tartagliare', to stutter). He speaks with a stutter, which is indicated in the script where it needs emphasising. Otherwise the actor is free to interpolate it as they wish.
<u>PLAGUE DOCTOR:</u>	The Student's alter ego (Il Dottore)
<u>STREET-CLEANER:</u>	Employee of the Plague Doctor
<u>ADMINISTRATOR:</u>	Servant of the university

## Notes for Audience

The Italian **Commedia dell'arte** was celebrated for its textual improvisation and spontaneous, carnivalesque performances. It was the first form of theatre to be marketed and sold through ticketing and was reproducible, using stock characters and masks that enabled the serialisation of performances. The word 'commedia' itself simply means 'theatre' - of all kinds, not just 'comedy', and the simplest translation of the word 'arte' is 'professional'.

**Grammelot** is an imaginary language that exists only for the duration of a performance. It produces meaning through sound effects and accompanying mime and mimicry, unlike gibberish which is unintelligible. While the origin of the term is unclear, manuscripts preserved from the seventeenth century suggest incorporating nonsense communication within *lazzi* and scenes was a common practice. The practice may have arisen from circumstances in which the travelling performers and audience spoke different languages and in which the Italian performers themselves spoke in different dialects.

The **lazzi** (singular *lazzo*) were standard comic routines that provided the inspiration for modern slapstick comedy. They were one of the chief resources of the Italian improvisators. In comic slang, *lazzo* indicates any solution adopted on stage to make an audience laugh. The *lazzi* constitute a stock of comic solutions, adaptable to all comedies, with each *lazzo* being linked to a particular character. An actor would resort to *lazzi* whenever a scene began to drag or his eloquence gave out. They are often infantile and commonly feature sexual or scatological humour.

**Pantalone** along with *Il Dottore*, is one of the two old man types. He derives from the figure of a Venetian merchant, often wealthy and respected, but who can also be in a state of ruination. He is avaricious and miserly. He has long red legs, a loose black cape, Turkish slippers, and a red woollen bonnet. His mask has prominent eyebrows and is gaunt and swarthy with a large, hooked nose and an untidy grey goatee. Usually portrayed as a manipulative parent attempting to marry his children off to people they don't want to marry, he often has lustful designs of his own on the younger generation.

**Il Dottore** (the Doctor) is a friend of Pantalone and his comic foil. Dressed all in black with a black gown and ruff and a large felt hat, he is a caricature of the

professional man of science or letters. He is learned but speaks nonsense, known as sproloquio, often spouting ersatz Latin or Greek. He wears a black or flesh-coloured mask which covers only his forehead and his nose, while his cheeks are smeared with red, which replicates a birthmark that disfigured the face of a well-known jurisconsult.

**Arlecchino**, the youngest of the family, wears a black mask and motley. His character is that of an ignorant valet, fundamentally naïve, but nevertheless making every effort to be intelligent, even to the extent of seeming malicious. He is a glutton and a coward, but faithful and energetic. Through motives of fear or cupidity he is always ready to undertake any sort of rascality and deceit. He is a chameleon who takes on every colour. He excels in impromptu, and is agile so that he can jump well, dance, and turn somersaults.

**Isabella** is the daughter of Pantalone. The women of Commedia dell'Arte did not wear masks but instead wore a black velvet loup (a cloth mask, often of silk or velvet, that covers only half the face) which allowed the audiences a glimpse of their beauty and sexual appeal. They were assigned generic roles as *Innamoratas* (lovers), servants, ingénues, mistresses, wantons, and matrons. According to Pierre Louis Duchartre, Isabella changed from being mainly tender and loving in the 16th century to a more flirtatious and strong-willed woman with a lively, picturesque wit by the end of the 17th century.

**Tartaglia** (from 'tartagliare' meaning to stutter) is a notary usually classed as one of the central group of old characters (*vecchi*), substituting for Pantalone or Il Dottore. Also often presented as a statesman based on a character in Carlo Gozzi's 1762 play *Il Re Cervo* (The King Stag). His stuttering is often scatological, and his servant Pulcinella is often on hand to force his words out with his cudgel to finish the *bisguizzo* (verbal lazzi). He does not have standard costume, but wears thick-lensed glasses and has been pictured by notable Commedia dell'Arte illustrator Maurice Sand in a green and yellow striped clown outfit.

Scene 1 - The Preliminaries

*Cubacade City. Amilcare Dammi and his daughter Brook have arrived at the train station and are standing on the platform. Janus-faced, Brook wears a loup covering her mouth, nose and cheeks with a full mask covering the back of her head. We hear the noise of a bustling crowd. Amilcare immediately escorts Brook to one side. A train attendant dressed in a black robe with a black hood and mask stops to inspect Brook's masks.*

TRAIN ATTENDANT

Getting on or off?

AMILCARE

Getting off of course. Isn't it obvious from the way we are facing?

TRAIN ATTENDANT

*Puzzled, inspects Brook again.*  
Just doing my job sir. Only regulation masks allowed. You will have to get one for your daughter for the return journey.

AMILCARE

We have just exited a carriage in which two people were not even wearing masks. And coughing all over the place. Disgraceful behaviour. They were beaten severely by the other passengers, but the incident caused an unnecessary delay.

TRAIN ATTENDANT

Asthmatics they were, I understand, with mask exemptions. An unfortunate misunderstanding.

AMILCARE

And look over there, there's a woman wearing a bra on her face.

TRAIN ATTENDANT

*Looks around*  
Yes sir, that's regulation 100 cup size G, unusually large noses.

AMILCARE

Well it may be legal but she looks like a right tit.

TRAIN ATTENDANT

People think I care but at breast I'm indifferent.  
Now if you'll excuse me sir I must move on.

*He moves away.*

AMILCARE

It really is a mystery how the civil got into civil servant. Back home our zanni were proper servants. Cringing, contemptible, arse-licking lackeys, who'd weep for joy after an exemplary thrashing.

BROOK

Don't fuss so much father, I'm sure it's safe to go now.

*Amilcare checks his watch.*

AMILCARE

Let's just wait for a few minutes more for the crowd to disperse. They sound particularly hungry today.

*He scans the audience.*

What an ugly mural.

*He then looks up*

And look at the glass in this station roof. It gives me shingles just to consider the cost of letting so much light in. All for the benefit of nowhere travellers who shuffle backwards and forwards without seeing anything. I doubt that even the light runs on time in this place.

BROOK

You know everything's running slow because of the carnival. It's carnival time! Can we please just try to get into the spirit of things?

AMILCARE

The place is lit up like a Courtney Place theatre. Oh yes there's an idea. We could collect old theatre programmes and make up new shows with a marker pen. Like movie sequels. Entertain the rabble while they wait for trains. Charge by the minute. Then sabotage a few signal points. Keep the audience captive.

BROOK

Time is up now, father. Look there are more crowds arriving. So many people waving and smiling. Have you ever seen so many colourful costumes?

AMILCARE

As far as I know, the Fair Trading Act has never been applied to an actual performance. We could do mime without actors. When you think about it the possibilities are endless. Why is it that people complain about glass ceilings?

BROOK

*Ignores him.*

Oh and look there are cymbals and drums!

*We hear the sound of cymbals crashing. Amilcare looks warily at the revelry going on around him.*  
Have you got the map, father? I can't wait to get to the main parade.

AMILCARE

Alright, alright, here you are. I've marked all the main performance areas and the nearest street exits. Now just let me just sit down for a minute. My head is thumping.

*He sits while Brook reads the map. The noise of the station around them grows quieter. A small group of citizens enters carrying hoses. They see Amilcare and Brook.*

C1

Hello. You look lost. Are you here for the election?

AMILCARE

*Looks questioningly at Brook*

BROOK

It's not in the script. It must be improvised.

AMILCARE

An opportunity for profit then.

*Gets up hurriedly and addresses citizen*  
Yes indeed we are, my name is Amilcare Dammi. You've

probably already heard of me. My company makes Neapolitan sausage.

C1

Salami?

AMILCARE

No, Dammi. And this is my daughter Brook. Sixteen when the sun is high but quite a lot less when there's cloud about.

C1

There's many a young head incubates thunder.

AMILCARE

With barely a tenth of its substance discernible to the naked eye. Thunderberg. Yes, that's a good word for it. They threaten a storm but are thankfully still too young to vote.

BROOK

There are other ways to ...

C1

*(interrupting)*  
So who do you intend to vote for?

AMILCARE

The First Party of course.

C1

Have you registered with them?

AMILCARE

Is that necessary?

C1

They don't like strangers, especially immigrants. Bit difficult to get a majority with that sort of policy in this country though if I must be honest.

AMILCARE

And if I were to make an ethical choice?

C1

Well, we don't approve of political jokes: we've seen too many get elected. But perhaps you could consider the Make it Right party. A marginal chance at best. They have a strict conflict of interests policy.

Every six weeks they convene a special meeting and serve all their members with an expulsion notice. That way no-one obtains any special influence. Makes it difficult to get their net registrations up, though. It's like meaningless sex - in and out, all that's left is a hole.

AMILCARE

Alright then, let's cut to the bottom line. Who holds the balance of power?

C1

Well there is a coalition in power - the Recklessly Left Party and the party just left of centre, the Anorexic Purples. They have a slim majority over the Centre Right Party who lost the last election on account of not being able to sit down to lunch with the Furthest Right party and reach that last piece of the pie, even though they had an agreement on matters of supply with the Always Right Party. Then of course there's the Left Leaning party also known as the Bobs, short for Bougies with over-bites.

AMILCARE

Bougies?

C1

Wanting to be French. You know, eating croissants and driving their heated tractors to parliament.

AMILCARE

Oh I see, but what sort of principles do the parties stand for?

C1

They stand for the dignity of citizens, free market commerce, rights of the underclasses, all who sleep in boxes and underpasses.

AMILCARE

But what are their economic policies?

C1

Oh I could give you script and verse - the transverse, the converse, the reverse and the perverse, but you'd best hear it for yourself.

