Dedicated

to the memory of my grandfather

Ruben Simonov,

the first Truffaldino on Evgenii Vakhtangov's stage

Table of Contents

List of Illustrations

Acknowledgments

The initial idea for this book came to mind during my graduate studies in the Department of Slavic Languages at Brown University in the late Professor Samuel Driver's class on Russian symbolism. While working on a paper about the symbolist fascination with the commedia dell'arte, I became curious about the deeper roots of this phenomenon within the Russian cultural landscape and began my research in this area with Professor Driver's enthusiastic encouragement.

This project was made possible due to the support of many colleagues and friends. First of all, I would like to express special gratitude to my doctoral thesis director, Alexander Levitsky, who ignited my interest in the influence of the commedia dell'arte on eighteenth-century Russian culture. My two other doctoral dissertation readers, Patricia Arant and Svetlana Evdokimova, shared with me their expertise on medieval and nineteenth-century Russian culture. My work on the pre-nineteenth-century roots of the commedia dell'arte in Russia would not have been possible without the guidance of Liudmila Starikova, one of the leading scholars of Russian eighteenth-century performing arts, whose encyclopedic archival work and numerous publications made many of the materials accessible. Starikova generously provided me with many valuable sources for this work and graciously shared with me

her deep knowledge and fascination with pre-nineteenth-century Russian culture.

The chapter on Alla Pugacheva greatly benefited from collaboration with Helena Goscilo, whose expertise in contemporary Russian culture and extensive comments on my work greatly stimulated my writing. I also thank my dear friends Alexandra Smith, Maxim Shrayer, and the late Svetlana Boym for reading some of the early chapters and giving me valuable scholarly comments and encouragement. I particularly thank Irina Reyfman for her detailed and constructive comments and suggestions during the final stage of this project, which motivated me to look at it from a new perspective. I also appreciate the thoughtful comments and suggestions of my peer reviewers. I thank Vladislav Ivanov for sharing with me his expertise on Vakhtangov and his milieu and for allowing me to use several illustrations. I thank the late Giacomo Oreglia who graciously allowed me to use images from his personal collection. I thank my husband, Matthew Partan, for his love and inexhaustible sense of humor. This work would not have come to completion without the patience and support of my children and family.

A Note on Transliteration

In the body of the text, I have used the conventional spellings of surnames (e.g., Gogol instead of Gogol', Trediakovsky rather than Trediakovskii); for the notes, quotations, bibliographic information, and terms that would be of importance to scholars, however, I use the Library of Congress system of transliteration.

Introduction

> "Stop moping!" she would cry. "Look at the harlequins!"
> "What harlequins? Where?"
> "Oh, everywhere. All around you. Trees are harlequins, words are harlequins. So are situations and sums. Put two things together—jokes, images—and you get a triple harlequin. Come on! Play! Invent the world! Invent reality!"
>
> —Vladimir Nabokov, *Look at the Harlequins!*

Mention of the Italian commedia dell'arte in Russian culture brings to mind visual and textual allusions to the sophisticated Russian Silver Age, with its seductive Columbines, melancholic Pierrots, and flamboyant Harlequins. One might think about Vsevolod Meyerhold's directorial experiments, Aleksandr Blok's symbolist play *The Puppet Show*, the theatrical costumes and scenery of the World of Art group, Sergei Diaghilev's *Ballets Russes*, and Evgenii Vakhtangov's commedia dell'arte–style production of Carlo Gozzi's *Turandot*, *Princess Turandot*, which crowned the commedia explosion on the modernist stage. While Russian modernism's infatuation with the commedia dell'arte has been widely studied, little has been written about the broader impact of the commedia on Russian culture through its Russification and gradual transformation during other periods. However, the iconic masks of the Italian commedia dell'arte have been vagabonding the roads of Russian cultural history for over three hundred years.

