

high school education kit



Performing  
quality  
school shows  
for 20 years

australian theatre of the deaf

# Commedia Deaf Arte



# Australian Theatre of the Deaf

In 1999 Australian Theatre of the Deaf (ATOD) celebrates its 20th birthday as a professional theatre company. Supported by the Australia Council for the Arts, NSW Ministry for the Arts, sponsors, members and donations, ATOD produces mainstage productions, school shows for all levels of education and community shows.

Renowned for its unique and accessible visual style, the company tours throughout Australia and supplements its program with workshops in visual theatre and non-verbal communication, performances at corporate events, launches, fundraisers and festivals. ATOD also organises Auslan (Australian Sign Language) Interpreted performances for other theatre companies.

## 'Commedia Deaf Arte'

With a reputation for presenting high quality, educational shows at schools the masters of visual theatre, Australian Theatre of the Deaf, have blended their unique style with the traditional Italian theatre of Commedia dell'arte; thus 'Commedia DEAF Arte'.

'Commedia Deaf Arte' is not about Deafness or Sign Language per se, rather it presents a style of traditional theatre and combines it with inherently 'deaf' qualities (visual communication, gestural movements and unique Deaf sounds).

## Education Kit

This education kit introduces aspects of Commedia dell'Arte and information about Deafness and Sign Language. We have accompanied the information with activity ideas to enhance your classroom preparation for the show. These activity ideas are starting points and can be adapted to suit different years or different subject areas.

For further activities regarding visual theatre and non-verbal communication, Australian Theatre of the Deaf can run the workshop 'Drama with vision' at your school. Led by professional Deaf actors, 'Drama with Vision' explores theatre techniques designed to free the imagination to enable students to communicate their ideas visually. Skills developed have applications in any public speaking, presentation and/or drama situations that require confidence, visual communication and understanding of body language and movement. Special discounts apply for schools that have booked a performance of 'Commedia Deaf Arte'.

Additional resources are listed on the back of this kit and you are also welcome to contact the ATOD office to discuss ideas further.



# Commedia dell' Arte

Historians have traced the birth of Commedia dell' Arte to sixteenth century Italy. The Commedia style developed from a melding of pre-existing forms of folk entertainment, improvised masking, acrobatics, music and dance.

Originally bands of actors performed Commedia in the crowded atmosphere of street markets and carnivals. The sets were therefore designed for speed and quick installation and the stage itself was often a collection of trestle. The approach of flexibility and spontaneity that was adopted for the set design, was also applied to the style of Commedia with improvisation the key component. In fact in a traditional framework there was no such thing as a written and rehearsed script for a Commedia show.

The crowds of the market attracted peddlers, inventors, prostitutes, magicians, illusionists and beggars; creating an environment of fierce competition for monetary donations from audiences. The commedia performances, therefore needed to draw the crowds and maintain attention. To fulfil this objective the commedia style developed outrageous comical appeal (similar to slapstick in antics and a plot revolving around a comedy of errors), acrobatic stunts, sexual innuendo, large movements and gesture, and a host of eccentric characters.

Despite the crazy antics, Commedia was often used as a vehicle to satirise current political scandals and social problems. Masks and stock characters were an integral part of Commedia's ability to effectively communicate these social and political statements.

Over time Commedia became a popular form of entertainment for royalty and the aristocracy. The commercial viability when performing to this type of audience dictated that the radical and satirical element of Commedia became diluted and less prominent. This ushered in the era of the playwright in which a strong script or scenario became important.

## Masks

It is generally the male characters in Commedia dell' Arte who wear complete masks. Women either are heavily made-up or wear cut-away masks. Commedia masks are more than an inanimate physical object. The mask has its own persona and when the actor wears it he becomes that stock character. Even characters who do not wear physical masks, are still bound by the same conventions of stock characters, and for this reason their personalities are often referred to as 'masks'.

The masks and stock characters were based on stereotypes of society. These stereotypes were employed to demonstrate social and political critiques, in the same way today's political cartoons use easily recognisable stereotypes.

Each mask and character also has the nature and characteristics of a particular animal. These animal attributes effect the attitude, stance, movements and speech of each character.



# Stock Characters

Stock characters in Commedia have set names, status, costumes, masks, props, stance, walks, movements and gestures, speech, characteristics, relationships with other characters and the audience, and role within the plot .

Following are the stock characters introduced in 'Commedia Deaf Arte'. For detailed information on other Commedia characters we recommend *Commedia dell'Arte: An Actor's Handbook* by John Rudlin. You will note that we have placed the word speech in inverted commas in the following stock character descriptions. In conventional Commedia there is dialogue, but in 'Commedia Deaf Arte' the Deaf actors will create the 'speech' effects with gesture, mime and vocal techniques.

