The Servant of Two Masters

By Bonnie J. Monte
Translated and adapted from the play by Carlo Goldoni

Know-the-Show Audience Guide
researched and written by the Education Department of The Shakespeare Theatre of New Jersey

Artwork by Scott McKowen
In this Guide

- About Carlo Goldoni ................................................................. 2
- From the Adaptor, Bonnie J. Monte ........................................... 3
- The Servant of Two Masters: A Synopsis ................................... 4
- Who's Who in the Play ................................................................ 6
- Commedia dell’Arte ..................................................................... 7
- Commedia Archetypes in The Servant of Two Masters ............... 9
- Commentary & Criticism ............................................................ 10
- In this Production ....................................................................... 11
- Explore Online .......................................................................... 12
- Sources & Further Reading.......................................................... 13

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The most important Italian dramatist of the 18th century, Carlo Goldoni wrote over 150 plays in his lifetime. He renewed and transformed the Italian Commedia dell’Arte style, replacing masked caricatures with more three-dimensional characters, and accordingly is often considered the founder of Italian realistic stage comedy.

Carlo Goldoni was born in Venice in 1707. His love of theatre began early in life, but it was not until 1721, when he ran away from his boarding school at Rimini with a group of traveling players, that his passion for the art form began to blossom. Later, he studied at the papal college Collegio Ghislieri in Pavia and absorbed the classical comedies of Plautus, Terence, and Aristophanes, while also learning French so he could read the works of Molière. After being expelled from college for frequenting a local brothel with some fellow classmates, he reluctantly began to study law at the University of Pavia as his father wished. Although he would eventually become a lawyer, Goldoni’s true interest and vocation would always be the theatre.

Goldoni’s first theatrical work was Amalasunta, a conventional melodrama. The play found little success, and Goldoni threw it into the fire and started over from scratch. During this time, he continued to write for the opera and served as literary director of the San Giovanni Grisostomo, Venice’s most distinguished opera house. He soon discovered that his talent lay in comedy, not in tragedy. In 1738, Goldoni wrote his first real comedy, L’Uomo d’imondo, or The Man of the World, based on the style of Molière. With the French playwright as his model, Goldoni began to transform Italian comedy, creating characters based upon real people and everyday life rather than the more rigid stereotypes of the conventional Commedia. According to Goldoni, with each new play that he opened, he would whisper to himself: “Good, but not yet Molière.”

In 1745 (which marked the beginning of Goldoni’s three-year stay in Pisa), the actor Antonio Sacchi, who later became famous as “Truffaldino,” requested that Goldoni write The Servant of Two Masters. This play stands as Goldoni’s most popular and beloved work, frequently produced to this day. In 2011, The National Theatre in London produced One Man, Two Guvnors, by Richard Bean, which is a modern play (specifically, a play with music) inspired by and based on Goldoni’s original text.

In 1748, Goldoni moved back to Venice with a five-year contract to write for Girolamo Medebach’s stage company. In the many plays he wrote during this period, Goldoni further developed his new vision of Italian theatre. With Pamela, he completely disposed of the old masked Commedia dell’Arte characters. Additionally, he began writing out the entire text for the actors, as Molière had done, in contrast to the Commedia dell’Arte plays which were quick sketches, or scenarios, written by the playwright but with much of the dialogue improvised by the actors on stage.

From 1753 to 1762, Goldoni wrote for the Teatro San Luca, continuing to move further away from his Commedia dell’Arte roots. His career at the Teatro San Luca was not without problems however.
Goldoni became embroiled in a bitter rivalry with the playwright Pietro Chiari, whom he regarded as a plagiarist, and with Carlo Gozzi, a Commedia dell’Arte purist.

Feeling unappreciated by his fellow Venetians, Goldoni left for Paris in 1762 where he soon received a position at court and became head of the Théâtre-Italien. He was popular at court, even writing a play to celebrate the marriage of Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette in 1771 entitled Le Bourru Bienfaisant, or The Benevolent Curmudgeon. He spent the rest of his life in France composing his plays and memoirs in French, not Italian.

In 1764, Goldoni retired to the palace at Versailles, becoming a tutor of Italian to French princesses. Unfortunately, like many at court, the French Revolution caught Goldoni by surprise and his pension and livelihood were cut in the aftermath. This left the playwright destitute despite numerous pleas made to the new regime by friends and family. The requests were finally granted, and his pension was reinstated the day after Goldoni passed away.

