

Crick, Oliver, *Too much knowledge? Experience in show creation for rural touring with the Fabulous Old Spot Theatre Company, Mummers Unconvention, Gloucester, 2013.*

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This paper is an attempt to identify and describe “folk memes” and their utilisation in creating popular entertainment, suitable for rural touring, with the Fabulous Old Spot Theatre Company in Gloucestershire between 2004 and 2010.

When a show first appears in front of any (largely unsuspecting) audience there must be no ambiguities of purpose nor confusion. Each show, especially company-devised shows (where the audience has less frame of reference than with, say, a television series), is the product of a lot of discussion, argument and experimentation. The audience sees about 10% of this on stage, but the other 90% needs to exist to ensure some chance of success. This is an introduction, with no apologies, to some of that 90%.

The aim of the Fabulous Old Spot theatre company was to create a form of *Commedia dell’Arte* that would appear to an audience as if they were seeing a reincarnated entertainment from genuine English theatre history rooted in a real English sense of humour and sensibility. Or, failing that, to at least present the dramatic comedy of this archaic form without the barriers of odd names, unfamiliar gestures and cod Italian accents. To do this we endeavoured to explore the roots of *Commedia dell’arte*, and attempted to recreate (or even fake) and /or find naturalised equivalents for the reasons behind its historical dramatic success. I would like to start with a quote from a contemporary practitioner of *Commedia dell’arte*. He states that his aim is to

“Make theatre for the present with the Angels and Demons of the past.¹”

His name is Carlo Boso and he was inducted into theatre in Italy after the second world war as part of the *Piccolo Theatre* (or small theatre) movement, specifically the *Piccolo Theatre of Milan*. To find a contemporary rural simile, this theatre movement was very much like the slow food movement, but with more of a socialist leaning. The aim was to produce high quality theatre for that mythical compound noun “the

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people”. Part of the Italian context at that time was to produce art untainted by the politics and excesses of Mussolini’s fascism and to be active in reflecting Italy’s cultural reinvention. Context is always important as theatre cannot exist or be created without it - even if that context is just pure entertainment. *Commedia dell’Arte*, in this case, was recreated to take a pre-fascist art form and develop it as part of a new nationalistic consciousness.

Carlo Boso was taught and inspired by a generation of theatre practitioners and experimenters who re-created *Commedia dell’arte* from iconographic, written and oral sources. In its hey-day (historically from the Renaissance to the French revolution) this form of theatre was rooted in fixed social types purporting to come from distinctive local regions and relied on a particular style of acting that was known as “Italian” from around the time of Shakespeare. There was a fixed scene structure and a very definite plot line, but the words and script to fill out these scenes were made up on the spot, relying on spontaneous wit, brio, panache and a lot of self-confidence. It was this style that was known by Shakespeare’s contemporaries as “Italian Acting”.

The dramas these Italians performed have been analysed by Tim Fitzpatrick² who proves conclusively that they were performed *al’improvisso*, that they were structured as a series of double acts, and that the dramatic structures of their plots all proceeded in this binary fashion: This was a professional and well considered practical working method. In short, it is far easier to achieve success on stage with only two “players” competing or cooperating for attention, whilst adding their own words to a pre-ordained storyline. The first pair to kick-start and evolve this system originated in a strong Venetian cultural context and were *Magnifico* and *Zanni*; the renaissance manifestation of the classic comedy master and servant.

Magnifico and *Zanni*, according to Toschi³, represent the spirits of the fat man of Carnival, who was ‘eaten up’ by the thin women of Lent in a recognizable form of popular drama and folk play in Venice and its surrounds during the late middle ages. The fat man as personified in Carnival, representing excess, food and mirth, was eaten alive and destroyed (albeit only for a year) by the thin woman of Lent, representing austerity, starvation and privation. Toschi further states or theorizes that the original

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masks used by the first commedia performers were the ones used by these lent/carnival mummers. The innovation practised by these early Comedians was that they used them within a contemporary context. These masked roles came to represent the contemporary and easily recognisable master-servant power dyad of the Magnifico (ruler of Venice) and the Zanni (indigenous or immigrant worker). Thus they came to portray a worm's eye view of the contemporary societal power structure and costumed themselves accordingly, presenting to the audience a pair of easily recognizable social types. Any social types we used, therefore, had to be recognized instantly by our audience, despite historical settings. Who and what were our UK based Magnifico and Zanni to be?

At the roots of Commedia is still this battle between carnival and lent: between excess and privation, oppression and freedom, the haves and the have-nots, licentiousness against a strong social order. The same is true of most Mummers' plays in the UK: there is always the battle between adversaries, usually ending with resurrection and reconciliation. Make of that what you will on whatever level, but it does reach out to some sense off both the holy and profane within an audience.

