

# Masquerade Mask (Fraternal Compagnia)

By [Alan Cranston](#) | Published on Monday 5 August 2024

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“Punch and Judy! Most of us know the seaside favourite is old and rooted in the Commedia dell’Arte. This funny, clever and engaging piece tells more about the Commedia’s origins and pervasive influence, from Shakespeare to pantomime and on into a flourishing living form. Many principal characters appear but this is far from a parade or history lesson, it’s a fully formed show. Seemingly effortless artistry all but conceals the performers brilliant clowning, vocal and mime skills. We’re taken from the very beginnings of the form, in a sketch that will especially amuse children (this is very much a show for adults which children can also enjoy) through a hilarious Macbeth cauldron scene to a virtuoso Harlequin. Brilliant, informative, entertaining.”

*C aquila, until 25 Aug*  
*tw rating 5/5 | [Alan Cranston]*

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By Matthew Partridge | ⌚ 10th Aug 2024

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“An introduction to the genre that will make many people eager to find out more about it”

“Commedia dell’Arte, which began in medieval Italy, is generally credited with providing the foundation blocks for modern comedy. Fraternal Compagnia’s *Masquerade Mask* attempts to give the Fringe a crash course in the tradition in the form of a play-within-the-play. Having lost most of his cast due to Brexit, the Professor is forced to enlist the help of his two servants, Pizza and Pasta, to play the classic roles, starting with the peasants. However, as the play progresses, the troupe squabble, bicker and fall out, before finally reuniting at the end in song.

All three actors are clearly masters of physical theatre, and throw themselves in the action, using their bodies and gestures to portray the various characters, including Death and the greedy Pantalone. So, even when they break into Italian, as they do when they are hurling insults at one another, it’s very easy to understand what is going on. In addition to the superb acting, the music and the historically authentic costumes (including masks), add further colour to the production. They even manage to find opportunities to involve the audience in the production, without it feeling forced, and by the end those watching were singing and laughing along with smiles on their faces.

Overall, this is an enchanting masterpiece of a show, which will appeal to everyone, and provides an introduction to the genre that will make many people eager to find out more about it.”

# EdFringe Review: Masquerade Mask

By WJQuinn • Jul 31, 2024 3:42 PM



“Fraternal Compagnia’s ‘Masquerade Mask’ is a wonderfully fun and fresh dive into the world of the Commedia dell’Arte. The trio of Luca Comastri, Edinburgh-based Gabriel Bird, and Fraternal Compagnia co-founder Tania Passarini put on a bravura performance.

The show’s framing story is cute, Gabriel playing the company’s director sans company thanks to Brexit complications. All he has left is Pizza and Pasta – Comastri and Passarini – and a treasure trove of costuming.

Their clownish negotiations, speckled with slapstick and exaggerated expressions have something of the Marx Brothers about them, or maybe Abbot and Costello. These palpable connections to comedians of later centuries are inevitable such is the enduring influence of the Comm

Done poorly, such tomfoolery can grate on an audience, but rest easy: the laughter flows before a single mask is donned.

“Fraternal Compagnia’s ‘Masquerade Mask’ is a wonderfully fun and fresh dive into the world of the Commedia dell’Arte.”

When the first of the centuries-old characters come out to play, it’s easy to why. The pair of ‘Zanni’ characters (peasants) brought to life by Passarino and Comastri really only have one joke: fleas. Performed almost entirely in Italian they must rely on physicality and expressive delivery to sell a boisterous song of a mutually assured scratching hell. Vibrantly absurd, the dance of these ancestral clowns is a joy, and sets a merry tone for a whistlestop tour through the major ‘hits’ of the Commedia.

If anything ‘Masquerade Mask’ could use a little more tragedy to balance it’s good-hearted merriment, but it’s a lot to pack into 50 minutes.

In every vignette the quality of execution is sharp whilst leaving just enough room for improvised chaos. A negotiation between a Scrooge-esque Pantalone and Death wanders into Three Stooges territory with chuckle-worthy effect. A battle of impossibly vain, red faced captains brings Laurel and Hardy to mind, whilst a somewhat gruesome run in with Macbeth’s witches summons a triumphant turn from Passarino as all three Weird Sisters.

