Introduction

The aim of this scheme of work is to allow the students to explore melodrama and commedia dell’arte; they can use a lot of what they learn in their work in a physical way in the future and it helps a lot with characterisation. The first 4 lessons focus on the art of melodrama; there are lots of examples of the characters online and a great resource to use is an episode of the original Sabrina, the Teenage Witch (see link opposite).

The remaining 3 lessons focus on commedia dell’arte; again there are lots of resources that you can use to demonstrate this style including Blackadder which captures the slapstick nature of this style of comedy. Students tend to really enjoy this scheme of work as it is a fun experience for them. I have found that it works particularly well for Year 8.

The aim of the scheme is:
- To understand the difference between melodrama and commedia dell’arte
- To develop an understanding of the stock characters from melodrama
- To develop an understanding of the stock characters from commedia dell’arte
- To devise an interesting piece of theatre using styles they have learnt.

Lesson 1: Stock characters

Success criteria
- To stay as a defined stock character from melodrama for a reasonable amount of time
- To relate and compare theatre you have seen or been in with the stock characters from melodrama.

Starter
In a circle, the class uses a ‘copying exercise’ which involves everyone. Without looking at anyone, each student must copy the people next to them, the teacher is the leader but anyone walking in should not know this, as time goes on, make the gestures made more exaggerated – 0%, 50% and 100% – discuss how easy it was to do. When did it get difficult?

An introduction to the history of melodrama is given; include the style of performance, theatres and the censorship constraints set up by the Lord Chamberlain. How much detail is given is left to the teacher’s discretion; this will depend on the group.

Main content
The class practically explore the melodrama stock characters. Teacher should give a demonstration of each, and students copy. Use the following lines:
- The Hero: ‘I’ll save you!’
- The Heroine: ‘Help, Help!’
- The Villain: ‘I’ll get you next time!’
- The loveable rogue: ‘I’ll help you, Jack!’
- The aged parents: ‘Oh dear, oh dear!’

The focus is on the exaggeration of movement and voice.

The story
Give students the basic story line: Often the good, but not very clever, hero is duped by a scheming villain, who has eyes on the damsel in distress until fate intervenes at the end to ensure the triumph of good over evil, and there is always a happy ending.

In groups of 3, students create three still images that capture some of the stock characters, the exaggeration and the general storyline.
Lesson 2: Melodrama plot

Success criteria
- Combine your skills and knowledge of melodrama to create a melodramatic style of play
- Interpret and rehearse a melodramatic scenario into a melodramatic play
- Discuss the way that melodrama has influenced the film industry, giving key examples.

Starter
Go round the circle; each student states one new fact they have learnt about stock characters.

A practical recap of the stock characters – students walk around the room; when a character is called by teacher, with a number from 1–5, they must become the character and play it at the exaggerated level, with 1 being 0%, 3 being 50% and 5 being 100%. The teacher demonstrates leading with their nose and the class come up with the type of character this suggests – maybe someone who is stuck up.

Main content
Explain that over the next few lessons they will create a melodramatic play which follows a standard structure, they can add their own small elements to make their play more original.

In groups of 3–4 students will create a melodramatic scene in the following format – students create the play scene by scene – explain that in today’s session we will omit the fighting scene and this will be added later. Teacher puts each scene up separately, allowing time for groups to create each scene – no speech.
- Hero proposes to heroine, she accepts but he then is sent to war.
- Villain proposes in his absence; she refuses and he kidnaps her and ties her to a chair; asks again she still refuses.
- Hero returns from war, no heroine.
- Villain ties heroine to a rail track.
- Hero and villain fight – this scene is omitted for this lesson.
- Hero rescues her in the nick of time.

While other students are not on stage they might be bystanders or people doing word sheets. Play music as they work.

Plenary
Ask class to think of different films and work out who the stock characters are. This should highlight the influence this period has had on the modern entertainment business.

Lesson 3: Use the skills (7 states of tension and centring) to create a living machine

Success criteria
- Combine your skills and knowledge of stage fighting to choreograph a fight scene
- Sustain a defined stock character throughout your fight scene
- Discuss the way that stage fighting must be presented to be successful.

Starter
Recap on the scenario and the missing element of the stage fighting.
Teacher then demonstrates with members of the class the key techniques for the chosen moves (sword fighting, slapping, kicking on the floor, hair pulling, strangling and banging the head on a chair)
Main content
In pairs the class works under the teacher's instruction through the moves. When the teacher is happy with their progress they can move on.

Stage fighting
The slap
This is the easiest and safest fight move. Teacher demonstrates with a chosen student. A and B stand facing each other looking each other in the eye. B holds hand straight in front of face, palm in. A says 'Are you ready?' and when B answers 'Yes' A slaps B's hand sharply (but not hard) and B reacts as if they have been slapped in the face. Try and manoeuvre bodies so the held hand is blocked from the audience.

In pairs students try the slap (allow them to practise for 1 minute).

