

Conflict and slapstick in Commedia dell'Arte – The double act of Pantalone and Arlecchino

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Abstract

This article will explore the centrality of conflict to the slapstick comedy of Commedia dell'Arte. Commedia flourished for over 200 years in Italy and throughout Europe. At its heart was the relationship between Pantalone, the wealthy old man, and Arlecchino, his poor servant. The conflict between the two arises from a series of social, physical and intellectual binary oppositions: wealth versus poverty; high status versus low status; intelligence versus stupidity and age versus youth. Drawing on a number of scenarios, this article will examine the relationship between narrative, status, conflict and comedy. What are the situations that give rise to conflict and to what extent are they resolved through either word play or through comic violence? A consideration of common lazzi centred around violence will also reveal the ways in which comic violence may have been used both to confirm and to subvert the usual status relationship between Pantalone and Arlecchino. In many ways Pantalone and Arlecchino constitute an archetypal slapstick double act with Pantalone as the straight man and Arlecchino as the more obvious stooge with, unlike Pantalone, a direct means of communication with the audience. Therefore the article will also explore the masks, costumes and performance styles of these two characters in relation to the opportunities they provide for comedy and conflict – most important of all, of course, is Arlecchino's batocchio – his slapstick.

Definitions

Before it is possible to consider the extent to which Pantalone and Arlecchino might be considered as a slapstick double act it will be helpful to establish a working definition of what is meant by the term Slapstick. This in itself is no mean feat. As Slapstick has rarely been considered in any detail by academia such definitions as exist must either be drawn from dictionaries or from more anecdotal or biographical texts that deal with slapstick. Traditionally Slapstick has been viewed as low-brow and without intellectual merit. The assumption seems to have been that such a lightweight form of comedy is barely worthy of serious consideration. However, this article contends that Slapstick is worthy of academic examination for a variety of reasons. The skill involved in creating and performing Slapstick sequences merits exploring and, perhaps more importantly, the question of how Slapstick triggers laughter, and to what purpose, is one that has not been adequately considered elsewhere. Such academic writing as exists does so across a range of performance media and this is problematic in that the definition thus far offered of slapstick on film is necessarily different to how slapstick might be defined on the stage.

Critical texts in the area of theatre performance are, nevertheless, not very helpful in defining slapstick. K. Pickering's *Key Concepts in Drama and Performance* (2010) does not include a definition of slapstick – presumably he did not consider it to be that key, despite the fact that it has existed for centuries. As J. Wright acknowledges 'most of our rhythmic physical comedy and our knockabout

slapstick routines ... has its origins in *Commedia dell'Arte*' (2006: 182). In his book *Slapstick: The Illustrated Story of Knockabout Comedy* (1987), T. Staveacre identifies the way in which violence is performed as key in identifying slapstick. 'Violence – or the parody of violence. There's a delicate distinction. The 'injury laugh' must always be carefully calculated: if a blow seems to cause real pain, there will, usually, be no laughter' (1987: 41). Beyond this, the closest Staveacre comes to identifying what slapstick is presented through his chapter headings some of which read as a list of potential ingredients: tumbling, physical encounters, props, traps, tricks and flaps, sparring partners, inspired lunacy, visual vulgarity and victimization. This list could equally be used to describe the range of interactions that occur between *Pantalone* and *Arlecchino*.

C. R. Gruner in *Understanding Laughter* (1978) says that slapstick is 'the form of humour that depends for its effect on fast, boisterous and zany physical activity and horseplay' (1978: 6). The link to *commedia* is clear here in Gruner's use of the word *zany*, which is derived from the name 'zanni' (z-a-n-n-i-) of the generic servant character in *Commedia dell'Arte*. Stolloff suggests that slapstick comedies 'escalated in tempo until they concluded with a crescendo of acrobatic chase and combat. These climactic battles usually included thrown projectiles (often but not necessarily pies) kicks in the rear, somersaults, belly flops and frequently concluded with all participants doused in some convenient body of water' (Paulus and King 2010: 152). Water, for obvious reasons, is less in evidence in the performance of stage comedy but it makes regular appearances in the circus ring. This approach of identifying a set of ingredients that can be expected of slapstick is, at least constructive. So in order to be considered slapstick, a comedy should include all (or most) of the following: comic pain and comic violence; falling and tripping; throwing of objects (often, but not always, food, particularly pies); malicious props (the falling piano and the collapsing ladder); stunts and acrobatics.

