

THREE THEORIES OF THE ORIGIN OF THE
COMMEDIA DELL'ARTE

by

NANCY KAY PENNELL

B.A., McPherson College, 1986

A REPORT

submitted in partial fulfillment of the

requirements for the degree

MASTER OF ARTS

SPEECH

KANSAS STATE UNIVERSITY
Manhattan, Kansas

1989

Approved by:

Harold Shustel

Major Professor

LD
2665
.R4
ENGL
1989
P46
C. 2

A11208 305057

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgements.....ii
Chapter I: INTRODUCTION.....1
Chapter II: THE COMMEDIA DELL'ARTE.....3
Chapter III: THE FABULA ATELLANA THEORY.....7
Chapter IV: THE MIME THEORY.....49
Chapter V: THE MOUNTEBANK THEORY.....67
Chapter VI: CONCLUSION.....72
Chapter VII: WORKS CONSULTED.....74

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank Dr. Lewis Shelton and Dr. Carl Hinrichs for sacrificing their valuable time to serve on my graduate committee and for their support through my years at Kansas State. Thanks, too, to Dr. Norman Fedder for his encouragement and enthusiasm for this project. To my parents, Bill and Grace Pennell, I extend deep gratitude and love for their support and for their unfailing belief in my abilities. Also, thanks to Sean Dwyer, for his tolerance, his encouragement, his advice, and his assurances that this project could be completed. Special thanks to my major professor, Dr. Harold J. Nichols, whom I admire greatly and without whose help this report would not have become a reality.

INTRODUCTION

Bright colors, comic characters, rude comments, and the crack of a slapstick were all elements of the *commedia dell'arte* of mid-sixteenth century Italy. This lively, improvised form of entertainment was extremely popular with both the upper and lower classes. There are numerous facts available regarding the *commedia's* characters, some plotlines and titles, costumes, masks, and comic business, but there are no definite facts regarding its origin. There are, however, various theories which attempt to explain the origin of the *commedia dell'arte*. In this report I will describe the *commedia dell'arte* and examine each of the three main theories of its origin in detail, sharing why each of these theories is attractive. I will also share my findings on why none of these theories is universally accepted as the truth regarding the origins of the *commedia dell'arte*.

In order to examine these theories as clearly and thoroughly as possible, I will begin by describing the *commedia dell'arte*. Then I will explain each of the three theories, beginning with the oldest theory and ending with the most recent.

For the *fabula Atellana* theory, the oldest one, I will share information on the origins of improvisational

theatre to provide a background on the fabula and its origins. Then I will share historians' comparisons of the fabula Atellana to the commedia as well as attempts by two historians to trace theatre from the time of the fabula to the commedia.

II

THE COMMEDIA DELL'ARTE

The commedia troupes who wandered through Italy, France, Spain, England and Bavaria were made up of strolling acrobats, singers, dancers and comics (Lea 229). This energetic form of entertainment began in the mid-sixteenth century and continued to enjoy popularity, especially in France and in its home, Italy, until the second half of the eighteenth century (Oreglia 1).

The actor-manager was the "director" of the troupe; however, not much direction, at least as we know it, was necessary. To perform, the troupes used simple staging. Sometimes a curtain was suspended in a wooden frame to provide an entry for the performers. A low stage might be erected. Sometimes the troupes performed with no stage, using only open space.

On these simple stages actors improvised comic scenes using local dialects and tumblers' tricks (Lea 229). Within a set framework, scenarios in three acts were performed by stock characters, who peppered their dialogue with stock speeches and comic business, or lazzi. The lazzi became standardized because the same actors portrayed the same stock characters throughout their entire career. Memorized rhymed couplets ended each scene, so not all of the performance was improvised.

Most of the plots dealt with intrigues and disguises. Old men were often duped. It was popular to portray an old man attempting to marry off his daughter to an old crony of his, who was much older than his bride-to-be. The plot focused on the attempts of the girl and her servants to avoid matrimony (Schwartz 37). Sometimes it was a pair of young lovers whose thwarted attempts at uniting provided the humor.

Titles for the commedia pieces included: "The Two Old Twins," "The Jealous Old Man," "The Husband," "The Bride," "The Doctor Past Cure," "The Counterfeit Sorcerer," "The Pedant," and "The Counterfeit Servants" (Herrick 213).

The characters in the commedia dell'arte consisted of the following stock types: two old men (Pantalone and Dottor Graziano), two zanni, or servants, a Capitano, two pairs of lovers and a servant girl (Nicoll, Masks, Mimes, and Miracles 233). The young lovers were the straight, or serious, characters. They did not wear masks and wore the costume of the day (Nicoll, Masks, Mimes, and Miracles 233). Brockett writes that the straight characters were "witty, handsome and well-educated or naive and not-so-bright" (183).

The comic characters were far more interesting. These characters wore masks of a dark color with "big or fat noses," "little and bleary eyes," wrinkled foreheads

and bald heads (Nicoll, Masks, Mimes, and Miracles 233). Common types included braggart soldiers, old fathers, lawyers, pedants (learned bores), and doctors.

Pantalone was an elderly Venetian dressed in red, who was the father, husband or guardian. He was an "amorous old man like Zeus of the phylakes" (Hartnoll 62). Pantalone's elderly friend or rival was Il Dottore, or the Doctor. He was a Bolognese doctor or lawyer, a learned man who was noted for his stupidity.

Il Capitano, or the Captain, was akin to Plautus' Miles Gloriosus. He was a soldier, frequently a Spaniard, who enjoyed bragging, but was actually a coward. The Capitano had a long and crooked nose and an enormous mustache (Hartnoll 63).

The zanni characters were also stock characters, who went by a variety of names, but had basically the same characteristics. These included: Tartaglia, Scapino, Stupino, Trivelino, Mescolino, Scatolino, Colafronio, Pulcinella, Burattino, Gradelino, Brighella and Harlequin, or Arlecchino (Nicoll, Masks, Mimes, and Miracles 233). Brighella, dressed in green and white, was "cruel, libidinous and cynically witty" (Brockett 185). He had a hooked nose and mustache.

Pulchinella was a Neapolitan who was a servant, innkeeper or merchant. He was a man of contrasts:

foolishness and shrewdness, villainy and love, wit and dullness (Brockett 185). He had an enormous hooked nose, a humped back and wore a long pointed cap. Pulchinella was the ancestor of the English puppet character, Punch.

The best known zanni was Harlequin. Traditionally dressed in a multi-colored, diamond-patterned outfit, he carried a stick at his side which was used for beatings. It was known as a slapstick. Harlequin was a cunning yet stupid acrobat with a bald head and was usually at the center of the intrigues.

Although much is known about the characteristics of the *commedia dell'arte*, its origin is uncertain. Numerous theories exist which attempt to explain the origin of the *commedia*. This report shall examine the three most popular theories from the longest held belief to the most recent.

III

THE FABULA ATELLANA THEORY

One of the oldest and most popular theories is that the *commedia dell'arte* derived from the *fabula Atellana* of ancient Rome. The scholars who support this theory believe that the Atellan farce continued through the Dark Ages and resurfaced in the mid-sixteenth century virtually unchanged since two to four centuries B.C.

The argument for this theory consists of two parts: recognizing similarities between the two forms of entertainment and tracing the *fabula Atellana* to the *commedia*. Some historians do not commit themselves to this theory, but do make comparisons of the two forms and provide similarities. In order to examine this theory thoroughly, however, we must first examine the origins of improvised comedy as well as the *fabula Atellana*.

Most of our knowledge of this ancient form of entertainment comes from written accounts. The works of Pomponius and Novius, who committed the farces to paper, exist, but only in fragments. (There are numerous titles in existence and single sentences or bits of dialogue on which to base some of our information.) Other information comes from letters recording the antics of the comics.

From what we can learn from these sources, the *fabula Atellana* was a rustic comedy which focused on poking fun

at both country folk and political leaders; however, political jests were more common later, in the first century A.D., when the farces were performed in Rome.

Most theorists are in agreement on at least a few aspects of the *fabula Atellana*. All agree it was a comedy with farcical elements, a simple plot, at least some improvisation, and at least four stock characters portrayed by masked performers. From this brief description of the *fabula Atellana* one can readily see parallels with the *commedia dell'arte*, parallels which some historians feel provide a sufficient basis to support their claim that the *fabula Atellana* influenced the *commedia*.

F.H. Sandbach provides additional information on the Atellan farce and its predecessors. In earliest theatre, Etruscan players danced and young men began imitating them while "bandying jokes in rough verses" (Sandbach 104). The Romans called these players "histriones"; the Etruscans called them "ister". Young amateurs alternated irregular and unpolished improvised lines which resembled the Fescennine verses (Sandbach 104).

Brander Matthews writes that the Roman appreciation of primitive comedies was developed by their Etrurian neighbors, who are often credited with bringing theatre in all forms to Rome. The Atellan farces were crude and not

unlike the rustic plays of Grecian vintage festivals which were also frequently vulgar.

Margarete Bieber suggests that the phylakes were the forerunners of the Atellan farce, an argument which will be examined later. Prior to the phylakes, in 364 B.C., Etruscan dancers and flute players were invited to Rome for a "ceremony of expiation to ward off pestilence" (Bieber 148). The Etruscan mimetic dancers, accompanied by double pipes, or tibia, blended with the Fescennine verses to form the Saturae or the Fabulae Saturae. Bieber quotes Livy as writing that these consisted of a medley of dance and crude scenes, but they were not like the Greek satyr plays (148).

Allardyce Nicoll has done extensive research into the origins of the commedia and the origins of improvised comedy. He writes that the connecting link between the Greeks, the Oscans and the Romans is the phylax vase. He tells us that the original type of Dorian farce was interpreted by the phylakes and was an influence on the Oscans in the fourth century B.C. (Masks, Mimes, and Miracles 65).

Nicoll believes there is a connection between the phylakes and the Atellan farce. The fabula Atellana was so named because it originated in Atella which was near the Greek settlements where the phylakes flourished

(Nicoll, Masks, Mimes, and Miracles 67).

Nicoll mentions that Diomedes likened the fabula Atellana to the Greek satyr play in terms of theme, language and comic style. There were differences, however. The satyr play employed satyrs or comic persons similar to satyrs in its roles. The fabula Atellana introduced Oscan types, local characters, like Maccus, in its mythological burlesque (Nicoll, Masks, Mimes, and Miracles 66).