*One of the citizens produces a box. As he stands up on it he puts on a dark grey mask.*

## DARK GREY SPEAKER

The statistics show we are almost in the black. Of our homeless brothers 43% are presently lodged in shop doorways in Central City. Another 7% are terminally ill and so don't have any pressing need for housing. That should look good for our home build statistics. With regards to achieving affordable housing for the rest, the recent flooding has freed up thousands of metres of perfectly habitable carpet. On the environment front our "don't drink that milk it's dirty" strategy has seen unprecedented new investment in dog-farming and tree planting. The one side waters the other. Such a marvellous symbiosis. Supplies of dog meat and salted pine-needles are at an all time high. We have never been such a prosperous sub-city. You can't go wrong with a vote for the Always Right party.

*He gets down from the box and a speaker with a cerise mask steps up.*

## CERISE SPEAKER

The truth is my friends we need to be left leaning if we are to aspire to go around in upper folk circles. So how do we get our economy turning in the right left direction and still be ahead on the environment? As you know a cornerstone of our environmental policy is to establish a hedge fund for the mass plantation of mulberry bushes. Not only will these provide new directions for our cold and frosty mornings but the fruit will assist with the production of chutneys.

*He glares at the 1st speaker before getting down.*

## AMILCARE

Was that part of the election?

## C1

No this is just the preliminary for the minor parties. Similar colours, but it allows alternative voters to waste their votes early so they can get on with more important things.

## AMILCARE

The speaker in the dark grey mask seemed to think they are running the show.

## C1

It's an Eigenrau mask - the colour you see in the absence of light. That's the way it is with the

Always Right party. None of the other parties want a bar of them. They just don't have a flair for entertainment. We all like to wonder who'll be holding the slops when the music stops.

AMILCARE

But they provide support on matters of confidence and supply?

C1

Just supply. That guarantees the slops. They give it to everybody on principle. The Always Right thing to do. Makes them feel like they're the ethical backbone of parliament rather than the Make It Rights.

AMILCARE

So when is the real election?

C1

After all of the votes have been counted for the preliminaries. There's usually only a handful or so but they wait half an hour as a matter of courtesy.

AMILCARE

Can anyone stand?

C1

We're a democracy here. If you can stand on the street you can stand for the street.

*A decrepit old man on a mobility scooter rides out onto the stage and stops in front of C1. He is waving a red steel bucket.*

OLD MAN

There's you with your ableist agenda. Not all of us can stand up straight, but we still have our backbones, and if we can spit we can dissipate that sort of bile. You'll get a thump with my bucket if I hear you talk like that again.

*He turns and waves his bucket at the audience then speeds off stage.*

BROOK

*Tugs at Amilcare's arm.*  
What about the carnival father? You promised.

AMILCARE

You're right, we must get on.

*Amilcare and Brook start to walk off stage.*

C1

*Shouts instructions to the citizens*  
There's a channel from the sewers to the council information office. You can connect the hoses to there from the main podium. Be quick about it or we'll all be in deep shit.

*He laughs at himself. Stage darkens.*

Scene 2 - The Shakedown

*Amilcare and Brook enter.*

BROOK

I don't think this alleyway shows on your map.

AMILCARE

We'll have to imagine it then. Listen, I hear voices.

BROOK

Imaginary voices?

AMILCARE

Don't be precocious. They're getting louder.

*Brook listens, then grows excited.*

BROOK

They sound happy. We could ask for directions.

AMILCARE

Oh if lives could be changed by a competent director.

BROOK

I'm sure someone can point us to the carnival parade.

*Enter the student and a vagabond*

VAGABOND

I'm so witherskin now I could swallow a horse on the

trot and be flossing with its harness.

STUDENT

If a beggar be his eats then that would make you a sulky bastard.

VAGABOND

*Thinking for a moment.*

What I would give for a succulent purse. I have a snappiness of hunger that masticates my brain.

*He spots Amilcare*

I think here be a pig on a plate.

*They approach Amilcare and Brook. The vagabond holds out a derby hat.*

Hey mister have you got spare for a pair?

AMILCARE

Spare for a pair?

STUDENT

You look like a man who's bellyfull of scraps.

BROOK

He means cash father.

*Amilcare searches his coat pockets in an exaggerated manner and shows his coat linings to demonstrate they are empty.*

AMILCARE

No silver lining here, I'm afraid.

VAGABOND

This pig needs a poke.

AMILCARE

*To the student*

What does that mean?

STUDENT

It means, this ham needs a hint...of vinegar and mint.

AMILCARE

If you are addressing me, here's another hint - I've always found a little oil helps a tart assemblage. I'm sure we can be more agreeable if you can just desist from your infantile intimidation.

VAGABOND

Hey mister hold your grammar.

STUDENT

He does grammar a bit.

VAGABOND

But where be the wit?

STUDENT

He be sharp as his spit, all gobbed on the floor. This pig be a boar.

VAGABOND

We poke him some more.

*They push Amilcare to the ground. He slithers away and his wallet falls onto the ground. The vagabond picks it up and turns to the student.*

VAGABOND

We be crackling now. Let's curry with favour a delicatessen.

STUDENT

*To Amilcare*

Hey mister why have you opened your cage for a dead sparrow? (he aims a kick at Amilcare's groin).

*Amilcare spins away with a ridiculous breakdance movement. The student and beggar run off. Amilcare gets to his feet slowly and adjusts his fly. Brook is staring at him.*

AMILCARE

That manoeuvre is a trick I learned in the navy, for confusing the snakes.

BROOK

You've never said you served in the navy.

AMILCARE

Merchant navy. I was a quartermaster. We were famous

for our procurement exercises. Snake meat was in demand so we trained on the floor.

BROOK

Was my mother with you then?

AMILCARE

Your mother was hungry like everybody else. You don't get fed in a war without some marital consequences. Anyway I think if we get a move on we can find those thugs. They wouldn't be so brave in a busy street.

BROOK

We'll be missing the main parade.

AMILCARE

We'll get there soon enough after we've recovered my wallet. If there's one thing I've learnt from the navy it's that the back pocket makes the steam that drives the bow.

*They are interrupted by the noise of trumpets. Some shabbily dressed citizens rush in and start putting chairs out in the centre of the stage - twenty-five in total. We hear solemn speeches coming through a loud speaker.*

LOUD SPEAKER 1

Why, when the power is once in the hands of the people, a majority are permitted, and for a long period continue, to rule is not because they are most likely to be in the right, nor because this seems fairest to the minority, but because they are physically the strongest. Can there not be a government in which the majorities do not virtually decide right and wrong, but conscience?

LOUD SPEAKER 2

Sounds like Thoreau. *Civil Disobedience*. That's a dangerous path. We say it is enough to mention the crises that by their periodical return put on trial, each time more threateningly, the existence of the entire upper folk society. In these crises there breaks out an epidemic whose over-production in all earlier epochs, would have seemed an absurdity.

LOUD SPEAKER 1

Sounds like some spittle from the *Communist Manifesto*. That's far more dangerous, or did you miss all the red flags?

LOUD SPEAKER 2

I give you zero Marx for that joke.

LOUD SPEAKER 1

Your mother is so classless, her harbour could be a Marxist utopia

LOUD SPEAKER 2

Your mother and a mangy horse.

*Citizens gather in a line across the stage. They wear coloured masks of black (7), red (8), orange (2), yellow (4), navy-blue (5). They form a train circling around the chairs. Music plays. When the music stops they push and shove each other to get to the chairs. Music starts and they circle again, then stop. Music plays a third time then stops. A citizen with an orange mask is left sitting on the floor without a chair. An orange colleague helps him up then slaps him around the ears and beats him. He exits limping.*

RED AND ORANGE OFFICIALS

We have 10 seats. That's the majority.

NAVY-BLUE OFFICIAL

Not so fast.

*He turns to the candidate with the black mask. Between us the Centre Right and Far Right have twelve seats. If we make an alliance we can share the house. We would be the senior partner of course and would have to instruct the menials.*

BLACK OFFICIAL

That seems like the crumbs without the schnitzel.

NAVY-BLUE OFFICIAL

There would still be plenty of opportunity for you to advance the intellectual complaints of your disaffected masses. It just means that if we disagree we may have to wrestle a bit.

BLACK OFFICIAL

Well you know how we Brothers disdain the easy life. We want a man to be absorbed in action with all his energies, to have a manly consciousness of the difficulties that exist and to be ready to face them.

NAVY-BLUE OFFICIAL

Quite so, and you can count on us to fight shoulder to shoulder to combat the liberal wave.

BLACK OFFICIAL

And the Neo-liberal wave and the ripples after that.

NAVY-BLUE OFFICIAL

You need to put more fire in your speeches.

BLACK OFFICIAL

You need to put more of your speeches in the fire.

NAVY-BLUE OFFICIAL

*Turns to orange official with a pained look*  
You don't think that our two parties could make an alliance?

ORANGE OFFICIAL

Out of the question. We all know what comes of mixing orange with blue.

RED OFFICIAL

So the navy-blues and blacks have twelve, but the Grammelots have four. It seems the balance of power may lie with them.

GRAMMELOT LEADER

Oh frabjous day!

RED AND ORANGE OFFICIALS

We would be willing to invite them into our coalition, subject to their policies being inclusive and environmentally sustainable.

NAVY-BLUE OFFICIAL

We could offer a modest bribe, subject to their policies not imposing fiscal constraints.

RED OFFICIAL

If your funds are constrained then you'll need to target the female members. With the current gender pay gap males cost almost fifty percent more.

ORANGE OFFICIAL

Bribes won't make a difference. Everybody's doing them. It's like a game of pass the peanut. You hand it to the left it gets eaten on the right. But hush, let's hear from the Grammelots.

*Enter sign language interpreter. He steps up beside Grammelot leader and starts to sign.*

GRAMMELOT LEADER

People say we are all too often invisible but it is time for our yellow colours to be seen in the spotlight. Now we all know how difficult it is to get voters in these times of pandemic to accept new messages, particularly when they're repeated day by day at exactly the same time by the same person in the same suit with the same monotonous gravity.