This definition clearly relates primarily to film slapstick. Indeed, film studies seems to have appropriated slapstick to such an extent that we tend to forget that its roots lie in live performance. Still some elements of this definition are useful to us, particularly the acrobatic chase and combat. Andrew Stott also associates slapstick primarily with the silent film era, suggesting it involves 'falls, blows, mishaps accidents and demands considerable skill from the performer' (Stott 2005: 153). This definition is more closely related to the way that slapstick operates within *Commedia dell'Arte*, particularly in its identification of the importance of skill, as we will see from the examples given later.

Commedia scholar Mel Gordon also makes a connection between *commedia* and silent film 'indeed it is hard to conjure images of the *commedia* without seeing Charlie Chaplin, W. C. Fields, Bert Lahr, the Marx brothers, Jack Benny or Laurel and Hardy' (1983: 3).

What more might dictionary definitions offer? The Oxford English dictionary online offers the following definition, 'Knockabout comedy or humour, farce, horseplay', which, while rather unhelpful in its brevity, does identify some key elements that might be expected in slapstick performance. The Encyclopaedia Britannica offers:

a type of physical comedy characterised by broad humour, absurd situations and vigorous, usually violent action. The slapstick comic, more than a mere funny man or buffoon, must often be an acrobat, a stunt performer, and something of a magician – a master of uninhibited action and perfect timing. Outrageous make-believe violence has always been a key attraction of slapstick comedy ... (Britannica.com)

This is potentially interesting in that, as well as categorizing some ingredients, this definition ventures towards identifying particular skills that are needed by the performer. It is important, therefore, not only to consider the content of the slapstick sketch as it is performed but also to consider the demands placed on the performer. Thus notions of physical mastery and timing should be considered when defining slapstick in addition to the list of ingredients above.

The term slapstick is thought to derive from the English translation of 'battacchio'; the Italian word used to describe the wooden stick carried by Arlecchino. It was 'derived from the Bergamese peasant stick used for driving cattle. Two thin pieces of wood are kept apart at the handle and slap against each other when a blow is stopped on the moment of impact' (Rudlin 1994: 77). In this way when Arlecchino struck a person with it, it made a satisfyingly loud sound without inflicting any real pain. Here then is a clue to the first element of slapstick performance: it offers the sound and appearance of pain without actually inflicting pain.

'Slapstick' is generally understood as physical humour of a robust and hyperbolized nature where stunts, acrobatics, pain and violence are standard features. Broad comedy of this type has been around since Aristophanes, but the form known as slapstick came into being as practically the sole condition of comedy in early American Cinema. (Stott 2005: 87)

Whilst it is true that early American cinema did not appear to be able to conceive of comedy that was not slapstick (largely because it communicated so readily with the audience without sound), it is necessary to take issue with Stott's dismissal of the tradition of slapstick that flourished between Aristophanes and, say, Chaplin, Keaton and Mack Sennett and without which slapstick may not have been a vital enough tradition to make the transition to celluloid. A lively slapstick tradition can be traced from Arlecchino's *battacchio*, through Punch and Judy, through pantomime and through stage plays right to the present. A similar trajectory can be traced on-screen from Chaplin (a modern day Arlecchino if ever there was one) through Michael Crawford, through Rowan Atkinson and through Jim Carrey. This ubiquity is one of the elements that makes slapstick so deserving of fuller academic consideration.