George Duckworth suggests the possibility that the commedia dell'arte was a descendant of the fabula Atellana. He traces improvised comedy to the Fescennine verses, mentioned earlier by other historians. These verses were "rustic jests in alternate verse" and became so scurrilous that they were restrained by law (Duckworth 4). The Fescennine verses were commonly used at weddings.

Similar to the Fescennine verses was the Etruscan dance after it had been copied by the Roman youth. They added rough dialogue and gestures to the music, utilizing repartee and impromptu verse (Duckworth 5).

These developed into the Saturia, a mixture of music, song, dance and dialogue with no real plot, accompanied by a flute (Duckworth 5). These were eventually displaced by plays with plots, known as "argumentum", which were introduced by Livius Andronicus (Duckworth 5). An old

tale, recounted by a few of the authors cited in this report, tells of an occasion when Andronicus strained his voice from too many encores. He employed the use of a boy to sing for him while he gestured to the music. Duckworth writes that this practice was similar to the Greek satyr plays, but it was also similar to the actions of the mimes.

James Allen traces the improvisational comedy which developed into the *commedia* to the Fescennine verses. Horace wrote of these verses saying they were so named because they originated in the village of Fescennium in Etruria. Another possible source of the name is the word "fascinum", which Allen says was a phallic symbol used to avert the evil eye. Whatever the source of its name, Allen writes that these verses originated at rural festivals of the harvest and vintage (22).

At first the Fescennine verses were improvisational and featured "coarse wit, personal banter and rustic raillery", but Allen writes that they later degenerated into "lampoons so virulent and scurrility so libelous" that a law was issued to restrain them (22). The verses were responsive and, according to Allen, performed in the old Saturnian meter (22).

The Fescennine verses were replaced by an improved version called the *Saturae*. These performances included

dancing and music and were also composed in the Saturnian meter. The Saturae featured scenes of daily life. Although there was no connected plot, the entertainment was filled with "good-humored hilarity" (Allen 22). The Saturae disappeared soon after the introduction of Greek literature, approximately 264 B.C.

The Saturae were improved upon and became the *fabula Atellana*, according to Allen. Although they enjoyed a prominent position in Rome in the last century of the Republic, they had already existed for some centuries. Allen writes that the farces were brought to Rome in 200 B.C. after the subjugation of Campania in the second Punic War; however, the farces were not given literary treatment until the time of Sulla, about the time of 100 B.C. (Allen 23).

Joseph Kennard believes that the *fabula Atellana*, which he calls "*favola atellana*", survived for centuries. He traces improvisational comedy to the *Saturna*, a combination of dialogue, or *diverbiu*, with music, singing and dancing. When the *Saturna* became licentious, a word which crops up frequently when referring to the improvised comedies, it was suppressed by law. He writes that satire was a "moral and didactic composition" which was often in dialogue and was the most purely Latin expression of Roman theatre (Kennard 5).

The fabula developed from the Saturna in the Etruscan city of Atella where it ridiculed the speech and local customs of its neighbor, Campania. These caricatures developed into absurd fixed stage personalities, or stock characters.

W. Beare also traces the development of improvised comedy back to the Fescennine verses, but provides some additional, and sometimes contradictory, information. The verses, from Fescennius, derived their name from "Fascinum", which Beare says means "black magic," and/or from the word "fari", meaning "to speak" (Beare 13). This could translate to mean "to speak of magic spells" (Beare 13). The people of this ancient time were quite superstitious and believed in the necessity of averting the evil eye. In order to oppose this threat a ridiculous or obscene object was necessary and thus the phallus was introduced. Since comedy developed from fertility magic, the phallic symbol is not surprising (Beare 13).

As mentioned earlier, the fabula Atellana was said to have originated in Atella which bordered Campania. Beare writes that the Campanians had a reputation for jests and merriment. Diomedes wrote that the name derived from the town of the Osci which was called Atella. This was nine miles from Capua, which Beare says was on the road to

Naples. The Oscan language was an Italic dialect akin to Latin (Beare 137).

Joseph Taylor writes that the fabula Atellana actors were young men from Atella, which is now Sant'Arpino in Campania. He agrees with Allen that the fabula Atellana came from the Saturna (Saturnae), which came from the Fescennine verses.

Bieber mentions that Campania was known as a "city of queerness where people do strange, inept things" and was known as "Abdera," "Gotham" and "Schildberg" (148). Many of these strange characteristics carried over when the fabula moved to Rome.

Sandbach states that, like the commedia dell'arte, the fabula Atellana possessed stock characters with masks; greed, gluttony and folly were also major components of this form of entertainment. The improvised dialogue fit into the predetermined scenario, which was developed with "rough jokes and raillery" (Sandbach 105). All of these aspects were witnessed in the commedia dell'arte of the mid-sixteenth century, which leads one to believe there may indeed be a connection between the two forms (Sandbach 105).

Allen refers to four stock characters: Pappus, the pantaloon, Bucco, stupid and swaggering, Maccus, the blockhead, and Dossennus, the hunchbacked, cunning knave

(23-24). He adds that these characters are analogous to the *commedia dell'arte* and the clown and harlequin of the "modern" pantomime show (24).

Beare gives some additional insight into the stock characters of the *fabula Atellana*. He supports the idea that Pappus was called Casnar by the Osci, citing Varro as his source. Another ancient source is Apuleius, who wrote that Maccus and Bucco were the fools. Maccus was either stupid, a guzzler, or both. Bucco derived his name from "bucca", meaning "fat cheeks" (Beare 139). This could signify that his character was greedy, stupid, boastful, or all of these traits.

The stock characters shared a family resemblance; they were coarse, greedy clowns, some of whom possessed animal characteristics. Their gluttony, drunkenness, horse-play and obscene jests were highly amusing to the primitive and rustic audience (Beare 139).

The characters had their differences, too. Pappus, as the grandfather-type, was an old fool who, according to Varro, appeared in only some of the *Atellanae* (Beare 140). Dossennus is supposedly greedy, cunning and hunchbacked because of the possibility that his name derived from "dorsum", or back. He may or may not have been the same character as Manducus, whose name comes from "mando", meaning "to chew" or "chever". Festus describes him as an

ogre with huge jaws which frequently champed together, a gaping mouth and chattering teeth (Beare 140).

These characters appeared in *tricae Atellanae*, intrigues, wherein disguise and masquerade were recurring themes with stock patter. This is identical to the practice of the *commedia dell'arte* to use intrigue, disguise, and stock patter for recurring themes. Also similar to the *commedia* was the fondness for "introducing topical allusions, and of alternately propounding riddles and trying to guess the answers" (Beare 141).

In describing the stock characters of the *fabula Atellana*, Duckworth does not stray vastly from the descriptions given by the other authors. He does, however, add that Pappus, or Casnar, was not only an old man, but an "easily deceived dotard" as well (11). This characteristic is seen in the *commedia* character of Pantalone, who is often ridiculed for loving a younger woman, being a cuckold and similar humiliations.

Manducus may not have been part of the Atellan farce, according to Duckworth. He also alludes to the fact that there may have been female stock characters, but if they existed, they were portrayed by men (Duckworth 12).

Nicoll goes into a bit more detail with the stock characters of the Atellan farce. Bucco's name means "fat cheeks", but according to Graziana, Bucco means "fat" and

"foul-mouthed" (Nicoll, Masks, Mimes, and Miracles 69).

K. Sittl describes Bucco as a "talkative, vehement man", and refers to the notion of earlier times that people with large cheeks were said to be babblers and idle talkers (Nicoll, Masks, Mimes, and Miracles 69).

Dossennus and Manducus may have been one and the same. The character had a row of large teeth placed in an exaggerated jaw, a long, hooked nose, and a wart on his forehead (Nicoll, Masks, Mimes, and Miracles 70).

Where Manducus was sly and cunning, Maccus was stupid, as his name suggests. His name may have come from "corn" or "macaroni", a term for a gross and crude rustic, according to Theofilo Folengo (Nicoll, Masks, Mimes, and Miracles 72). In addition to his stupidity, Maccus was a "blustering rustic" who was a glutton with a taste for "stodgy food" (Nicoll, Masks, Mimes, and Miracles 72). Nicoll writes, "If it be true that the macaronic poetry ultimately derives from him, than Maccus preserved his existence, if only in shadowy forms, up to the period of the Renaissance [sic]" (Masks, Mimes, and Miracles 73). Dieterich supports this idea and adds that Buffalmacco or Macco was a comic character in early fifteenth-century fiction.

Albrecht Dieterich, quoted in Mimes, Masks and Miracles, adds another character to the fabula, one who

appears to be similar to the commedia dell'arte's Pulchinella. Cicirrus was a "cock type" as seen in early Attic animal figures and the birds of the phylakes vases. Nicoll continues his comparison with the phylakes by saying that the Atellanae may be maskless as in the phylakes, but the main comic characters normally were masked (Nicoll, Masks, Mimes, and Miracles 75). Props were used in both forms.

Bieber provides additional information about the stock character types. She writes that the Greek Pappus became the Oscan Casnar and was later the Latin Senex. In each case the character was a grandfather-type. Bucco, as well as being a braggart, was a stupid dunce. Maccus was a glutton and Dossennus, a mischievous deformed man, was often a schoolmaster or learned man in his roles. These types come from the Greek phylakes, which had their origin in the old Doric farce (Bieber 148). She also believes that the fabula actors used the phylakes stage.

According to Kennard, the Atellan farce reached its pinnacle in Rome with the characters Macco, Pappo, Buccone, Manduco and Casnare (5). These names differ slightly from those provided by other sources, and Kennard does not cite a source for these names, but one can readily see the similarities.

Like the other authors, however, Kennard also

supports the belief that the fabula Atellana became more offensive the longer it enjoyed popularity. He writes, "Because of the licentious speech permitted this form of dramatic composition, these masks became extremely popular and survived for centuries" (5).

Michael Coffey writes that Roman theory saw a connection between the fabula Atellana and the Greek satyr play. Like the satyr play as well as many other forms of early comedy, the fabula were sometimes crude and offensive. However, the rulers of the day were often quite tolerant of jests pointed at their royal selves. Coffey writes, "According to Suetonious, Nero was unexpectedly tolerant of scurrilities against himself, including an Atellan actor's jibe at the manner of the death of Claudius and Agrippina" (264).