Snippets of english dialogue are more than enough to keep the audience in the know, whilst trusting them to intuit the Italian majority. Given the transformations of motion and even the shape of mouth beneath the grotesque masks, it’s easy to say the least.

The masks and costume changes are evocative, and the linking story of the company in crisis is highly genial. A final encounter with a very funny Arlecchino (That’s Harlequin to you), made a small girl in the front row laugh so much that anyone else’s opinion hardly mattered.

Ultimately ‘Masquerade Mask’ is a warm and entertaining love letter to the Commedia. In the 50 minutes, much of life’s silliness has been staged with grotesque effect, skewering our vanities and lampooning the powerful. It offers a lovely introduction to the Commedia dell’Arte for the novice, and a welcome reunion for everyone else.”



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## Masquerade Mask

Posted on [August 10, 2024](#) by [AJ Clay](#)



“The Renaissance genre of Commedia dell’Arte is perhaps not well-known among Fringe-goers, and Bologna-based Fraternal Compagnia are here to fix that. The mysterious Professor and his two assistants Pasta and Pizza are tasked with introducing the masks of the stock characters to the audience, in a show somewhere between presentation and performance.

Our hosts were charismatic and full of beans for a mid-morning show, and really got the crowd going. At the heart of commedia is improvisation, we’re told, and the banter with the front show demonstrated their grasp of the skill. We’re taken on a whirlwind tour of the Commedia with figures like Pantalone, Arlecchino and Il Capitano, all represented by beautiful masks handmade by the director. The roots of pantomime, tragedy, opera and modern comedy can clearly be seen in the characters’ antics; indeed, Shakespeare is among the writers inspired by commedia.

The action is fast-paced, full of slapstick and fourth wall breaking; while the dialogue is in Italian, you don’t have to be fluent to understand what’s going on. The duelling Capitanos with their Marx Brothers-like mirror routine was particularly side-splitting! There’s education among the laughs too; commedia was ground-breaking in terms of female participation. And somehow, our players have energy for a few rowdy songs on top of it all. The audience lapped it all up – especially the row of Italians.

Masquerade Mask’s actors bring us a potted history of an ancient art form with charm and gusto, and it’s the perfect morning pick-me-up.”

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*Masquerade Mask is at C Aquila on 1-11, 13-18, 20-25 Aug*

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# Masquerade Mask



“When Shakespeare accompanied William Stanley to Italy in 1585-86, he witness’d an art form that would revolutionise the English stage – an entity that is now slap bang at the top of the Royal Mile in Edinburgh this Fringe

A couple of days ago, at the C Venues launch party, a snippet-centric cornucopia of international flavors & treats, & witness’d something I thought I never would, slept on it, & set determin’d to see the full thing. But first, the back story.

There is a certain corner of academia dedicated to the invalidation of Shakespeare as, well, Shakespeare. They ruminate on him being too poor to gain the incise details of continental Europe, & of Italy especially. Another bone of contention is the lack of university training from a vastly superior intelligence which could never have been wrought from the son of a shoemaker in some rural Warwickshire backwater. Of course it is university-trained ‘wits’ who say this.

However, I turn a pretty good phrase myself, despite dropping out of higher education with drugs-fueled rapidity. So Shakespeare could have been Shakespeare after all, & a few years ago I attack’d the problem with an Agatha Christie style passion, gaining some rather interesting results. The general idea is that Shakespeare accompanied the future earl of Derby, William Stanley, on a tour of Europe 1585-87.

Like all art, poetry grows naturally out of accumulated materielle, to which is added an individual poet’s personality & technique. Their creations should be seen as the fragrant flowers of a bush, the roots of which are buried deep under the earth. By following these roots to their sources of nourishment, we can slowly create a picture of the poet’s unseen life, the one that lives beneath the surface of the page. If Shakespeare had accompanied Stanley, the sheer wealth of scenery & culture that Europe contains should have found an eventual memorial among his plays.

Superimposing Stanley’s travels of Shakespeare’s continental locations provided a perfect fit, the sonnets to the handsome youth have been proved, via Richard Barnfield’s own sonnets, to be dedicated to Stanlet – there’s even an amorous ‘Dark Lady’ who turns up in Istanbul.

