

Reading Drill #1

Commedia Dell'arte

Flourishing in Italy from the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries, *commedia dell'arte* is a distinctive style of comedy that employed masked characters. The name of the form sometimes confuses modern readers. In fact, even some published reference works incorrectly state that the correct English translation is “comedy of artists.” A better rendering is something like “drama of artisans.” In the Italian spoken when *commedia dell'arte* was current, *commedia* did not refer exclusively to comic theater, and *arte* was used in connection with craftsmen and skilled workers such as leatherworkers and carpenters.

Commedia dell'arte, unlike the literary comedy of the Renaissance, did not require written scripts. Rather, it was a theater of improvisation. It began with street performers. They put on masks and used overdone gestures to represent characters and get laughs. Because it began among performers who did acrobatics and juggling, the developing form retained an emphasis on physical movement.

Instead of memorizing a performance line for line and gesture for gesture, actors combined variable plotlines with stock characters. These characters exaggerated the stereotypes of doctors, merchants, lawyers and other unpopular occupations present in Italian society at the time. The humor was very broad—subtlety was a hallmark of many artistic achievements of the period, but not the *commedia dell'arte*. The actors poked fun at the different regions of Italy by speaking in overdone local accents.

To perfect their portrayals of these standard characters, actors had to develop distinctive skills. The plays they performed were improvised, but actors still needed a basic set of routine scenes and situations that could be altered in unexpected ways from one performance to another. It was common for an **actor** in the *commedia dell'arte* to choose a **type of role** and **specialize** in it for life. Most actors kept notebooks, *zibaldone*, in which they noted down monologues, dialogues, and tag lines that their characters regularly rehearsed with. Additionally, the immobile masks most characters wore prevented them from using facial expressions to convey emotions. To accustom themselves to conveying mood exclusively through gesture and tone of voice, new actors practiced a variety of characters with a neutral mask. This was a wooden mask, without the markings for any specific character, used exclusively to remind an actor not to use his face to emote during rehearsals.

The unpredictable nature of *commedia dell'arte* helped account for its extraordinary popularity and influence. But it did not help the form to develop over time. What had been a fresh and interesting method of improvisation at the end of the Renaissance turned stale by the end of the eighteenth century. Many of the characters, having been standardized for centuries, were no longer relevant to a changing Italy, in which a conservative revolution was occurring both in society and in the theater. The popularity of *commedia dell'arte* decreased as it alienated the emerging middle-class audience. Audiences had tired of jokes in questionable taste, and they faulted the plotlines for not flowing believably and lacking a clear message. The use of improvisation had started in the Renaissance as a break from traditional passion plays, with their sober, predetermined storylines. As *commedia dell'arte* progressively became an institutionalized form of theater, improvisation itself began to seem old-fashioned.

As a result, the *commedia dell'arte* was transformed. It evolved from presenting improvised performances of stereotyped characters toward following a script. The resulting performances both relied less on character types and expressed a clear moral lesson. Despite its ultimate decline, however, its influence on European drama can be easily detected: French pantomime and the English harlequinade took character types directly from the *commedia dell'arte*. The classic French playwright Molière created some of his most famous characters from the raw materials of villains of the *commedia dell'arte*. Even today, many modern stage movements and settings can be traced back to it.

1. How did *commedia dell'arte* differ from Renaissance comedy?
 - (A) Roles in Renaissance comedy included doctors and lawyers.
 - (B) *Commedia dell'arte* was performed outdoors.
 - (C) Renaissance comedy was scripted.
 - (D) The actors of Renaissance comedy weren't paid.
2. The word **broad** in the passage is closest in meaning to
 - (A) exciting
 - (B) timeless
 - (C) comic
 - (D) exaggerated
3. Underline the word or phrase in bold text that it refers to.
4. Actors in the *commedia dell'arte* made fun of different regions through their
 - (A) occupations
 - (B) costumes
 - (C) speech patterns
 - (D) conservatism
5. The author implies that *zibaldone*
 - (A) were read aloud during performances
 - (B) helped the performers develop their characters
 - (C) relaxed the audience members
 - (D) were valued by Renaissance actors

6. It may be inferred from paragraph 4 that which of the following made *commedia dell'arte* unpredictable?
- (A) Its fluctuations in popularity
 (B) The various Italian accents used by actors
 (C) The use of actors from different regions
 (D) Improvised combinations of stock scenes
7. The word stale in the passage is closest in meaning to
- (A) popular
 (B) historical
 (C) boring
 (D) unclear
8. The word progressively in the passage is closest in meaning to
- (A) gradually
 (B) purposefully
 (C) suddenly
 (D) unnoticeably
9. Each of the following is a reason the *commedia dell'arte* decreased in popularity EXCEPT
- (A) people became more conservative
 (B) plot lines were too simple
 (C) the audience tired of vulgar comedy
 (D) improvisation no longer seemed interesting
10. According to the passage, what was a result of the transformation of *commedia dell'arte*?
- (A) The performances were shorter.
 (B) Audience members felt it lacked humor.
 (C) Plots had a more obvious message.
 (D) Theatergoers became less conservative.

11. Underline the sentence in paragraph 5 in which the author describes specific ways that theatergoers became more conservative.
12. The word detected in the passage is closest in meaning to
- (A) seen
 (B) performed
 (C) translated
 (D) increased
13. Directions: An introductory sentence for a brief summary of the passage is provided below. Complete the summary by selecting the THREE answer choices that express the most important ideas in the passage. Some sentences do not belong in the summary because they express ideas that are not presented in the passage or are minor details in the passage. This question is worth 2 points.

The ***commedia dell'arte*** was a form of Italian theater that rose and fell in popularity between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries.

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Answer Choices	
Actors used exaggerated gestures, accents, and masks to give comic performances of stock characters.	Similar kinds of improvised comic theater were developing in other European countries during the same period.
"Comedy of artists" is not the best translation of <i>commedia dell'arte</i> .	The <i>commedia dell'arte</i> 's origin in street theater produced its emphasis on improvised performances.
<i>Commedia dell'arte</i> was forced to evolve when its vulgarity and lack of clear storylines lost favor with audiences.	An unmarked mask was used to help actors practice their characters.