Therefore we of the Grammelot Party have embarked on a project of seeking new ways to express our political voice. To assist with our strategy we have appointed a spokesperson for crisp and clear messaging.

DEPUTY

(Has a stutter which is marked in places for special emphasis but should otherwise be used liberally)

We are confident that if we explore a full range of linguistic options we will at some point c-connect deeply with voters. C-c-c-create...

*Sign language interpreter repeats all the consonants. Grammelot leader thumps deputy on the back. Deputy continues.*  
congregations rather than constituencies.

RED AND ORANGE OFFICIALS

Your clear messaging spokesperson seems to have a stutter.

GRAMMELOT LEADER

Yes, yes it might seem that way but it's a symptom of his political far-sightedness. This man's vision is so acute he is already reading the next sentence as the last one arrives. There's just no way to avoid tripping over words with that sort of ability.

RED AND ORANGE OFFICIALS

It's extraordinary.

GRAMMELOT LEADER

One of our tenets is that no man, woman, child or marginalised other has time to learn new words or new acronyms for all the same tired old policies.

Of course that's not to say there is not something to say about the value of tired old policies. But we think they can be made to work more efficiently. In the words of a great Grammelot philosopher, why seek to use two words when with one word we know how little we know?

So as the first of our clear communication initiatives we have adopted an abridged manifesto - we call it our *minifesto* - containing only half sentences. The result is a veritable pocket-book of half-policies that a half-wit wouldn't struggle to understand. Our strategy will halve taxes and double entendres. There won't be any more messy legal arguments about the letter of the law. There's now barely half the back of an envelope of the law. And when we talk to the media we'll get the sign language done in half the time. Here I'll read you an extract. This section is called 'Let's keep abridging'.

*He begins to read from minifesto*

One day many years from the beginning when the word was God and his grammar was good

we will look back on this project and recognise that with the clear plan we've talked about and unwavering commitment to cut out the verbs

*To Deputy*

Have you a pen?

DEPUTY

*Rummages in his pants*

I have a huge p-p pen pen...

*Sign language interpreter makes rude gestures.*

GRAMMELOT LEADER

Yes, but have you got something to write with?

*Deputy hands Grammelot leader a huge pen.*

*Grammelot leader continues, scribbling on the page*

without using verbs, especially compound verbs  
being eloquent but not doing,  
that there will never be an end to our aspirations.

BLACK OFFICIAL

Not much manly action is there? What about your  
policy on the environment?

GRAMMELOT LEADER

We have developed a set of calculations to save the  
environment, it's an Al Gore-ithm. So far we have  
quite a lot of air, some maxims about water with  
scatterings of compost. Oh and some half provisions  
for riparian planting. Left bank only.

NAVY-BLUE OFFICIAL

There'd only be half as much funding.

RED OFFICIAL

It may be simpler to hold a new election.

ORANGE OFFICIAL

Yes, let's have another election! The parliament café  
does a special Election Day coffee, the  
fullacrappaccino with cinnaminute scones.

BLACK OFFICIAL

That's enough of mis-sconduct, we need to vote now  
for a leader who can give us strong direction.  
Someone with a thick ear who doesn't complain about  
the noise when opportunity knocks.

RED OFFICIAL

I would be honoured to stand.

ORANGE OFFICIAL

In that case we would not put forward a candidate,  
just to avoid any possible leaching of votes. It's  
key that we preserve our shade of the spectrum. In  
short we would ab-stain.

BLACK OFFICIAL

We could not support red. It's a colour for socks.

NAVY-BLUE OFFICIAL

We couldn't possibly vote for anyone left.

RED OFFICIAL

We're at an impasse then.

*Amilcare rubs his hands as he steps forward*

AMILCARE

With respect if you are unable to agree on a candidate with universal support, then I would be willing to offer myself. I have no support, no complicating allegiances. There'd be no forms to fill.

BLACK OFFICIAL

Name and rank?

AMILCARE

Amilcare Dammi. Quartermaster sergeant.

BLACK OFFICIAL

A fine first name. Goes with Mussolini. And what could you offer our Brother voters?

AMILCARE

I would promise to keep our ship's rudder straight, and smartly thrust myself into unruly ports.

NAVY-BLUE OFFICIAL

That sounds diplomatic enough. Have you got residency? You look a bit swarthy. You are not an overstayer are you?

AMILCARE

I am a naturalised citizen.

RED OFFICIAL

He'd need to meet minimum educational standards.

ORANGE OFFICIAL

Do you have NCEA? Any level will do?

AMILCARE

I have a honours degree in commerce from the University of Naples.

NAVY-BLUE OFFICIAL

With that qualification you could drive an Uber, though you'd need a PhD in engineering to change the tyres. I think we can grant you equivalent status. You don't have any terminal illnesses do you? Any crimes that wouldn't merit a knighthood for services to business?

AMILCARE

None.

RED OFFICIAL

And what is your position on decriminalising cannabis? We're looking to drum up joint support for medicinal marijuana to treat arthritis. Would you back the bill?

AMILCARE

I really couldn't say.

ALL OFFICIALS

What a splendid president!

AMILCARE

Well there is the matter of a salary commensurate with the grave responsibility. Running a state is like running a cemetery - everyone talks rot and they won't do anything to elevate themselves.

RED OFFICIAL

You'll get the standard rate of fifty dollars per promise, honoured or not.

AMILCARE

That's a lot of promises to make ends meet. I'll need a lot of ministers.

NAVY-BLUE OFFICIAL

There are certain other perks of office.

AMILCARE

First choice of the young clerks, perhaps?

NAVY-BLUE OFFICIAL

You put it rather too plainly. We have processes to follow.

AMILCARE

Tell me more about those.

*Navy-blue official takes Amilcare to one side and whispers in his ear. Amilcare's face lights up and he nods his agreement. They start to walk off stage leaving Brook behind.*

### The Lazzi of the nightfall

*The whole troupe descends upon the stage. We see various figures on stage carrying candles. Some have ladders which they put against the stage*

walls and begin to climb. In the dim light they bump into each other, mistake identities, apologise, grope each other, squeal with surprise and then delight. They bump into objects and fall over. One trips over Brook, she squeals in fright, he bows to apologise and extinguishes his candle with his hat. Everything is dark. A rooster crows.

Scene 3 - Brook meets River

*Brook is alone on stage and sobbing. River enters wearing a clown's mask and a dress with a long green train. She circles Brook and then puts her arm around her.*

RIVER

Hush pretty girl. Why be so sad on this happiest of days?

*Brook is startled and slips out of River's embrace, but nonetheless seems fascinated.*

BROOK

My father and I were going to the carnival together.

RIVER

But where is your father now my dear?

BROOK

He's been elected.

RIVER

Elected?

BROOK

Yes, the parties came and made their speeches but they couldn't agree and Father offered to be their president. That was yesterday. I'm sure he'll be back soon.

RIVER

Seems a long time to leave a young girl alone.

BROOK

It's my fault. I did ask him to get into the spirit of things. I've never been to a carnival before. Never even been to a birthday party. Father was very particular about germs. When his suppliers came to

visit he would lock my door.

RIVER

He sounds like a very careful man.

BROOK

*Looks at River excitedly*

I've never been this close to a clown before. Father always said they were nasty things. Never knew if underneath they were Bozo or Pennywise.

RIVER

Well I am whatever clown you like, I wear all faces. My name is River. What do they call you?

BROOK

My name is Brook. I babbled a lot when I was a child. On account of being alone.

RIVER

Do you have a birth-name?

BROOK

No, and my mother died before they could settle it. After that Father kept putting off naming me, waiting for the right business strategy.

RIVER

How exciting that you should be so full of possibilities. Well, Brook, the election is not really part of the carnival. But if you and I were to walk quickly together we might attend the main parade. My job is guide you.

BROOK

I must wait here. Father would be furious if he thought I was going into a crowd unprotected.

RIVER

I would protect you.

BROOK

You couldn't really. In any case it doesn't matter - here he comes now.

*Amilcare enters and walks over to River*

AMILCARE

My dear I'm so sorry. Have I been long? It's all so

very complicated. My bearings seem to have gone since they stole my wallet.

*Takes River's hands*

Now my dear you should know that with the belly dropping out of the pork business I have made a number of new investments. We must sell off the house. The streets are not such a bad place, after all.

BROOK

I'm over here, father. I've been waiting for you to take me to the carnival.

AMILCARE

*Inspects River and drops her hands with a look of disgust. Turns to Brook.*

I know that I promised, but there are more pressing matters to attend to. We don't even really know the way. No, the carnival will have to wait.

*Brook hangs her head in disappointment*

RIVER

Let me guide you both to the carnival.

AMILCARE

And who are you? You have the look of someone who could cause a man in need a great deal of disorientation.

RIVER

That's offensive.

BROOK

*Excitedly*

She is here to help us father.

AMILCARE

For a contribution no doubt.

*He feels for his wallet then remembers it is gone.*

Well, I'm sure we can manage. (to Brook) Where did you put that map? I need to locate the boundaries,

put border controls in place. Keep out the riff-raff.

BROOK

But father, we need to hurry.

AMILCARE

Keep your mask on my dear and try to refrain from talking with strangers. My betterment plan will need some careful infiltration. Tight lips and tight hips make tight ships, as we used to say in the service. Leave no holes for the buggers.

RIVER

That's also offensive.

AMILCARE

Yes I'm a bit off-colour today. So many foreign elements to deal with. Now, come away Brook. Your mask is slipping.

RIVER

As is yours, Mr President.

BROOK

*Takes off her rear-facing mask. Then sadly*  
Goodbye River. It was lovely to meet you.

RIVER

I'll accompany you a while. There are some dubious-looking characters about.

*She glares at Amilcare.*

AMILCARE

There's no fear of thieves. They'll leave me alone now that I am in politics, it's a well known professional courtesy.

*All three walk off to the side of the stage, where they remain as spectators. Lights out.*

#### The Beggar's Lazzo

*Lights on. A citizen walks past a beggar sitting in a shop doorway.*

BEGGAR

Please sir, have you any change for a poor mute?