The fame of the fabula spread to Rome around 200 B.C. after the independence of Campania was overthrown in 216 B.C. (Taylor 199). In Rome the young patricians began acting in the afterpieces, which were reminiscent of the Greek satyr plays. Like the commedia after it, the Atellan farce was performed with only the main plot features determined before the performance. Unlike other forms of entertainment in its day, the fabula Atellana never took its themes from Greek life (Taylor 199).

In the first century A.D. the Atellanae were still

performing in Rome with their stock characters: Maccus, Bucco, Pappus, Manducus and Dossennus. The actors traded "riddles, quips and topical allusions" as before, but now their status was no greater than other performers. After Pomponious and Novius the fabula may have returned to its original sub-literary, semi-improvisational form. It was not heard of after the first century, according to Beare (239).

The Atellan farces were controlled by young Roman citizens. Because they were not professional actors, they did not lose the membership of their tribe as did professional actors, and they also retained the right and honor to serve in the army.

Livy wrote that the young Roman citizens who had performed the fabula Atellana were forced to abandon amateur drama due to professional competitions which were occurring then. Beare writes that after the time of Andronicus the old Fescennine verses were revived, with their exchange of repartee and blended with the fabula Atellana, which Beare writes never fell into professional hands (141).

Beare also writes that Velleius describes L.Pomponious as the founder of the fabula Atellana; Pomponious was active in 89 B.C. (143). Seventy titles of works by Pomponious exist; forty-four titles of Novius'

works survive from 91 B.C.

The Atellan farce existed through the time of Cicero, Augustus and into the Empire. Rewritten in Latin, the farces replaced the Roman Saturas and the Greek satyr play as exodia, or afterpieces (Bieber 148). In Latin, the fabula Atellana was introduced into literary form in 89 B.C. by C. Novius and L. Pomponius. Sandbach says that originally the Atellan farces were performed in the Oscan language, but as this was an Italic language which could not be understood in Rome, it was performed in Latin or a modified dialect when it was performed in Rome (Sandbach 104-105). Duckworth, however, says the fabula Atellana was still sometimes performed in the Oscan language in the classical period (10).

These short farces were generally 300-400 verses long, written in the regular meters of Roman comedy, although at first they were metered like the Saturas. The Atellanae included farcical situations, cheating, trickery, riddles, tomfoolery, double entendres and obscenities (Duckworth 11). By the first century, Duckworth writes that the farces had assimilated a bit to the fabula palliata, the regular Roman comedy which was adapted from Greek Comedy and the fabula togata, a comedy with Latin settings and characters (11).

Bieber says that the Oscan farce transmitted to Roman

farce, but the fabula went to Rome in its Oscan form. Here we have characters which are reminiscent of phylakes characters, those of Greek mythology. Maccus, the greedy blockhead resembled Apollo. Dossennus, the clever hunchback, was similar to high-backed Heracles. Bucco, the braggart, was Iolaus; Pappos, known in Oscan as Casnar, was an old man often seen in earlier forms of comic entertainment (Bieber 131). She writes, "These are types which can be used in any doltish farce. They were revived in the Italian Commedia dell'arte" (Bieber 131).

Because the actors attacked local conditions and scoffed their contemporaries, they wore masks to conceal their identity. Taylor writes that "regular" actors of this time performed unmasked (179). He adds that in the period of Cicero, Roscius wore a mask because he was cross-eyed, but we may never know if this was true.

Beare writes that the actors in farce wore masks and resembled bald fisherman or bald messengers. He refers to the farce as "a type of Punch and Judy show with stock types": a "clown", a "guzzler" and a "gaffer" in ridiculous situations (Beare 25).

Bieber, like the other authors, refers to the fact that the Atellan farce was quite popular in the time of the Empire and totally displaced comedy. The masked actors were sometimes chosen for roles because of

possessing "abnormally ugly" bodies, which added to the audience's amusement (Bieber 248).

Sometimes the actors were as scary or offensive as they were ugly. Although the farce was popular under Trajan and Hadrian, one fabula actor attacked Caligula and was sentenced to be burned to death in the amphitheater. A fearsome character was Lamia, a female character which none of the other authors in this research mentioned, who "swallowed naughty children who were pulled from her body" (Bieber 248).

Sandbach notes that in the early first century Pomponius and Novius wrote the texts for the short afterpieces. All that remains in existence, however, are fragments, titles, and single lines, which featured coarse, unusual vocabularies and alliteration. Some of the titles Sandbach lists include: "Maccus the Innkeeper," "Maccus the Soldier," "Maccus in Exile," "Bucco Adopted," "Pappus' Bride," "A Nanny-Goat," and "The Fullers" (105).

From these titles one can see that Maccus was an especial favorite with the crowd because he is the title character for many of the farces. One can also see evidence of the stock characters.

Some Dionysiac subject matter may be evidenced by some of the titles of the farces: "The Ass," "The She-goat," "The Syrians," "The Transalpine Gauls," "The

Fishermen," "The Slave in Prison," and "He Who Was Bound" (Nicoll, Masks, Mimes, and Miracles 68). In addition to these subjects and themes of daily life, the farces satirized foreigners and did mythological burlesque. "Hercules a Receiver of Money" is one title which displays this theme. Herakles was a character who was frequently the object of ridicule in the phylakes (Nicoll, Masks, Mimes, and Miracles 69).

Some of the titles mentioned only by Beare include: "Maccus the Maid," "Maccus the Exile," "Maccus," "The Bride of Pappus," "Pappus Defeated at the Poll," "The Pig," "The Sow," "Hog(g) Sick," "Hog(g) Well," "The Woodpile," "A-hoeing," "The Vine-gatherers," "The She-goat," "All in White," or "The Candidate," "The Pimp," "The Inspector of Morals," "Phoenissae," "Marsyas," "Agamemnon," "The Counterfeit," "Hetaera," "Adelphi," "Synephebi," and "The Boy Favorite" (143-144). These titles suggest topics of rustic life, town life, burlesques of tragedy and relationships to other forms of comedy such as the palliata or New Comedy, the Hellenized togata of Afranius or with the mimes, who will be dealt with in depth later in this report (Beare 144).

The titles Duckworth refers to represent country life, titles from festivals ("Kalendae Martiae"), titles from districts ("Campani" and "Galli Transalpini"),

mythological titles ("Andromacha," "Hercules the Tax Collector" and "The Award of Arms"), and some titles which resemble those of regular comedy ("Citharista-The Music Girl," "Adelphi-The Brothers," and "Hetaera-The Courtesan") (Duckworth 11).

Bleber's list of some of the titles provides insight into favorite characters and typical scenarios: "The Rustic," "The Farmer," "The Cow," "The She-Donkey," "The Pig," "The Uncle," "The Legacy Hunter," "The Twins," "The Wedding," "The Fortune Teller," "The Auger," "The Doctor," "The Cithara Player," "The Painters," "The Fishers," "The Fullers," "Maccus and the Soldier," "The Twin Macchi," "Pappus the Farmer," "The Two Dossenni," and "Bucco the Gladiator" (160). From these titles we can see that the *fabula* dealt with themes of rustic life, social classes, professions or tradesfolk, or civic and family life. Many of these same themes are seen in the *commedia dell'arte*.

Some of these same themes are seen in the work of Plautus, who was greatly influenced by the *fabula*, so much so that he adopted the name of Maccus, a *fabula* stock character, as his middle name, Maccius. Some of the characters appear in his plays. Dossennus was used for parasites, as in "Persa," or "The Persian," where the character is called "Saturio". Casnar types appear in several comedies and Manducus or Bucco is seen in *Rudens*

(Bieber 151).

The Atellanae were performed after the tragedies, serving as "afterpieces" to "relieve the mental strain of an audience unnerved by the horrors of tragedy" (Taylor 198). Although the fabula Atellana was satiric like the satyr plays, it was not as coarse as the Fescennine verses.

These short afterpieces were performed until the latest period of the Empire, but by that time had been replaced in the public favor by the mimes.

As mentioned earlier, there are parallels between the phylakes and the fabula Atellana. Both featured scenes of everyday life and Duckworth says both forms used masks (13). The Dorian Herakles of the phylakes resembles Bucco; Odysseus is similar to Dossennus.

Although there are similarities between the phylakes and the fabula Atellana, Duckworth writes, "It is unwise to identify the fabula Atellana with the phylakes, as some scholars have done, but the Greek plays had a decided effect upon the Italian farces at an early date" (13). He adds that the area around Naples, which was only a few miles from Atella, had been Greek for centuries (Duckworth 13).

Several theorists compare the fabula Atellana and the commedia, but make no definite statements that the

commedia was a descendant of the fabula. Allen writes that the fabula Atellana featured simple plots using the life of country towns and villages for subject matter. Unlike the forms of improvisational theatre mentioned earlier, the actors in the Atellan farces wore masks as did the actors in the commedia dell'arte of the mid-sixteenth century.

Giacomo Oreglia points out some of the similarities between the fabula Atellana and the commedia dell'arte in his book, The Commedia dell'arte. Pantalone of the commedia resembles Pappus and other varieties of old men seen in the plays of Plautus, Terence, and Aristophanes. If one believes that Plautus and Terence were influenced by the fabula and that Aristophanes was influenced by the satyr plays which influenced the fabula, one may suggest that Pantalone was certainly an ancestor of Pappus.

Pulchinella, according to Oreglia, was originally from Acerra in Campania, where he was known as Pulchinella Cetrula, from the word "citrullo", which means "stupid" (Oreglia 92). Pulchinella was derived from "Pullicino", a diminutive for a newborn chick, and was a typical Neapolitan who spoke with a clucking voice (Oreglia 92).

Pulchinella is similar to Maccus of the Atellan farce. Both had beak-like noses and Maccus was sometimes called "pullus gallinaceus" because he tried to chirp like

chickens (Oreglia 92). Pulchinella is also similar to the deformed hunchback Doxenus (Dossennus), the covetous Bucco, and the glutton Pappus.

Nicoll is another historian who compares the fabula and the commedia. The fabula may have been phallegoric and there is speculation that the commedia was as well. Both forms employed stock characters and stock comic business, known as "lazzi" in the days of the commedia. Both used intrigue as a frequent theme. Nicoll notes that some fabula performances were "polished and delicate", using "mock serious discourse on trivial subjects" (Masks, Mimes, and Miracles 76). This practice was also seen in the commedia. Both forms were occasionally performed at banquets.