What all this means is that Shakespeare was in Italy with Stanley, & in all likelihood, studied together in Padua. Forty years earlier, in 1545, a troupe of communally-funded traveling performers of the new-fangl’d ‘commedia erudite,’ went to a notary office in Padua to make their existence official. The theatrical tradition was about to explode into Europe, & by the end of the century permanent playhouses were springing up all across the continent, the earliest of which were in Shakespeare’s London, which I am convinced was inspired by Shakespeare witnessing the Commedia plays first-hand, including the masked Commedia dell’arte offshoots. Indeed, two of Shakespeare’s earliest plays, *Love’s Labours Lost* & *Twelfth Night*, possess striking Italian influences. Chief among these is the ‘confusing twins’ plot of *Gl’Ingannati* (the deceived), one of the *commedia erudita* of the Italian Cinquecento. The diarist John Manningham noted similarities in his diary record of a performance in 1602, when it was, he wrote, ‘most like and neere to that Italian called Inganni’.

& so, to the 2024 ressuraction ! What a delight! I’d only seen the costumes in oversize books, secretly dreaming I’d love to have seen a CDA show in real life – but now it was happening before me – in English AND Italian. Even the phrase, *Commedia dell’arte* sends a shiver down my spine, just as the word ‘*atreviamoci*’ exotically-excited Eat Pray Love’s authoress, Elizabeth Gilbert.

At its core, *Masquerade Mask* is a showcase for each of the stock ‘avatars’ that constitute CDA, whose masks & costumes are donn’d by the three excellent actors – Luca Comastri, Tania Passarini, Gabriel Bird – of the ‘*Fraternal Compagnia*’ company from Bologna. The avatars include the servants Zanni and Arlecchino, the Doctor; the Captains & a brilliant contest between Death & the old Venetian merchant, Pantalone. Along the way they extract groans & happy aahs from the audience, which is a sign of a professional ability to form a consummate connection with an audience. This is top-level theater, despite the buffoonery.

There’s music, too, like songbirds occasionally chirping along to a cathedral organ. Yeah, it was great, & with the costumes & masks hanging on rails on the stage itself, I really did feel like I’d time-warp’d to some Italian piazza watching CDA in its true heyday. The art form engages with some really deep, primal fibers of humanity, that are charmed into chiming life by the spectacle. I am VERY happy I went to see *Masquerade Mask*, in which centuries of history were condens’d perfectly into the length of a standard Fringe Show – I mean literally, perfectly, as experiencing those 50 minutes felt like listening to one of the classic rock & Roll albums of our times.”

The logo for FringeReview, featuring the word "FringeReview" in white text on a blue rectangular background.

## Masquerade Mask

*Fraternal Compagnia (Italy/Scotland)*



### Low Down

With a respect to the tradition, the investment of joy that comes with the beauty of the form and three people invested in its delivery, this is a cracking expose to Commedia dell'arte. Sumptuous costumes and a tightly directed piece of theatre makes this unmissable for those of us who think we are scholars of the genre.

### Review

The Professor, along with his two servants – Pizza and Pasta – introduce us to an old Venetian merchant, Pantalone, the servants Zanni and Arlecchino, the Doctor, not one but two Captains amidst madness and mayhem on a stage designed for such fun. The conceit, that they have lost their company to BREXIT and need to do the whole thing in double quick time brings a contemporary feel to it. The skills on display bring an authentic feel to it as we have three incredibly well drilled and highly skilled performers.

Commedia will never be known for its naturalism and the slip between the nervous servants and the expectant professor and the characters they inhabit in Commedia are managed with glee. There is a real passion on display, and it is one we are invested in from the very beginning. It is there to be loved and it is that love for the craft that drips off the front of the stage. All three manage to give the conceit such charm that the interplay between them suggests pantomime but stays just on the right side of believable that we are sold. There is a very important relationship between the three of them and this, with the looks, the arguments and the disagreements over who must play death and the witches abound with joy. Though most of the Commedia is performed in Italian, it has a clarity in its physicality that you are never left wondering what is going on.