Many scholars of Italian literature hold that Carlo Goldoni is the playwright most responsible for bringing a literate, polished form of Italian theatre to perfection. His plays were innovative, full of animated and lively dialogue, and enormously entertaining to audiences. Plays like The Servant of Two Masters have preserved his gentle, optimistic wit and zest for life through the centuries where they are still enjoyed by young and old alike.

**FROM THE ADAPTOR, BONNIE J. MONTE**

“As the artistic director of a classic theatre company, I found myself yearning for an English translation/adaptation of Carlo Goldoni’s comedic masterpiece that honored both the time and circumstances from which it sprang, as well as its original style and its status as an important transitional classic. The 18th century was an age of evolution and revolution in all arenas, and playwriting was no exception; and so while Goldoni’s work is shot through with the colorful threads of the centuries-old Commedia dell’Arte tradition, it more prominently boasts new ‘strands’ and stances for the stage. In this translation/adaptation, I have endeavored to capture the wonderful flavor of Goldoni’s native, 18th century Venetian dialect and culture. I have also tried to honor his attempt to humanize and deepen the stock Commedia characters, as well as depict the bridge he created between the old Italianate style and his new one—one very much influenced by Molière and the English comedies of manners. Goldoni created an evolutionary leap for the two-dimensional stock characters and crude style of Italian commedia, attacking with fervor the old and very tired traditions. He called for the elimination of excessive improvisation, as well as the use of masks, because they obliterated true and subtle facial expression. He employed the use of more heightened language, created and celebrated female heroines, and he introduced people and subjects that bore far more resemblance to real life than the repetitious, stereotypical situations, plots, and characters of Commedia. He strived to create a new, classier veracity for his theatrical worlds, replacing fairy-tale, vulgarity, and cliché with a new step toward realism, more sophisticated humor, and actual sentiment. While it is a far cry from what we in the 21st century consider realistic, his work is marked with an earnestness and cynicism that are entirely real. Following Goldoni’s lead and his words, I have shunned the more popular urge to update, schtick-up, and beriddle it with contemporary pop culture references or constructs. And though I have taken many liberties with dialogue in order to span the gap between 1745 and 2010, I have strived to remain true to Goldoni’s voice. I have also honed down both playing time and number of characters, allowing it to better serve modern theatres and audiences. This in no way, however, should prevent a director from adding porters, waiters, or other ‘extras’ as one sees fit.”

- Bonnie J. Monte, 2010
The Servant of Two Masters

A Synopsis

Please note: Below is a full summary of the play. If you prefer not to spoil the plot, consider skipping this section.

In Venice, an engagement is announced between Clarice, daughter of Pantalone, and Silvio, son of Dottore Lombardi, at a local inn run by Brighella. Suddenly, a bewildered servant, Truffaldino, arrives and proclaims that his master, Federigo Rasponi of Turin, is not only alive and well (it was believed that he had been killed in a duel), but is in Venice and waiting outside to meet his fiancée, none other than the same Clarice. Pantalone had first promised his daughter’s hand to Federigo, but hearing the news of his death, he settled upon Silvio (his daughter’s choice) as an acceptable replacement bridegroom. The room is thrown into an uproar. Everyone had believed Federigo to be dead. After some arguing, Truffaldino brings his master into the house. The “master” is not Federigo Rasponi, however, but his sister Beatrice in disguise. Since Pantalone only corresponded with Federigo and never met him in person, no one sees through Beatrice’s disguise. To Clarice’s horror, Pantalone feels obliged to keep his word to “Federigo” and rescinds the offer of her hand to Silvio. Clarice refuses to comply. Silvio and his father press their suit, but the wedding is called off.

Recognizing Beatrice as the sister of Federigo, Brighella, the innkeeper, pulls her aside. Beatrice decides to take Brighella into her confidence, and explains the truth: her brother Federigo had forbidden her romance with her lover, Florindo Aresti, and Florindo later killed Federigo in a duel. With no surviving family, and Florindo on the run from the law, Beatrice was left with no means of support, so she disguised herself in an attempt to claim the dowry owed to her brother by Pantalone. Brighella, admiring her plucky spirit, agrees to keep her secret.