Slapstick and Commedia dell'Arte

The use of stunts and acrobatics as a central performance trope of slapstick demands particular skills from the performers; their bodies appear capable of physical feats beyond the ability of ordinary everyday people. Indeed in his book *The Body in Hollywood Slapstick* (2007) (which focuses as the title indicates on American film comedy from the early silent greats through to the late twentieth century but which does not, unfortunately, offer a neat definition of slapstick) A. Clayton identifies what he defines as the notion of 'other bodies' asking the question 'how do I know that the body of another is not entirely unlike my own – say rubbery and numb rather than fleshy and sensitive?' (2007: 173). Here then is another element of slapstick performance: the performance frame encourages the viewer to consider that the performer is perhaps not affected by pain in the usual ways. This point is particularly interesting in relation to Commedia dell'Arte where, as I shall illustrate, the use of masks changes the way in which the audience respond to pain. Commedia dell'Arte emerged in the mid-sixteenth century and has existed in some form or other ever since though its most vital period extended from the mid-sixteenth to the early eighteenth century (when it was appearing in scripted form most significantly from the pens of Carlo Goldoni and Carlo Gozzi). In fact the term Commedia dell'Arte 'was never used of the activities of actors or professional acting companies until the eighteenth century, when we find Carlo Goldoni employing it to distinguish the masked and improvised comedy from the scripted comedy that as a dramatist he himself favoured' (Richards and Richards 1989: 8–9). The original performers would have referred to what

they did as *commedia improvise*, *commedia alla maschere* (highlighting the importance of the mask) or *commedia dell'Arte all'improvviso*. A *commedia* troupe would usually consist of at least ten actors. Between them they would play the following masks (the term when applied to *commedia* signifies both a physical mask for the face and to the character as a whole) Pantalone and Dottore, two male lovers and two female lovers, Colombina, Capitano and a number of zanni (depending on the size of the troupe). Of these the lovers and Colombina did not wear face masks, relying instead of heavy and stylized make-up. Performers usually played a role for life, developing the physicality of the mask and learning routines and speeches that could be moulded to work in a variety of different scenarios.

Scenario is the term used to describe what the troupe performed. A scenario may be viewed as a plot outline, indicating to the performers the key events, exits and entrances, which had to take place in order for the scenario's story to be told. The *capo-comico* or actor manager would gather the troupe together and tell them what the scenario for the day's performance was to be. He (the *capo-comico*'s were almost exclusively male) would remind them of the plot of the story, highlight the potential for *lazzi* and also remind them of which family their mask was in.

Key features were repeated in the scenarios (which were not exclusively comic) such as status interaction between Pantalone and his servant (often Arlecchino), unrequited love or love triangles and disguise and mistaken identity. Such devices created the opportunity for the performers to introduce set pieces into the structure of scenario. Gordon's book, *Lazzi*, provides a good cross-section of the forms of *lazzi* to be found in seventeenth and eighteenth century manuscripts in Venice, Rome, Padua, Paris, Naples and Perugia. According to Gordon a *lazzo* (the singular form of *lazzi*) is 'Any discrete, or independent, comic and repeatable activity that guaranteed laughs for its participants' (1983: 5). He identifies twelve categories of *lazzi* but here we are most concerned with those *lazzi*, which fall in the categories of 'Comic Violence/ Sadistic Behaviour', 'Social-class rebellion' and 'Stupidity/Inappropriate Behaviour'. For the zanni, physical set pieces were common and these could provide the opportunity for the introduction of comic pain into the performance. Of central importance here was Arlecchino's *batocchio*. It is possible to explore the ways in which slapstick violence and the resultant comic pain were incorporated in *Commedia* performances by analysing a number of *lazzi* and scenarios. Two key forms of performed pain are well evidenced in *Commedia*. These are intentional pain inflicted by others and accidental self-inflicted pain. The former most commonly involves the beating of a low class zanni by a higher class character such as a lover or Pantalone but it can also include elements of the subversion of class expectations when the zanni beats the higher class character (and even, sometimes, gets away with it). The second form usually occurs as a result of the zanni's stupidity. As will be shown in the following examples the zanni (who is often, but not always, Arlecchino) is central to the performance of pain, either as the inflictor or the victim. Another important feature of the performance of pain in *Commedia* is that the performance style highlights the importance of the threat of pain and the role played by anticipation in the audience's enjoyment of the performance of comic pain. There is also the opportunity for accidental pain inflicted on others to occur but one of the difficulties of assessing the primarily physical performance of *commedia* is the paucity of documentation on which we can draw.

