



# THE NEW JERSEY ITALIAN HERITAGE COMMISSION



## Commedia dell' Arte

**Grade Level:** Kindergarten and First Grade

**Subjects:** Art, Language Arts, World History

**Categories:** Arts and Sciences / History and Society

**Standards:**

Please see page 4 of the lesson plan for complete New Jersey Student Learning Standards alignment.

**Objectives:**

Students will be able to:

1. create masks that will symbolize the characters of a play.
2. participate in an impromptu performance.
3. define a play as a genre of literature.

**Abstract:**

Students will be introduced to the characters of *Commedia dell' Arte*. They will learn that all of the actors developed their own specific type of character, such as the Captain, or Pantaloon and the Doctor, or the Zanni. Since the actors wore masks, their roles were eventually called *masks*. Before going on-stage, actors agree on a basic plot and a general idea of how the play should be performed. The improvised, or adlibbed performances were never subtle. Students will make masks to perform part of the comedy in class.

**Materials Required:**

- Internet access or copies of Internet documents
- Paper plates
- Paste or glue sticks
- Scissors
- Construction paper
- String

## **Background:**

1. Teachers can read a brief account of Commedia dell Arte at:  
<http://italian.about.com/library/weekly/aa110800a.htm>
2. [http://www.theatrehistory.com/italian/commedia\\_dell\\_arte\\_001.html](http://www.theatrehistory.com/italian/commedia_dell_arte_001.html)

## **Procedures:**

- I. Have students draw a picture of the funniest person they know.
  - a. After 5 minutes let some of the students share their pictures with the class.
- II. Inform the students that they are going to participate in a play. This type of play comes to us from the sixteenth century Italian Renaissance, well up into the eighteenth century. Traveling troupes performed the *Commedia dell' Arte*, or the Italian comedy. Each troupe had ten or more actors. All of the actors developed their own specific type of character, such as the Captain, or Pantaloon and the Doctor (two old men), the Zanni (valet-buffoons). Since the actors wore masks, their roles were eventually called *masks*. Men originally played all parts, but now parts are played by females, as well.

Before going on-stage, actors agree on a basic plot and a general idea of how the play should be performed. The improvised, or adlibbed performances were never subtle; the humor was often bawdy and raucous.

- III. Go <https://www.detroitcommediarap.org/single-post/2018/01/23/Commedia-dellarte-masks>.
  - a. Read through the sight.
  - b. Make note of the list of characters.
  - c. Show students some of the standard characters of each show.
    - i. Point out that all actors wore masks
    - ii. Show then each characters' mask.
      1. The masks symbolized the Commedia dell' Arte so much that the actors' roles are called masks.
    - iii. Also, point out how one actor would play two or more characters.
- IV. Ask students to create masks, based on the standard characters in the play **and/or** masks of the funniest people they know.
  - a. They should use the pictures they created in the Do Now.
  - b. Students will make masks out of paper plates.
    - i. They may use markers to create symbols on their masks.
    - ii. They may use construction paper to cut out features for their masks.

1. Students will use paste or glue sticks to put the construction paper features on the masks.
  - c. Once the students have finished their masks, tell them the class is now going to put on a play.
- V. Tell the students that in the Commedia dell' Arte, actors would go over a general plot before they went on stage.
- a. Ask five to seven students to develop a general plot for a play.
    - i. You may give them an example and a trial run.
      1. e. g., tell students that all of the regular characters in the Commedia all were turned into five and six-year-olds by a wizard.
    - ii. Give them the general disposition of the characters, as described in <https://www.italymask.co.nz/About+Masks/Commedia+dellArte+Characters.html>.
      1. The doctor and Pantaloon were turned into five-year-olds and they don't know how to get their money.
      2. Arlecchino wants to trick the doctor and Pantaloon into telling him where their money is.
      3. Mezzatino will gain the doctor's trust, then betray him and steal his money.
      4. The students could then put on a play, much like the comedians on Drew Carey's "Whose Line Is It Anyway?"
      5. They will impromptu their lines, while trying to stay in character.
      6. They must remember the other characters and the plot.
    - iii. Let two to three students appear on "stage" at a time in the trial run.
  - b. Have the 3 to 4 groups of five to seven students present their plays.
    1. They will impromptu their lines, while trying to stay in character.
    2. They must remember the other characters and the plot.
- VI. Once the plays are completed:
- a. Ask students to explain whether it was hard to stay in character.
  - b. Ask them explain how they adlibbed and still followed a plot.
  - c. Have students share what they think about the actors of the Commedia dell' Arte, who had to improvise or a regular basis.

**Assessment:**

Teachers will assess the students' masks, according to a teacher-made check list. They will also assess the students' performance on stage, based on whether they comprehend playing a role and adlibbing lines according to a plot. The teacher should use teacher made checklist for each activity.

# Standards Alignment

## **New Jersey Core Content Standards: Visual and Performing Arts**

- 1.1.2. C.1 The elements of theater are recognizable in theatrical performances.
- 1.1.2. C.2 Theater artists use precise vocabulary when staging a play.
- 1.1.2. C.3 Creative drama and storytelling use voice, movement and facial expression to communicate emotions. Creating characters is an act of intention in which actor play themselves in an imaginary set of circumstances.
- 1.1.2. C.4 The technical theatrical elements and theater architecture are inherent in theatrical design and production.

## **English Language Arts**

- RL 1.1 Describe characters, settings and major events in a story
- SL.1.1b Build on others' talk in conversations by responding to the comments of others through multiple exchanges.