CITIZEN

Yes, you could change from being an ugly mute to a handsome one. Are you really even mute?

BEGGAR

Dumb as a tongue that was poked at a king.

CITIZEN

How can you be when you have just answered my question?

BEGGAR

Manners, sir. I was always taught that not to reply to a civil question is a sure sign of a poor upbringing. But to be properly courteous I will admit to you that I am more deaf than mute. Profoundly deaf.

CITIZEN

How is it then that you hear me so well?

BEGGAR

On account of my blindness. They say it sharpens all the other senses.

*Citizen feigns a punch at the beggar. The beggar ducks, then realises what he has done.*

BEGGAR

Of course had I not been so lame I could have been a contender myself. Have you any change for a poor lame boxer sir?

*Citizen puts money into the beggar's hat and exits. The beggar counts his coins out of his hat.*

One blind, two deaf, three mute, four lame, five an old rugby concussion, six a dicky heart. What a calamitous day!

*The old man on the mobility scooter rides up to the beggar and holds out his bucket with a menacing look. The beggar reluctantly hands over his cash.*

*Lights out.*

Scene 4 - The Prohibition

*Amilcare is centre stage with Brook and River. The beggar from the previous scene is trying to sleep in the shop doorway. He lunges at a flowerpot, grabs a handful of parsley and tries to stuff his ears. A citizen approaches.*

CITIZEN

We've had a complaint Mr President. About chick-rolling.

AMILCARE

Chick-rolling?

CITIZEN

Yes sir. It's a nasty trick. The retailers are playing Chick music on an endless loop through loudspeakers in their shop doorways. Trying to move the beggars on. Disrupting their sleep. Here listen for yourself.

*He cocks an ear. We hear The Chicks singing "Timothy."*

AMILCARE

These Chicks sound harmless enough. Better than farm dogs singing about slices of dung.

CITIZEN

It's making the beggars very grumpy, especially the ones called Timothy. Last week a tourist got bitten on the hand. People are becoming reluctant to reach out.

AMILCARE

So why don't the beggars just stop begging and move on?

RIVER

To where would they move?

CITIZEN

Some have dependents, Mr President. Some have dreams.

*Enter the student on all fours humming "Timothy"*  
Look, here's an example of one who is striving to better himself. Paying his way through university - a degree in third world banking he says.

AMILCARE

But that's outrageous.

CITIZEN

It's a bit ambitious I grant, but he says it works the same, poverty leading to begging on an international scale.

AMILCARE

It's outrageous that anyone should be receiving cash without proper records being kept. It undermines our counts of the money supply. Wait a minute, this beggar has the look of a familiar dog.

STUDENT

*Student freezes and hangs his head between his legs*

No look at all sir. I am a merely a diligent student, dedicated to my elevation by practising my learnings. Social investment starts on the street.

AMILCARE

Let's have an exam then. First question. What does an investor get for their social investment?

STUDENT

Trickle-down and pass-through. It's a complex subject, third world banking. But to reduce it to moral-dash-economic principles, each person unloads according to the weight of their conscience, a virtually costless redistribution.

AMILCARE

*Points to the beggar now snoring.*  
And what of that beggar there. Still asleep and stinking of alcohol? What are his principles?

STUDENT

He has the side-effects of trickle down.

AMILCARE

I think the dash in your principles is balderdash.

RIVER

*To Amilcare*

Have you never had to medicate your own experience?

AMILCARE

*Looks suspiciously at the student*

Well I have had recent experience of cash withdrawals. I see there are grounds for moral and economic improvement. Administrator, please see to it that there is an immediate prohibition on all begging, and have this beggar soundly flogged.

*The student howls like a wolf.*

RIVER

With respect, this is not a wise policy, Mr President. There is a complex natural ecology here. We must care for those who by virtue of circumstance are rooted underfoot. If a wolf comes among us begging like a dog, is it not likely there is a blight in the forest?

AMILCARE

Who are you to lecture me on the subject of natural relationships? Come to think of it how is it that you have so quickly ingratiated yourself again with my daughter? She is quite a few stops above your station.

BROOK

Father, it is my fault for being too familiar.

RIVER

We share the same journey from station to grave. I know that my voice is weak and you will not hear me but I must repeat that it would be unwise to enforce this ban.

AMILCARE

I have been entrusted to govern to the betterment of all. There will be no begging. If we are to aspire to be upper economic folk we must learn to work hard and open our books to the state. We must be strong men and women and...

*looks at River*

whatever is left over from God's design.

RIVER

No.

*She makes a move to bar his way. He steps to the side. River steps with him. He steps to the other side. She steps with him again, then slips behind him and puts her arms around him, turning him to face the audience. With one hand she slaps his cheek. Then with the other she pulls his nose. He turns a full circle angrily trying to confront her. She turns with him. She tweaks his genitals. He appears to take pleasure from this and waits for another. She pulls his nose. Furious he shakes her off so she falls to the ground. Brook watches with trepidation.*

AMILCARE

That's where you belong. Now do not remonstrate with me further or I'll have you prosecuted for perverting the course of administrative affairs.

*Thinks aloud*

We must have a new department for that. It can be given all the impossible tasks and be blamed for the failures in policy implementation. And I'll need a Minister of Explanations.

*Amilcare walks off stage deep in thought.*

RIVER

(to the audience) And so the river keeps its course - drowns those who cannot hear its force.

*Two policemen rush on to the stage and seize the student. One holds him while the other pulls out his truncheon.*

1ST POLICEMAN

How many strokes?

2ND POLICEMAN

*Walks over to face the audience*  
How many strokes?

*He listens for a moment then points to a man in the audience*  
Soundly he said. About forty should do.

1ST POLICEMAN

*Counts as he swings his truncheon*  
One, two, three...

2ND POLICEMAN

Ten!

1ST POLICEMAN

Oh now I've quite forgotten. No, I remember. One, two, three, four...

2ND POLICEMAN

Ten!

1ST POLICEMAN

*Thinks hard for a moment*  
One, two, three, four... ten. No doesn't sound right. The number rhymes with 'staying alive'. Oh that's it.

*To the tune of 'Staying Alive'.*  
One, two, three, four, five...

2ND POLICEMAN

Ten!

RIVER

*Launches herself at them*  
Stop, you'll kill him with your Level 1 maths. He's only a beggar.

1ST POLICEMAN

Oh dear, we thought he was a protestor. Trespassing on the public grounds of democracy. But you mustn't interfere. That's another offence.

2ND POLICEMAN

Calls for a frisking I think.

1ST POLICEMAN

What about the other one?

BROOK

I'm not with her.

2ND POLICEMAN

Her, is it?

*He inspects River closely*

RIVER

I am truthfully denied by this president's daughter.

1ST POLICEMAN

Very well then. Our duty is clear.

*They release the student, who flees, and escort River off stage. Brook follows at a distance.*

*Lights out.*

Scene 5 - Unchained

*Lights on. River is chained to one side of a tree. The beggar who was previously lying asleep wakes up yawns and stretches, then walks over to the opposite side and urinates on it. One of the policemen strides over to the beggar and taps him on the shoulder with his truncheon, pointing it to the audience. The beggar looks around at the audience horrified, and starts to address them.*

BEGGAR

Oh what a fine gallery tonight. Such charitable people, such enlightened people. Such exquisite sculptures of lacquer and lard. And Cubacade City, surely the loveliest city in the world, a tree on every corner to stand and admire, and when the dew drips out of them in the morning sun, look how the pavements glimmer with gold.

*He points to where he has urinated, bows extravagantly and is chased off the stage by the policeman who then returns to stand guard. Enter Brook who rushes over to River and starts trying to free her.*

BROOK

I'm so sorry they have behaved this way. They are just trying to protect everyone. Is there anything I can get for you?

RIVER

You are all the sustenance I could want sweet child.

BROOK

You are so brave. I would like to be more like you but I have always been taught to keep my distance.

RIVER

You are too flattering my lovely. These waters will just as often recede. But every River must have its tributaries. What a shame about the carnival.

BROOK

Yes, father has stopped it. He wants to control the spread of infection, but he has had to send all the masks to auction to raise funds for all his new ministers. So why don't you wear a proper mask instead of that clown face?

RIVER

My family were born into the carnival. There is a gene that somehow makes us different. A fascination.

BROOK

*Looks longingly at River*  
I think I have felt this fascination.

RIVER

There's a spirit of carnival that rings in our hearts like an Angelus bell.

BROOK

If only my heart were like yours.

RIVER

It can be, there's nothing holding you back.

BROOK

Only my own sickness.

RIVER

But you have the glow of a blessed child.

BROOK

I have a self-consuming disease. There are dark cells inside me, nibbling away. Waiting for the main course my father says.

RIVER

Then the mask for you is a second skin.

BROOK

From the first day I can remember. Looking out of the window. Always hoping the weather would be warm enough to go outside. Always staring out at the other children having fun.

RIVER

Oh how painful that must have been.

BROOK

I don't think you could begin to imagine. You have the freedom to take off your mask but your freedom constrains me, leaves me no choice.

RIVER

I have been there too, looking at life from the other side. As a baby I was abandoned, left in a box on the banks of a river. Then the caravans came and I had carnival parents. They were unable to have any children of their own. They gave me a name and a place. When they died in their act I was sent to an orphanage. I had my own voice by then but nobody heard me cry out.

*She looks pensive*

BROOK

Did something terrible happen to you there?

RIVER,

I, too, began to look out the window at the other children. One day a trustee of the orphanage held me there. Touched me. Told me to keep looking out and never to tell. The State said he was an honourable man and I needed more teaching. I climbed through that window on my sixteenth birthday. The outside seemed a healthier place.

BROOK

I couldn't have done that. However did you survive?

RIVER

I begged and stole, told fortunes and slept in bus shelters. Until they started installing the spikes.

BROOK

Spikes?

RIVER

Yes beds of them. Stainless steel. Hostile architecture they call it - stops people who are homeless from sleeping there.

BROOK

How cruel.