Travelling troupes of performers moved around Italy (which was not a unified country at this point in its history but a collection of independent states using different dialects) and further afield into Spain, France and even England. To cope with lack of communication via the spoken word, like silent film, *commedia* developed a range of techniques. *Commedia* troupes relied heavily on broad characters, a highly physical playing style, the use of masks and *grummelot* (a nonsense language equally comprehensible or incomprehensible to all) and the use of *lazzi*. These *lazzi* often, but not

exclusively, revolved around the infliction of comic pain through beatings, trips and falls, either openly or through subterfuge. At the heart of the commedia performance and usually taking the lead in the dishing out and receiving of comic pain was the double act of Pantalone and Arlecchino.

The importance of a central double act

Comic double acts existed centuries before Commedia dell'Arte. For evidence of this one has only to look at the opening scene of Aristophanes' *The Frogs*, first performed in 405 bc, in which the master servant combination of Dionysus and Xanthius prefigures that of Pantalone and Arlecchino. Equally comic double acts have continued to exist in film (Laurel and Hardy, Abbot and Costello), on television (Morecambe and Wise, Basil Fawlty and Manuel) and in animation (Tom and Jerry). The popularity of the double act in comedy and in slapstick in particular derives from the opportunities it presents for conflict and for comic contrast. Often the two halves of a comic double act look very different (think Laurel and Hardy or Basil and Manuel), they sound different, they have a different status level. The pairings work through binary oppositions and out of the oppositions arises conflict and out of the conflict, one way or another, comes comic pain.

Pantalone and Arlecchino, therefore, represent a seminal slapstick double act. Pantalone is old and doddering whilst Arlecchino is young and very fit. Pantalone is rich: Arlecchino is poor. Pantalone is intelligent: Arlecchino is stupid and there we have the three most richly comic contrasts: physical, status and intelligence.

These differences, exemplified here through Pantalone and Arlecchino exist in many double acts. Take Laurel and Hardy as an example. They are physically very different. Whilst not richer, Hardy is clearly the boss with higher status than Laurel and Laurel's stupidity and incompetence frequently gets the seemingly brighter Hardy into trouble. Similar contrasts can be seen between Basil and Manuel. Physically there is the height difference. The whole relationship revolves around the contrasting status of boss and servant (in a way that is very close to the status relationship between Pantalone and Arlecchino) and finally the issue of intelligence is addressed to comic effect through Manuel's lack of English – here a lack of comprehension comes to represent (perhaps wrongly) a lack of intelligence.

Whilst comic pain is inflicted and received by all three of these pairs, there is a striking lack of malice or malevolence. Comic pain occurs either through comic violence (beatings, slaps and punches), which are inflicted with almost weary inevitability by the higher status character on the lower or through the trickery or stupidity – often this is where the lower status/lower intellect character can take some revenge. With reference to Commedia, Gordon refers to lazzi involving this kind of behaviour as sadistic behaviour but this, it seems to me, rather misses the point. Importantly for our comic response we recognize that what is occurring is not individual sadism but an important social instrument used either to confirm or subvert the usual status quo.

The comedy double act provides the opportunity for contrast in the three key areas of physicality, status and intelligence. This is exemplified in, and exploited to comic effect by, Pantalone and Arlecchino. The physical contrast between Pantalone and Arlecchino is huge. Their contrasting ages mean that Pantalone is presented as hunched, stooping and very slow moving. On the other hand, Arlecchino is upright, full of energy and never stops moving. Two lazzi highlight the differences between them whilst demonstrating the slapstick comedy of commedia. In the 'lazzo of the beetle', according to J. Rudlin, Pantalone 'falls flat on his back on hearing bad news (usually financial). Like a beetle he cannot then right himself' (1994: 94). The inclusion of trips and falls in slapstick was identified earlier by both Staveacre and Stott. In performance this can be quite dramatic and