## Pantalone

Old, wealthy, greedy and upper class. His high social ranking allows him to be mean and bossy to his servants and behave as a narrow-minded dictatorial father . He moves slowly and hunches over or is short in stature. Pantalone is dithery and forgetful and the keys to his money cabinet are often misplaced. He is obsessed with money and loathes paying anyone for anything. He is also lustful especially for young women.

When met with bad news, Pantalone characteristically falls flat on his back and is unable to right himself similar to a beetle. Other stock characteristics of Pantalone include a continuous flurry and rubbing of his hands. He appears unable to control these obsessive gestures and holding his hands behind his back or under his cloak is the only temporary solution for keeping his hands still.

Pantalone is modelled on the chicken or turkey. And his 'speech' reflects this feathered stereotype with high-pitched chicken squawks and gobbled mutterings.

In regards to the plot Pantalone is a major catalyst. For example he typically wants to marry the same woman as his son or he wants to marry his daughter off to a wealthy man to avoid paying a dowry. These plans often become the centrepiece of the action.

## Smeraldina (also called Colombina)

Servant or personal maid. Smeraldina has often been referred to as the only rational person in Commedia dell' Arte. Traditionally she has little bearing on the plot, but participates more as a spectator. Her spectator role translates to a close affiliation with the audience and passing confidential acknowledgments that she too is aware of how irrational the rest of the troop are. In this Commedia Deaf Arte production Smeraldina is however central to the action.

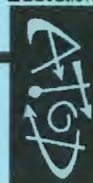
Smeraldina is modelled on the dove and her physical appearance is very feminine. Her persona is outspoken and energetic and her movements indicate this with skips, jumps and runs. Her fast and nimble mobility enables Smeraldina to escape unwanted attention.

## Truffaldino (also called Arlecchino)

Truffaldino is a servant to Pantalone, and like his master he too is greedy and very keen to make money. Yet unlike Pantalone, he is generally good natured and childlike. His animal basis is the cat, monkey or the fox. In keeping with these animal characteristics, he is mocking and enjoys roguish trickery. His tricks however never go to plan.

He is physically quick and agile yet mentally dull and slow and his posture indicates that gravity is pulling him down (the result of his servant chores: ie carrying bags etc). His 'speech' is guttural and impetuous and he either speaks continuously or maintains long periods of silence.





## ACTIVITY IDEAS

### 1. Everyday visual communication

There are many forms of visual communication that are used in every day life. In some cases these are used to enhance clarity of verbal information (eg: sports referees, body language, facial expressions) but in the majority of instances they are the only effective means of communication for the situation (eg: policeman directing traffic, road signs, semaphore, gesturing with someone who speaks a different language, friends waving hello etc). Ask students to list or demonstrate examples of visual communication and body language in every day life.

### 2. Imaginary Clay

Mime relies on the imagination of the audience and the artist to create a pretend environment and objects. This exercise will help students both perform and comprehend mime. Sit students in a circle. One by one, each student mimes creating an object out of imaginary clay. The student then shows how the object is used. When the object has been demonstrated clearly, so that someone can guess what it is, the student can then squash the object back into a ball of clay and pass the ball on to the next student.

### 3. How do you feel?

Ask students to walk around the room, and as they do so, call out an emotion to them (eg angry, sad, frightened, happy etc). The students must attempt to express that emotion using their faces, bodies and hands.

### 4. Pass the Mask

This activity is a combination of the previous two activity ideas. Students pass around an imaginary mask. When the mask is put on, it becomes a different emotion represented by facial expressions.

### 5. Australian Commedia

All of the character animals in Commedia are obviously European. Ask students to design their own Commedia stock characters based on Australian native animals. This can be either a written or performance based activity.

### 6. Political Cartoons

Collect political cartoons and list the stereotypes used. Discuss what political or social comments you would use to create a modern Commedia plot.

### 7. Make a mask

Make and decorate Commedia masks. Use either paper mache or the plaster bandage technique.

### 8. Explore stereotypes

Stereotypes are a set of adjectives to describe a defined group of people. The smaller the number of adjectives selected the stronger the stereotype (eg: 3 or 4 adjectives is a strong stereotype). The adjectives are based on assumptions, therefore more information and closer involvement with a defined group will decrease the strength of the stereotype. Test this theory by trying to define groups (eg: Americans vs a stereotype of your class etc)



# Deafness

More than **one and a half million** Australians have some sort of hearing loss. People with **mild** losses have difficulty hearing speech in noisy conditions. **Moderate** and **severe** losses result in people only being able to hear when the speaker is close by. All of these sorts of losses can be greatly helped by hearing aids. A small number of people have profound hearing loss. Even with hearing aids these people hear only limited parts of speech. They may therefore need to communicate through **lipreading** and/or **signing**.

There are two types of hearing loss:

**Conductive Hearing Loss:** This is due to damage to the eardrum or the small bones of the middle ear. This sort of hearing loss is common in young children following ear infections and can also result from illness or accident. Conductive hearing loss can often be treated by doctors.