RIVER

It wasn't long before all the bus shelters were occupied by swamis.

BROOK

(Considers this for a moment) Oh, you're joking aren't you?

RIVER

I would like to have been a comedian. But no-one can hear my jokes.

BROOK

I can. I think you are the most fascinating person I have ever met.

RIVER

You have been in confinement.

BROOK

My confinement has taught me that most of our world can be discovered by simply opening our eyes and that our first encounters are often the ones most filled with wonder. Like first loves, I imagine.

RIVER

I sense there's a miracle waking in you.

BROOK

There are miracles everywhere, my mother used to tell me. There must be one we can celebrate today.

RIVER

Yes, let's celebrate being equal. All are the same at carnival time.

*She grabs the policeman's truncheon, and waves it over the chains. They magically fall away from her.*

Have you ever played frisbee with a policeman's hat?

BROOK

You wouldn't dare.

*River uses the truncheon to knock off the policeman's hat and throws it offstage. Brook looks horrified. The policeman starts to run after River. She circles the stage and passes the truncheon to Brook.*

RIVER

Now you have to run.

*Brook runs a circuit then passes the truncheon back to River. River takes off her mask and throws it at the policeman then runs off stage laughing with the policeman in pursuit. Brook watches them flushed with excitement.*

Scene 6 - The Student meets Brook

*Enter Student limping*

STUDENT

I recognise you. You're our president's daughter.

BROOK

Not much better than an orphan really.

STUDENT

You have influence, nonetheless, of the heart-tugging kind.

BROOK

My father is too busy to mind me at present.

STUDENT

And syllables so sweet they would startle a bee from its hive.

BROOK

If only it were true. My father is so preoccupied these days.

STUDENT

Then I appeal to your initiative should a moment come free.

BROOK

What is it you want me to say to him?

STUDENT

This ban on begging is a brake on endeavour. It robs us of the means to better ourselves.

BROOK

You could employ your endeavour in other ways that are less deceitful. You are a student aren't you? There are scholarships if you apply yourself.

STUDENT

They are chains to the visions of upper folk. I have a genius's need to rise on my own.

BROOK

*Impatiently*  
You must play to the rules like everyone else.

STUDENT

The mask amplifies this child so it carries like an adult. I wonder - would you be so loud without yours?

*He advances threateningly. Brook recoils. Enter River*

RIVER

I smell the stench of connivance. Or is it festering ambition?

STUDENT

Ah River, my sweet. It seems almost a lifetime since our last meeting. The commedia in Venice. I recollect you smelled of... of something not quite ripened.

RIVER

You were a money-grubber then, though you had a doctor's mask. I see that the writer has cast you anew. But however long past, the time since our meeting is not yet fully stretched.

STUDENT

It holds tight in my memory.

RIVER

We have many memories, yet every one of yours is diseased. You must be the son of a sickly father.

STUDENT

Well then, if we cannot reminisce together let's try looking forward.

RIVER

Let's as briefly as possible spend the here and now.  
What's your business with this girl?

STUDENT

We are merely discussing the ramifications of the  
present ban on begging.

*Brook starts to speak but is silenced by River.*

RIVER

You must stop it as commanded.

STUDENT

I did not see you as a supporter of the regime.

RIVER

I support tolerance of the laws, when made with due  
process, just as I support tolerance of unavoidable  
transgression. But you are hardly a beggar by  
necessity. In any case, I doubt the state will be  
looking in your direction when there is so much else  
to be fretting about.

STUDENT

Opportunities for an enterprise. This reminder of the  
past has me thinking about my doctor's face.

RIVER

It is all the same to me what face you put on  
tomorrow. But so long as the sun shines today I will  
not let you sully this girl with your unclean hands.

STUDENT

You've come far for a faint-heart, but we'll see what  
we see when all of our voices are the same shrill  
pitch behind our masks.

*Exit Student.*

BROOK

You were magnificent, but what did he mean?

RIVER

He sees the future too well. Come, let's get you home  
to safety.

*They both exit. Lights out*

Scene 7 - The Insurrection

*Lights on. A group of citizens is centre stage. The student stands observing them. One citizen is clearly the leader and another his deputy. The other citizens bow to the leader. The deputy directs them to bow lower. They do. The deputy again directs them to bow lower. This is repeated several times until they all fall over.*

GRAMMELOT LEADER

We have fallen down in the polls.

DEPUTY

You should go dancing with the stars.

GRAMMELOT LEADER

This is serious. our support is down by half. It's obvious that hungry voters don't like clear messages even half ones.

DEPUTY

Life is miserable enough without seeing the future.

GRAMMELOT LEADER

That's it. We need a new language. We need to make our policies as comforting as a roast dinner. We need warm and friendly words like "kindness".

DEPUTY

And "frummage".

GRAMMELOT LEADER

What's that?

DEPUTY

To pickpocket a friend.

GRAMMELOT LEADER

That may come in useful. In fact our minifesto could be like a dictionary, but with no definitions. Just cross-references to friendlier words. People may construe what they want to construe. We'll need a memorable slogan. Something post-modern. The French knew how to confuse language with words. How about "With Grammelot you make the différence."

*(the last word is delivered with a heavy French accent)."*

DEPUTY

It's a bit old hat. Endless def-f-f-f-ferral of meaning and all that.

GRAMMELOT LEADER

Yes but if meaning can be endlessly deferred then there is no truth, no policy that is any more right than another, no electoral disappointment.

DEPUTY

Then I'll start to rework our minifesto by putting all the words into a meaningless order.

GRAMMELOT LEADER

Start with Grammelot and defer backwards. We'll also need add some more words ending in "lot" so it sounds like we are giving voters much more of everything. Like an abundance of caution but words with a happy feeling, like giglot. Isn't that someone who finds everything funny?

DEPUTY

No, gig-giglot means the same as har-lot.

GRAMMELOT LEADER

Quite so. Ha ha. Happy words that give so much pleasure. Now how about diglot?

DEPUTY

Bilingual.

GRAMMELOT LEADER

Digging in two languages at once. Well, that's got to be better for your hole.

DEPUTY

Then there's zealot, calotte, melilot, ocelot, shallot and cachalot - that's a sperm whale.

GRAMMELOT LEADER

Oh wonderful, that last word should fill it. Now we'll need a strategy to take down this government. Stir up a bit of discontent. Force a vote of no confidence. A feisty bit of scrabble.

STUDENT

If you'll excuse my interjection, your word deconstructions are very noble in spirit, but nothing moves a person like fear, fear of starvation, of dying, fear of missing out.

GRAMMELOT LEADER

Yes, yes, our manifesto needs to be warm but with a hint of menace. Like a bowl of old curry. That'll get people running.

STUDENT

I am simply suggesting a more direct route. People fear for their livelihoods. You could start by taking a look at this ban on begging. It's constitutionally questionable, you might say *ultra virus*. After all, even in these times isn't begging a right?

DEPUTY

Indeed it is. Just like housing. In fact it was our most recent government that stated in front of the United Nations that housing is a human right. Not that it is like a human right but that it is definitely a right of the most fundamental kind, a binding legal obligation of the state.

STUDENT

And so it must be complied with.

DEPUTY

If followed to the letter it could bring about the widespread opening up of privately owned entrances for communal enjoyment.

GRAMMELOT LEADER

This sounds like a promising subplot. Full of intrigue. I will have our shadowy Minister of Justice look into at once.

*An unmasked citizen runs onto the stage and starts breathlessly reporting*

CITIZEN

A horde of unmasked scavengers is marching down March Street.

LEADER

You stand over there. Everyone else, put on your masks?

CITIZENS (TOGETHER)

What colour are we wearing today?

DEPUTY

With respect, Leader, we don't have a choice.

GRAMMELOT LEADER

What are you talking about?

DEPUTY

There's been a run on the colours. We only have stocks of surgical white.

GRAMMELOT LEADER

Then we will have to stand out on the strength of our whiteness. How white is this white?

DEPUTY

As the ghosts of our consciences.

GRAMMELOT LEADER

Very well, whiteys we are. Now then, where was I? Oh yes, the horde. I suspect that they have brought in the disease. They question our morality but as you all know that is entirely subordinated to the interests of our underclass struggle.

DEPUTY

Who decides those interests?

GRAMMELOT LEADER

Well I do of course but never mind that. They say we too easily take offence but taking offence is a duty, a pleasure.

DEPUTY

You could say that, as a rule, we sit on offence.

GRAMMELOT LEADER

Please be quiet. These people merely wish to have a perch on which to preen themselves, telling themselves they are somehow naturally higher, like the upper folk who tread us underfoot. They play the outcast as if there were some exciting adventure in the murderous operations of natural selection.

DEPUTY

They say that behind our masks we are like rhizomes of a creeping fungus that smothers and poisons the roots of free will and free speech.

CITIZEN

They surrounded us at Kitchen Hall earlier today. Ugly as ignorance in their bare skin and beaks. Eyes that would stiffen the spine of a cat. All chanting their birdsong, bold as kereru come to feast on cherries. And counting while they chant. Why do they

have to count?

DEPUTY

It's so they don't forget the words. It's a good thing there aren't any words that are supernumerary.

*There is a pause while the citizen stops to think about this.*

CITIZEN

We had to fight them off with the soup du jour.

DEPUTY

What was it today?

CITIZEN

Pea and dog. A long-haired variety I think. I've got fur stuck in my teeth.

DEPUTY

Could the virus have come from the dogs?

GRAMMELOT LEADER

Keep quiet. Talk like that could threaten farmers' livelihoods.

CITIZEN

If you ask me they were infected at birth - with inferior genes. They need to be eaten.

GRAMMELOT LEADER

Did you say eaten?

CITIZEN

With a plum sauce. Goes best with gamey meat. The more I think about it the hungrier I get. In fact I have so great a hunger today I could gnaw my own arse off. Yum gnum. Belch.

GRAMMELOT LEADER

You may choose to express yourself like a Roman in your own house but such a public declaration of appetite is at odds with our new party remit. In fact I suspect you may already have been infected. Look, you are sweating.