The punch in the face
This is a bit more difficult. Teacher demonstrates with a chosen student. A and B stand facing each other looking each other in the eye. A says 'Are you ready?' and when B answers 'Yes', A swings a hook sharply (but not hard) and with an open palm strikes themselves on the chest to make a noise. (Gorillas do this to make a warning sound!) and B reacts as if they have been punched in the face.

In pairs students try the punch (1 minute allowed).

The punch in the stomach
Teacher demonstrates with a chosen student. A and B stand facing each other, looking each other in the eye. A says, 'Are you ready?' and when B answers 'Yes', A 'punches' B a few inches in front of the stomach area while pulling B forward so that they 'jack-knife' and their stomach is pulled back. B makes a gasping sound as if they've been hit. In pairs students try the punch for 1 minute.

Hair-pulling
Teacher demonstrates with a chosen student. A takes hold of a handful of B's hair and pushes down onto B's head so that any pressure moves in a downwards direction. B takes hold of A's wrist and holds it tightly, again so that any pressure is held there. A can then pull B around and any pressure will be on the wrist, not on the hair. B screams and adds to the effect. In pairs students try the hair-pulling for 1 minute.

The pairs are now to choreograph a short fighting sequence that should be believable to watch, including faces and sounds (no giggling).

When some of these pieces have been watched, the group give feedback on their effectiveness.

Students then get back into the groups they were working in last week, and must now add a fight scene into their piece.

Allow rehearsal time of the whole play, with music playing, ending with a final run-through with music.

Plenary
Recap on the importance of control, focus and conviction when stage fighting to make it believable and engaging to watch.

Homework
Ask them to bring in a prop/costume that symbolises a character for performance in the next lesson.

Lesson 4: Melodrama performance

Success criteria
- Organise a short, clear and coherent melodramatic performance
- Improve and refine your acting through the rehearsal process by showing the ability to play convincing stock characters
- Compare different interpretations of the same text, e.g. how different groups have interpreted the scenario.

Starter
Go around the circle; each student says how their prop/costume symbolises character.

Physical warm-up focusing on stock characters: space walking, teacher calls character's name, students must become character.
Main content
Final run-through, with music
- Performance and evaluation of work: choose students to comment on effectiveness of pieces. How is it similar to modern film and theatre?
- Discuss as a class the different interpretations of the scenario.

Plenary
Create a still image of a film of their choice which somehow captures the stock characters from melodrama; this should highlight the influence of melodrama on modern entertainment.

**Lesson 5: Commedia dell’arte**

**Success criteria**
- Use knowledge of the commedia dell’arte style to devise a short scene exploring role reversal
- Select and control appropriate vocal and movement skills that show a commedia character and develop them within rehearsal
- Discuss and give reasons for your preference in theatre styles, considering classical and contemporary theatre styles (commedia dell’arte compared to melodrama).

**Starter**
Walk the space individually: represent the following adjectives by changing physicality and movement:
- Cheeky
- Feeble
- Wealthy
- Poor.

What changed (pace, posture, etc.)? Which did you feel were closest to one another (e.g. cheeky and wealthy, feeble and poor)?
- In pairs, create two still images where one partner has a higher status than the other. One must be exaggerated and one must be subtle. Encourage students to think about the ‘characters’ they have just created.
- Spotlight one or two still images.
- Class discussion: What conventions have they used to convey status?
- Did students imagine that the wealthy character held the higher status? Why?

**Main content**
Explain that we will be looking at commedia dell’arte, a type of street theatre that began in Italy. Masks were often worn by the actors so gestures and movements were exaggerated. It was a family tradition, roles were passed on from generation to generation as were the storylines. It was a fun style of theatre with archetypal characters that would be in each play. In most pieces the poor servant was often made out to look like the witty hero.

- In pairs, devise a simple scene in which a master is ordering around his servant to fetch him an outfit. He keeps changing his mind and the servant gets more and more frustrated. It should end with the servant ‘getting his own back’ on his master.
- Watch one or two examples, followed by positive comments and suggestions for improvement.

**The Characters**
Ask for a volunteer and act out a scene – Boss and Employee. Student (Boss) and teacher demonstrate performance style and students copy after to explore the style in more detail: The traditional physicality of:
- Pantalone. He is a rich old man who hunches over his money purse on his belt, protecting it from thieves, or his daughter Columbina who might want money for a snack. His body is old, he shuffles across the stage, but his hands and head are expressive and quick. His hands are always moving. Have a go at moving around as grumpy old Pantalone with his slow body and quick hands which he moves around as he talks. You might also like to tug at his goatee beard. Spotlight some Pantalones. He has been described as a chicken, turkey, stork or crab. Do these animal shapes help you get into role?
- Arlecchino. Pantalone’s servant who is very acrobatic, he juggles and tumbles, he can do cartwheels and other movements and is generally brought on stage to entertain the audience. Harlequin is loads of fun and never stops moving; his
knees are bent and his hands are placed on his waist, he pushes his chest out. Harlequin never walks in a straight line but zig zags left and right (left, then centre, right, then centre, etc.). One of the most important things about cheeky Harlequin is that he might steal your purse! Have a go at ‘light on his feet’, ‘knee leading’ Harlequin. Spotlight some Harlequins. He has been described as a cat, a monkey or a fox. Try him again, does this help?