Mummer's plays and traditional seasonal plays have 'stayed put' in some areas with slight adaptations, and it is sometimes their antiquity that attracts us. There is always a slightly guilty feeling that we ought to like them as they come from "our" past, and we will watch them recited as if we were in a slightly beery outdoor church: there is a sense of vague belonging but also of a certain distance and a tenuous engagement. Enough has been said about links with Frazer's vegetative renewal (in the seminal *Golden Bough*⁴) and also Baroja's⁵ revisions, focussing on specific social and annual events. What was important to us as a theatre company was finding a connection with an audience that was the opposite of tenuous, that was not like going to church and where beer was certainly allowed. It felt that on one level we were trying to create something entirely new, but on another level we were scrabbling furiously to get inside the skin of these strange ancient customs and make them live on stage as entertainment. In deciding to build from a commedia model, however, it was important for us as that the folkloric echoes and historical reverberations came from an English, not an Italian, consciousness. What, therefore, were the echoes within an

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English consciousness that might touch an audience? Commedia dell'Arte, to sum up, was a composite art-form which combined a neo-classical dramatic structure with inhabitants drawn from real life and carnival. It combined easily recognisable contemporary characters dressed in, and enjoying the license, of the masks of pagan carnival.

It is this old tradition of Commedia dell'Arte, recreated by the Piccolo theatre of Milan and its satellite artists⁶, that Carlo Boso spreads and teaches, with this addition: Comedy, and especially comedy dressed in the costume and masks of a bygone era, has a paradoxical affect on an audience. It distances them (or us) from the time period where the action is set, and therefore gives the performers permission to engage with the characters and action more closely. It is clear to an audience that this comedy couldn't possibly be about them so they give themselves permission to relax and enjoy the work. Since the show couldn't possibly be poking fun at 'us' it is safe to enjoy it and laugh at it. The paradox comes when, to maintain an entrancing theatrical and dramatic story, these historical "safe" characters take as their subject matter the basic stuff of human life: love, hate, war, betrayal, hope, corruption, mischief and starvation. What is the context of this performance, then: one of pure entertainment? It cannot just be this, surely, as an audience is being shown how humanity interacts, and is being shown this through the prism of a "historical" entertainment. This modern incarnation (or neo-Commedia dell'Arte) works best in the form of a parable.

With Boso it is these parables that propel him on. For him the plot always reflects or mirrors some aspect of contemporary life, but is never directly mentioned by name as this would destroy utterly the audience's belief in the historical fiction being presented to them, which gives us the third context. Namely, that all the emotional interactions must both ring true and be 'amped up to the max' - as is the wont of comedy. Thus the audience are taken on an emotional and enjoyable ride which bounces them between the extremes of completely identifying with a character's problems or joys and utter *schadenfreude*: the unmitigated relief that the "bad thing" is happening to someone else.

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These last three: entertainment / parable / and emotional connection seem to me to be the strongest legs upon which to build a show. However, to paraphrase Gramsci, we are operating in a different cultural hegemony than the Italians. Adopting Boso's mission statement is one thing, but how does it apply to our particularly UK rural context?

Before I dive into the nitty gritty of what we wanted our artistic cultural hegemony to be, there is a personal context. Most of the performers in the various company incarnations had children and were based in rural areas. It was obvious that the shows had to be something we could take our kids to if that was how child care worked out, so no nudity, swearing or gratuitous violence. Traditional touring theatre takes one away for days and weeks at a stretch and this was not acceptable. Therefore, we identified what local audiences were available, and came across the conclusion that village halls and rural community centres were the thing, and if we played our cards right, would also come with a ready-made audience. Local audiences made it possible to get home every night and still be able to take the kids to school in the morning.

This practicality gave us both our touring zone and a context. Villages and village halls in Gloucestershire cover a wide range of geographical zones and income brackets, and the expected audience is whoever bothers to turn up. In other words, from seven to seventy years of age, with quite a bit of leeway either end. Our target audience was the "family" audience of a rural county with a very wide income range, a fierce independence and *je ne sais quoi* which can be easily misidentified as pure bloody-mindedness. The search for folk-memes began to focus on a local and geographically distinct area.

We thought of creating a show with the property of being able to make each performance seem venue specific (treating each audience as special), whilst simultaneously trying to add deeper resonance in terms of place, culture, theme and way of life. We had decided that, as our characters came from a mythical and historical past, to re-invent the Commedia tradition within the UK. Go a few miles north east of Gloucestershire and you run across the heritage fiefdom of Stratford on Avon, and the cultural-industrial complex spawned by its most famous son. We

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needed to differentiate ourselves from that, and that encouraged us to anchor ourselves more in Gloucestershire. What elements from the County, therefore, in terms of folk drama, music, local lore and geography could we find that were suitable show ingredients; that did not patronise an audience, and that together might help create a performance that not only entertained, but was good enough to get one invited back for a subsequent show? There were two paths through this conundrum. The first was our theatrical expertise in devising shows, and the second was to find a method of making the best possible educated guesses as to form and content.