*We hear a loud fart. The party members all stand back. The deputy frantically starts to fan the air*

CITIZEN

I smell a bubbling gravy of buttock grease.

*He twists himself as if to nibble on his own bottom.*

DEPUTY

Keep your distance everybody. Oh dear lord, he's consuming himself. He's degrading into offal.

*We see the citizen collapse and disappear under his clothing. We hear noises - teeth grinding, a wheeze, another belch, a gurgle.*

GRAMMELOT LEADER

What are those leaking sounds? They might be useful for the minifesto. Take them down. The substratum is always the where renewal begins. That last one sounded like a belly-laugh.

*The lights go down.*

Scene 8 - We meet the Plague Doctor

*In the middle of the stage the old man sits on his mobility scooter with his bucket in one hand and a cardboard sign in the other saying "Alternative medicine - help stop the pricks." Amilcare enters accompanied by Brook and River. A citizen follows.*

CITIZEN

Mr President, there is terrible news. The Grammelot party has published a new manifesto. It's got everyone stuttering so they can't be understood. They are having to resort to gestures. There are waves of infection. Citizens are eating each other's parts in the streets. Our tartan is unravelling.

AMILCARE

How can we keep them all in check, the revolting bodies?

OLD MAN

(Calls out) Cannabinoids for all your troubles!

AMILCARE

You can keep quiet, and I'll have your bilge bucket.

*He takes a coin out of his pocket and holds it out. When the old man reaches out to take it he pushes him off the scooter, sinks heavily down onto its seat and puts the old man's bucket over his head. The old man gives him the fingers.*

*Enter student, putting on the mask of the Plague Doctor.*

PLAGUE DOCTOR

Mr President allow me to introduce myself.

AMILCARE

You are allowed, but mind your lobbying. I won't hear anything that's beyond the pale.

PLAGUE DOCTOR

I am called the Doctor. Recently arrived from a foreign pandemic. All cured now. You see I have a specialist practice in infectious diseases, anything at all that pustulates and festers. The elimination of pestilence is my lifetime's work and, forgive me for a modicum of arse-blowing, but I have a gift for the eradication of maladies bearing Greek letters. *Mors mihi lucrum*. It pays to have had a classical education in my profession.

AMILCARE

*Takes off the bucket to inspect the Plague Doctor*

I can't say I've heard of you.

PLAGUE DOCTOR

I'm sure some of my old work will be familiar, like the Coromandel Caroma-virus. Caused a bit of a stink. Freedom campers of course. I shifted it to Rotorua. Now it's hardly noticed.

AMILCARE

Have you any more recent experience?

PLAGUE DOCTOR

Well, I have just put in a tender for the cure of a new strain of asinine flu. Transmitted from donkeys.

AMILCARE

I've not heard of that one. Can it be vaccinated against?

PLAGUE DOCTOR

It is not always possible. In its mule stage, the patient is often too stubborn to give consent.

AMILCARE

I fear that ours is an even more intractable disease.

PLAGUE DOCTOR

Oh is this your daughter? Even with her mask, she seems a singular beauty.

RIVER

(Aside) The wolf is outside the henhouse.

AMILCARE

She is like her mother. The best is concealed. But sadly she cannot remove her mask. A rare form of lupus acidifies her blood and rots her detail.

PLAGUE DOCTOR

Sounds like some sort of acne. Regrettably, an affliction I have not studied.

AMILCARE

I begin to wonder whether I myself am rotting from the inside out. I can hardly bear to inhale my own breath within this mask.

PLAGUE DOCTOR

Let me conduct an examination.

*He pulls off Amilcare's mask and peers into his mouth.*

Oh yes you have some festering there. Crooked wisdom teeth in need of extraction.

AMILCARE

And what would the cost of that be?

PLAGUE DOCTOR

No cost to a man whose wisdom is nonetheless straight.

AMILCARE

What do you mean?

PLAGUE DOCTOR

You have a pestilence. I have a gift, and a desire to study much more of your daughter's situation. I will promise to cure all that I can.

AMILCARE

I have spent all my life protecting my daughter. She is most precious to me.

*He thinks hard for a moment*  
But it is a poor investment if she is further devalued by disease. You may conduct your examination of her, provided she wills it.

PLAGUE DOCTOR

I warrant she will. I am most persuasive.

AMILCARE

Then we have a contract. As to your methods, I am of course anxious to avoid unnecessary pain and suffering. But enough of the detail. My own pain insists that we conclude this present examination.

PLAGUE DOCTOR

I will need an anchor and a breaker bar.

*He takes the tools out of his bag.*

AMILCARE

Are they really necessary?

PLAGUE DOCTOR

You have such big teeth. Oh and I'll need a bale of plugging for the holes.

*He takes a large bundle of cloth from his bag. Amilcare faints and falls off the scooter. The Plague Doctor starts to operate using his tools to extract several teeth. As he works he addresses the audience.*

This first one here is a payment for begging, and there's another just for spite. The third I shall take as a payment for meat. Such a meal I will make of this president's bite.

*He stuffs Amilcare's mouth with cloth and lays him over the old man's bucket.*

Now we'll leave you there to drip-dry while I investigate how to properly clean out this city.

*To the old man*

Come on you. Let's get you to an asylum.

*The old man climbs on the scooter and they ride off stage. The stage goes dark.*

Scene 9 - The Street Cleaner

*Lights on. Amilcare's body is still lying over the bucket on the stage, with the cloth still stuffed in the mouth. Enter the street-cleaner with his broom.*

STREET-CLEANER

What the Doctor wants the Doctor shall have. Clean up the streets in a clinical fashion.

*He inspects Amilcare's body and feels for a pulse.*

An enema for you sir. Oh yes it should be quite the pick-you-up. If you'll just be brave and assume the position.

*He arranges Amilcare's body so it is on hands and knees over the bucket with its bottom facing up. He then appears to insert his broom handle into the body's rectum.*

*River enters.*

RIVER

These are despicable actions.

STREET-CLEANER

Ah look at what has crawled up from the drains. A woman of many parts. But your anatomy confuses. Where wouldst thou like thy enema then?

RIVER

I have outlived many cleansing rites and I know too well that when filth cleans filth only filth remains.

STREET-CLEANER

Then I think perhaps we might try some surgery.

*He pulls a bayonet out of his pocket and attaches it to the end of his broom. At the same time Amilcare's wallet drops to the floor from the Street-Cleaner's pocket. Amilcare stirs.*

AMILCARE

*Mumbling through the stuffing in his mouth.*  
Are my testicals black?

CLEANER

*Groping around in Amilcare's groin area.*  
They seem fine to me. No bruising to speak of but I could cut them off.

AMILCARE

*Removing the stuffing to speak clearly.*  
Are my test results back? Wait, you're not the doctor! Oh what has become of me, hung on a bucket with wounds at both ends, my good intentions well and truly punctured?

*He spots the wallet on the ground.*  
What's that? My wallet. What kind of man would defile another in this way? Even in war, though the outcome was vile, we could play our game straight.

This situation warrants a captain's mettle.

*He gets up and puts the bucket on his head.*

STREET-CLEANER

It matters little to me whose blood runs in the drains. So long as they are clear by the end of the day.

AMILCARE

*(to Street Cleaner, grabbing hold of his broom)*  
Let's call it claret in the spirit of the game. Now we'll scrummage, you and me.

CLEANER

What are the odds - another beggar with a rugby concussion!

*They begin to circle each other locked together in a scrummaging motion.*

RIVER

No, you must not put yourself in danger. He cannot hurt me. The wounds of a River are soon healed over.

AMILCARE

You have a strange way of saying things. But as foreign as you are, you have managed to beguile my daughter with your carnival promises. Well, I may have failed her as a father but I will still protect the things that I hold dear.

RIVER

This code of yours is too dangerously rigid. It will come away broken. Please I beg you, disengage.

AMILCARE

It's uncanny, but your begging is so easily ignored.

*He lunges forward. The broom is wedged between them. It falls to the floor. They both fall after it and continue grappling. Then both are still.*

STREET-CLEANER

What a magnificent ruck. We have cleaned each other out.

AMILCARE

*Holding up his wallet and showing it to the audience.*

I feel I won though the scores are even. Did you hear the whistle?

*They both cup an ear as they lie on the floor. A strange, plaintive whistling fills the air.*

RIVER

(To audience) For those unable to attend the funeral due to the current limit on gatherings, we bring you this broadcast expression of grief.

AMILCARE

It's an eerie after-match. You'd think we were dead.

*He sits up and pokes the streetcleaner. Finding no movement he shrugs his shoulders and collapses again with his back on the floor. As he lies motionless River bends down to close his eyes, then bows her head for a moment before*

walking slowly off the stage. Lights out.

Scene 10 - The decision

*River and Brook are sitting together. River is comforting Brook.*

BROOK

I can't believe he is gone. Was he in pain at the end?

RIVER

Just a bit in his middle, but he bore it well.

BROOK

He was just trying to make these streets a healthier place.

RIVER

He sold many thousands of masks, it's true.

BROOK

His decisions have nursed me all my life. What chance do I have of a carnival now?

RIVER

You can surely make these decisions yourself.

BROOK

He loved me though my weakness caused him pain. And his weakness was to want me to be better, not myself. Could I be myself and yet be better?

RIVER

I will help you as far as my story allows.

BROOK

You will be my other?

RIVER

*Embraces her*

Yes, I will be your other.

(Aside) Lord, will no-one hear my voice  
battered between the banks of choice

never just to be  
to run with the sea.

*Enter the Plague Doctor*

PLAGUE DOCTOR

I have just heard of your terrible news. I've come to offer you my support and counsel as your family doctor. Here, take this bag full of tranquilisers. They will help you to manage your grief.

*He hands her the same bag that previously held his dental instruments.*

BROOK

You are generous with your solace.

PLAGUE DOCTOR

I have come across a stock of tablets that are past their use-by dates. They'll be a little less dangerous should you miscalculate.

*River opens the bag and rifles through it.*

BROOK

I don't think miscalculation is likely. I think I will choose to keep my grief awake.