Meanwhile, Truffaldino waits for his “master” and contemplates his next meal. He notices a porter struggling to carry a new guest’s heavy trunk into the inn. Deciding that the man must be rich based on the size of the trunk, Truffaldino helps with the luggage. The new guest reveals that he is seeking a servant, and Truffaldino decides to say that he is “masterless” (as his master is not present at that very moment). Truffaldino surmises that, with a little luck and craft, he can double his income (and his meals) working for both Beatrice diguised as “Federigo” and his new master who is, in fact, the fugitive Florindo.

As it turns out, the two masters immediately send Truffaldino on nearly identical errands: Florindo asks him to go to the post office and inquire for any letters addressed to him, and Beatrice...
asks him to do the same. Collecting letters for both Florindo and Beatrice, Truffaldino mixes them up and delivers the letter for Beatrice to Florindo, who decides to sneak a peek at it; he is elated to learn that his beloved is in Venice searching for him. He asks Truffaldino how he came by the letter, and the servant quickly invents a story about “another servant” who, hearing that he was already bound for the post office, asked Truffaldino to run an errand for him as well. Florindo sets out in search of this mysterious second servant and his mistress, Beatrice. At the same time, Florindo has had a chance encounter with an angry Silvio, who is trying to hunt down “Federigo,” which leaves Florindo convinced that his old nemesis has survived their duel and may, in fact, be staying at the very same inn.

Beatrice returns to Pantalone’s house and reveals her secret to the distraught Clarice. The snooping Pantalone, seeing them embrace, assumed the match between his daughter and “Federigo” is on, and he exits to tell Dottore Lombardi to give up his son’s suit, sending Silvio into a jealous rage. Clarice is forced to intervene to prevent a fight between Silvio and “Federigo.” She tries to convince Silvio that she still loves him, but the jealous young man refuses to believe her. Now more distraught than ever, Clarice threatens to kill herself unless Silvio relents and returns to her. Smeraldina, Clarice’s servant, stops the potential suicide and tries to talk some sense into the two lovers.

Both “masters” return to Brighella’s inn, mere feet apart, to have their dinners. Caught between his two masters, a frantic Truffaldino attempts to serve both their dinners at once without either noticing his divided attention. Despite the catastrophic culinary chaos that ensues, Truffaldino is left enjoying the dessert and patting himself on the back for his own cleverness.

The stakes are raised in the second act, as Truffaldino’s increasingly outrageous attempts to keep his two identities separate lead to more mix-ups. When he confuses items from both his masters’ trunks, he claims to each master that the owners of these items have passed away. This convinces both Beatrice and Florindo that the other is dead. Deciding that life is not worth living without one another, they each decide to take their lives. Brighella interrupts them and in the process reveals that both Beatrice and Florindo are alive.

As a result of these revelations, many happy endings abound. Beatrice and Florindo are united. Clarice is released from her engagement to “Federigo” and is free to marry Silvio. Truffaldino proposes marriage to Smeraldina. Though he is revealed to have been working for two masters and causing numerous problems, in the spirit of love and marriage, he is forgiven.
Who’s Who in the Play

PANTALONE DE BISOGNOSI: The Father of Clarice; he holds honor in high esteem and is determined to fulfill his promises even if it sacrifices his friendships.

“I gave my vow. I cannot take it back. My daughter seems content. Where’s the problem?”

CLARICE: The daughter of Pantalone, and like her father, she never breaks her promises; an emotional and naive young woman, she’s hopelessly in love with Silvio.

“I did not pledge myself to another man and never will! I would die before I abandon you.”

DOTTORE LOMBARDI: The father to Silvio; an immensely proud old man.

“But this is not a thing to bring into a man’s courtyard! It’s not proper procedure! You are a fool to let yourself be carried away by anger!”

SILVIO: The son of Dottore; he is infatuated with Clarice, but his hot-headedness often gets him into trouble.

“Oh, wicked, treacherous, deceitful woman! You make a mockery of the word ‘love!’ I am a scorned lover, a husband betrayed!”

BEATRICE RASPONI: A strong, independent young woman who will stop at nothing to be reunited with her love, Florindo.

“I need my freedom and I need Florindo; and I need that money to get both.”

FLORINDO ARETUSI: A young man on the run from the law as a result of a duel with Beatrice’s brother Federigo.

“I’ve fled the embrace of my true love, only to find myself in the arms of my enemy?”

BRIGHELLA: An innkeeper; his first job is customer service, but he can be relied upon for discretion.

“...my belly is filled with secrets instead of pasta!”

