

Kalevala dell'Arte: performing the invisible bridges

theatre, shamanism, ritual of renewal, masks, oral culture

Abstract

The text presents and analyzes the similarities and differences between the Italian theatrical style, the Commedia dell'Arte with the Finnish epos, the Kalevala. It emphasizes the anthropological background of both sources and points out that despite the geographical distance and the apparent lack of contact, a continuity could be found. The presence of invisible bridges therefore permitted and justified the combination of these two “languages”: the Finnish epos with the Italian drama. At first the article explores the ritualistic origin of the Commedia dell'Arte and then links it with the healing session of the Finnish tietäjä. In the second part the essay focuses on the language and compares the different types of languages employed in the Commedia dell'Arte and in the Kalevala.

Kalevala dell'Arte: performing the invisible bridges

The incongruous idea to “join” the Kalevala with Commedia dell'Arte, appeared in our¹ head during summer 2005, our investigation started with the question: what could connect the Finnish epos with the Italian theatrical style; two worlds so far from each other without any similarity? At the beginning it looked more like a joke, maybe a funny one, but no more than a joke. However, while we were examining the astonishing adventures of these Nordic heroes, we noticed that some of them could be documented as archetypes, for their features were recurrent in various traditions; the old man craving for young girls, the bombastic soldier, the intrepid lover, the witch, etc. This detection was the first access in building the bridge between these two worlds, in fact the Commedia dell'Arte is a theatrical style based only on stock characters, archetypes. Some of these characters are Pantalone: the old greedy merchant running after young women, the Capitano: the boisterous but incapable soldier, the Innamorato: the young lover, The Strega: the witch, the female opponent to the patriarchal society, the Dottore: the pedant and pretentious doctor, Arlecchino: the silly servant. Through these archetypes the Commedia dell'arte companies could mirror all the society with its different social status and portray its delicious misery². Therefore we tried to imagine what would it be if we replace Vainämönen by Pantalone? Or Lemminkäinen by the lover? Or Louhi by the Witch? But Commedia dell'arte is not only the showing of archetypes that could be put in whatever situation. The Commedia dell'Arte is as well the heritor of older archaic tradition. In fact the origin of Commedia dell'Arte is not clear. The first contract proving the existence of a Commedia dell'Arte company dates back to 1545, but it is impossible to find what generated this theater style. It is a fusion of elements from Sacred

¹ The theoretical research and afterwards the practical exploration of this work that I am describing has been firstly envisioned by Soile Mäkelä and me and subsequently it has been developed by the theatre company *Teatteri Metamorfoosi*, a theatre company specialized in mask acting based in Helsinki.

² The “birth” of all the commedia dell'arte characters didn't happen at once, they appeared slowly through time and practice. It is assumed that the medieval storyteller-fool could have originated the emergence of the characters. He was known to perform stories embodying different characters, usually three: the rich husband, the wife and the young servant. At one point, the storyteller was not anymore alone, but three actors embodying the three different characters. Later, the rich husband split into Pantalone and Capitano, the young servant into the young lover and the stupid servant, the wife into the young female lover and Smeraldina, the female servant. And later on other characters “joined” this family in order to represent on the stage all the basic types of the society of that epoch.

Representations, Latin comedy, minstrels, acrobats, storytellers, etc. Eugenio Barba defines *Commedia dell'Arte* as a gathering of liminal artists, people considered parasites and not recognized at all, who combined their different skills and created this impressive theater style which permitted them to survive and eventually to become a central axle of culture during Renaissance and Baroque period.

An essential element of the *Commedia dell'Arte* is the mask, with each stock character wearing a different mask, particular to and identifying his or her character. This expedient may be a heritage from the Latin comedy, the *Fabule Atellane*, which relied on typological masks to visually define the characters. The *Commedia* performances took place in the open markets, where the actors had to compete with surrounding noise. Moreover in Italy, at that time, each region, and even each town, had a different dialect. It would have been difficult for the traveling companies to learn the language of each town were they stopped, so the actors had to find a visual way to convey the story. The mask with its feature, which codifies the movements of the actor, was an expedient that allowed the audience to immediately recognize each character. The shape of the mask, which models also the actor's bodily posture and voice, isn't fortuitous but reveals physically the inner psychology of the character. By covering the face of the actor, the mask paradoxically reveals the concealed nature of the character. But I don't think that this practical motive explains completely the mysterious reason for the use of masks in the *Commedia dell'Arte*. We may have more chance to find an illumination in the ctonic world.