PLAGUE DOCTOR

Well the night might last a while yet. We'll have a goodbye-election of course. A better outcome than a trial I suppose.

BROOK

What do you mean trial?

RIVER

State your meaning plain.

PLAGUE DOCTOR

Oh dear I shouldn't have mentioned it. Your father was to have been charged with profiteering. His mask manufacturing businesses. He made a show of trying to protect the people, but when the state purchasing agent mixed up its orders he auctioned off the stockpile and cornered the market. His inventories have now been seized by customs. Nonetheless his enterprise might be an example to you.

BROOK

How could that be?

PLAGUE DOCTOR

We were not much different, your father and I. Just a difference of strategy. I believe there are better margins to be had on the cleaning side. And there are many who would forgive a daughter for following the general direction of her father's hand.

BROOK

What are you suggesting?

PLAGUE DOCTOR

I am merely suggesting that there is a certain *mise en scène* that might make some meaning of his demise.

RIVER

Such *mise* and *demise* hint of misery.

BROOK

There's something about your eyes that is troubling. Perhaps it's the mask that makes them so bold.

PLAGUE DOCTOR

All the better to observe things with. Now I have a way for you to continue your dear late father's work. It is clear there are foreign elements to blame for fouling up this city. If you could lend your support to my standing in the goodbye-election we will very soon clean up this mess. Ramp up the disinformation, get rid of the masks and trust in a diet of my branded disinfectant.

BROOK

I cannot agree to your proposal.

DOCTOR

That part is already settled. Your father betrothed you to me as reward for my work.

RIVER

No, that is not how this scenario ends.

BROOK

My father would never have done that.

PLAGUE DOCTOR

He was a most purposeful man, but how does one choose right when sickness makes that pathway longer?

RIVER

He was operated upon.

BROOK

What she says must be true. You and I are no match,  
and I will not endorse your cleaning regime.

PLAGUE DOCTOR

You would have us in masks for the rest of our days  
then? Just like you?

BROOK

I am fated to take up my father's cause. We must  
shield ourselves from the reeking dribble of deathly  
contagion. One day when we grow strong enough we will  
cast off our masks and be truly freed. That day will  
be a carnival day.

RIVER

We will dance with our shadows outside this cave.

PLAGUE DOCTOR

You sound like Platonists, of the naïve kind. Well,  
regardless I will mandate my plan. As Plato's  
stranger said, "How does a physician get a patient to  
take their medicine"? Either persuasion leads us back  
to health or the prescription is useless.

BROOK

Your prescription is to bleed the people till their  
pockets and their souls are dead. But the disease  
will persist. We must be protected...together as one  
city, a city that has its centre in each of us and  
its circumference in us all.

PLAGUE DOCTOR

So much philosophy in one so young. Yet it is not  
quite the same as your father's.

BROOK

I'll stand by myself and look outside in.

PLAGUE DOCTOR

Then I'll huff at your windows and blow down your  
house. Be warned not to cross me.

RIVER

I hear a bell ring. It's time for a prayer.

*We hear a bell ring*

PLAGUE DOCTOR

There'll be a reckoning. One way or another you'll pay my wages.

*Plague Doctor exits.*

RIVER

I fear that doctor. His visits seem timed to check the sun.

BROOK

I'm sure he would suck the marrow from our bones. But you speak as if he has unsettled you.

RIVER

I'm reminded of nights when his shiftings have unmade many a bed. To ignore his warning would put us both in the gravest danger.

BROOK

He would rake his muck over my father's name. I must resist him.

RIVER

Then you must be vague with your promises lest you cannot keep them.

BROOK

Is that how you think I should I should live my life?

RIVER

Perhaps, I don't know. My life has been lived in cross-wise currents whereas you have the surge of a new-vented stream. You should follow your flow.

BROOK

But I have no support, no stock of metaphors, no scripted solutions.

RIVER

You have the power to rework the questions. And as for support - tonight I will sing in the ears of the sleeping. My notes will run clear in their waking recollections.

*Lights out.*

Scene 11 - The Election

*The citizens are all assembled on stage with the Grammelot party deputy and leader, Brook, River and the Plague Doctor. Everyone is wearing white masks.*

DEPUTY

We are assembled in front of this audience today to hear your election pledges. But how are we to tell one party's promissory notes from another's?

CITIZEN 1

Our voices will sound with a righteous trill.

CITIZEN 2

And ours will be tinged with the soul of the blues.

GRAMMELOT LEADER

Our newfound voice has suspended chords  
in Major G, with a warmer tone,  
giving like the strings of an aeolian harp  
that play flat and sharp as the wind is blown.

DEPUTY

*Looks suspiciously at the Grammelot leader*  
Yes, I sense we are in for a dire poetic end. But before you all get your wind, I must officially open the house.

*Deputy stands back and two citizens carry a door onto the stage. The deputy gestures to a third to come forward.*

DEPUTY

You may strike the door.

CITIZEN

What has it done to deserve to be hit?

DEPUTY

You must do as you are asked. It must be hit.

CITIZEN

And then I will be seen as a workplace bully, in front of all of these witnesses. Actors Equity could

have me blacklisted.

DEPUTY

Then hit it softly.

*After considering, Citizen taps lightly on the door*

Now so everyone inside is woke, hit it a little bit harder.

*Citizen hits the door harder.*

Now hit it low.

*Citizen stoops and knocks on the door.*

Now hit it high.

*Citizen reaches up and knocks on the door.*

Higher.

*Citizen tries to climb up the door.*

Now call out loud, "Is there anybody in there"?

CITIZEN

Is there anybody in there?

*They wait a moment, listening. The door opens and a male and female citizen in a state of undress (from the group that had been hidden behind the door) creep through it cautiously, as if wary of their tryst being discovered, then hurry away off stage.*

DEPUTY

I declare the house open. Let the speeches commence. But I warn you now - if they come not as natural as a leaf to a tree I will pinch their growth.

PLAGUE DOCTOR

Then as the acting Director of Public Health I will begin.

*He coughs with emphasis*

We are rotten with canker that will not heal

within our lifetimes.

Export it we must, for it will reprise  
in another form, another disguise.  
In the carts of our dead let's carry the fruits  
of the viral flower to the upper folk  
until they retch and make masking a cloth  
of questionable value. Then our soaps will be ingots  
of wholesome metal,  
and they will not question who sells to them,  
their brother, their fellow tainted saint.  
Their purses will readily leap to us  
and the street-muck will bubble with silver and gold,  
like the sun split through oil.

CITIZENS (TOGETHER)  
Yes we like that speech.

BROOK  
No! Let me speak.

*She starts to remove her mask. River grabs her hand.*

RIVER  
No, Brook, this brooks ill. It is not safe.  
*Brook inhales deeply.*

BROOK  
Oh look I am crying. Hold me, please.  
*She embraces River, and kisses her.*  
Let me sit down for a minute, I feel a rush of  
weakness, as if my body were swelling.

PLAGUE DOCTOR  
A part of my body swells, too.

CITIZENS (TOGETHER)  
She reminds us of a beautiful girl we knew long ago.

How strange that we did not remember her before.

DEPUTY

Such a face could launch a thousand waka.

*Brook adjusts her mask then stands up again  
aided by River*

BROOK

This plague has stacked up all of our fears  
into towers of indifference,  
but when we allow it to block up our hearts,  
we die inside.

In the darkest days of the upper folk rule  
the carnival freed us from our rank and file,  
to live for a day like a flowering pasture,  
riotous and sweet. Patience is all.

Our masks must continue to be our wall.

When the time is right we will take in the air  
to invigorate ourselves  
and trust in renewal to melt off the callus,  
rubbed in with the chafe of these Winter casings.  
Then we will live in carnival grace,  
where everyone is kind and can freely transact  
without the fear of moral inspection.

CITIZENS (TOGETHER)

Kind and moral! Such beautiful words!

GRAMMELOT LEADER

*Splutters with indignation*  
Hubbub these minstrels! Parlement of fous! Hijacks  
of lyric, thieves, cross-reference prostiliferous  
hacks. Poetry? Nein, yeah na. Je suis tout ce que

vous dites. Growl doggerel la luna. Vive le  
différance, le leakage!

*The stagelights dim and he drops to all fours,  
walks around the other actors spraying on them  
as he goes. Then starts barking up at a single  
light in the ceiling.*

Scene 12 - The Political Posting

*An office at the university in which the Doctor  
struts about. He addresses the audience.*

PLAGUE DOCTOR

There was a time we fretted that Athens was becoming  
a theatrocracy, ruled by the flatulent arses on  
theatre seats. Well, once again the votes have fallen  
for an actor. In the end she had more balls than her  
father. But every wolf will have its day. For every  
Greek letter there is a poison and a chance to  
translate opportunity for one who knows how to speak  
the language.

*He looks off into the distance.*  
A shame, she would have been delectable.

*There is a knock at the door. Enter the  
university administrator*

ADMINISTRATOR

Congratulations again on your appointment as Vice  
Chancellor, sir. Perhaps not quite the political post  
you craved, but you're certainly an inspiration to  
our school of banking.

PLAGUE DOCTOR

How so, given I lost the vote?

ADMINISTRATOR

Well, the liquidity crisis you started with that  
pandemic caused such a run on bedsheets that noone  
noticed the banknotes in the wash. The banks have  
laundered millions of dollars. You've managed to  
flush out all of our systems.

*He picks up an imaginary microphone.*  
Welcome to our new vice-chancellor, who out of the

compost of underworld poverty has risen and served his community with uncommon distinction, recently recognized with an honorary business doctorate upon the recommendation of the president.

*Puts the microphone down*

This is a plum posting - you control the educational pathway to the upper world.

PLAGUE DOCTOR

Hmmm. Well if I am to make it work to my advantage I will have to make more than a few cuts. The trouble is we are too inclusive, too liberal. We encourage the down-trodden. We've made 'University' a contraction of 'universal adversity'. No, we will have to change the name.