SMERALDINA: Clarice’s lady maid; she always looks out for her mistress’s best interests and isn’t afraid to speak her mind.

“If I were a queen, I’d make every unfaithful man carry a tree branch in his hand. Trust me, every town in Italy would look like a forest!”

TRUFFALDINO: The well-meaning servant of Beatrice who is constantly looking for ways to make more money and get more food! He is often inept at accomplishing the tasks with which his masters have set him.

“Two masters equals two salaries!
Two salaries equals double dinners!”

Costume sketches for Pantalone and Dottore by Paul Canada © 2018.
Goldoni’s *The Servant of Two Masters* is best understood as the inheritor of an important and influential Italian theatre style, Commedia dell’Arte, which is most often translated as “comedy of the profession.” Some scholars have argued that the financially self-supporting Commedia troupes indeed represented the first truly professional theatre companies in Western society.

Arising in mid-16th century Italy and reaching its apex of popularity around 1600, the style of Commedia dell’Arte was characterized by improvisation, detailed plots, stock characters, and masks. It was also the first theatre form to employ women on the stage in female roles. While it seems likely that Commedia troupes first began to take shape in Rome, it was in Goldoni’s native Venice that Commedia found its distinctive, masked form.

Commedia dell’Arte originated as a form of street theatre that quickly developed and transformed to be performed in public theatres. The wealthy Italian patrons of the arts began to take these players under their wing, giving them access to education and literature. This access to education allowed the players and performers to learn multiple languages, to search the classics for inspiration, and to express their ideas about the social and intellectual problems of the time.

As the form became more rooted in literature, definitive patterns began to emerge in the art form. Plots were generally centered around one or more of these six themes:

- The opposition of love to friendship
- The opposition of friendship to duty
- A rivalry between father and son
- A rivalry between a pair of young men for a girl
- The recovery of a father’s long-lost children
- The recovery of a faithless lover by a virtuous woman

The plots would be set out in detail for the actors, including their entrances and exits and leaving only the dialogue to be improvised.
However, if a group of performers sensed that their audience was growing bored or restless with the story, they skillfully would switch gears and perform one of their tried-and-true lazzis.

Aazzo (plural: lazzis) is a comic routine that was often rooted in physical comedy or lude behavior. These lazzis would be so well-rehearsed by the performers that an actor would only have to give the opening cue line to aazzo for the entire troupe to understand what needed to happen next. Specific Commedia troupes became famous for their lazzis, and audience members would frequently request these lazzis at performances. For example, in The Servant of Two Masters there is the “Lazzo of Searching” where the two lovers, Beatrice and Florindo, search for one another, but each time one leaves the stage, the other appears. This is repeated several times in the course of the play.

Perhaps some of the most recognizable features of Commedia are its stock characters and masks. While each company riffed on these characters and their appearances, there were generally three types of characters within the play: the servant, the master, and the lover. The masters—generally the fathers of the lovers—were characterized by dark masks with hooked noses, large stomachs in tight clothing and often had a penchant for younger women and money. The servants, or zanni, often spoke with country accents separating them from the upper class. They wore brightly colored clothing and masks and were incredibly acrobatic. The lovers, or innamorati, wore rich, silk costumes but never wore masks. They had a gift for languages and frequently delivered eloquent speeches. With the exception of the lovers, the masks that the other characters wore enhanced the already exaggerated characteristics of their characters.

Commedia was tremendously popular and its influence spread across Europe throughout the 16th and 17th centuries. This theatrical form had a profound influence on Shakespeare (The Comedy of Errors), Molière (The Bungler), and many others. Contemporary comedy, from the Marx Brothers to The Simpsons, bears many of the marks of Commedia as well. As for The Servant of Two Masters, the play is a representative example of Goldoni’s efforts to transition from the rigid form of traditional Commedia to a more relaxed, naturalistic, human, and literate style.
Commedia Archetypes in *The Servant of Two Masters*

**ARLECCHINO** (Truffaldino): A *zanni* (servant) character who is a fool or “child-man” from Bergamo, Italy. He is a master of disguises, extremely agile, and acrobatic. Traditionally played with a deep parrot-like voice, he wore a small gray, felt hat, often with a hare’s tail attached, a black mask with a snub nose, and his celebrated diamond patched short waistcoat and breeches.

*Truffaldino comes from the Italian word “truffa” meaning “fraud.”