The *Commedia dell'Arte* is debtor also to Sacred Representations (or Mystery Plays) where the only masked character was the Devil. In this context the mask was an artifice to materialize what was intangible for humans: the divine entity. Through the mask a person could establish a contact with supernatural forces belonging to the realm sky or to the underworld. The mask is an opening between this world and the other world, between real and unreal, between life and death. Masks were used to cover the face of the dead, and they were also used to recall the dead or to call the spirit of the dead. Furthermore, the "devils" were sacred guardians of the ctonic world, the realm of the dead, who, by lying in the earth, could interfere positively or negatively with the regeneration of nature. These guardians were thus invoked during carnival to grant fertility for the year. Later Christianity, in its attempt to modify pagan cosmogony to fit its constructs, changed them to the Devil and the underworld to Hell. In that light the *Commedia dell'Arte* is a troupe of devilish characters mocking, criticizing and thus regenerating, human behaviors. In some ways, *Commedia dell'Arte* functions like the jesters. It combines a pitiless derision of society with the popular culture's celebration of the body and uses humor to express what normally is not allowed to be said. However, above all, the *Commedia dell'Arte* is debtor to the carnival. If we look at Middle Ages and at the Renaissance we found an incredible tension between the official culture and the popular culture of that time. The official, serious and austere culture represented and justified the oppressive hierarchy of society in which kings rule, with the complicity of the church, over a subjugated population. But these rulers, aware of the danger of enforcing a continual submission, allowed certain activities to take place in which the roles of the rulers and the oppressed were reversed for short period of time—carnival time. During carnival, the rulers disappeared and the fools or other people at the bottom of the social ladder became kings. (The symbolic "death"-disappearance of the king is the echo, or secularization, of dying god who afterwards resurrect, which is interpreted as the cycle of the seasons). In the explosive festivity of carnival, the folk were temporarily liberated. Carnival became a moment of abolition of distinctions and a time for rejecting a severe God. Everything could be mocked, and through the laughter all boundaries were abolished, creating the sense of an utopian equality. Furthermore, flesh and all the body parts, especially the reproductive ones, were celebrated and exposed. The obscene aspect of the feast was an echo of ancient pagan rituals of fertility that the Christian church had been unable to suppress or eradicate. Through this exuberance of

food, flesh and life, all fears of illness, aridity, misery and death were overcome. Death and Devils, the menacing guardians of the underworld, participated in the carnival and they were fellows of mockery and tricks. During this exulting moment of joy, the society could express what was repressed and so could regenerate itself, while still letting the official order reestablish itself at the end of it. The *Commedia dell'Arte* is the theatrical transposition of the ritual of carnival, of the ritual of fertility, the agrarian rite of renewal, for the archetypal structure of a *Commedia dell'Arte* plot sets the conflict between the old characters and the young lovers, where the firsts represent the old year and the latter the new coming year. The young lovers have to overcome many obstacles but finally they succeed and can finally enjoy their love: the earth has overcome the winter and the new life can start again.

Surprisingly we discovered that the song XV of the *Kalevala*, telling one of the adventures of Lemminkäinen and especially of his mother, carries some aspects mentioned in the previous paragraph. Lemminkäinen after being defeated by Louhi, the mistress of the North, is cut into pieces and thrown into Tuonela, the river of the dead. His mother is warned by her son's brush on which magically appears blood stains. The mother wanders asking news about her son until the sun answers her and informs her that he is floating in the river of Tuonela. The mother goes there and after gathering the body parts she manages to give back life to her son. This is a tale of resurrection, which can be compared to the agrarian myth where a god, Ra in Egypt, Dionysus in Greece, Jesus-Christ in Occident, dies and resurrects. But not only: desiring to understand the shamanistic background of the Finnish epos, we compared the song XV with a healing session led by a "tietäjä"³.