ADMINISTRATOR

Hurrah, we will never again be mistaken for all the other universities in the world with 'university' in their name.

PLAGUE DOCTOR

And we will have to adjust the curriculum. I'm afraid my old alma mater Third World Banking has had its day on this campus. We should establish a chair in commercial theology, these new wave churches are far cleverer than the banks at siphoning off other people's money. Lots to be learned there. Of course gender and sexuality studies can go, along with foreign languages and anything creative. And as for theatre..

*Comes closer and peruses the audience*

Oh well, I suppose most of you have paid. But no more street-theatre. Just fosters a sense of civic duty which makes it harder to clarify the economics of things.

*There is another knock at the door. The administrator attends to it.*

PLAGUE DOCTOR

Oh what now?

ADMINISTRATOR

It's another petition to grant academic staff the right to teach in their chosen disciplines.

PLAGUE DOCTOR

They can't seem to accept that higher education is a leap of faith. If we were to let them fully indulge in such faith then we would have to think about tithing.

*We hear a loud gurgling sound.*

What was that? I could have sworn I heard the sound of water going down a plughole.

ADMINISTRATOR

Must have been the maintenance staff about the drains again. We seem to have had no end of trouble since we sold off all the copper piping.

*The gurgling grows louder. Curious, the administrator opens a window and is hit by Amilcare's bucket, which is filled with water. He stands there dripping.*

The staff are obviously trying to scuttle our plans.

PLAGUE DOCTOR

It's the sound of a general tide of discontent. I might yet sail its crest.

ADMINISTRATOR

Will you need me to see to the rigging?

PLAGUE DOCTOR

Yes but this time we'll try a different approach. Tell me, what do you know about crowd-funding?

ADMINISTRATOR

That's the School of Finance. I'll schedule a seminar.

*Exit administrator followed by the doctor.*

### Scene 13 - A cup of tea

*The university office is now the president's office. The deputy leader of the Grammelot party is in discussion with Brook. River looks on. They are still in white masks.*

DEPUTY

I'm afraid that with our Grammelot leader on leave with verbal diarrhea, I will have to act in his place.

BROOK

A shame. Even though he leaked he was a consummate politician.

DEPUTY

Still, we have a strong coalition without him - you have won many hearts. Your icon is in every boutique in Queenstown. But with the people's mouths still covered their stomachs are grumbling. And the daily Labrador deliveries are just ribs and tripe now. The farmers are stockpiling all the best cuts.

BROOK

But the daily deaths are down. We must be over the wave.

DEPUTY

The flu season is finished, that's all. But there are new tides rising. The university has commenced its business with international students. There's people with all sorts of ef-ef-ef-foreign letters coming in. New waves of hunger.

BROOK

But we have meat-raffles for entry.

DEPUTY

They're coming in on the ships. No tedious inspections of ticket stubs. No tiresome in-f-f-f

*He flaps his arms*  
safety videos.

BROOK

What is to be done? How can we give relief without opening the floodgates?

DEPUTY

You could progressively change the caps on the numbers allowed to gather. Manipulate the infection data. Remove the deaths and anyone over 65 who depends on National Super. They aren't going to live much longer anyway.

BROOK

No, we need something bigger, more statistically significant.

DEPUTY

Then let them try on some different masks, and throw them some peas. Keep them safe but appeased.

BROOK

Our supplies of surgical masks are low.

RIVER

What about carnival masks? Let's give them a carnival.

BROOK

Oh yes, how exciting! But how would it work?

DEPUTY

Well with the rocketing price of carbon dioxide it won't be all beer and skittles. You could announce that it's time for a cup of tea, given the pace of our indirection has given some of us bed-sores. So we'll turn the other cheek for a day. Our officials can give out crayons and cardboard. We can tap into the provincial outbreak fund. Give out a grand prize for the best mask.

BROOK

We could have high tea on the parliament lawn.

RIVER

With clowns and portaloos.

BROOK

And hot dogs and streamers.

RIVER

And rainbow lights. You could be the carnival queen.

*Brook turns to River*

BROOK

Oh yes, I have dreamed of this for so long. You know me so well. When you gaze at me I could swear your eyes are circling my face as if gathering up all the tears of the past. Then they fall back on my cheek. How warm they are.

RIVER

You must not get too amorous. I am a stock character

destined for many a play.

BROOK

What are you saying?

RIVER

I have been typecast for so long. I thought until now I could be my own personality, my own "it" singular, my own "they/their/". But this fascination for pure things is tethered by an unbreakable chain. I am betrothed to Isabella, and one or two others. I must do as I'm told when the playwright commands.

BROOK

So you are really a player, and when the carnival is over we must say goodbye?

DEPUTY

Now, now, none of us can answer that, we must get on.

RIVER

For some of us the sun is already set at the start of the day.

*She and Brook gaze at each other. They embrace and walk off stage with the Deputy trailing behind.*

#### Scene 14 - Carnival Day

*Enter Brook, the Deputy and River. Brook has on a brightly coloured carnival mask while River is dressed in full motley with Harlequin mask. Stage right there is a brick wall. We hear the sounds of rioting. Objects being thrown. A megaphone calling for the rioters to fall back. A crash and breaking glass. Brook is dripping wet.*

BROOK

Whoever would think to turn on the sprinklers? Our masks are ruined. Our celebration has been flushed with spite.

RIVER

It is early yet. We can make new masks.

DEPUTY

There are people marching around in tin foil hats. They nailed a cease and desist notice to the cathedral door. Something about acoustic weaponry

being installed in the spire.

BROOK

They must be talking about the church bell. We'll have to suspend our special service.

RIVER

No, the bell must toll.

DEPUTY

There was an incident I'm afraid. A mobility scooter rammed into a police cordon. Assault with a battery. They threw the offender into the crowd and he's been stirring them up with Mexican waves. There's a nasty-smelling chilli being thrown about. We've had to arrest him.

*He gestures to a policeman who pushes forward the Doctor carrying his bag.*

BROOK

I might have known.

PLAGUE DOCTOR

Just making ends meet. Where there's a political party there's a profit. I've a good racket going here - coin-operated portaloos and an opportune outbreak of dysentery.

*He produces a laboratory test tube from his bag and looks at it lovingly.*

BROOK

You do disgust me.

PLAGUE DOCTOR

I could sell you a fur loup for that disgust. It would help take off the chill.

BROOK

There's no loup that could warm the feel of you.

PLAGUE DOCTOR

Well you're new to this game. A slipper in need of a husband's foot. Oh, if you could serve me a portion of your sweet desserts how I would love you, how I would caress you, how I would flatter you, how I would ...beat you, girl!

BROOK

You would do what?

RIVER

You dare talk about beating?

PLAGUE DOCTOR

I meant just a little slapstick here and there. To invigorate your blood.

BROOK

We are done with you and your ministrations. We have requisitioned some new vaccines. Soon everybody will be able to go mask-free without infection.

PLAGUE DOCTOR

Yes, I was expecting that. I have a chain of pop-up clinics preparing to issue fake exemptions.

BROOK

But that's completely unethical.

PLAGUE DOCTOR

No, not at all. You see, none of our university doctors are registered medical practitioners.

BROOK

The people will see through you.

PLAGUE DOCTOR

Chiunque dica che non sono un dottore, gli prescrivo della merda in faccia.

BROOK

What does that mean?

PLAGUE DOCTOR

Whoever says I am not a doctor, I prescribe shit in his face. In any case I think you'll find that when righteous indignation marches it does not stop to check labels. And don't think that people will believe your vaccinations are harmless. I have a whole department dedicated to statistical debunking.

BROOK

This is not medicine. It is murder. Our nation is jointed, and its tolerance hangs by a ragged suture. Arrest all the doctors!

DEPUTY

Should we assume for this purpose that if it looks like a doc then it's a quack?

*A brick is thrown across the stage.*

BROOK

What is that? A brick?

DEPUTY

It came from the audience. The first of the brickbats. We have been too slow in coming to a resolution.

RIVER

Don't worry. We can improvise. We need a lazzo. The lazzo of getting through a brick wall.

*Another brick flies in and hits River in the head. She collapses. The policeman rushes in, looks at River, then looks reproachfully at the audience.*

POLICEMAN

This is going to require a lot of counting.

*Brook screams. The deputy rushes over to River and checks her pulse. He gets up slowly and turns to face Brook. As he does so River shakes her head, gets up and with the help of a double appears to pass through the brick wall to the right of the stage.*

DEPUTY

I regret to say her spirit has departed.

BROOK

(Collapses to the floor, sobbing). She is the spirit of this carnival she cannot be dead.

PLAGUE DOCTOR

She will come around in another theatre soon. We're in a comedy after all. But as to this competition for the best mask - well I think I now have a very good claim to that grand prize.

BROOK

*Glares at the Plague Doctor, gets up and angrily advances upon him.*

On a platform of excrement you would aspire to be the carnival king. And so you shall have your just reward.

*Turns to the police*

Into the sewer with him!

*The police roll a port-a-loo onto the stage  
stuff the doctor into it and then roll it away.  
His bag is left in the middle of the stage.*

BROOK

*Shouts out angrily after the doctor*  
You will be a beggar again!

*She turns to the audience*  
And you there grinning. I see you have not the  
necessary patience for true liberation. There will be  
no prize-giving here today. The best masks reform the  
actors beneath.

*She sinks down to the floor and speaks in a  
pensive tone.*  
But I have had my carnival for better or worse so  
it's clear this commedia has come to an end. Some  
beggars may fly but I must sleep alone in my  
chrysalis, dreaming of multi-coloured wings, as pure  
in potential as a still-born child.

*She takes off her carnival mask revealing her  
loup. She puts the carnival mask into the Plague  
Doctor's bag and takes out a bottle of pills.  
She stares at the bottle. Long pause.*

*Enter River chased by a policeman waving his  
truncheon. She is wearing nothing but the  
policeman's helmet and a codpiece. Brook gets up  
joyfully and takes off her loup. Throwing it  
into the audience, she runs off stage after  
them.*

*Music plays. The Seekers, "The Carnival is  
Over".*