**PANTALONE**: A cheap old man bent over from age, he is typically portrayed as a ridiculously gullible merchant from Venice. A foolish authoritarian figure that often chases younger women, Pantalone traditionally wears red breeches, a red vest, a dark brown mask with a hooked nose and a black ankle-length coat. He often carries a ubiquitous handkerchief and a money pouch slung before his genitals.

**DOTTORE**: An old pompous and Latin spouting scholar from Bologna, Italy. His speech is filled with malapropisms and gibberish. He is often greedy with members of his family and a great bore to the other characters. Traditionally he has a potbelly, a red spot on his check, a black half-mask, and dressed head to toe in black except for a white collar.

**ISABELLA** (Beatrice): One of the *innamorati* (lovers). A beautiful and chaste young woman with an independent will. She is highly cultivated. Traditionally she wears stunning silk dresses, often in antique Renaissance style with necklaces of gold and pearls.

**CINTHIO** (Florindo): One of the *innamorati* (lovers) and one of Arlecchino’s male masters.

**BRIGHELLA**: Often referred to as the smart or scheming servant, he is a cynical libertine who frequently becomes involved in schemes of unlawful seduction and theft. Traditionally, his costume consists of white trousers, a green-striped jacket, a brown mask with a hooked nose and upturned eyebrows, and often sports a beard and a mustache. He also carries a dagger in his belt which he sometimes used to poke holes in curtains and wine barrels.

**FLAMINIA** (Clarice): One of the *innamorati* (lovers) and usually the daughter of either Dottore or Pantalone. She is often the primary love interest who has a gift for language.

**ARSENIO** (Silvio): One of the *innamorati* (lovers) and a wealthy, young man.

**COLUMBINA** (Smeraldina): One of the female *zanni* (servant). The maid of one of the Old Men or the wife of Arlecchino, she is a happy-go-lucky and successful schemer. Traditionally intelligent, pretty, small, and skilled in dance and rhetoric, she dresses like her mistress or Arlecchino and frequently has a small apron.
Below are some comments on the play from the world premiere 2010 production at The Shakespeare Theatre of New Jersey.

“...it’s delicious and made of fine ingredients.”

“...a seductively silly production of Carlo Goldoni’s rarely seen 18th century comedy.”
- William Westover, The Daily Record, 2010

“Goldoni’s work is sometimes lumped in with Commedia dell’Arte, although what he wrote was more realistic and much less improvisational. Bonnie J. Monte, the Shakespeare Theatre’s longtime artistic director, has delivered a translation that is simultaneously proper and casual.”

“Goldoni’s play lends itself to this free and easy treatment, because its characters speak directly to the audience almost as much as to each other. The aside is elevated to something of an art form here.”
- Bob Brown, The Princeton Packet, 2010

Commentary & Criticism

GOLDONI
by Robert Browning

Goldoni,—good, gay, sunniest of souls,—
Glassing half Venice in that verse of thine,—
What though it just reflect the shade and shine
Of common life, nor render, as it rolls,
Grandeur and gloom? Sufficient for thy shoals
Was Carnival: Parini’s depths enshrine
Secrets unsuited to that opaline
Surface of things which laughs along thy scrolls.
There throng the People: how they come and go,
Lisp the soft language, flaunt the bright garb,—see,—
On Piazza, Calle, under portico,
And over bridge! Dear King of Comedy,
Be honoured! Thou that didst love Venice so,
Venice, and we who love her, all love thee!

First appeared in The Pall Mall Gazette, December 8, 1883. This sonnet was written for the “Album” of the Committee of the Goldoni monument in Venice.

-Excerpt from A Complete Bibliography of the Writings in Prose and Verse of Robert Browning by Thomas James Wise
In this Production

RIGHT: Preliminary scenic design sketch by Jonathan Wentz © 2018.

LEFT & BELOW: Costume design renderings for Truffaldino and Smeraldina, Silvio and Clarice, Florindo and Beatrice by Paul Canada © 2018.
Explore Online

Basic information on Carlo Goldoni’s life and works:
http://www.carlogoldoni.net

More information on Commedia dell’Arte from an article on The Met’s website and another from TheatreHistory.com:
https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/comm/hd_comm.htm

http://www.theatrehistory.com/italian/commedia_dell_arte_001.html

The World of Commedia dell’Arte, a short film introducing the stock characters of Commedia:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h_0TAXWt8hY
Sources & Further Reading


Costume rendering for Brighella by Paul Canada © 2018.