The healing session has a specific structure, or dramaturgy, where the tietäjä has to go through specific tasks and steps in order to discover the reason of the illness and fight against the negative influence affecting the patient. We thought, what about using the specific dramaturgical shamanistic' session of healing and apply it to a story? So we fragmented the song XV and decided to reconstruct the adventure of Lemminkäinen and his mother according to a healing session. Anna-Leena Siikala presents this structure as⁴:

- A The tietäjä has to activate his/her special force (The "väki")
- B The tietäjä summons the help of spirits or forces into nature
- C The tietäjä explains the reason of the call
- D The tietäjä seeks protection before undergoing this quest
- E The boisterous song of the tietäjä
- F Investigation of origin of the sickness
- G Designation of the enemy, of the opponent
- H The tietäjä sings and enchants the enemy
- I The tietäjä attacks the enemy
- J Description of the mythical animal, which will help the tietäjä for this fight
- K Chasing away the cause of the disease
- L Final battle between the tietäjä and the disease
- M Praising the superior force that helped the tietäjä
- N Final mages of recovering

When we applied this structure to the song we actually noticed that the song was already constructed as a healing session. This song is not describing the exploit of the mother healing his son, it is the exploit itself, while telling the resurrection happen, the

³ Tietäjä: can be translated as healer. He or she can be described as a shaman, telling stories and curing illness by engaging battles with the invisible forces of nature.

⁴ *Mythic Images and Shamanism: A Perspective on Kalevala Poetry*. By Anna-Leena Siikala. (FF Communications 280. Helsinki: Suomalainen Tiedeakatemia, 2002.

mother brings back to life the son, and the humans bring back the sun. If we apply this division to the song it results that:

- A The tietäjä has to activate his/her special force (The väki)
The brush covered by blood, the mother's love for her son.
- B The tietäjä summon the help of spirits or forces into nature
She goes into the forest
- C The tietäjä explains the reason of the call
The sun explains what has happened
- D The tietäjä seeks protection before undergoing this quest
Ilmarinen, the blacksmith, builds an iron rake to gather the body parts, while the sun puts asleep everybody near the river.
- E The boisterous song of the tietäjä
The raven challenges the mother who replies back
- F Investigation of origin of the sickness
Flash back of what has happened
- G Designation of the enemy, of the opponent
Battle between life and death
- H The tietäjä sings and enchants the enemy
The mother sews the body parts
- I The tietäjä attacks the enemy
She sings while sewing
- J Description of the mythical animal, which will help the tietäjä for this fight
The presentation of the bee
- K Chasing away the cause of the disease
The bee bringing the special unguent
- L Final battle between the tietäjä and the disease
The mother applies the unguent on the dead body and brings it back to life.
- M Praising the superior force that helped the tietäjä
The mother thanks God
- N Final mages of recovering
The mother asks her son to stay away from the malign spirit.

Therefore we noticed that while telling this story of resurrection the process of healing is operated, in the similar way, while a Commedia dell'Arte story presents the struggle of young lovers, it enacts the ritual of the carnival, which is a process of "healing", of helping nature (or society) to resurrect.

As I mentioned above, one preeminent part of carnival, which is reflected in the Commedia dell'Arte, is the special attention to the body and especially to the

reproductive ones. In fact the *Commedia dell'Arte* is filled with references to sexual desire, eroticism, lust, penis, vagina, breast, bottoms. The acting as well is not greedy of showing this aspect of the human body; the behavior of the characters is mainly driven by instincts, which emphasizes basic human needs: food and sex. The *Commedia dell'Arte* aims as well to unveil the inner struggle between social, educated behavior and primal impulses. The impulses are usually masked by culture but sometimes they pop up more or less violently. This dichotomy is one of the kernel points of the specific way of acting in this style; it is the feast of the body. The *Kalevala*, however, doesn't have such inclinations towards sexuality and sensuality. The characters in the Finnish epos do have desire (Vainamönen), they get married (Ilmarinen) or seduce women (Lemminkäinen), but the relationship towards the other sex remains generally prude and contained: as if it would have been indecorous for these heroes to feel lust, to be sensual. But this verdict was forgetting the nineteenth century censorship, which shaped the epos. Lönnrot, among the vastness of the songs he collected, made a choice and decided to drop what he thought would have been not suitable for his literary project. In searching among the neglected material, we discovered a huge amount of dirty songs; songs speaking of desire, sex, penis, vagina and so on. Exactly like in the *Commedia dell'Arte*. Once more, we felt entitled to bond these two worlds. Lönnrot's work was as well a political project; the desire to shape a Finnish identity. Therefore it was undoubtedly an attempt to establish some official culture legitimating the established power, which commissioned this publication. The same process of "cleaning" while transiting from popular culture to official culture happened to the *Commedia dell'Arte* as well. Like with the dirty songs that were disregarded, when the companies of *Commedia dell'Arte* left the squares, the open market, to perform in the rich salon of prince and kings they had to tame the corrosive and insubordinate nature of their show. Slowly the *Commedia dell'Arte*, over three centuries lost all political content and became a mere amusing distraction, which found obviously its natural death.