This study seeks to fill that academic gap by exploring the impact of the Italian commedia (often called the "harlequinade") and its aesthetic principles on the Russian artistic imagination,

going beyond the narrow time frame of modernism to evaluate selected cases from the eighteenth century to the twenty-first. I argue that there has been a rich yet insufficiently studied tradition of Russian harlequinized art that has extended for three centuries. In this tradition, the term "harlequinized" describes art or literature that contains core features of the commedia. Each generation of Russian artists has interpreted the commedia differently and borrowed various elements, using the ancient themes of the Italian harlequinade to produce artistic innovation within Russian culture. The breadth and depth of the rich, multifaceted, harlequinized tradition in Russian culture is so extensive that it could not be addressed in a single volume, so the present work uses a case study approach to focus on examples of harlequinized art and literature that have had major cultural significance. This study investigates which important features Russian artists have borrowed from the commedia in various cultural and historical milieus and how individual artists have reinterpreted and Russified the commedia. The Italian commedia dell'arte has been an inexhaustible source of inspiration, providing a powerful impetus for the development of the Russian arts and liberating the Russian artistic imagination. The fact that the commedia was a synthesis of many different arts suggests that an interdisciplinary approach should be used to trace its influence on drama, fiction, literary translation, theatrical performances, and popular culture.

The Italian Commedia dell'Arte

Commedia dell'arte was born in mid-sixteenth century Italy—with roots going back to Greek and Roman comedies and medieval farces—and has had a tremendous impact on the Western artistic imagination in literature and in the performing and visual arts in areas such as music, dance, circus, pantomimes, and playwriting.[1]

[1] This discussion of the commedia dell'arte is based on studies such as Anton Giulio Bragaglia, *Pulcinella* (Rome: Gherardo Casini, 1953); Cesare Molinari, *La commedia dell'arte* (Milan: Arnoldo Mondatori Editore, 1985); Konstantin

The term "commedia dell'arte" is attributed by some scholars to the eighteenth-century playwright Carlo Goldoni, while others suggest that it could have been in oral circulation much earlier. *Arte* signifies "professional craft" or "craftsmanship." Historically, the commedia was also known as *commedia all'improviso* (improvisational comedy), *commedia di zanni* (comedy of *zanni* [servants]), *commedia delle maschere* (comedy of the masks), and *commedia a soggetto* (comedy of the plot).[2]

The commedia had several essential characteristics: the absence of dramatic text, the use of improvisational dialogue, and the use of comic stock characters wearing masks. Each mask represented a well-known character who typically exhibited certain onstage behavior, had recognizable speech and movement patterns, and wore a traditional costume. Commedia dell'arte was a unique type of theatrical performance as it relied on improvisation and the actors' virtuosity because performances were not based on a traditional body of dramatic text and audiences did not see the leading actors' faces. The commedia did not rely on directorial power since it was the art of an actor-creator. The directing that is inseparable from the modern idea of performance was not necessary and neither was a script.

The onstage action was based on schematic scenarios that simply summarized the plot, so the performances relied on the actors' improvisation and acting skills. The commedia dell'arte was a synthetic form of the performing arts as its actors were simultaneously mimes, acrobats, singers, and dancers who had to

Miklashevsky [Constant Mic, K. M. Miklashevskii], *La commedia dell'arte, ou Le théatre des comédiens italiens des XVI, XVII, & XVIII siècles* (Paris: Shiffrin, 1927); Pierre Louis Duchartre, *The Italian Comedy* (New York: Dover Publications, 1966); Giacomo Oreglia, *The Commedia dell'Arte* (London: Methuen, 1968); and Judith Chaffee and Olly Crick, eds., *The Routledge Companion to Commedia dell'Arte* (London: Routledge, 2015).

2 See Miklashevsky, *La commedia dell'arte*, 22–25; Robert Henke, *Performance and Literature in the Commedia dell'Arte* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 5; and Antonio Fava, *The Comic Mask in the Commedia dell'Arte: Actor Training, Improvisation, and the Poetics of Survival* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2007), 25.