But to keep that line of communication open, the performers must be steeped in the tradition of the artform. This is therefore no whimsy, but a deeply held passion of each of the three. Added to that is the writer and director, also made the masks and you have clear connection between the theory of an exceptional artform and the desire to communicate and share that enjoyment with an audience.

I was hooked from the beginning to the end. It might not have been the history lesson of the artform as promised but it was a sneak preview of how it works and what joy it can bring. This is particularly true of the slapstick. Oftentimes this can be left to chance and feel a little as an afterthought, but here it has the strength, of people who know where and how to get the laugh. Add in music which makes many sequences work better and then the costumes... and the costumes. Now I love a set and a I love a costume. Here the costumes sit out onstage for the duration and whilst you could work out how much time there was left to go, based on the number of costumes to be worn, this was more of a hint and a suggestion of what was to come. It never disappointed as the costumes – especially the masks – made the piece. Eloquent and grotesque when they needed to be, craft fully created and beautiful in their suggestion of the inner workings of each character, these were a nod to a tradition which had three exceptional proponents of its craft onstage.

Published August 14, 2024 by [Donald Stewart](#)





## BUTTERWORT

Watch, read, write, repeat



–irresistible, masterfully crafted Commedia

August 18, 2024

physical theatre, Theatre

Masquerade Mask

Seen by Federica at Edinburgh Festival Fringe on the 15th of August 2024

The mission is as simple as impossible: to trace the history of Commedia dell'Arte in 50 minutes. One of the actors is desperate to start, but the other two don't seem willing to collaborate... The down-to-Earth humour typical of the Commedia is extended beyond its boundaries, in a playfulness that barely lets the audience catch breath between one laughter and the next.

In this joyful linguistic pastiche, the actors metamorphose into the traditional figures of Zarni, Pantalone, il Capitano, and Arlecchino, among others, dragging the audience into different times and places. The perfectly clocked gags are irresistible, while they mock the characters, the audience, the Venitians, and... Brexit.

Compagnia Fraternal's original show, created and directed by Massimo Macchiavelli and Luca Comastri, is a model of the highest levels of theatre craft in a more 'traditional' sense: masks are handmade, music is played live, comedic effects are created on stage with simple, effective tricks. The exceptional ability of the performers, Tania Passarini, Gabriel Bird, and Luca Comastri, makes any technological support merely superfluous.

The five-hundred-year history of Italy's Commedia dell'Arte is neatly packed into *Masquerade*, a truly entertaining show, which offers a taste of Italy, past and present. The three strong cast of Bologna's celebrated Fraternal Compagnia has embarked on a world tour taking in some European countries and China, with a month's stay at the Edinburgh fringe, where they are performing at C Aquila venue. What is it that makes Commedia dell'Arte live on, I wonder, as I come out of the show. You can find one of the answers, the minute you take your seat in the auditorium and observe the expressive Commedia masks lined up on coat-hangers on either side of the stage. Masks have accompanied the development of Western theatre from the very beginning, and still today they have the power to lift a play above realism into the realms of the magical and the universal. I reflect on the greed and lust embodied in the Pantaloon mask, staring back at me, or the dark mask of a downtrodden, always famished Arlecchino. They strike me as alive today as they were in 1575 when a Commedia dell'Arte troupe, led by Drusiano Martinelli, paid a visit to Queen Elisabeth's court. This probably included among its members, a nineteen-year-old Tristano Martinelli, the amazing performer and impresario from Mantua, who invented the Harlequin mask.