After having found the connecting elements between *Kalevala* and *Commedia dell'arte*, we had to face the problem of transposing the poetic language of the epos into the physical, body language of *Commedia*. Although the *Kalevala* describes the marvelous adventures of the Nordic heroes, it lingers in the realm of trance. The *Kalevala*, for its episodic construction and its specific rhythm enchants the listener, while the *Commedia dell'Arte* with its strong physical and visual acting, aims to catch the attention of the spectator. We were facing two opposite poles that seemed irreconcilable. Even though both have a similar oral tradition, they find their own expression in total different manners. The *Kalevala* emphasized the singing aspect of the storytelling, developing its specific rhythm and melody. The *Commedia dell'Arte* pushed the dramaturgical facet of the storytelling and transformed the narrator into an actor. I would define the difference between the Finnish bard and the Italian actor as someone who brings the audience to another space, the bard, and someone who shows to the audience another space, the actor. The actor makes present what is not here, while the bard takes the "here" to another space. The result of these differences created on one side a powerful poetic and hypnotic world where the words are fundamental and on the other side a very dynamic and explosive theatrical style where the pace is determinant. The solution we found, in order to bound these widely divergent faces without undermining one of the two, was to oscillate between the two languages. The oscillation allowed to create a tension between the two languages where both fluctuated simultaneously without blending. It was like carrying two different narratives while telling the same story. This permitted to present the desacralizing element from the *Commedia* while preserving the lyrical and elegiac quality from the epos.

Another element we had to solve was the passage from the episodic construction of the *Kalevala* to the dramaturgic construction of the *Commedia*. *Kalevala*, like other epic poems is episodic; it describes the events one after one, without hierarchy, presenting all of them on the same level. While the *Commedia dell'Arte*, like all

traditional theatre plays, puts the events converging towards the crucial moment, the revelation instant, the turning point, where the character reaches a higher level of consciousness. In order to catch the attention of the audience, the events, or actions, unlike the epic poetry, are organized according to a clear purpose, creating the suspense and leading towards a unique focus. If the epic poetry unrolls its content calmly, the dramatic poetry evolves in spirals increasing the climax at each gyration. Our decision was then to take a basic story, which would be the frame story and to incorporate in it other adventures from the Kalevala. However we couldn't use whatever story and make it in Commedia dell'Arte style, for the Commedia uses specific archetypal scenarios. It was necessary then to adjust the Kalevala myths to the Commedia scenario. The Commedia as mentioned above, sets the conflict between the old and the new. The old is represented by the old character running after money and power, while the young is symbolized by the lover fighting for their love. The basic Commedia plot is then the conflict between power and love: the power of love against the love for power. To fit this structure we organized the different stories around this concept; Lemminkäinen and the daughter of Louhi are in love, but Louhi has promised in marriage her daughter to Ilmarinen, in fact she has trade the daughter for the Sampo⁵. However, by mistake, during a dispute, she transforms her daughter into a swan without being able to convert her back into a human shape. Ilmarinen, therefore, wants the Sampo back while Lemminkäinen goes looking for the swan. At the end, after fighting with Louhi, dying and resuscitating, Lemminkäinen marries the daughter of Louhi and Vainämönen throws the Sampo into the water.