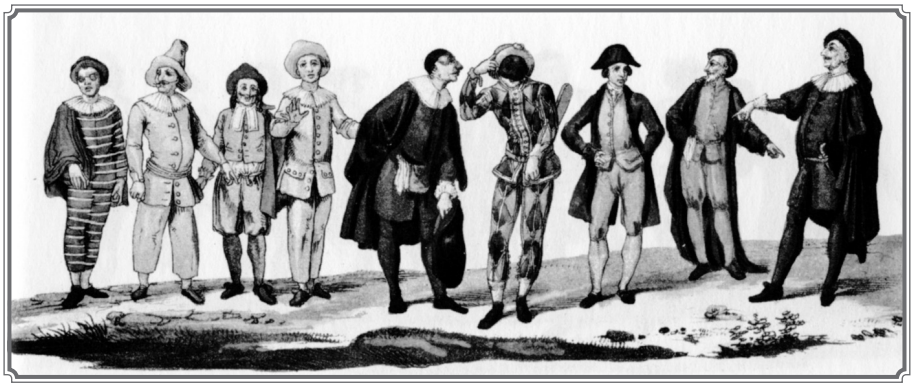

Figure 1. *Commedia dell'Arte Characters.*
Nineteenth-century lithograph by G. Gallina.
Courtesy of Giacomo Oreglia.

entertain the audience while wearing typological costumes and half-masks that left only their mouths uncovered. Therefore, physical expressiveness as well as vocal and verbal skills were essential attributes of the performances.

The most prominent performers of commedia dell'arte stock characters also presented philosophical issues intermixed with the buffoonery. For instance, the legendary Italian comic actor Antonio Sacchi was citing Seneca, Cicero, and other classical philosophers under the mask of a buffoon. The actors performing stock characters were expected to maintain a centuries-old comic tradition, relating it to the sociohistorical cultural context outside the theater. The physical appearance of stock characters had grotesque overtones due to the bizarre combination of deathly expressionless half-masks (which could be black, brown, or white) that covered the upper part of the face, and expressive uncovered mouths and agile acrobatic bodies. This juxtaposition of symbols of life and death presented a philosophical message that forced spectators to simultaneously mourn the inescapable approach of death while celebrating life's endless joy.

The Italian language's musicality and extensive use of vowels helped the masked actors articulate using their mouths as emotional and artistic apparatuses that replaced the barely visible eyes and otherwise totally absent facial expressions. Goldoni, who

juxtaposed the improvisational commedia with theater based on literary texts, stated that the commedia dell'arte was purely and distinctly an Italian genre of comedy that no other nation was ever able to imitate.[3] Nevertheless, since the mid-sixteenth century, Europe had been infatuated with the commedia dell'arte, and its artists and authors sought to imitate and reinterpret the commedia, borrowing the masks and adapting them to their national sense of comedy and reshaping the inventive plots of the Italian scenarios. The famous characters of the commedia, also known as masks, were based on diverse personality types and were associated with specific Italian regions and cities, representing their typical features and speech patterns, proverbs, and sayings. For example, Harlequin was a cunning servant from Bergamo, Dottore was a learned fool from Bologna, Pantalone was an old miser from Venice, and so forth. Over the centuries the Italian commedia developed distinctive poetics and aesthetics that had a powerful impact on the European artistic imagination and were transposed into drama, literature, music, and visual arts across Europe. Core elements of the commedia include the masked character; improvisation within a stable scenario or plot; extensive use of grotesque imagery, plasticity, exaggeration, and self-parody; and the presence of doubles and mistaken identities.[4]

The theater practitioner, theoretician, and commedia historian Antonio Fava argues that the commedia is still alive and is convinced that it has been evolving and reinventing itself together with the changing world, inspiring generations of artists and nourishing theater and dramatic texts worldwide. Simon Callow writes,

> We are, all of us in the theater, haunted by the idea of Commedia, partly because the prints and engravings of it that have come down to us so clearly embody the essence of theater

[3] Carlo Goldoni, *Mémoires de M. Goldoni, pour servir à l'histoire de sa vie et à celle de son théâtre, ed. Paul de Roux.* (Paris: Mercure de France, 1965), 256.

[4] This discussion of the commedia dell'arte is based on the following works: Duchartre, *The Italian Comedy*; Winifred Smith, *The Commedia dell'Arte: A Study in Italian Popular Comedy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1912); Miklashevsky, *La commedia dell'arte*; and Molinari, *La commedia dell'arte.*

> but also because the whole corpus of dramatic literature until the nineteenth century is haunted by it: Shakespeare, Ben Johnson, Molière, Marivaux, Beaumarchais, Goldoni (it goes without saying), Nestroy, Holberg. Wherever there are witty servants and domineering masters, young wives and old husbands, pompous pedants, thwarted lovers, or bragging soldiers, the Commedia is there in spirit, and also very often in form. What we respond to in it is the energy that leaps out of the old illustrations, a fundamentally theatrical vitality which takes hold of and possesses its characters, fabulously exotic but somehow instantly recognizable.[5]