Another parallel with the commedia is seen in a fragment from Novius' "Phoenissae" which reads, "To arms! I'm going to kill you now with my cudgel of straw", which in the original reads, "Sume arma, iam te occidam clava scirpea" (Nicoll, Masks, Mimes, and Miracles 77). The idea of the chopped straw is seen again in the character known as Pagliazzo, Pagliaccio, or Pagliacci, whose name means "chopped straw"; this character appeared centuries after the fabula Atellana (Nicoll, Masks, Mimes, and Miracles 77). Nicoll says:

Perhaps in doing this we are over-adventurous

and over-credulous, but the fact remains that someone is to 'kill' another with 'a cudgel of straw'-Harlequin's blunt baton and Pagliacci's name fifteen centuries before their time.

(Masks, Mimes, and Miracles 77)

Nicoll adds further evidence to support his theory. He points to the similarities between the characters of Manducus and Punch, or Pulchinella. Both characters had warts on the nose and cheek; these warts were shown on the mask of the commedia character.

Nicoll cites various sources that attempt to prove the existence of the fabula Atellana through the centuries. In 55 B.C. Cicero wrote to a friend, referring to it as though it were a thing of the past, "yet the Atellanae are still seen flourishing in the first century A.D." (Nicoll, Masks, Mimes, and Miracles 77-78).

In the sixth century Lydus refers to the Atellanae as afterpieces in a "living form" (Nicoll, Masks, Mimes, and Miracles 78). This led Nicoll to write, "...it is not entirely fanciful, as some modern scholar-skeptics suppose, to trace the influence of the Atellanae down to the period of the Renaissance [sic]" (Masks, Mimes, and Miracles 77).

Nicoll states that the fabula can be traced up to a late period in the Dark Ages (Masks, Mimes, and Miracles

164). He also refers to other theorists who believe that the fabula Atellana was at least a partial influence on the commedia dell'arte: Maurice Sand (1915), A. Bonilla y San Martin, C. Stoppato and V. de Amicis (1882) (Nicoll, Masks, Mimes, and Miracles 214). Most of the theorists who attributed the commedia dell'arte to the fabula were from the eighteenth century, however.

Maurice Sand wholeheartedly supports the theory that the fabula Atellana was the source of the commedia. He provides a thorough explanation of his theory, giving more detail to this area than any other source used in this report. His argument can be examined in two parts: tracing the improvised comedy and comparing the fabula and the commedia.

In tracing the development of improvised comedy Sand relates information on Susarion, an ancient Greek who directed acting troupes in Icaria and went out following the company's booths and charlots through the cities of Greece in 800 B.C. The troupe was represented by a "slave with shaven head, drunkard rubicund of face, brutalised by libations, an obese glutton, who tumbles incessantly" (Sand 9). Comic poets, such as Achaeus, Magnes and Timocreon, wrote "scripts" to be performed with comic dances, or cordaces, and pantomimes (Sand 9).

Thespis was also in Icaria, but continued this

tradition centuries later. Often referred to as the first actor ever, Thespis led a troupe which performed brief dramas and comedies with music. The actors performed with soot or dregs smeared on their faces, an early form of masking (Sand 9).

Sand continues to trace early troupes of comic and improvisational companies to the charlatans in Athens and Sparta in 400 B.C. These cunning salesmen set up trestles in public places and did comic routines to attract crowds to peruse the unguents which the charlatans sold. Sand notes two characters sometimes used by the charlatans: the thieving rogue and the foreign doctor who had a "ridiculous accent" (10).

While the charlatans entertained their prospective customers and the plays of Aeschylus were being performed in amphitheaters, other entertainment was also taking place. Equilibrists performed in the streets. This form of entertainment, according to Sand, derived from the rope dancers. The Greeks called them "shoenobates" and "acrobates" and the Romans referred to them as "funambuli", a term which appears again later in this report (Sand 10).

Sand continues his description of these early forms of entertainment which laid the groundwork for the fabula Atellana by labelling five categories of Greek actors,

some of which share similarities with the fabula Atellana: ethologues, biologues, cinedologues, hilarodes and phallophores. The ethologues were from Magna Graecia and Alexandria. Their entertainment displayed the lowest, most crude and most corrupt manners of the five categories. The biologues portrayed and parodied persons of their day. The cinedologues, also known as simodes and lysiodes performed pieces which were authored by Susim of Magnesia and Lysis. In this form of acting obscenities were not only spoken but performed as well.

The hilarodes, dressed in white with sandals and golden crowns, acted and sang to the accompaniment of stringed instruments. The phallophores of Sicyonia were less angelic; phalluses were worn by the actors who formed "phallic choirs" and performed scenes called "episodes" (Sand 10). The Sicyonian phallophores blackened their faces with soot, like the troupes of Thespis, or wore papyrus masks. Sand believes that these phallophores became the planipes of Rome and went on to become the sixteenth century Bergamese Harlequin (Sand 11).

Sand continues with his account of early comic entertainment. Since the actors performed near their audience, much of the customary costuming of the traditional Greek theatre was unnecessary. Robes did not need to be long and flowing to cover high-heeled cothurni

because the actors did not need to increase their height with the audience so close. Another reason for not wearing cothurni and long robes was that the actors had to be able to perform dancing and acrobatics.

Masks were not used as was the practice in traditional Greek theatre and in the later fabula Atellana; faces were simply smeared with whatever color was necessary to represent the character type portrayed, according to Sand. This would seem to be similar to the practice of using certain set character types in masking traditional Greek theatre; the character's personality traits would be known upon sight as the audience would recognize the set masks.

Sand writes that the fabula Atellana were the first comedies performed in Rome (11). He believes the farces derived from the satire and buffoon pieces of the Greeks. At this time the fabula Atellana consisted of dancing, singing, pantomime, and improvised jokes. Sand writes that it went on to eclipse the Saturae, the "indigenous and national comedy of Rome" (12). This seems to contradict his reference to the fabula Atellana as the first comedy in Rome.

Another form of comedy at this time was the tabernariae comedy. The subjects for these were lower orders and tavern life. These comedies were sometimes

performed barefoot as the planipediae, or mimes, performed. Sand writes that the actors in the fabula Atellana performed barefoot and were referred to as "comaediae planipediae" (12). This term, or the term "planipes" or "planipedes" is later seen in connection with the mimes.

Sand continues to trace the improvised comedy. He writes that mimes, mountebanks, and buffoons were in existence at the time of the State-subsidized theatre. The term "buffoon" comes from "buffo" which refers to "inflating the cheeks so that the smacks which the actor is to receive [will] make more noise, and induce to greater laughter" (Sand 19). The mountebanks were all over Italy and performed pieces similar to those of Atella. The pieces were written in verse which was sometimes sung to the accompaniment of a flute. The use of musical instruments was a common practice of the time.

Another form of entertainment which Sand describes as an influence on the fabula Atellana and later on the commedia dell'arte is the Roman nevrospastes, or marionettes. Greece was also said to have marionettes. Sand says the fabula Atellana borrowed "religious pomps" like the character Manducus from these ancient marionettes (19). M. Charles Magnin is quoted by Sand as suggesting:

a sort of interchange [in Rome] between the

characters of the Atellanae and those of the theatre of the ancient marionettes, just as much more recently in France the masks of the Italian comedy mingled, and, as it were, duplicated themselves with the actors of the troop of Pollichinelle; so that it is not easy to know whether in certain roles marionettes preceded living actors or living actors preceded marionettes. (Sand 19)

The marionettes, which were brought to Greece from Egypt, were used in Roman religious ceremonies; they preceded games in the circus and the triumphs. The wooden statues with strings included Manducus, a sharp-toothed child-eater. Sand writes that the human-like head was a primitive type of Machecroute and Croquemitaine. This procession of marionettes was seen again in the Middle Ages in Turkey and mid-sixteenth century Italy (Sand 20).

It was through the marionettes and also puppets that the "traditions of farce and satire were preserved throughout the Middle Ages" (Sand 21). Mountebanks, always outfitted with the popular entertainment of the day, also had marionettes which were also called marmozets. These marionettes were in existence in 1550 when Burattino, one of the masks of the Italian comedy, was personified among them. The Italian marionettes were

called bagatelli or magatelli (Sand 21).

Sand continues to support the idea that the fabula developed into the commedia. He writes that in the fourth and fifth centuries there were "little dramas" which were popular in Greece and Rome. Women and men performed in "intrigues of gallantry and misadventures of guardians or betrayed husbands (Sand 22). Philosophers and doctors were subject to ridicule. These same subjects and characters are also seen in the commedia dell'arte.

Sand writes, "It would be somewhere about the year 540 of Rome, that the Romans introduced the style of pieces known as Atellanae, with Maccus, Bucco, Pappus, and Casnar as the principle types, speaking Oscan, Greek and Latin" (Sand 107). Sand cites no sources for this date. Sand's account of the endurance of improvisational theatre continues. In 560 A.D. Cassiodorus wrote that mimes and pantomimes were still popular. Sand mentions next that the Church sought to abolish theatre, but gives no date. The next date Sand mentions is 1224, when St. Thomas Aquinas spoke of comedy existing in his day and wrote that it existed for centuries before. Pilgrims returning from the Crusades told of theatre they had seen in their travels.

Alongside the sacred mystery plays was comedy. Sand says this comedy was very much like the ancient Latin

mimes; it consisted of burlesque farces, improvisation, tumbling, dancing, etc. (24). Some of these activities were enjoyed by crowds in fifteenth century France. The audience watched mountebanks swallow swords or canes and do acrobatics. "Profane and gross pleasantries" were seen in the mystery plays of this time (Sand 25). It should be noted that burlesque farce, improvisation, acrobatics, and offensive words or actions were popular aspects of both the fabula Atellana, which preceded this period, as well as the commedia dell'arte, which followed this period. Sand suggests that some connection is possible.

Sand continues to lend his support to the theory. He writes that when pagan theatres were destroyed, along with comedy and tragedy, the fabula Atellana continued to perform in public places. Polichinelle and Harlequin were two of the characters seen in these performances. He writes that Polichinelle disappeared in the Middle Ages, but was revived by Silvio Fiorello, the leader of a troupe of comedians (Sand 112).