In 1947 Strehler and a group of actors decided to stage a Commedia dell'Arte performance: *Arlecchino servant of two masters* at the *Piccolo teatro di Milano*. At that time, nobody; neither actors, neither professors and even neither Strehler had a clear idea of what was the Commedia dell'Arte: how were the shows, how was the acting, and what was the form, since this specific theatrical style, which influenced deeply western theatre, died 200 years earlier, without leaving any continuation of its tradition. So Strehler and his actors had to invent everything, from the scrap and to rediscover what the actors of the Commedia dell'Arte were doing a couple of centuries ago. The result of that research had been a clamorous and successful performance. 60 years later we had a similar experience; we managed to craft our Commedia dell'arte, to reinvent this explosive and humorous style⁶. We wanted to reinterpret the Finnish identity and in summer 2007, after two years of research and exploration, Kalevala dell'Arte was finally performed⁷. The commedia dell'arte is theatrical style which stages archetypal stories that

⁵ The Sampo is a mythical object manufactured by Ilmarinen. The nature of this object is not clearly defined; it is supposed to produce wealth, money, food, abundance, everything that humans need in order to survive. The Sampo is thus a mysterious object that everybody desires. In the epos, Ilmarinen trades the Sampo for a woman but later and after having been deceived by her, Ilmarinen and his pals want the Sampo back. The song 43 of the Kalevala depicts an impressive fight between Vainämönen, Ilmarinen and Lemminkäinen against Louhi who has transformed herself into a terrific eagle. But during the battle, which happens on a boat, the Sampo slips away and falls into the depth of sea.

⁶ It is difficult to define clearly what was Commedia dell'arte, not only because we have few documents from that time, but also because it has been a theatre style that even though used strong physical and visual codes it has never been codified. Therefore, unlike other codified theatre style, such as Noh theatre or Kathakali, Commedia dell'Arte during its 3 centuries of life changed a lot. The Commedia dell'arte performed in France in the 18th century was clearly different from the one presented in Italy in the 16th century. The success of Strehler's production helped to promote this forgotten theatre style, but paradoxically it killed it at its birth. The performance *Arlecchino servants of two masters* became immediately the ultimate paradigm of any Commedia dell'Arte show. After it, and still nowadays, actors and directors are still struggling in trying to surpass and in daring to present a new version of Commedia dell'Arte.

⁷ The show Kalevala dell'Arte has been presented for the first time in June 2007 at Koko Teatteri, Helsinki. The cast was as follow: Lemminkäinen: Sakari Saikkonen. Ilmarinen: Ari Suzuki. Mother of Lemminkäinen (and Ilmarinen): Tanja Eloranta. Vainämönen: Davide Giovanzana. Louhi: Johanna MacDonald. Daughter of Louhi: Maija Ruuskanen. Servant of Louhi: Soile Mäkelä. The performance has

exceeds all local identity and let the renaissance actors cross all European national frontiers and languages and therefore to travel in all Europe and share their stories. It must have been a marvelous surprise for these Italian actors of that time to notice the French audience (or English, or Spanish, or Russian, etc.) laughing at the same jokes and situations as was doing the audience of their native country. Similarly this happened with this experience, where we were rediscovering and reinventing traditional elements of the Commedia dell'Arte. But how is it possible that someone from a Nordic country, which doesn't share anything with someone from Italy or France, could develop a similar physical language? Beyond cultural differences, humans share archetypal roots that the masks and in general that theatre unveils and puts in evidence. In fact the use of masks (which are at the origin of European theatre) and the strong physical and visual expression that its use requires, allow every spectator to understand the action even without knowing the language spoke on the stage. In fact from the simple and naked stage of the commedia dell'arte emerges the characters, which are the immemorial archetypes of all human society; the servants, the masters, the lovers, the intellectuals, the clever, the arrogant, the weak and the idiots, eternally in contrast and fighting for their survival and for they basic needs. In these times where the European union is questioning if its cultural foundation is Christianity or not, we can answer that actually what is the cultural foundation of Europe is not religion but theatre.

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been well received by the audience and critics have praised the particular explosive and emotional treatment of the national epos. The spectators have predominantly enjoyed the combination of the "seriousness" and poetry of the Kalevala and at the same time the derision of it. For this work the *Kalevalaseura*, the Kalevala Society, which seeks to research, publish and transmit knowledge about the Kalevala and its cultural history, has invited Davide Giovanzana to become a member of it.