Explain slapstick: action-reaction-pause. (Mention timing and safety.) Give a simple example using student as volunteer.

Can we think of any examples in performances today? Have you ever noticed actors addressing the audience when something funny is about to happen?

In pairs develop the previous scene, trying to bring out the traditional physicality of Arlecchino and Pantalone and also adding in some slapstick. Encourage higher ability students to have characters speaking to the audience occasionally.

Mid-point: stop the students and remind them to think about levels and how these can be used to help convey status.

**Plenary**

Watch one or two examples and ask audience to evaluate the effectiveness of the performance.

Ask students to name 5 facts that they have learnt about commedia dell’arte in this lesson.

Discuss preferences of theatre.

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**Lesson 6: Commedia dell’arte – plot**

**Success criteria**
- Use knowledge of the commedia dell’arte style to devise a short scene
- Select and control appropriate vocal and movement skills that show a commedia character, and develop them within rehearsal
- Discuss and give reasons for your preference in theatre styles, considering classical and contemporary theatre styles.

**Starter**

Discuss leading with parts of the body. How does this suggest types of characters? What parts of the body did Pantalone and Arlecchino lead from last lesson?

**Main content**

Recap on what we learnt last lesson about this style and anything they have found out from their homework.

Introduce the key four characters. This can be done physically as well as through description depending on the class you are teaching.

**Key Characters**

Four key characters:
- *Pantalone*: Old miser and tight with money.
- *Arlecchino*: Servant who likes to steal things.
- *Il Capitano*: Pretends to be brave, but is a coward and thinks he is gorgeous.
- *Columbina*: Lady’s maid who is intelligent and gentle and kind.

Discuss the contrast of these characters and which part of the bodies students feel each would lead from. Individually walk around the room as each of these stereotypical character types.

Put the class into groups of 4. In these groups they are to use the main characters to create a scene called ‘The Restaurant’. Ask them to consider using slapstick if possible and to think about how they are using levels and status within their work too.

**Potential plot line**

If groups are struggling they could use the potential structure below to help support their scene:

- Pantalone is at dinner with Il Capitano who is showing off
- Columbina takes the orders and Il Capitano is flirting with her
- Arlecchino brings out the meals but is trying to steal from his two customers
- Il Capitano makes a big confession of love and is put down by Columbina who tells of her love for Arlecchino
- Pantalone leaves miserable as he has not got Il Capitano’s attention.
Rehearsal time. Remind class to focus on the stereotype and think about the part of the body that could be leading.

**Plenary**
Create a still image of the key moment in their scene so far.

# Lesson 7: Commedia dell'arte – performance

## Success criteria
- Use knowledge of the commedia dell'arte style to devise a short scene.
- Select and control appropriate vocal and movement skills that show a commedia character and develop them within rehearsal.
- Discuss and give reasons for your preference in theatre styles, considering classical and contemporary theatre styles.

## Starter
Create still images to show the start, middle and end of their work based on the title 'The Restaurant' and using commedia dell'arte characters.

## Main content
Recap on the task and the key characters.
- **Pantalone:** Old miser and tight with money.
- **Arlecchino:** Servant who likes to steal things.
- **Il Capitano:** Pretends to be brave, but is a coward and thinks he is gorgeous.
- **Columbina:** Lady's maid who is intelligent and gentle and kind.

Give rehearsal time of their scene, 'The Restaurant'. Remind groups to consider using slapstick if possible and to think about how they are using levels and status within their work too. Challenge more able students to use asides to the audience if possible and justify the choices they have made.

After each performance, students highlight two moments where the style was clear and discuss the impact of this. They also identify a moment that could be made clearer and offer this as a what went well.

## Plenary
- In pairs discuss the two performance styles and their preferences.
- Share this with the class, time permitting.

If additional lessons or a final assessment is required then students can be asked to complete a final performance which showcases both styles. Please see below:

## Assessment task
- In groups of 3–5, students are to devise, rehearse and perform a short play inspired by 'The Old Man and his Grandson' and 'Portrait of an Old Man in Red'. See links opposite.
- The play must be in the style of melodrama or commedia dell'arte, or a mixture of both. Students must be able to justify their decisions.

## Things to consider
- At what style do you think you, as a group, are strongest?
- Which style had the biggest impact on the audience?
- Which skills and techniques from the styles could fit well together?
- What is the story that you want to tell? How are you inspired by the stimuli?
- How will you structure your piece? Will your piece be one long scene, or several shorter scenes, each focusing on a different skill?
- Will you use dialogue? If so, how much?
- Will you use music or sound effects?

Allow approximately 2–3 lessons for students to create and devise their work and then a lesson to perform. To help prepare students for GCSE I tend to get them to write an evaluation (500 words) of another group's performance.

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https://www.poemhunter.com/poem/the-old-man-and-his-grandson/