We're at the Edinburgh Fringe, where each slot runs at about 55 minutes, so time is of the essence, and a Presenter figure (Gabriel Bird) is goading his fellow cast members, Pizza (Luca Comastri) and Pasta (Tania Passarini), to get a move on. They've got to keep punters happy and get through the entire five-hundred-year history of Commedia dell'Arte in less than an hour. What's more, they're on their own, the Presenter informs them, making a typical Commedia allusion to contemporary issues. The rest of the company have had to return to Italy, due to Brexit which severely clamped down on immigration. Pizza and Pasta protest but then give in, their lively, witty banter, continuing throughout the show. The first scene kicks off, with Pizza and Pasta in the roles of bedraggled travelling players in the 1400s, struggling to survive and tormented by treacherous fleas, which they curse in the hilarious chant, 'pulci traditori' ('treacherous fleas'). Thanks to their masterful physicality, we empathise with their torment and pain, becoming acutely aware of their dogged determination to keep going. In another scene the trio whisks us off to Venice, where we meet the wealthy Pantaloon, who is facing Death; the latter dons a sinister black mask. The Presenter invites the audience to conjure up the scene in Venice, by making the sound of waves, imitating a lively Venetian crowd as well as a flock of birds. Pantaloon, who has spent his life obsessed with money and wealth, desperately clutches a bundle of coins, pleading with Death to give him a few days longer. Still Death enjoys playing games with Pantaloon, tugging at his money bag, knocking repeatedly on his door and keeping him guessing if he will end up in Hell or Heaven, so creating a tragi-comic scene that points to the universal truth that we must all die, rich and poor alike. Instead, the scene, featuring the Captain, another famous Commedia mask, alludes to war, masculinity and machoism. Onstage two Captains (Capitani), each flexing his muscles and brandishing a makeshift sword, strives to convince his opponent and us, the audience, that he is the best, the strongest, the most heroic. Then Isabella Andreini, the celebrated 'queen' of Commedia dell'Arte, puts in an appearance and soon deflates the overblown egos of these pompous army men. Women, Isabella reminds us, had considerable power in the Commedia troupes, as performers but also as managers. And a final word about the larger-than-life Doctor (Dottore), who gives the audience a hilarious lesson in making and cooking pasta. As he guides us through the various stages, our man reveals his passion for the hen that every day lays fresh eggs which emerge from his chest and drop directly into his floury hand. There's also Hugo, the friendly cow, condemned to die to provide him with his tasty meat pasta filling. The finished dish is of course the delicious tortellini, typical of Bologna, where the Doctor hails from. The show, written and directed by Massimo Macchiavelli and Luca Comastri, is in English with some Italian and Bolognese dialect thrown in. However, don't worry, even if you don't know Italian or Bolognese, the visuals and physicality of this first-class Commedia troupe will make sure you come out feeling as if you do.



# COMPLITALY

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## "Masquerade Mask": la Commedia dell'Arte sbarca all'Edinburgh Fringe

Uno spettacolo della Fraternal Compagnia APS, rinomata compagnia teatrale italiana

La Fraternal Compagnia APS, rinomata compagnia teatrale italiana sostenuta dal Ministero della Cultura per la diffusione della tradizione in maschera italiana, sta incantando il pubblico del Festival di Edimburgo con il suo spettacolo dedicato alla Commedia dell'Arte. Questa forma teatrale, che ha radici profonde nella cultura italiana, è portata in scena con grande maestria dalla compagnia, che si esibisce ogni giorno alle 11.30 fino al 25 Agosto presso il C Venues Aquila, Victoria Terrace.

Lo spettacolo, che ha già ricevuto entusiastiche recensioni, offre una vibrante celebrazione della Commedia dell'Arte, attraverso le avventure di due servitori, Pasta e Pizza. Questi personaggi sono incaricati dal loro padrone di introdurre e mostrare al pubblico il fenomeno culturale della Commedia dell'Arte, riportando in vita le Maschere tradizionali come Pantalone, l'avidio mercante veneziano; Zanni e Arlecchino, i servitori astuti e burloni; il Dottore, con la sua saggezza comica; e i Capitani, figure altezzose e comiche allo stesso tempo.

Lo spettacolo è presentato in una combinazione di inglese e italiano, rendendolo accessibile a un pubblico internazionale, pur mantenendo l'essenza e la vivacità della tradizione italiana. Attraverso giochi di parole, scherzi e battute, lo spettacolo esplora i temi centrali della Commedia: l'amore per il potere, il potere dell'amore, la fame e la miseria dei meno fortunati, e la magia che circonda la vita e il teatro.

Questo evento rappresenta un'opportunità imperdibile per chiunque voglia immergersi nella cultura italiana e scoprire la magia della Commedia dell'Arte, un genere che continua a ispirare e affascinare spettatori di tutte le età. Maggiori informazioni sono disponibili qui.