Russian Harlequinized Art and Literature

The term "harlequinized" art and literature is based on the name of one of the beloved commedia characters—the servant Harlequin (Arlecchino in Italian). Harlequin was one of the stock characters of the improvisational Italian commedia dell'arte, and the first Russian Harlequins represented a peculiar hybrid of a Germanized version of the commedia dell'arte mask with the medieval Russian wandering minstrels—the *skomorokhi*. By 1702, during the reign of Peter the Great, Russian jesters under Harlequin's mask had become an integral part of early Russian drama and bore names such as Arlekin, Garlekin, or Gaer. Russian Harlequin adaptations later appeared in many eighteenth-century comedies and comic interludes, significantly before the first authentic Italian Harlequin appeared on Russian soil as part of a commedia dell'arte troupe that traveled to Russia by the invitation of Anna Ioannovna in 1731. In the nineteenth century Harlequin migrated from high culture (court stages) to low culture (the arena of various circuses and *balagan*-entertainment booths), and Harlequin continued to be one of the most popular entertainers in the Russian circus and balagans into the twentieth century. Russian modernist artists such as Aleksandr Benois, Nikolai Evreinov, Vsevolod Meyerhold, and others transformed Harlequin from a comic persona into an irresistible

[5] Simon Callow, foreword to Fava, *The Comic Mask*, vii.

lover and erotic icon of Russian modernism. Thus, Harlequins and many other Russified Italian masks were vagabonding the roads of Russian culture for several centuries.

I introduce the term "harlequinized art and literature" to denote the transposition of the theatrical language of the Italian commedia dell'arte into the language of literature and other arts. This term is rooted in Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of the carnivalization of literature as the process of transposing the carnival's symbolic language into the language of literature.[6] However, there is a distinction between the carnival, which is a real-life phenomenon, and the commedia dell'arte, which is an art form based on a theatrical convention. I define the core elements of the commedia: playing the mask; improvisation within a set scenario or plot; and the extensive use of grotesque imagery, plasticity, exaggeration, and self-parody; and the presence of doubles and mistaken identities. This terminology is used to investigate how Russian artists experimented with this ancient art form to produce innovation and break preexisting canons.

In its early stages the commedia dell'arte was inseparable from carnivalistic festivities, as commedia performances were a major form of popular entertainment. Bakhtin establishes a direct connection between the medieval carnivalistic culture and the commedia and writes that the commedia preserved stronger ties with the carnivalistic milieu than any other art form.[7] According to Bakhtin, the carnival itself is not a literary phenomenon but a "syncretic pageantry of a ritualistic sort" that historically developed its own symbolic language, concrete forms, and sensations.[8] Bakhtin calls the "transposition of carnival into the language of

6 Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984); Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Helene Iswolsky (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1968).

7 Mikhail Bakhtin, *Tvorchestvo Fransua Rable i narodnaia kul'tura srednevekovia i renessansa* (Moscow: Khudozhestvennaia literatura, 1990), 42.

8 Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, 122.

literature the carnivalization of literature."[9] Analogously, I use the term "harlequinized" to describe works of literature and art when characteristic features of the Italian commedia dell'arte have been transposed into those works.

Carnival traditions and the commedia tradition share many features, yet they are also different. Both carnival and commedia rely on such features as the extensive use of grotesque eccentricity, an atmosphere of festivity, and life-assuring laughter. Furthermore, both the carnival and the commedia flourished during the Renaissance, and both began a gradual decline thereafter, transposing their distinctive features into various art forms and intermixing with masquerades. Nevertheless, unlike carnivalistic festivities that represent real-life phenomena, the commedia is a theatrical convention with a strict division between performers and spectators. The carnival was a real-life phenomenon in which participants temporarily ignored their social statuses and liberated themselves from the dogmatic rules of the church. During carnivalistic festivities, people were all actors in the free and merry reality of the carnival. In contrast, the commedia dell'arte was an art form that was performed by well-trained professional actors.