After his description of the continuance of comic, improvisational theatre since ancient times, Sand makes numerous comparisons and other statements regarding the fabula Atellana and the commedia dell'arte. He writes that "Pulchinella had never ceased to exist from the days of the Atellanae, in which he went by the name of Maccus,

the *minus albus*" (Sand 26). He also states that Pappus or Casnar of the Atellan farce, "the flouted and ridiculous old man, became Pantaloon, and later Cassandro" (Sand 25-27). The *zanni* of the *commedia*, Harlequin and Brighella, were derived from the *sanniones* of the *Atellanae*.

Sand describes Maccus, Bucco, Pappus and Casnar who spoke in Oscan, their regional dialect, Latin or Greek. Subject matter for these farces came from rustics, the manners of the peasants and the oddities of the city dwellers.

Maccus and Bucco were the two *sanniones*, or slave characters. The former was "lively, witty, insolent and a little ferocious"; the latter was a "self-satisfied flatterer, boaster, thief and coward" (Sand 107). Sand believes that Pulchinella of the *commedia dell'arte* is a combination of the two. He backs up his argument by stating that Ferdinand Fouque believes that Maccus corresponded with Harlequin, but more with the French Polichinelle. An additional supporter of this belief is Riccoboni, whom Sand quotes as saying, "No further proof is needed to assure me that I was not mistaken when I believed Polichinelle to be a direct descendant of the *Mimus Albus* of the *Atellanae* comedies" (111).

Maurice Sand writes that George Sand, another

historian, believes Polichinelle derived from the ancient Maccus. Both he and Riccoboni refer to a bronze statue which was discovered in Rome in 1727. Because this statue has a hooked nose with warts, a hunchback and a swollen belly, which seems to fit the description of Pulchinella or Polichinelle, they see this statue as positive proof that the commedia dell'arte was a child of the ancient fabula Atellana, according to Maurice Sand.

Masks were worn by the performers of the commedia and had not changed much from the masks worn by the ancient players. Sand writes that nightcaps hid hair to resemble the bald heads of the ancient mimes (27).

Costumes had changed very little as well. Phalluses continued to be worn by mimes and buffoons until the time of Louis XIII, as seen in Callot's illustrations in Les Petit Danseurs of Cerimonia, Smaraolo, Scaramuccia, Captain Spezza-Monti, etc. (Sand 27). Most characters in the commedia wore a mantle, il tabaro, but all "lackeys" wore short garments like the slave roles in the fabula Atellana. In the latter, togas and robes were reserved for nobles and old men.

Sand continues with his comparisons by stating that Harlequin's bat, or slapstick, and Pulchinella's club were merely modifications of the curved staff carried by peasants of the ancient Greek theatre. The ancient

influence was also seen in the modern planipes, the Bolognese Narcisino, who chatted with the public and scorned the manners of the day in their impromptu performances (Sand 28).

These similarities are sufficient for Maurice Sand to write:

These resemblances and many others would prove that the Commedia dell'arte is no more than the continuation of the theatre at Atella with its improvisations and its free and often licentious scenes, mingled with songs and pantomime. (28)

To add support to his claim, Sand writes of the desire of the people in the audience to be represented in the performances. Just as the fabula Atellana poked fun at various regions and the stock characters represented specific areas, the commedia also had representatives of various regions.

The province of Bergamo was represented by Harlequin and Brighella. Beltrame and Scapino were from Milan; Venice was represented by Pantaloon and Zacometo. Pulchinella, Scaramouche, Tartaglia, el Capitan and Biscegliese were from Naples. Rome was represented by Meo-Patacca, Marco-Pepe and Cassandrino, while Florence had Stenterello. Sicilians were pleased by the Baron, and Peppe-Nappa while folks from Bologna saw their

idiosyncrasies portrayed in the Doctor and Narcisino. Turin was represented by Gianduja; Calabria had Coviello and Glangurgolo (Sand 28).

This thorough representation of the provinces in the *commedia dell'arte*, as well as the other previously mentioned similarities, led Sand to declare:

Enough has been said to show that the Italian comedy is directly descended from the performances of the ancient Latin mimes; and the genre called *commedia dell'arte* in particular is none other than that of the *Atellanae*. (32)

Pierre Duchartre is another author who supports the theory of the *fabula Atellana* as the forefather of the *commedia*, and he provides some intriguing insights. He writes:

The cradle of the family [the *commedia dell'arte*] was the ancient city of Atella, in the Roman Campagna, and the gallery of ancestors shows, among others, Bucco and the sensuous Maccus, whose lean figure and cowardly nature reappear in *Pulchinella*. (Duchartre 18)

Duchartre also mentions Manducus the ogre, the *Miles Gloriosus* in Plautus' plays, who became the swaggering, braggart Captain or *Capitano* in the *commedia*, and Lamia, the "patron saint of Ghoul-go-betweens and scheming

mothers" (18).

Although the commedia used the principal stock characters of the Atellan farce, new types were also invented. Various regions were represented in the commedia. Bologna had Dottore. Venice, a city of merchants and adventurers, had Pantaloon and the Captain. The "sly booby, Harlequin, and the knave, Brighella, hailed from Bergamo (Duchartre 18).

Each character had his/her own characteristics in the commedia dell'arte. These included the manner of speaking, gesturing, intonations, dress, warts and moles. Duchartre writes that although there are many character names in existence for the commedia dell'arte, there was a limited number of character types.

These types included: Pulchinella, Captain, two old men (Pantalone and the Doctor), and two zannis, or valets (Harlequin and Brighella or Francatrippa). There were also the lovers, with women playing the female roles, unlike in the fabula Atellana. Women performed unmasked, but wore a "little black velvet loup to protect their beauty" (Duchartre 20).

Among these characters, Duchartre sees ancestors of the fabula Atellana. He traces Pulchinella back to Maccus and Bucco. In what is known of the physical appearance of the two ancient characters, Pulchinella might be viewed as

a combination. Maccus was "quick, witty, impertinent, ironical, and a bit cruel"; Bucco was "self-sufficient, fauning, silly, timid, boastful, and a thief" (Duchartre 208). The commedia character, Pulchinella, is drawn toward opposites due to his mixed parentage (Duchartre 208).

Riccoboni (1731), Ficoroni (1750), Flogel (1788), and other historians support the theory that the fabula Atellana continued through the commedia dell'arte (Duchartre 216). To explain why it is not common knowledge that the commedia descended from the fabula, Duchartre writes that people will carry on a behavior without knowing or caring where or when it originated. Duchartre writes:

It is not unusual to find them employing customs and locutions of speech which have come down to them from remote antiquity, and yet they remain unaware of the fact that they are perpetuating traditions; nor are they conscious of the real meaning underlying their words and habits.

(218)

Because the improvised comedies were often performed by peasants, especially in the ancient times, vagabonds and other less respected folk, it seems possible that they may not have questioned where their brand of entertainment

originated.

Not everyone agrees with this theory, obviously. Dr. Michele Scherillo is referred to frequently in Duchartre's book. Duchartre responds to Scherillo's criticism of the theory by writing:

It is true that Dr. Michele Scherillo in The Mask has contested (and also, more recently, M. Constant Mic) the ancient origins of the commedia dell'arte with no little wit and learning; but if we admit this point how are we to account for the fact that the Italian comedy was the only theatre in Europe which adopted the ancient custom of wearing the mask? And how, moreover, explain the striking similarity between the traits and gestures of Pulchinella in the seventeenth-century picture preserved in the museum of the Comedie Francaise and those of the statuette, supposed to be of Maccus, which was unearthed in the eighteenth century? (29)

Later in his book, however, Duchartre writes that Scherillo suggests "striking analogies between Pulchinella and his ancestors in the Atellanae plays may be explained as due to heredity and the genius of race handing down characters" (216). It seems from these sections quoted by Duchartre that Scherillo does not stand firmly on either

side of the issue.

The theory that the fabula Atellana continued through the Dark Ages and resurfaced in the commedia dell'arte of the mid-sixteenth century is the oldest theory on the origin of the commedia. It is an attractive theory because there are indeed many similarities between the two forms of improvisational comedy.

Both forms employed stock characters who were masked. Both forms used improvisation, but some of the comic business and certain monologues or dialogues were so frequently used that they were standardized, stock business and phrases. Both forms were short entertainments, usually not performed by professionals and usually not considered proper or learned entertainment. Both forms were also extremely popular with the local citizens who delighted in seeing their provinces represented in the comedies. Unlike other forms of theatre at that time which dealt with the classics, both the fabula and the commedia dealt with everyday life, the lives, albeit exaggerated, of their audience.

Both comic forms used similar titles for works and similar plots of intrigue and masquerade. Both also used characters with physical deformities and extreme personalities, especially braggarts, gluttons and buffoons. Both forms spread in popularity to other

regions; the fabula went to Rome and the commedia influenced France and England as well as touring in other countries. Both forms mocked the learned folk and/or entertainment of their day. Also, both forms utilized music and physical comedy as well as dialogue.

However, for all of their similarities, the connection between the fabula Atellana and the commedia cannot be proven. First, no records exist to prove a relationship. We may consider statues and vases as evidence of a sort; however, the chief form of evidence for the phylakes, which some say became the fabula and thus descended to the commedia is inaccurate. Oscar Brockett writes that the vases have now been redated to 400-325 B.C. This was a century before any known phylax plays were written (Brockett 53). Since some historians use these vases to help understand the fabula, this evidence suggests theorists may be basing their ideas on inaccurate information.

There are also several differences between the fabula and the commedia. The fabula was performed by men only; the commedia had females in the female roles. The set of lovers seen in the commedia is absent in the fabula, possibly because there were fewer known stock characters. The fabula never fell into professional hands according to most sources; amateurs, average citizens performed the

fabula Atellana. However, there is evidence that at least some commedia performers were professionals; some of these actors performed in the learned or serious comedies as well. Some sources also suggest that the fabula was first improvised, then committed to text, and that with the commedia the reverse was true.

