

Commedia dell'arte

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Didi Hopkins: The world of commedia. Masters, servants and lovers. They're universal types that you see everywhere. We use this diagram to look at the world of commedia. At the head, you've got Magnifico. At the feet, you've got Zanni. At the shoulders, you've got the First Actor and the First Actress. Then you've got the two masters, Pantalone and the Doctor. In the very centre, you've got Columbina, the servant girl. At the hips, you've got Brighella and Harlequino. At the knees, you've got the Captain, and down at the feet, Zanni. This is Magnifico. He's like an eagle. He looks down on everything.

Ninian Kinnier-Wilson: He's the leader of the city. When he dies, another Magnifico automatically appears. He's the most powerful man there. He's the head, he thinks.

Didi Hopkins: Down at the bottom, is the Zanni. And that's the one where you were leading with the nose and the arms are involved in that and the feet are the, they're the feet that want to come up, like a pigeon. Zanni's a peasant and he's come to the city. Everything is extraordinary to him. And he's extremely curious and enthusiastic because, of course, he wants to please and he wants work.

Ninian Kinnier-Wilson: So, you have Magnifico. The top master.

Didi Hopkins: You're evil. Think evilness.

Ninian Kinnier-Wilson: And a crazy Zanni as his servant.

Didi Hopkins: Alice, look at us in between. There, you see. That's it, good. See the relationship is absolutely with the audience, not just with the person on stage.

Bitesize

- Ninian Kinnier-Wilson:** These are the two old men. You have Pantalone, the merchant, the miserly old man, who is a version of Magnifico, who has lost his teeth.
- Didi Hopkins:** Everything about him is mean and vinegary. He's called Pantelone de Bisognosi, of the needy. He needs, he's got a lot of needs.
- Ninian Kinnier-Wilson:** The Doctor is the man of learning, who knows everything about everything, but understands nothing.
- Didi Hopkins:** Who is so weighed down with knowledge, that he can hardly contain himself. And he waffles and he waffles and he waffles and he waffles.
- Ninian Kinnier-Wilson:** You then have the two servants, Brighella and Harlequin. Brighella is the cunning servant and Harlequin is the stupid servant.
- Didi Hopkins:** Brighella is the master of servants and the servant of masters. So, he's like a maitre d' in a hotel or in a restaurant. He welcomes the guests, so a little bit like John Cleese in *Fawlty Towers*. "No problems in the kitchen, no, no, no, the food's fine." He can also be a great womaniser and he can fall in love with people and First Actresses and things can be tempted by him because he's cunning. He thinks ahead, "What's in it for me?"
- Ninian Kinnier-Wilson:** Harlequin is intuitive and happy-go-lucky.
- Didi Hopkins:** He thinks he's gorgeous because why wouldn't he?
- Ninian Kinnier-Wilson:** He's not immoral, he's amoral. He doesn't know the difference between right and wrong.
- Didi Hopkins:** Columbina is at the centre of the diagram. She is as cunning as Brighella. She is as playful as Harlequin. She's as good with the money as Pantelone might be and she can hold an academic discourse on love, men, marriage and life. Just like the doctor. The First Actor

and the First Actress are aristocrats. Everything they do is very, very grand. They take up a lot of space because they own it.

Ninian Kinnier-Wilson: They are serious, dangerous, lovers. They are part of the court of Magnifico, quite capable of killing. The First Actress may well have had a previous husband, who has died in mysterious circumstances.

Didi Hopkins: So the First Actor and the First Actress don't have a mask. We have masks and non-masks. Then, what happens is that the non-masks act with the masks as if they were real, so you believe them differently. It is all a game. We know it's a game. We know that they're people wearing masks. But when I'm on stage without a mask, working with one of them, I treat them as if they are normal. So the game continues. The second pair of lovers are the young lovers, the teenage lovers. They're the children of Pantelone and the Doctor. But they've been bought a fantastic education, which means they can move up the social scale. They could become aristocrats.

Ninian Kinnier-Wilson: They are, if you like, Romeo and Juliet.

Didi Hopkins: Lastly, we come to the two outsiders. The Witch is actually a 20th-century invention but she represents a Magnifico of the countryside. She is dark, she is powerful, she is earthy and she's the supernatural element. And she basically moves in figures of eight. So she's got a real freedom about her. The Captain comes from somewhere else. He is often a mercenary soldier. He could be Spanish. He is full of swagger and bragadocio. But in reality, he would do anything to avoid a fight. When you put all these characters together, big and bold with their desires, their needs, their energies, their shapes, their ways of walking, it's like a firework display. It's an exaggerated mirror of society.