To answer the second, which is the main thrust of this extended digression, our frames of reference needed to be widened intellectually rather than narrowed, but focussed more closely on those with some local connection. Our working method in placing where our shows occurred began to solidify round a sense that that our audiences should have heard of the place where our “historical” shows occurred, and hopefully see them on a map or road sign in the course of their weekly routine.

The frame started to include models of theatre from the past, especially Greek comedy and the *commedia dell’arte*. We added to this mummer’s plays; mystery plays; local saints’ plays; local legends; faery stories; historical, quasi-historical and mythical figures; early Christian and pre-Christian ceremonies. I am only concerned with the search for dramatically entertaining folk memes that can be used to connect and entertain: To bring to our audience “the *Merrie Englande* that never was”. Local festivals, events, ceremonies and historical “waps” (local dialect for seasonal domestic hiring fairs) were collected, collated and listed, and then examined not for historical accuracy, but for how well they could be used as a functional and entertaining element within a drama. Having gathered together many ideas and themes the final test was always whether the ideas and memes also possessed the capacity to engender “stage-life”: could they escape from their innate cultural self-referentiality and become part of a comedy “snow-ball” plot?

The lives of local historical characters (such as the Cliffords of Berkely Castle, where Edward II met his unfortunate and alleged demise) as well as local hero and villain stories were examined to see if some kind of Joseph Campbell type story structures

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could be extracted from them⁷. We needed to see what events were fixed in place for all time, immovable and unchanging, or could be played with and used as starting points for a simultaneously local and epic-scale drama.

We had a few “gifts” bestowed upon us by the region which were of great theatrical use: The River Severn, the Forest of Dean and the ubiquity of cider. The River has its own local history, peculiar customs, the great Severn Bore, and is a natural barrier for keeping the Welsh out. The Forest of Dean is a large area of ancient woodland, historically and geographically isolated, full of proud people with a wonderful selection of ancient rights and habits. Its inhabitants are generally regarded as a bit odd by the rest of the County. It is great place for outlaws to escape from the law and find unexpected help and comradeship. Cider is as ubiquitous as the orchards and as a theatrical device it provides its drinkers with completely understandable reasons for errors of judgement, celebration, madness, consolation in desperate times or very often just a hanging threat of what might happen if we drink Farmer Dallymore’s cider again at which point each audience member can insert their own tale of drunken woe.

A breakthrough occurred when we discovered that the engine room of a traditional commedia drama, the urban Venetian miser Pantalone di Bisognosi, had a direct UK rural equivalent in the popular (mis)conception of the landowning and grasping farmer. This character had all the attributes that made him such an important and central character within commedia: a parent with ungrateful children, a hard worker who was never satisfied with the work of others, someone who was way past middle age but refused to admit it, and someone who was sitting on a pile of money but claimed to be on their uppers. Once he had found a name (Titus Dallymore or Farmer Dallymore) and offspring and inferiors to persecute, the jigsaw began to fall into place.

We had a geographical location, a viable start to our Commedia explorations, and access to a wide range of locally based historic and mythic information. The best definition of a folk meme that we have come up with is:

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“a cultural or historic element that has fallen out of current use, but that nevertheless makes a connection with an audience member: something that an audience member feels they ought to be connected with, but isn’t currently”. There is, however, in the world of theatre a great difference between folkloric documentaries and having fun with the information. The genre of “alternative histories or realities” or pranking the audience with bogus historical facts comes to mind. In one show we had the Spanish Armada sail up the River Severn and then be wrecked on the bore. Dario Fo, according to Antonio Scuderi, employs this approach in many of his “historical” dramas, including *Mystery Bouffe*.⁸

Our job, as a theatre company, was to leave the audience more connected with (our idea of) their local roots and, of course, leave them laughing. Finding local connections, whether cultural, historical or geographical, and then serving them up dramatically proved successful, and locally the audience got the joke, which was always not against, but with them.

Notes:

¹ Quoted from the festival program from the 1st Val de Marne International Commedia dell’Arte festival 1983, from the Theatre Romain Rolland de Villejuif

² Fitzpatrick, Tim. *The Relationship of Oral and Literate Performance Processes in the Commedia dell’Arte: Beyond the Improvisation/Memorisation Divide*. Lewiston/Queenston/Lampeter: Edwin Mellon Press, 1995.