We are also unsure whether the fabula characters usually appeared together in the same afterpiece as we know that the commedia characters did. Pantalone, Dottore, Capitano, Harlequin and company obviously appeared in the same plays together because there are scripts in existence. We do not know if Maccus, Pappus, Bucco and Manducus appeared together because only fragments of scripts exist. No titles mention more than one of the characters. Beare writes that "we have no evidence that any two of them took part in the same performance except one of the literary fragments, which shows Dossennus as present in a piece entitled 'Maccus the Maiden'" (140). We are also unsure if the costumes in the fabula were stock costumes unique to each character.

Another theory on the origin of the commedia is the idea that the mime was its forefather. This is similar to the fabula theory in that both point out similarities between the ancient entertainments and the commedia. Both theories also attempt to trace the ancient form through

the Dark and Middle Ages.

IV

THE MIME THEORY

The theory that the mime continued from ancient Rome through the Dark Ages and resurfaced as the *commedia dell'arte* is the second oldest theory after the *fabula* theory, and it continues to be popular with scholars and historians today. Allen defines the mime performance as a crude farce, scenes from low life, with song, dance and dialogue (24). He writes that it was not cultivated as a literary type until the last century of the Republic.

Allen writes that the mimes, which replaced the *fabula Atellana* in the public's favor, maintained its popularity until the end of the Empire in both the West and the East (25). This form of entertainment featured a chief actor, or "archimimus". He, along with some of the others, was a "fat-cheeked booby" with a shaven head (Allen 26).

Some theorists support the idea that the *fabula* developed into the mimes. Kathleen Lea writes that Vincenzo De Amicis wrote of the *sanniones*, generally associated with the *fabula Atellana*, in conjunction with the mimes. He said they were bald, had their faces stained with soot and wore sandals; this is similar to the shaven heads, black masks and the flat shoes of the *zanni* in the *commedia dell'arte* (Lea 227).

Nicoll supports the theory that the fabula Atellana blended with the mimes and developed into the commedia. He writes:

It seems more probably that this stupid Zanni [of the commedia] is a direct descendant, with a lineage through medieval secular drama, of the classic sannio, the stupidus, who, in his turn was connected with the Atellan figures and with the bald-headed mimes of Greece. (Masks, Mimes, and Miracles 266)

Of the mimes, Bieber writes that they originated in Sicily with men and women as acrobats and dancers. The first mention of the mimetic dancers in Rome dates from 212 B.C. (Bieber 159). She writes that "short, indecent plots or burlesques of lower class city life" were popular (159). This differs from the fabula, which dealt with country life. She adds that the mimes had to be sensational in subject matter and staging in order to compete with the circus and gladiators of ancient Rome.

Duckworth agrees with Bieber's description of the mimes. He adds that the mime arrived in Rome no later than 211 B.C. and took over the themes of the fabula Atellana and regular comedy (Duckworth 14). The themes of adultery and the fat, stupid husband who is ridiculed were popular. These themes were often popular with the

audiences for the commedia.

Duckworth believes that the fabula did not become the commedia, but was incorporated in to the mimes. He writes:

It would be attractive to look upon the commedia dell'arte as a survival and elaboration of the ancient Roman fabula Atellana, but the Atellanae seem to have died out in the late Roman Empire, being absorbed by the mime, which persisted throughout the Middle Ages. (Duckworth 399)

Reich believes that the fabula Atellana "perished in the Dark Ages, but pure mime persisted in provinces of the Western Empire and in the East" (Nicoll, Masks, Mimes, and Miracles 214). He adds that in the West the mime tended to decay, but led to the French farce, interludes in literature of the fourteenth century (Nicoll, Masks, Mimes, and Miracles 214).

Benjamin Hunningher argues that it is incorrect to believe that the mimes ceased to exist in the West. He writes:

A complete theatrical vacuum from the seventh to the tenth centuries implies the existence of an iron curtain between Eastern and Western Europe, for we know that the mime actor lived on and flowered in Byzantium. It also implies a

temporary withering of human instinct, human tendencies and human capacities whose disappearance is strange, to say the least--the more so as they later manifest themselves in full power and strength. (3)

The mimes required only simple staging and relatively simple costumes. Characters wore hoods, or *ricinium*, to disguise themselves. Bieber adds that the actors wore patchwork clothes, or *centunculus*, like the costume of Harlequin in the *commedia dell'arte* (160). The actors and actresses were otherwise barefoot and unmasked. A simple stage with a curtain and three houses in the background was used to stage the show, according to Beare (147).

The mimes wore amusing costumes, but wore no masks and performed barefoot, thus the term "planipedes". Shoes were not worn in order for the mimes to dance and perform acrobatics. Allen writes that there were grimaces and "lascivious gestures," along with "unrestrained horseplay," while a chorus of male and female dancers accompanied the leader's songs or words with pipe music and dancing (26). The dancers often mocked the lead singer.

Another way the mimes amused their audience was by their physical appearance. Unlike the *fabula Atellana* performers, the mimes wore no masks on which to display

the large noses, fat cheeks, warts, and chattering teeth that the audience so thoroughly enjoyed. Therefore, many mimes were chosen for physical deformities. Anyone with a grotesque face, a "stupid, cunning expression," a "large nose and ears," thick lips, small eyes, or a "distorted, long bare skull" had the opportunity for huge success as a mime (Bieber 249).

Phyllis Hartnoll writes that in the early centuries of the new era, Roman theatre housed "bawdy and obscene mimes and farces dealing with drunkenness, greed, adultery and horseplay or lavish acrobatic spectacles with scantily clad dancers" (29).

Over the years the mime became increasingly rude and crude. Kennard writes that in the last years of the Empire "aesthetic sentiment declined and sensuality increased" (8). Scenic spectacle and realism, no matter how offensive or grotesque, was demanded. Domitian ordered that in place of a fantoccio, or dummy, a live man was to be crucified and then devoured by a bear as part of a mime performance (Kennard 9).

Romance, or more accurately lust, was also portrayed by the mimes. Adultery was a popular theme, and there is evidence that live sex and nudity were seen onstage, as ordered by Emperor Heliogabalus (Beare (240).

Of this crude and often lewd form of entertainment,

Allen writes:

The gross buffooneries and obscene suggestiveness of these farces suited the degraded taste of the times and gave them a power over the multitudes which the more refined drama had not known even in the best days of the republic. (26)

Beare adds that the mime was a "sub-literary, unmetrical, impromptu" form of entertainment (239). The performance was imitative, ranging from "sheer mimicry to playlets with several scenes" (Beare 239).

The titles of some of the mime plays include: "The Soothsayer," "The Prison," "At the Cross-Roads," "The Youth," "The Fuller," "The Twins," "The Courtesan," "The Gossips," "The Birthday," "The Fishermen," "The Salt Miner," "The Man of Crete," and "The Gauls" (Nicolli, Masks, Mimes, and Miracles 112). The mime subjects seem rather similar to the fabula titles.

The new Christian Church did not escape ridicule. A Christian figure was added to the mime's repertoire. Performers, dressed as priests or bishops, "ridiculed ministers and proselytes of the new religion" (Kennard 9). These performances outraged the Church leaders who warned their flocks to avoid the evil theatre.

In the fifth century A.D. all mimes were

excommunicated, and in the sixth century Justinian closed all theatres (Beare 240). It is interesting to note that Justinian married Theodora, a former mime actress who had performed strip-tease acts before her royal marriage (Beare 240).

However, some historians believe that theatre survived after the theatre buildings were closed. Phyllis Hartnoll believes there was no break in the development of theatre; all forms are connected to what preceded them. Hartnoll writes:

It was for a long time thought that there was no connection between the two [classical and liturgical drama]; that one died with the invasion of the barbarians and that after a gap of centuries the other was born. This is to underestimate both the force of the mimetic instinct in man and the stubbornness of inherited traditions. (32)

Hartnoll traces the mimes and other performers like them through the Dark Ages. Although performances were outlawed, plays of Terence were read aloud while actors mimed the story (Hartnoll 32). Acrobats, dancers, mimics, bear and monkey trainers, jugglers, wrestlers, ballad-singers and story-tellers wandered in groups at this time. She adds, "...it is surely from among the

wandering entertainers that the players of comedy were drawn" (46). Evidence of their existence is proven in attacks on them by the Church, which shall be explained later in this report (Hartnoll 32).

Matthevs writes of acrobats, wandering minstrels, magicians, comic singers and animal trainers who performed at a dinner for Theodoric in the mid-fifth century (109). These may have been descendants of the mimes, who may have wandered about after the Church outlawed theatre.

Nicoll traces the mime to Constantinople, where he writes that the Roman mime remained unaltered until "modern times" (Masks, Mimes, and Miracles 214). Here the mimes may have developed into Turkish puppet drama. The character Karagoz, a relic of the classic days, sports a bald head, phallus and ancient Greek dress. There is a doctor character like the fabula's Dossennus and the Doctor of the commedia (Nicoll, Masks, Mimes, and Miracles 214). Indeed there is evidence, mentioned earlier in this report, that the puppets or marionettes were popular in ancient times and may have been similar or related to the fabula, and subsequently the mime and the commedia dell'arte. Reich believes this Eastern mime fled to the West when Constantinople fell in 1453 and settled in Venice where it developed into the commedia (Nicoll, Masks, Mimes, and Miracles 215).

Nicoll continues his support of the theory by writing:

...all the innumerable points of contact between the old mime and the new cannot be coincidence only, nor can we dismiss as of no account the many links which even the sparsely documented Middle Ages present to us, joining classic mime with Italian actor by means of ioculatores.
(Masks, Mimes, and Miracles 348)

In Byzantium, Hartnoll writes, there was an attempt to adapt the old pagan theatre to the needs of the new religion. She adds that religious plays performed for the "edification of the faithful Empress Theodora" may have helped theatre to continue (Hartnoll 33).

Hartnoll suggests that the Byzantine theatre of the ninth and tenth centuries may have influenced the literary drama of the twelfth or thirteenth century. In fact she reports that some literary dramas "told of saints whose conversion had taken place while they were acting in obscene burlesques designed to ridicule Christianity" (Hartnoll 39).

Although it is generally agreed that theatre might have persisted in the East, the West has been thought to have lost theatre entirely during the Dark Ages. There is evidence, however, to suggest that the mimes flourished in

the West. As Christianity gained popularity in the West, the target of the mime's mockery moved. Instead of mocking the Christians themselves and Christian rites, the mimes poked fun at "wrangles over dogma and the mutual vindictiveness of the various groups and sects within the Church" (Hunningher 65).

