

DRAMA *Works*

Plays Through Practice

A SERVANT TO TWO MASTERS

by

CARLO GOLDONI

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EXTRACT

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Extract

WORKING THROUGH THE PLAY IN A PRACTICAL WAY

Before starting the work on the play itself, it is important that students should have read it. Knowledge of the plot and its outcome is assumed throughout as is knowledge of the characters and style. It is strongly advised then that students will have studied the work on Commedia and Commedia characters in the earlier sections of this book.

It is important that students keep a record throughout of practical experiments undertaken and decisions made. This will give a feeling of unity to the final result and will be an enormous advantage when writing about the play in examination.

There is no doubt that the play, though always comic and often farcical, can be interpreted in different ways. At some point, students will have to make a decision as to whether to go for the all-out Commedia style, or whether to make the characters more realistic, with some depth. Room is given for at least these two interpretations throughout the following.

ACT ONE, SCENE ONE

Pantaloone's house.

The traditional set-up for a Commedia play is to have three house frontages at the back with the requisite entrances. For this play, only Pantaloone's house, Brighella's inn and the street or courtyards outside these places are required, though at least two doors to Beatrice and Florindo's rooms are needed inside the inn and Dr Lombardi's house could be the third house; he and Silvio would then make their entrances from here.

Consider the following options:

a] a Shakespearian approach, where the stage is an empty space which can denote anywhere according to the furniture or props brought on by the cast. You might want some background to this 'anywhere', which perhaps shows the front of a building or buildings with at least two entrances [further entrances and exits being by way of the wings]. An addition of a portable inn-sign could then perhaps indicate when we are at the inn. The backdrop could also be the traditional Commedia three houses set, as detailed above, which will give three exits at the back.

b] a more representative setting using screens perhaps, which could indicate anywhere and any number of entrances. Coloured lighting on these could indicate different settings - interior or exterior - or a Brechtian type announcement on a screen could tell us in written form where we are.

c] a simple setting that feeds into the farcical nature of the play, especially when the two 'masters' keep only just missing each other whilst staying at the inn. This could be a central revolving door set between two frames. The idea would enable the comic surprise of having people able to wait behind the frames so that on each revolve of the door a different person enters.

d] a more detailed and realistic setting, dividing the stage into two areas. Furnishings in one area would indicate the status of Pantaloone and the period, in the other would show the inn interior - a neutral hall-way off which are two doors to bedrooms. The settings could be permanent with, in each case, the majority of the stage being a spill-over from whichever setting is in use. An alternative would be to have the two settings on a revolve, to block out the setting not in use.

Discuss all these options, and any ideas you might have too. It is important to have an idea of your setting before working practically on the play. At least make decisions as to where your entrances and exits are and indicate these in

your studio rehearsal space.

You might want to use elements of more than one of these options, which is of course fine.

Colour, props and furnishings are going to be particularly important, to fit with the style of the play. Consider the following as options:

- a] cut-out cartoon-style furnishings brought on by porters/ waiters, perhaps with the additions of cartoon-style labels, hand-written, mis-spelt, with arrows etc. [e.g.

TABEL

Have fun with this idea. This would require miming if anything is used [which is true to Commedia.]

- b] the basic furniture [tables, chairs, cushions etc.] real and period, though kept minimal - just sufficient to indicate period and place
- c] light modern furniture, painted in bright or light colours - period not being important and the furniture just being useful rather than indicative of period or status.
- d] Ridiculous furniture.... too big, or too small, or absurdly ornate, etc.

Think of colours too - bright neon? light pastel colours? black and white? What would fit best with the style of the piece?

Have fun with your ideas, but make sure that any decisions you make will serve the play rather than get in the way of the action. All choices need to be justified. e.g. 'characters are cartoon-like, two-dimensional, so I chose cartoon-like setting...'; 'many of the set-pieces are clown-like, so I chose furniture that was too [big/small/ wobbly, always moved before being sat upon] to chime in with this idea....'; '.... chose light pastel colours because I see the play as a frothy comedy...'; '... chose to use realistic period furniture because I see the characters as more real and fully-fleshed than the traditional Commedia ideas and believe that this is what Goldoni was seeking to achieve ...' - and so on.

Discuss all the above and their implications. The choices are yours - and you may change your mind as you progress through the play, but bear in mind that all choices affect the finished production and must show a consistency of vision. If your mind does change as you study further, you will need to go back through all your first ideas to make them fit with your final decisions.