**Sensorineural Hearing Loss (or Nerve Deafness):** This type of hearing loss is due to damage to some or all of the "hair cells" - the numerous nerve endings on each ear's single nerve ending. Damage to the nerve of hearing cannot be treated. Sensorineural hearing loss can be caused by a number of factors: old age, loud noise (several rock musicians have hearing losses caused by noise) or the effects of illness such as Rubella and Meningitis. Sensorineural hearing loss can also be inherited, though the factors are not yet determined.

In Australia, more than two children in 1,000 are born with hearing impairment. Because hearing deteriorates, however, one in four (25%) of people over 65 years of age need hearing aids.

Acknowledgement: Paul Cameron, Assistant Manager, Australian Hearing Service, Victoria

## ACTIVITY IDEAS

### 1. What is it like to be Deaf ?

Give each student some cotton wool or earplugs to put in their ears, in order to muffle sounds. Keeping the classroom as quiet as possible, let them try to communicate without using their voices, either through lip reading or through body language. Talk about the experience afterwards

### 2. What are they talking about? (lipreading)

Videotape a television program. Play the program to the class with the volume off. Ask the class to write down or discuss what they think the program was saying. Then replay the tape with the volume on. See how accurate the students were in their understanding.

### 3. Some sounds are easier to hear than others

Divide students into small project groups. Allocate each group objects/ activities that make different noises of varying levels (eg: stop watch, sports whistle, jangling keys, clapping hands, spoken and whispered words etc).

With one student blindfolded, others in the group make the 'sound' starting close to the blindfolded student and moving further away until the sound cannot be heard. Measure the distance when the sound cannot be heard. Repeat for other 'sounds' and other students. Plot results on a graph and discuss the results, ie: pitch and volume.



# Sign Language

Sign language is a vibrant, dynamic, expressive language with strong cultural significance for the Deaf community. There is no universal sign language in the same way there is no universal spoken or written language. Different countries and deaf communities have different sign languages.

Auslan (Australian Sign Language) is the name given to the sign language of the Australian Deaf community. The language is used by Deaf children and adults to communicate at school or work, and with their family and friends. With the aid of sign language interpreters Auslan is used to enable deaf people to access and participate equally in a wide range of activities and situations from universities, meetings, conferences, legal, training, church services and medical consultations.

Many hearing people are aware of fingerspelling. This is a system of different hand shapes used to represent each of the 26 letters of the alphabet (you can find this in the front of the phone book and copy supplied in this kit). Deaf people use fingerspelling to spell out names for people and places. Auslan however includes far more than just fingerspelling. Auslan consists of a rich system of gestures and signs to represent concepts, ideas and things. Auslan is a complete language onto itself with its own grammar and syntax, the same as any of the hundreds of spoken and written languages throughout the world.

Auslan operates on a three dimensional plane utilising space and movement to convey different types of meaning. The use of facial expression is a vital part of the grammatical emphasis in Auslan. For example when you ask a question you usually have a quizzical look on your face (ie you open your eyes wide and lift up your eye brows) as well as use of a questions sign (ie: who, where, when, etc), in the same way spoken languages utilise inflections and tone to enhance expression.

Also many signs are iconic. That is, they 'look like' or are obviously connected to a concept, idea or thing. In similar way to onomatopoeia words 'sound like' what they mean (eg: 'bang', 'cock-a-doodle'-do or 'whoosh'). However for the vast majority of signs the connection is not obvious at all.

Acknowledgement: Dr Trevor Johnston, Senior Research Fellow, Renwick College - University of Newcastle, NSW.

## ACTIVITY IDEAS

### 1. Design your own classroom sign language

Write a list of simple words on the blackboard (ie: drink, sleep, house, dog, eat, apple etc). Ask the students to try to make up a sign for each word. Discuss why they think the word would be signed that way.

### 2. Added facial expression & gesture

You can try activity number 2. on page 5 with different types of programs to demonstrate how important facial expressions and gestures are to enhancing comprehension (eg a newsreader versus Play School)

### 3. What is your name?

Hand out the fingerspelling alphabet sheet (provided in this kit) and encourage students to learn to fingerspell their name and other simple words. Once students have an understanding of the fingerspelling alphabet you can try simple games like eye spy to practise the recognition of the letters.



# More information

**Resources:** Deafness Resources Australia  
33 Argyle St, Parramatta, NSW, 2150  
ph: (02) 9204 2970  
fx: (02) 9204 2972  
tty: (02) 9204 2993  
email: dra@aceinfo.net.au

**Sign Language:** Deaf Education Network  
PO Box 500, Strathfield, NSW, 2135  
ph: (02) 9764 4600  
fax: (02) 9746 8426  
tty: (02) 9764 4972  
email: den@deaf.nsw.edu.au



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australian theatre of the deaf



ALPHABET:  
 right hand only moves in  
 arrow.  
 all formations.