extremely comical as the fall is usually very sudden and much is made of Pantalone lying on the floor helplessly waving his arms and legs and screaming for help. If present onstage, Arlecchino watches laughing to encourage the audience response. If summoned to help, Arlecchino proves incompetent (and the level of his incompetence can be increased or decreased according to the level of audience response). Various moves may follow: Pantalone can be spun round on his back rather than being helped to his feet. Alternatively he may be nearly pulled standing repeatedly before being allowed to fall back by Arlecchino who becomes distracted. Once Pantalone is back on his feet, Arlecchino may well receive a beating but Pantalone is so weak that the beating he can offer is laughable. In contrast to this show of physical ineptitude one of Arlecchino's lazzi, 'the lazzi of getting inside' is acrobatic in nature. Gordon describes the lazzo thus 'Arlecchino, standing on the top of a ladder, falls through a window and returns right back through the door in one movement' (1983: 12). This move requires a high level of physical skill and emphasizes the acrobatic nature of Arlecchino. This lazzo together with the lazzo of the spilling of the wine, in which Arlecchino executes a backward somersault whilst holding a glass of wine without spilling a drop provides a strong physical contrast with Pantalone's infirmity and out of this physical contrast comes physical comedy. Arlecchino can, potentially, leap and run to avoid beatings. He can hide behind Pantalone ducking, twisting, even diving through his legs to avoid being caught, all while Pantalone moves very slowly and deliberately around the stage, always turning just a fraction too late.

The only means by which Pantalone can exercise any control is by asserting his higher status. According to Rudlin Pantalone is 'top of the pecking order. Pantalone is money: he controls all the finance available within the world of commedia dell'Arte and therefore his orders have, ultimately, to be obeyed' (1994: 92). The commedia scenarios are littered with scenes in which Pantalone gives orders to Arlecchino – to deliver letters or presents, to bring or take money, to prepare parties. In most tasks Arlecchino fails miserably and his low status is emphasized by his lack of intelligence. He misdelivers letters because he cannot read; he is tricked out of the money; he forgets where he should be going or who he should be talking to. However, these failures provide the opportunity for slapstick comedy. In attempting to conceal his failures and to avoid the inevitable beating Arlecchino employs a variety of tactics. He hides, for example, behind Pantalone and then when Pantalone turns to see who or what is behind him, Arlecchino walks round too so that he is always out of sight. If Pantalone turns suddenly, Arlecchino ducks so that he is below Pantalone's eye line. Often this lazzo ends with Arlecchino diving through Pantalone's legs in a desperate attempt to avoid being caught. In doing so he put himself, of course, in full view and sometimes knocks Pantalone over in the process. Here then is an example of the trips and falls so common in slapstick comedy. It also serves as a reminder of the importance of the skill and timing of both performers.

As Rudlin says Arlecchino is 'quick physically and slow mentally' (1994: 78). Pantalone, while old, is still mentally sharp and this we have the third of the central binary oppositions. As with age and status Arlecchino usually ends up being beaten. For example, in the lazzo of the counting Pantalone wants Arlecchino to be beaten but realizes he is too weak to do it effectively. He therefore orders Capitano to do it for him. What ensues is what Gordon identifies as the 'lazzo of the counting'. The Capitano starts to beat Arlecchino but loses count. '1, 2, 3 what comes next?' Ever hopeful Arlecchino shouts 'ten' to cut short the beating. Capitano starts again from one. The humour of this can be emphasized in performance through Arlecchino's responses to the beating, through his optimism each time he shouts 'ten' and his weary disappointment each time the Capitano starts from one. This lazzo plays on two key elements of slapstick comedy. First, it engages the audience in a cycle of anticipation and fulfilment, the audience quickly realizes what is going on and may even have joined in to disrupt the counting. The second, and perhaps more important, element is comic violence.

As has been demonstrated this far, comic violence (usually beatings) is a key ingredient for provoking laughter in commedia and it is a common feature in slapstick comedy in all its forms. Staveacre identifies 'falls and blows [as] the elemental basics of knockabout comedy'. He also stresses the importance of 'the parody of violence' ... 'if a blow seems to cause real pain, there, will usually be no laughter' (1987: 41).