³ *Le origini del teatro italiano*, Paulo Toschi Publisher: Einaudi (Edizioni Scientifiche) Published: 1955

⁴ *The Golden Bough*, by Sir James Frazer, originally published between 1906-1915 in 12 volumes, and the abridged to one volume in 1922 by the author and his wife. It is a seminal anthropological work on the similarities between world religions, including types of ritual magic, the sacrificial killing of kings, the dying god, and the scapegoat.

⁵ Julio Caro Baroja (1914-1955), a Spanish anthropologist who re-focussed the origins of cultural and religious events more on social and annual events.

⁶ Jaques Lecoq, Amleto Sartori, Giovanni Poli, Georgio Strehler, Carlo Mazzone-Clementi were all part of this theatrical avant-garde, focussed around an axis between University of Padua and the theatre in Milan.

⁷ See any of Campbell’s works in the field of comparative myth and religion such as *The Hero with a Thousand Faces: the Collected Works of Joseph Campbell*, New World Library 2008.

⁸ Antonio Scuderi explores in great detail Dario Fo’s historical pranking, and the reasons behind it, in his book *Dario Fo, Framing, Festival, and the Folkloric Imagination*, 2011, Lexington Books. New York, Toronto, Plymouth UK

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Appendix 1 Possible memes

Mummers plays: the archetypal Death and Resurrection show.

Seasonal events: Waps (local hiring fairs), Wassailing, St. Georges day etc.

Saint's Plays.

A Hero called Jack.

Local legend: various ghosts.... useful as walk on characters, e.g. The Bisley Boy.

National legends and Historical Figures e.g. Walter Raleigh, Edward II, the Berkeley Hunt.

Pirates and Sea related nautical gibberish.

Ghosts and Robbers.

That to rural folk all City folk are weird (especially folk from Gloucester and Cheltenham).

Proverbs and local lore and sayings.

He might be an idiot, but he's our idiot.

Rural '*Urban Myths*' - contemporary legends with a rural setting.

Local geography: May hill, River Severn, Berkley Castle, Forest of Dean, the Welsh, Londoners, the Cotswolds etc.

Local History: Both in and out of individual and collective memory, exploiting echoes in the audience's own memory, referencing other villages. (Puppy pies are, for example, always elsewhere.)

Broader English themes:

The sea has a connection with the English, especially with Pirates: some are stupid, some clever, some dangerous, some not, but they all have treasure.

Cross dressing: both ways for pleasure, for profit, for expediency or disguise.

The pub provides a meeting point or an alcohol fuelled crossroads where anything could happen and frequently does. This can be literal or referenced within a plot.

Appendix 2 First Show: Hot Crackling 2005

Welcome song to audience (makes them feel comfortable and refers to local places).

Jack, a bored teenager (universal) lives with his mother, a witch (universal) or valuable herbalist (feminist) in the Forest of Dean (local colour) and setting up the expectation of something bad about to happen.

The local men (rustic idiots and *bravos traditional*) decide she knows too much about them and all their "complaints" (realist-paranoid) and kill her (faery story: a classic evil deed).

Jack is left orphaned (parable-faery story) and heads off to seek his fortune (universal) with his mother's herbs as a universal and magical panacea (parable). Woodland animal puppets and Jack sing a valediction (emotional).

He meets a girl (traditional, universal) sent shopping by her evil (as yet unknown) step-father (universal/traditional) and with mother's herbs (traditional) cures her melancholy and she instantly cheers up (comic compression of passage of time). They fall in love and decide to get married.

Dad opposes it (traditional/emotional/faery story) and sets Jack a task (traditional/parable) to kill the Beast of Bibury (or Westgate Street/ Macaroni Wood/Horsley Tip, always a "bad" place local to where we were performing) to win his daughter's hand in marriage.

Jack wants to bid farewell to Florence (traditional/universal) and is forbidden by dad (point of view seen from both sides of the fence) goes to drown sorrows at local pub (first drop of alcohol/cider/initiation)...gets given a sword (is it Excalibur? links to past myth...well, its ex-army) and advice as to how to say farewell to Florence: only way to get past her Dad is to dress as a woman...landlord gives Jack sumptuous dress "left behind" in pub during an average night...Jack sings farewell song up to Florence at her bedroom window (traditional)...dressed as a woman...which confuses Florence so she doesn't let Jack in but still loves him despite oddness (modern) .

Jack fights the beast (traditional hero combat) and wins.

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He is reluctantly allowed to marry Florence. At the wedding Dallymore recognises Jack's ring as belonging to his ex-wife who ran off with their only son 18 years ago (trad. Comic/faery tale device). Jack has found a father (trad. happy ending) but cannot now marry Florence, whom all now believe to be his sister. Florence and Jack are devastated (greek tragic element), but Dallymore reveals that Florence is adopted (confusion, but eventual happy ending, with Florence revealed to be a Royal bastard).