It is a good idea, in groups, to make a model set according to your decisions. Make sure that all things are workable [e.g. think of what materials you would use if making things full-size - that they are light and strong enough. Experiment with such as how to make revolving doors, or other surprise entrances.

Each group should present their set, with full justifications as to all decisions in a report-back session to the rest of the class.

The action starts *in media res* [in the middle of things]. **Try out the following as possible openings. Any of them will precede the first line of the play:**

- a] **A mime in which the characters in the scene enter from either side [or from separate houses if you are using that option]. Pantaloone escorts Clarice and Dr Lombardi enters with Silvio. There are greetings, cordial between the two fathers and perhaps too eager between the lovers, which would cause an indulgent smile from the Doctor and an abrupt tug to separate them from Pantaloone. Smeraldina is beckoned in from offstage by an impatient Pantaloone. Brighella mimes rapping on the door and is greeted**

cordially by both fathers.

- b] The above could be done as an improvised extra scene, with speech.
- c] The whole cast are on stage in traditional poses as looked at in the Preliminary Work section. Truffaldino, or Smeraldina, introduce us to each character with a little bit of cheeky narration, finishing with him or herself. Whichever of these two narrates could take the opportunity of leering at the other - sharing their attraction with the audience, but hiding it from the other.
- d] This could be preceded with appropriate music [modern or a seventeenth century dance tune to set the style and tone of the piece] allowing each character to enter in character and then freeze.
- e] There is mime, or narrated mime, which fills in the back-story of Beatrice, Federigo and Florindo too, before going into, say, option a].

Once you have become used to keeping the Commedia-style characters consistent, the play will become easier. Don't allow the exaggeration or the energy to drop. Remember each person's key characteristics.

Having said that, Goldoni wanted the style played down a little and was eager to introduce more realism and depth of character. This approach too ought to be experimented with and discussed as an option.

Look at Dr Lombardi's line, halfway down the page: 'Excellent, that's all sorted then. No turning back now.' **Try it:**

misty-eyed with sentimental affection

with relief. He knows Pantaloon well and doesn't quite trust him not to find a better offer. But a betrothal in those days was as binding as the marriage itself.

with pompous satisfaction

By experimenting like this, you will begin to find a style for each of the characters that you are happy with.

Smeraldina's line tells us right at the outset that she's on the look-out for a husband. Do you think it is the fun of a sexual relationship that she's after, or the relative 'freedom' of marriage? Perhaps she will no longer have to be a serving-maid if married.

To whom does Pantaloon address the speech beginning 'Well, it's only right and proper...'? It seems clear that it is a response to Brighella's polite speech about honour and privilege. Perhaps Pantaloon is taken aback by such fine words coming out in such a rough accent and his first sentence is a reproof. He doesn't want flowery ceremony when the marriage is going to be low-key.

Try out the movement as follows, changing the recipient of the speech accordingly.

Having heard Brighella, Pantaloon moves over from him to the Doctor for 'After all, I was best man ...' Move away to share with the audience 'It's all a bit low-key....' Raise the voice to a more public volume on '.. a nice quiet little meal....' whilst homing in on the young couple.'

Look at Smeraldina's aside on Page 2, 'That's the tastiest dish for sure.' **Try it:**

eyeing Silvio lasciviously and practically licking her lips

wryly sharing with the audience her knowledge that there won't be much actual food - our delight at this betrothal is all we'll have to dine on.

Which seems most likely here? In either case, the line is direct address to the audience.

Eager to please Pantaloon, the Doctor hastily protests that they don't want a lot of

ceremony either and then backs it up with his huffing windbag wordiness.

**Try Pantaloon's line 'Well, I have to say this is a match made in heaven'
disappointed, as if he is really saying, that Silvio is better than nothing
... but not a lot better.**

**indulgently, matching the Doctor's tone - he does love his daughter
the same as the second option, but instantly catching himself being all
lovey-dovey and giving himself a good shake to snap out of it**

**For the rest of the speech: 'If my prospective son-in-law...' onwards, try it:
gloomily - the loss of all that money is uppermost in his mind
slyly - enjoying torturing the Doctor and making him feel both inferior
and as if he should count himself lucky that his son has now won
the prize**

**self-congratulating - how clever he has been to have arranged
something so wonderful for his daughter; it's not his fault
that the man has had the impudence to get himself killed**

Decide which version you like best.

How can you establish the fact that from the beginning the lovers should not be just lovey-dovey and wet? Clarice's 'even if I'd been forced to marry Rasponi...' might occasion a glare in the direction of her father and a toss of the head that tells us there have already been arguments over this. We can then see that there is some steel in her character.