This is one reason why Arlecchino's slapstick is such an important prop. The loud noise highlights and exaggerates the pain (as the percussive sound track does in Tom and Jerry) without the blow causing real pain. There is plenty for Arlecchino to react to but the audience are freed from any moral concern by the knowledge that however awful the blow sounds it does not, in fact, cause any harm.

Comic violence can also be contextualized in such a way as to increase its comic value and to give it a purpose beyond mere entertainment. In an extended piece of business known as a burle, the following action occurs. Arlecchino tricks Pantalone into hiding in a sack by telling that a band of robbers is marauding around the town and that as Pantalone is clearly wealthy he is likely to be attacked. Once Pantalone is hidden, Arlecchino puts on different voices pretending the robbers have arrived. He cries as if he is being beaten, shouts as if he is trying to defend his master and then beats Pantalone as if the robbers were beating him. As with other lazzi this can be repeated, shortened or extended according to the audience response. It usually ends with Pantalone emerging from the sack whilst Arlecchino is pretending to be the robbers. Arlecchino is so involved that he fails to notice Pantalone watching him. The consequence? A beating for Arlecchino.

Of course we may be laughing at a number of things in responding to this lazzo. We laugh at Arlecchino's obvious enjoyment of pretending to be the robbers; at his exaggerated cries as he pretends he is being beaten but most of all we laugh in pleasure at seeing the underdog on top. For once Arlecchino is beating rather than beaten. This lazzo fits into the category that Gordon identifies as 'social-class rebellion' lazzi. Here the comic violence serves a more serious purpose. There may well be an element of wish fulfilment for all those in the audience who have been the underdog, all those servants or lowly employees who have been beaten or pushed around by their masters or employers.

The purpose of slapstick

Identifying what slapstick should include and even how it may be performed provides only a partial definition. It is necessary also to consider the purpose of slapstick comedy. Director Leo McCarey raises an interesting notion 'there must always be a purpose behind slapstick' (Gehring 2004: 34). We know what elements make us laugh in slapstick performance but McCarey raises the more complex issue of why. When somebody slips on a banana skin and falls to the floor are we simply laughing, as Bergson, would have it because, in falling, the individual becomes less human and more like some kind of mechanism? What the quotation from McCarey suggests is that, as was the case with Commedia dell'Arte, status plays a key role in whether or not we find slapstick funny. If the person slipping on a banana skin is high-class gentleman in a top hat that should be funnier than watching an urchin child slip. Many examples of slapstick work because, as an audience, we find it funny to see the mighty fallen or to see dignity upset. Stan Laurel himself suggested that:

The antics of the funny men in the custard-pie comedies are an exaggeration of those which keep children in the heights of laughter. You may not see the similarity at first but on thinking it over the resemblance is very definitely there. The comedian who knocks down the policeman is the small child rebelling against authority. The custard-pie is the symbol of revolt. (Louvish 2001: 293/94)

Here arises the suggestion that it is not only that we can all enjoy seeing dignity overthrown but that slapstick (and in particular the ubiquitous custard pie) is a safe form of rebellion. The pie thrower knocking the helmet off the policeman does so for all of us. We can feel the thrill vicariously but we are safe from any consequence. In this way slapstick can be seen as working on several levels. First, as Laurel identifies, slapstick makes children laugh. There is a directness to the broad action of slapstick, which even very young children can enjoy. As adults watching we may remember our own enjoyment of such scenes when we were children so that nostalgia is at work when we enjoy slapstick but as adults we are probably also more aware of the elements of rebellion and wishfulfilment contained in slapstick scenes. Here are people doing things that we could not get away with in our everyday lives and there is a great deal of entertainment from watching others suffer both as victims and perpetrators.

Film director Leo McCarey (who directed three of Laurel and Hardy's film and wrote many more) recognized in an article in the New York Herald Tribune in 1937 that the potential social purpose of slapstick lay in its universality 'And the reason it will always go is because little boys will always throw snowballs at high hats. Upset dignity is eternally funny' (Gehring 2004: 34). When Pantalone emerges from the sack, in the example cited earlier, we see just such 'upset dignity'. There is a sense of the world, however momentarily having been put right, of Arlecchino having got his own back. For a few brief moments we rejoice in Arlecchino's revenge, in his retaliation.