Evidence of the existence and the popularity of the mimes is apparent due to the numerous edicts from church officials ordering the clergy to stay away from the performers. At the Council of Nicea in 325 A.D. St. Athanasius accused Arius of wanting to smuggle the popular songs of the mimes into the church service (Hunningher 65-66).

In the same century St. Gregory Nazianzen "attacked the Arian heresy; nevertheless, he laid the foundation of Christian song with his Virgin's Song and Vesper Song, borrowed from the theater and adapted the meter from a mimic stanza" (Hunningher 66). In fact, Hunningher writes that many of the princes of the church followed the Roman and Byzantine emperors in openly admitting their appreciation for the mimes (66).

However, not everyone was pleased by the mimes. A church leader by the name of Chrysostom threatened his congregation with excommunication if they attended theatrical performances. Although bishops forbade theatre

in their conclave of 692, in "the same Byzantium that was host to the Trullan Council" the mimes prospered and continued to do so, especially at the Byzantine Court "until the time of the Paleologi" (Hunningher 66).

Hunningher bases his belief in the continuance of the theatre in the West on the fact that visitors to the East who witnessed theatre did not find its existence unusual. He writes:

Bishop Liutprand of Cremona, twice sent ambassador to Constantinople by the Emperor Otto about 970, complained that Hagia Sophia had been turned into a theater-but he considered an explanation of the word 'theater' superfluous for his western readers. Other western travelers to the Eastern Empire did not comment on the theaters, which indicates that they were not unfamiliar with such institutions.

(66-67)

Hunningher continues to trace the mimes by stating that the mimes adapted when Rome fell, using temporary structures in amphitheaters. Even their costuming remained unchanged; Hunningher writes that the garments were the same in the Dark Ages as the centuculus of the ancient mime (68).

Additional evidence of the mimes' existence is in the

seventh century encyclopedia written by Isidore of Seville. Theatre is mentioned as a thing of the past in this encyclopedia, but the mimes are described in the present tense (Hunningher 67). These mimes existed under various names: *histrion*, *mimus*, *joculator* or *saltator*.

The mimes continued to infuriate church leaders whose congregations and priests were enthralled with the performers. The Archbishop of Lyons, Agobert, "rebuked the faithless prelates and clergymen" in 836, who "wasted the Church's property on mimes, meanwhile allowing the poor to die of starvation" (Hunningher 70). A similar accusation was sent by Alcuin to Higbald, an English bishop, "urging him to feed the poor rather than the *histriones*" (Hunningher 70).

Complaints were quite frequent in the ninth century. A ruling from Charlemagne's Capitularia clergy forbids bishops, abbots and abbesses, who are mentioned by name, to own hunting dogs, falcons, hawks and *jocutores*, or jesters. Corporal punishment was threatened for anyone who "*ex scenicis*" dressed in priestly or monastic garments (Hunningher 70).

Hunningher disagrees with Nicoll's belief that the mimes either tried to ridicule the clergy or that the mimes became Christians and performed religious plays. Hunningher maintains that if the mimes had attacked the

clergy, the punishment from Charlemagne would have been more severe. As for the latter argument, Hunningher states that if the mimes portrayed clergymen without ridiculing them, what would be the cause for reprimand? Whatever the case, there is evidence that at least occasionally clergy lent their garments to the mimes (Hunningher 71).

Tropes were popular liturgical dramas in the same century "in which the Church issued its antimimic edicts", the ninth century (Hunningher 72). In Western Europe the abbey of St. Martial at Limoges was the leader in the production and development of the tropes. From this monastery there exists some fascinating information. A troparium, which is now in the Bibliotheque Nationale in Paris, is illuminated with miniatures. This is not an uncommon addition; however, the miniatures in this book portray mimes acting, dancing and accompanying themselves on instruments. The mimes, forbidden fruit to the clergy, are portrayed acting in liturgical drama. Hunningher writes:

From his [the scribe's] evidence we can see that the mimes of his day were little changed from those of antiquity, and-what is far more important for us-that they were closely connected with the tropes. (74)

Unlike some theorists, who suggest that liturgical drama developed over time from symbolic liturgy to theatre, Hunningher believes the mimes influenced liturgical drama. After fighting the mimes for so long, the church may have adopted and altered theatre to avoid competition. One example of the two sects working cooperatively is that minstrels were hired "to compose and sing chansons de geste to attract pilgrims to particular relics and sanctuaries" (Hunningher 76).

According to Hunningher, clergy regularly used mimes in Western Europe in the eleventh and twelfth centuries. In Abbeville, the performers used the church building on Lady-day, a holiday for which the priest was the "roi des ribauds" and had jurisdiction over the players; "after 1291, this latter right reverted to the city" (Hunningher 76). In these same centuries the element of humor increased in the plays and gave rise to the new comic theatre (Hunningher 78).

Another amazing discovery, perhaps as significant as the troparium, was made when a scribe, whose name Hunningher does not mention, "collected... various pieces of Netherlandish literature which appeared to him worth reading; by this chance, the Abele spelen were preserved, the oldest romantic dramas known to us, and with them, the cluten or farces" (Hunningher 79). In these farces are

the characters Lippijn ("he who is slapped"), Buskenblaser ("old skirt-chaser"), and Rubben ("shrewd quack") (Hunningher 79). These characters bear a remarkable resemblance to Pappus, Maccus and other characters of the fabula Atellana and the ancient mimes. This discovery, which was made in the Middle Ages, supports Hunningher's belief in the continuance of the fabula Atellana through the mimes and up until the liturgical drama, which he believes led to the commedia dell'arte.

Hartnoll provides some information regarding liturgical drama which supports Hunningher's argument. The medieval play was a combination of comedy and tragedy; comic elements were added to the original story. The Second Shepherd's Play is an example of a biblical story with comic elements added. Indeed Satan was a comic character in the medieval plays. Masks were worn and interludes of dancing, acrobatics and mime were performed between scenes (Hartnoll 45). These interludes seem to be reminiscent of the mimes which began many centuries before.

These literary pieces were not simple. Besides the masks, complicated machinery and elaborate costumes were used. Because the drama was complicated, skilled players were necessary. Who were the skilled players of the time? The traveling performer, of course; they were the mimes

who had wandered about who had the sort of experience necessary for such performances.

Hunningher concludes his argument by stating that religious plays of the Middle Ages lacked structure. Characters were thrown in and there was no scenic balance.

On the other hand, secular drama "excelled in poetry and dramatic technique" (Hunningher 82). He writes that this is "remarkable since secular theater is supposed to have originated from religious drama" (Hunningher 83). He believes the basis for the secular drama came from the mime. Brockett agrees with Hunningher that the mimes influenced secular theatre and adds pagan rituals, entertainers of all kinds, and jongleurs, with their songs and stories as influences on secular theatre (137).

It appears that the mimes were indeed similar to the *commedia dell'arte*, and Hunningher in particular provides a laudable account tracing their existence. Both forms used women, which made their common themes of adultery and cuckoldry more humorous. Both forms sometimes were obscene. Both the mimes and the *commedia* used acrobatics and other physical comedy.

However, in spite of the many similarities between the mimes and the *commedia dell'arte*, it is still virtually impossible to trace an unbroken line of descent from ancient Rome to the mid-sixteenth century. One

problem is that the forms were improvisational, so not much information was written down. There is also the argument that to exist is to change. That is, most things, including forms of entertainment change and develop rather than remaining constant; therefore, the mimes and the commedia may be too similar to be part of a continuous chain.

Cyril Beaumont writes that there is "...no definite evidence to support the theory advocated by some writers that the Arlecchino of Italian comedy is a direct descendant from the mimes of ancient Rome" (25). Lea writes, "The sooty face of a collier [miner] is a better prototype for the black mask of Burattino than a Roman *mimus 'cum viso fuligine tincto'*" (228). In The World of Harlequin Nicoll writes:

Most of these [older works] devote considerable space to the discussion of the ultimate origins of the Italian stage characters; the currently fashionable view rejects the supposed Roman sources and attributes the rise of the commedia to (a) the development of carnival elements, (b) the attempt to make popular the academic comedies of the time or (c) the desire to find a means of social satire. (226)

Beaumont quotes J.A. Symonds as saying, "Nothing

could be more uncritical than to assume that the Italian masks of the sixteenth century A.D. boasted an uninterrupted descent from the Roman Masks of the fifth century B.C." (26). Symonds believes the Italy of ancient times and the Italy of the *commedia dell'arte* possessed the same "mimetic faculty" and used it in the same fashion (Beaumont 26). This would explain the similarities in the comedy of both eras.

Perhaps the best argument against either the theory of the *fabula Atellana* or the mime theory as the source of the *commedia dell'arte*, besides the lack of physical evidence, is the confusion of terms. Various words, translated as "mime" appear frequently in ancient writings. This word does not generally refer to a mute performer as it does today, but may refer to tumblers and acrobats, musicians, singers, wrestlers, rope dancers, magicians and the performers of improvised comedy.

Although it is possible that a mimetic instinct, such as Beaumont mentions, exists, some sort of catalyst would be necessary to bring the instinct to fruition. It is possible that the catalyst was the mountebanks or that the mountebanks existed from ancient times and developed into the *commedia dell'arte*.

THE MOUNTEBANK THEORY

This theory of the origin of the *commedia dell'arte* is the most recent theory. Although this theory does not appear to have as many supporters as the earlier theories, it possesses some strong advocates and is worthy of investigation.

Beaumont writes that mountebanks, acrobats and comic actors may have formed the first *commedia* companies. A simple stage could be set up at fairs. The audience could enjoy a simple play with "improvised jokes on the physical peculiarities of certain of the members of their audience and amusing allusions to the local surroundings and traditions" (Beaumont 27).

Winifred Smith is the major advocate of this theory. She begins her theory by disclaiming previously held theories. Of the ancient Roman theories, she writes, "...the hoariest and most outgrown is that concerning their putative Roman father, surely a ghost that by now ought to be permanently laid..." (Smith 21).

Smith writes that it was the fashion in the Renaissance to trace everything back to ancient times. The discovery of the hunch backed, hook-nosed statue in 1727 which was mentioned earlier, was merely a "lucky accident" which "stimulated and fortified the theorists"

(Smith 22).