Dr Lombardi goes for the over-pious tone, eyes cast up, perhaps crossing himself. His voice and tone should always contrast with those of Pantaloon. Pace is one sure way of achieving this. The Doctor is ponderous, Pantaloon quicker and more impatient in general.

Whatever Pantaloon's regrets over the loss of such a rich suitor, he has moved on and gone for the next best option as quickly as possible. He is also pleased that this indulges his daughter's wishes. Above all, his tone shows his practicality and lack of sentiment.

Brighella has overheard this interchange and is intrigued. He lived in Turin himself and knows the family. Before Beatrice's entrance, then, we are already interested in her. Brighella admires her spirit and her flouting of convention by riding a horse astride, in man's clothing. Scandalous behaviour in general is hinted at. Her brother Federigo must have caught them embracing, or similar, and this was not done in an age where women were chaperoned until marriage and not left alone with a man. Thus, to defend her honour he challenged her lover [Florindo], but was killed himself.

Of all the Commedia characters, Brighella is the most toned down in this play. Following Goldoni's treatment of him, this character in future comedies by other playwrights, transmuted to the curious by-stander, who commented to the audience on the action, sometimes philosophising on it. There is still enough in the script to give him the rough edges of the Commedia scoundrel. Or he can be played more tamely, as the bystander. This will be your choice to make.

If there is something brigand-like about Brighella [remember, Lee Hall had him with bare torso, braces and a fag hanging out of his mouth] it could explain Pantaloon's reaction to him when he snaps 'It's only right and proper' earlier and his response here 'In the very middle,' which sounds like a put-down - tone of 'why do you want to know anyway?'

Try Brighella's lines:

narrow-eyed, as if casting about for something that might benefit him in

**this juicy bit of scandal
genuinely shocked and sorry that a devoted brother should die through
no fault of his own**

Whichever way it is said, Pantaloon has little time for Brighella and gets rid of him by asking him to go and prepare food. He soon realises that the phrase 'choice specialities' might have given an impression he doesn't want. Pantaloon is first and foremost the miser.

What is Pantaloon doing during Brighella's boastful speech about his culinary skills. Clearly, as well as being inn-keeper, Brighella is himself a cook. And one who considers himself the best. Think celebrity chefs on modern TV and then add that hoarse Brighella voice. Pantaloon will react with growing alarm as he listens. From 'feast fit for kings' onwards we should see how scared he is that this might actually cost him a lot of money! Hence his plea for simple fare - just bread and soup.

Thinking about the cost of things has made Pantaloon jumpy, so when there is a knock on the door he is terrified that it will be relatives who will need feeding as well.

Pantaloon's voice in Commedia goes high when he is stressed. **Try the whole comic interchange from the knock to 'let's hope it's not relatives, eh?':**

**with exaggerated panic, trembling, etc to show his Commedia-style
fear of spending**

**with one of his famous flash rages - Pantaloon likes to be in control of
situations**

**an edge of nervousness, but obviously trying to master himself, the
voice tight and controlled**

**You could play with Smeraldina either not responding to the knock
except to watch her master through cynical eyes, or actually starting
towards the door, but obviously not quickly enough for her master's liking.**

**Dr Lombardi could say his line resonantly pompous, as if imparting a
fascinating new fact or puzzled, worried at Pantaloon's dismay.**

Having played with the dialogue, decide on the combination that works best.

**Remember the preliminary work on the lovers - how they want above all to
touch but are liable to faint - or at least swoon - if they actually do so. This
exercise might be useful here, where the pair want to leave the room to be on
their own, hoping they will be allowed to since Pantaloon is distracted.
Without upstaging, keep this sort of approach up as they also try to sidle
towards an exit.**

Smeraldina is always above her station - the pert maid - a character that Moliere adopted and took to wonderful heights in his plays, inspired by Commedia models. Here she is clearly miffed that the 'servant with a message' has not divulged it to her. **Put this sense of outrage into her 'It's a servant with a message...' speech.**

Pantaloon responds with his own outrage. What is she thinking of not sending him up?

Try Smeraldina's 'All right, I'll show him up, sir.':

cheekily - a bit of hesitation before 'sir'

tone of 'keep your hair on', casting her eyes up

still miffed, and she doesn't like being ordered about - reluctantly

The choice you make will affect the way she exits.

Notice how Pantaloon divides what he says between the audience and whoever he is addressing. 'You must be joking, young lady. [To Clarice.] I'm not leaving those....' [To the audience.] Then back to Clarice again.