A similar instance of retaliation or retribution exacted is seen in the scenario 'The Tooth-puller' (a concept that has been used in many subsequent comedies). Where what occurs is a combination of comic violence and sadistic behaviour. The plot is more elaborate than the comic beatings mentioned above. In this scenario (translated by Richard Andrews) Pantalone attacks Pedrolino who is fighting with Pantalone's son. Pantalone bites Pedrolino's arm so Pedrolino decides he will get his own back. In various plot twists and turns Pedrolino persuades a variety of characters to join him in pretending that Pantalone has bad breath. He then pays Arlecchino to disguise himself as a tooth-puller. Everyone tells Pantalone his breath smells. Pantalone orders Pedrolino to find him a dentist and the disguised Arlecchino arrives. He carries with him a selection of blacksmith's tools and sets to work on Pantalone's teeth. Causing great pain he extracts four perfectly good teeth. In terms of slapstick comedy a number of features are at play here. Anticipation is built by the fact that the audience witness each stage of the plot. We know there is nothing wrong with Pantalone's teeth and there is an increasing tension as to whether he will actually lose any teeth. Once Arlecchino gets to work the tension transfers to how many teeth he will lose. The tension is offset by the cartoon quality of the violence. Arlecchino uses what are obviously inappropriate tools. The plot is also highly unrealistic. It is unlikely that Pantalone would bite a servant. All these elements combine to create what Andrews calls a 'mechanical comic fantasy' (2008: 68). Andrews also suggests that the tooth-pulling 'could be orchestrated by Arlecchino into a climax of comic violence. He would use his survey of the blacksmith's tools "inventing silly names" for them as a technique of delay, with Pantalone expressing suitable fear' (2008: 69).

The potential for comedy in Pantalone writhing in the chair and having to be restrained, screaming in fear and/or agony is huge. This could be extended by Arlecchino's obvious pleasure at Pantalone's distress. Here is where a degree of sadism is present and it is possible that an audience might feel that Pedrolino and Arlecchino are going too far. Commedia troupes could certainly have added spurts of blood to enhance the violence (they used pigs' bladders full of blood for such effects). In terms of morality the key is to establish Pantalone as enough of a villain for the audience to feel that the pain and punishment is deserved. If the victim is innocent we are less likely to laugh but if the

victim has been unpleasant and our sympathies have been secured by the perpetrator of the violence we are more likely to laugh.

In this way slapstick comedy has the potential to be used as a means of reversing the usual status relationship and of exacting revenge where necessary – even if such a revenge may short lived and Arlecchino's slapstick is soon used on him again.

Conclusion

So Slapstick can be defined as a form of broad physical comedy in which laughter is likely to be provoked by comic violence and the appearance of pain. It uses as its techniques tripping, falling, hitting and throwing; all of which occur in patterns of repetition and escalation. In provoking laughter in these ways slapstick gives us the pleasure of seeing dignity over-turned. Pleasure can also be obtained by recognizing the skill, timing and mastery of the performer. All of these elements are, I would contend, best demonstrated through a central double act that embodies a series of binary oppositions as outlined above. Arguably the most important of these is status. The centrality of status in slapstick performance opens up the possibility for such performances to comment satirically on contemporary society. The centrality of status in slapstick performance opens up the possibility for such performances to comment satirically on contemporary society. In this anarchic and at times, excessive mode of performance lies the potential for social subversion. Therefore, what on one level works as entertaining and impressive physical skill, also contains two possible socially cathartic effects. One is that the audience witness the mighty brought low by a well-placed blow from an underling. They laugh at the blow, at the reaction to the pain inflicted and at the joy of seeing the under-dog temporarily triumph with the result that the temptation to something similar in real life may be diminished. The slapstick violence and laughter acts as a release valve. The other, more subtle effect is that, in seeing the traditional battle between high and low status played out in this comic way, those whose lowly status is exploited can feel that the situation has been recognized and, vicariously, righted.

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