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978-0-521-35357-1 - Scripts and Scenarios: The Performance of Comedy in Renaissance Italy

Richard Andrews

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The Italian Renaissance produced a new type of stage comedy, experimental and even revolutionary in its time, by copying and updating the dramatic formats of Plautus and Terence from ancient Rome. The influence of these innovations on European drama – Shakespeare, Jonson, Molière, Lope de Vega – is a well-known fact in outline, but the Italian plays themselves are unfamiliar to English-speaking readers and theatregoers. They were written and performed for private audiences, and show a surprising variety of tone, from sober moralism to scurrilous farce. Authors range from the well-known and respectable Ariosto and Machiavelli through the anarchic Aretino to the barely accessible genius of Ruzante – and some plays, not the least successful, had collective authorship.

This book gives an account of how the new dramatic experiment was born and grew, moving from closed courtly audiences to a wider public. By concentrating on the order in which things happened, it underlines the novelty of almost everything that was produced. By highlighting performing qualities, rather than literary ones, it is able to show how improvised *commedia dell'arte* depended to a surprising degree on these relatively respectable antecedents. Scripted and improvised comedy are treated as part of the same phenomenon – and in this way a crucial phase in the development of European theatre is explored for the first time.

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The performance of comedy in Renaissance Italy

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*Professor of Italian,
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For Bimandy

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Molte cose stanno ben nella penna che nella scena starebbon
male.

(Lots of things work well on the page which on the stage would
work badly.)

Ruzante

Nothing with kings, nothing with crowns –
Bring on the lovers, liars and clowns.

Stephen Sondheim

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Preface

Theatre historians recognize in general terms that it was the Italians, in the early sixteenth century, who took the first steps towards a modern European concept of theatre – paradoxically, by reviving models which were sometimes two thousand years old. But the plays which were produced in the process – initially almost always in the form of comedy – are relatively neglected outside Italy. In English they tend to be treated either dismissively, or with emphasis on their sources rather than their qualities as an innovative, if sometimes immature, form of theatre. This can leave behind a misleading picture, both of scripted ‘erudite’ comedy as such, and of the extent to which *commedia dell’arte* (better known, and more romantically approved of) actually depended on *commedia erudita* for its raw material and its very existence. One of the aims of the present study is to give a simple account of this whole seminal process, taking things as much as possible in their chronological order. In the writing, it emerged that the story was too long for one book. This one can claim to cover with reasonable thoroughness the period from 1500 to the 1550s, a decade which it is convenient to treat as a watershed. *Commedia dell’arte* had probably begun by then to take on a separate identity; and other cultural changes were in process which can be seen as concluding what can usefully be called the ‘Renaissance’ in Italy. Hence I can justify the use in the sub-title of the term ‘Renaissance’, rather than the ‘sixteenth century’ which had originally been proposed.

However, as well as retelling facts which are already known at least to Italian scholars and readers (and for which I am heavily indebted to Italian secondary sources), I have tried in this book to emphasize aspects of the story, and of the plays, which have previously been explored in less detail or in no detail at all. Italian critics have been used to treating Renaissance drama as literature,

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and are skilled in analysing its literary qualities. In addition, more recently, they have produced impressive large-scale accounts of Renaissance theatre in general as a cultural, social and even semiotic phenomenon. What has been infrequent so far, in studies of *commedia erudita*, has been the close theatrical analysis of individual plays. There has been little attempt to look closely at dramaturgical techniques; or at how such comedies might have functioned, scene by scene, in the face of a live audience. The standpoint, in other words, has been that of a reader: rarely that of a spectator, and almost never that of a theatre practitioner. In missing these lines of inquiry, Italian scholars have also tended to underestimate how the early writers of Humanist comedy were working entirely without any supporting tradition of performance in their new genre, and how almost every aspect of their dramaturgy was an experimental shot in the dark. Admittedly, that statement applies to methods of composition more than to the choice of plot material. Italy at this time possessed a substantial common stock of fictional and narrative *topoi*, which were used indiscriminately in texts for reading and in texts for performance. This should not blind us, though, to the fact that dramatic artefacts differ substantially from literary ones in their compositional technique. The ‘early modern’ dramatists of sixteenth-century Italy were rather like people attempting to produce a brand new style of three-dimensional sculpture, basing themselves mainly on two-dimensional paintings.

Throughout this book, therefore, I have tried systematically to foreground those aspects of dramatic texts which are *not* shared by a work of fiction intended just for reading; and to bear in mind, within the limits of my admittedly amateur experience, the practical aspects of turning a script into performance. Such an approach can be one-sided in its turn: it means airily waving away a number of legitimate lines of inquiry, especially in relation to authors who have an established literary personality and who wrote also in non-dramatic genres. If Ariosto, Machiavelli, Aretino and Bruno have been treated superficially in this volume, I apologize to their ghosts – but they have suffered only a temporary snub in the cause of treating theatrical texts as theatre, and of giving the ‘text–audience’ relationship priority (for once) over the ‘author–text’ one which has traditionally been addressed. If there are any unifying themes in this book, they will be found in the attention paid to the techniques of composing comic dialogue for the stage, on the level of the indi-

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vidual scene; and in my speculations on the particular comic experience offered to contemporary audiences, first by *commedia erudita* and then by *commedia dell'arte*. Both of these contribute to a study of what Italians might call the 'constituent elements' of the European comic stage, in a period when those elements were being created, sometimes rather tentatively, for the first time. They are presented here primarily as part of a continuing collective process, by which modern comedy was built – and only secondarily as discrete achievements by individual talents.

This book in its turn also comes from efforts which were not purely solitary, and some acknowledgements must be recorded. With the working conditions currently prevalent in British universities, the volume might never have been completed without a grant from the Leverhulme Trust, which liberated me for the whole of the academic year 1990–1. As well as my deep gratitude for this, I must express thanks to friends who have read portions of the text and given perceptive advice – most notably Professor Peter Brand, Ann and Michael Caesar, Christopher Cairns, Maria Rees, and my close colleague Brian Richardson. Sarah Stanton of Cambridge University Press has exercised some necessary control, but also shown a notable amount of tolerance. My wife and children are in these pages somewhere – partly because they too have commented on bits of the text and helped with the index, but mostly because they are part of the way I think. The dedicatees know, I hope, how important they are in everything. If I have been foolish enough to ignore the contributions, explicit and implicit, of any of these people, then the fault and the errors are mine.

I must also claim responsibility for all translations in this volume which are not otherwise attributed.