Not only does Smith doubt a connection between the ancient comedies and the *commedia*, she also doubts much of the information regarding the ancient theatre, information which was accepted as fact by many for centuries. Smith questions whether *Maccus* was a stock character or simply an actor who specialized in satire and was a popular favorite with the audiences of his day. Smith suggests that theorists have credited stock characters to the *fabula* and defined their characteristics based solely on the etymology of their names. Further, she questions whether the *fabula* consisted of farcical entertainment or realistic monologues and dialogues. Smith writes, "No example of an 'Atellan farce' has lived to answer these questions definitely and as I have said most studies in this field have been viviated by deductive reasoning based on the *commedia dell'arte* itself" (25).

Smith continues her argument by challenging the previously held belief that the *fabula Atellana* were farces marked by improvisation and masks. "And no amount of good will can make the shadowy Roman Mime or the still more insubstantial medieval profane comedy take the definite form of the perfectly familiar *commedia dell'arte*" (Smith 26).

Although Smith refuses to believe there was any

connection between the ancient comedies and the commedia, she does believe the commedia was influenced by a source, one which can be proven to have existed during the time of the commedia: the mountebanks. She writes that it was common for these street vendors to sell their wares by attracting attention with commendatory speeches or other sorts of entertainment. This practice occurred previously in 1250 and was the same in the fifteenth century (Smith 29). Maurice Sand said that the mountebanks had existed since the time of ancient Greece (19).

The cantimbanchi, saltimbanchi, mountebanks, charlatans and jugglers wandered in groups of men, women and children. At fairs and carnivals temporary stages were raised to sell "quack medicines of doubtful composition" and "counterpoisons", which Smith writes were "more apt to kill than cure" (29).

These performers demonstrated sleight of hand, magic, songs, dances and jokes, which were considered unwholesome by some of the public. Smith writes that some of the players wore masks, used a stage, utilized trunks with "trumperies" and made use of vocal and/or instrumental music (31).

The principal mountebank, the captain or ringleader, sometimes gave orations which lasted up to thirty minutes or an hour. One mountebank is noted for holding a viper

in his hand and playing with its "sting"; another man gashed his arm with a knife and used the oil which he was selling to stop the flow of blood (Smith 33). These sideshow tricks were used to sell not only oils but sovereign waters, printed amorous songs, apothecary drugs and other sundry items (Smith 32). The bartering over the price provided additional entertainment for the crowd.

The masked men and women who performed around the chief charlatan provided a wide variety of entertainment. Monkey trainers, guitarists, rope dancers, merry-makers, dog and snake trainers, gymnasts, and skilled folks who spun eggs on sticks also performed (Smith 34).

The central figure "made a specialty of riddling couplets, gnomic sayings and burlesque prescriptions-ancient conceits that undoubtedly influenced the Doctor of the *commedia dell'arte*" (Smith 36). A quack doctor sometimes performed in the crude farces, which sometimes featured mock fights at the end of scenes or acts. Smith writes that the Captain was as much a charlatan as the quack doctor; "both dealt with words rather than deeds and both were fair game for the satire of the plain man whom Zanni always represents"(48).

Smith credits Angelo Beolco, also known as Il Ruzzante, with developing the use of dialects and with using the academic theatre of the time for inspiration.

Indeed there are theorists who believe Beolco was the father of the *commedia dell'arte*, but this theory is not widely held and will not be dealt with in this report.

Smith is correct in seeing similarities between the mountebanks and the *commedia dell'arte*. Their brand of humor, physical comedy and improvisation is similar. Men and women performed in both forms, and sometimes the mountebanks were masked as were the *commedia* performers.

However, although the two are similar, that does not disprove that the *commedia* may have had some ancient influences. The mountebanks existed for centuries prior to the *commedia* and may have been influenced themselves by the *fabula Atellana* or, more likely, the mimes. The mountebanks may have been former mimes who made a living selling potions. Not many theorists criticize this theory. It is a fairly recent theory and many believe the mountebanks did influence the *commedia*; however, it is possible that the roots of the mountebank are to be found in the mimes. This would support the mime theory. Whatever the case, there is no concrete evidence that the mountebanks were the originators of the *commedia dell'arte*.

VI

CONCLUSION

The origin of the *commedia dell'arte* has been widely disputed. Some theorists trace the *commedia* to the *fabula Atellana* of Atella and ancient Rome. Other theorists try to trace the origins of the *commedia* to the mimes of ancient Rome. There are numerous similarities between the three forms, and it is possible that the Byzantine mimes brought this form of entertainment back to Italy, if indeed it had ever died, when Constantinople fell in 1453.

Some theorists have actually been able to trace the mimes through at least most of the Dark Ages and Middle Ages. The problem with this theory is that there are not sufficient records to convince many of the connection, and it is also curious that such a form could exist unchanged for sixteen centuries.

The third theory is that the mountebanks, the street vendors who sold medicinal cure-alls, were the fathers and mothers of the *commedia*. Both forms improvised and catered to the audience, and there is evidence that the mountebanks were contemporaries of the *commedia dell'arte*. However, it may be argued that the mountebanks had existed for centuries and may have been mime performers themselves.

Perhaps the origin of the *commedia* is not based

solely in one theory. It is possible that the fabula Atellana was absorbed by the mimes as it declined in popularity. The two forms were quite similar in any case.

The mimes may have carried on through the centuries, serving as mountebanks or working with mountebanks to earn their keep. Whatever the case, it appears that the origin of the *commedia dell'arte*, cloaked by the mantle of time, shall remain shrouded in mystery.

WORKS CONSULTED

- Allen, James Turney. Stage Antiquities of the Greeks and Romans and Their Influence. 1927. New York: Cooper Square Publishers, Inc., 1963.
- Beare, W. The Roman Stage: A Short History of Latin Drama in the Time of the Republic. 1950. London: Methuen and Co. Ltd., 1964.
- Beaumont, Cyril W. The History of Harlequin. New York: Benjamin Blom, 1926.
- Bieber, Margarete. The History of the Greek and Roman Theater. 1939. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1961.
- Brockett, Oscar G. History of the Theatre. 5th ed. Boston: Allyn and Bacon, Inc., 1987.
- Coffey, Michael. Roman Satire. New York: Barnes and Noble, 1976.

Duchartre, Pierre Louis. The Italian Comedy: The Improvisation, Scenarios, Lives, Attributes, Portraits and Masks of the Illustrious Characters of the Commedia dell'Arte. 1929. New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1966.

Duckworth, George E. The Nature of Roman Comedy: A Study in Popular Entertainment. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1952.

Hartnoll, Phyllis. The Theatre: A Concise History. Rev. ed. New York: Thames and Hudson, 1987.

Herrick, Marvin T. Italian Comedy in the Renaissance. Urbana: The University of Illinois Press, 1960.

Hunningher, Benjamin. The Origin of the Theater. 1955. New York: Hill and Wang, 1961.

Kennard, Joseph Spencer. The Italian Theatre: From Its Beginning to the Close of the Seventeenth Century. Volume One. New York: William Edwin Rudge, 1932.

- Lea, Kathleen Marguerite. Italian Popular Comedy: A Study in the Commedia dell'Arte, 1560-1620 With Special Reference to the English Stage. Volume One. 1934. New York: Russell and Russell, Inc., 1962.
- Madden, David. Harlequin's Stick-Charlie's Cane: A Comparative Study of Commedia dell'Arte and Silent Slapstick Comedy. Bowling Green: Popular Press, 1975.
- Matthews, Brander. The Development of the Drama. 1903. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1920.
- Nicoll, Allardyce. Masks, Mimes, and Miracles: Studies in the Popular Theatre. 1931. New York: Cooper Square Publishers, Inc., 1963.
- Nicoll, Allardyce. The World of Harlequin: A Critical Study of the Commedia dell'Arte. Cambridge: University Press, 1963.
- Oreglia, Giacomo. The Commedia dell'Arte. New York: Hill and Wang, 1964.

Sand, Maurice. The History of the Harlequinade. Volume One. New York: Benjamin Blom, 1915.

Sandbach, F.H. The Comic Theatre of Greece and Rome. New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 1977.

Schwartz, I.A. The Commedia dell'Arte and Its Influence on French Comedy in the Seventeenth Century. Paris: Librairie H. Samuel, 1933.

Smith, Winifred. The Commedia dell'Arte. 1912. New York: Benjamin Blom, 1964.

Taylor, Joseph Richard. The Story of the Drama: Beginnings to the Commonwealth. Volume One. Boston: Expression Co., 1930.

THREE THEORIES OF THE ORIGIN OF THE
COMMEDIA DELL'ARTE

by

NANCY KAY PENNELL

B.A., McPherson College, 1986

AN ABSTRACT OF A REPORT

submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree

MASTER OF ARTS

SPEECH

KANSAS STATE UNIVERSITY
Manhattan, Kansas

1989

The commedia dell'arte was a lively improvised form of comedy which originated in Italy in the mid-sixteenth century. It featured masked stock characters who improvised within a set plot which frequently used intrigue and mistaken identity. Much is known about the commedia dell'arte's characters, plots, and staging, but its origins are obscure. In this report, three of the theories on the origin of the commedia dell'arte are examined.

The first, and oldest, theory is that the commedia is a descendant of the fabula Atellana of Atella and ancient Rome. This was also an improvised form of comedy with masked stock characters which made frequent use of intrigue. The similarities between the fabula Atellana and the commedia are numerous, but to accept this theory it is necessary to trace the fabula through the Dark Ages and the Middle Ages.

The same is true of the second theory. This theory holds that the commedia is derived from the mimes of ancient Rome and continued through the Dark and Middle Ages. The mimes were also improvised and employed many of the same plots as the commedia. Although the similarities between the mimes and the commedia are not as numerous, it is easier to trace the mimes through history.

The third theory does not necessitate tracing the improvised comedy through time. This is the mountebank

theory, a more recent idea, which suggests that the commedia developed from entertainments provided by mountebanks who performed to attract prospective buyers of their "medicines". The mountebanks and the commedia dell'arte performers entertained their audiences in a similar manner, joking, singing, doing acrobatics and performing short, loosely structured "plays". The two forms were indeed similar, but this theory does not explain the masked stock characters, an important feature of the commedia dell'arte.

In this report I examine each of these three theories on the origin of the commedia dell'arte. The attractiveness of each theory is explained, and the reasons why none of these theories is universally accepted are discussed.