Iurii Lotman remarks that "art can be described as a certain secondary language, and a work of art—as a text in this language."[10] During its long life on European stages, the commedia dell'arte formed this type of secondary language. Russian culture first became acquainted with the language of the commedia dell'arte in an indirect fashion, through various foreign interpretations that included the German version of Harlequin and foreign puppeteers who frequently visited the Russian Empire. In 1731, Russian culture was directly exposed to the original language of the Italian commedia dell'arte for the first time. Since that encounter, this secondary language has been deeply rooted within Russian culture, but, as with any language, it has been subject to constant change

9 Ibid., 122.

10 Iurii M. Lotman, "Isskustvo, kak iazyk," in *Ob iskusstve* (St. Petersburg: Iskusstvo-SPb, 1998), 22.

and transformation. While this secondary language was purely theatrical at first, it was gradually adapted by Russian literature, drama, visual arts, music, and ballet. This adaptation occurred through what Lotman calls the method of "artistic translation."[11] In his discussion of theatrical language, Lotman notes that an original play and its final production on stage use dramatically different language, and that theater production is one of the most difficult types of artistic translation.[12] This definition can be fruitful for the purposes of this study as it provides a terminology for the transposition of the language of theater performances into other arts and literature, translating theater language into the various artistic languages. Therefore, harlequinized art and literature represent the artistic translation of theatrical language into the language of other arts. The examples of harlequinized art and literature discussed in this book are characterized by a vivid theatricality.[13]

The mask is one of the essential attributes of the harlequinade; therefore, I argue that the presence of Italian masks in Russian literary or dramatic texts or performing arts suggests that this particular work may have intertextual and cultural links with the Italian commedia. I suggest that works of art and literature that contain the Italian masks and other key attributes of the commedia can be defined as harlequinized. Lotman notes that the commedia dell'arte created an original model of the universe, where stability and unshakable canons (the masks and what was expected from the actors who perform in them) were combined with the full freedom of artistic improvisation and flexibility of the scenario. The masks were the only stable images of the commedia dell'arte, and they were based on the principle of predictable identities: from the very

11 Iurii M. Lotman, "Iazyk teatra," in Lotman, *Ob iskusstve*, 606.

12 Ibid. "Пьеса и спектакль говорят разными языками, и слово, которое пишется на бумаге, глубоко не адекватно играемому на сцене. Постановка — один из труднейших видов художественного перевода."

13 Ibid., 604. Theatricality, according to Lotman, is an artistic theater language: "Театральность есть язык театра как искусства."

beginning of a performance, the spectators were well acquainted with the nature of the characters.[14]

The term "grotesque" denotes a comical and absurd distortion of reality, something that is bizarre and fantastic. According to Bakhtin, both medieval and Renaissance-era carnivalistic festivities and the commedia dell'arte were famous for their grotesque imagery. The term "grotesque" originated in fifteenth-century Italy when, during the excavation of Roman ruins, an old cave—*grotta* in Italian—revealed a sample of a previously unknown decorative art. Ornaments in the cave presented fantastic combinations of human, animal, and plant forms with fanciful distortions of natural shapes. The comic absurdity of the figures and the bizarre exaggeration of nature were first used exclusively in the visual arts but gradually were transposed into other art forms, including literature. Bakhtin sees the grotesque as providing unlimited freedom of the artistic imagination and at the same time a comic liberation from artistic rules, placing strong emphasis on the primarily comic nature of the grotesque. The commedia dell'arte vividly illustrates this view since its improvisational nature provided actors with endless imaginative possibilities. Visually, the commedia dell'arte caricatures humankind, exaggerating various body parts, covering actors' faces with half-masks with enormous noses, and presenting comic characters who imitate animal sounds and movements on stage. The commedia absorbed the rich cultural heritage of Roman antiquity, and the visual, comic grotesque is one illustration of this continuity.

It is important to emphasize that the masks and other key commedia attributes must be present in order for a text or performance to be considered harlequinized. The presence of features such as grotesque, eccentricity, plasticity, and parody alone do not mean that a work is harlequinized, as they can be used in various forms and genres that have nothing in common with the commedia dell'arte. This study will trace the elements of

[14] Iurii M. Lotman, "Tekst i vnetekstovye struktury," in Lotman, *Ob iskusstve*, 276.