Commedia Dell’arte Essay, Research Paper

Commedia dell’arte is a truly popular form of theatre – of the people, by the people, for the people.

Discuss this statement with specific examples of Commedia dell’arte scenarios, stock characters, performance features and circumstances.

Commedia dell’arte is definitely an artform centred on people and their world. Although its origins are hazy due to the illiteracy of its first performers and audience, it is believed to have stemmed from the carnivals in Italy during the sixteenth century. Here it rose from the people from folk theatre, which used masks and music, and from the charlatans using pretence as a means of earning money.

The scenarios involved in Commedia arose from the thematic concerns the form had. It was mainly concerned with examining the human condition via satire. Therfore, the canovaccios were filled with driving themes such as food, drink, sex, love, money and vengence. The artists created the scenarios to fit into the peoples living conditions as a safety valve. They could laugh at their situation on stage, making their conditions a little more bearable. In this way, Commedia was designed by troupes, simply the Italian public, for their audience and the people.

Stock characters came from the people in that they were often satirizations of them.

Ill Dottore, an expert on everything who could talk unendingly, was a satirization of the bolognese academics. Ill Capitano was a satirization of invaders of Italy, particularly the Spanish army. Pulchinella is believed to have been derived directly from an interjecting peasant whom the troupes found entertaining. Such characters as these were created because the audience could relate to them and laugh. As the people changed, so too did stock characters. More were added into the list of masks, and elements such as costume changed to suit the society the play was directed at.

Performance features of the performances were directed straight to the people. The amount of credit the audience gave the actors, determined the energy of the charcters. For example, if a crowd cheered Arlecchinos antics on, he would play this up by continuing it for a longer period of time. Such was the improvising nature of commedia conventions.

Many stock characters would directly address the audience, which would allow further interest to evolve in the people watching. Isabella would flirt with the audience, Ill Dottore would address them with “expert” knowledge on anything, and fool them with tautologies, “he who is always wrong, is less right than anyone else”. Ill Capitano would address them directly in an attempt to gain praise from them. Other characters, such as Pedrolino, would play on the audience for sympathy. The degree of response by the people watching towards the masks indicated the action the troupe would continue to further their scenarios.

The masks themselves often reflected the Italian people, Their warts, apart from hiding imperfections in the leather, alluded to the boils on the malnourished poor of Itlay. In similar ways, the costumes echoed the people. Zanni often wore loose white clothes made of potatoes sacks, while the higher status masks wore fashionable garments, with lace becoming seen as it became fashionable in Europe.

The performers were always outside, where actors could “breath the fresh air of intervention”. This allowed access to many people and made commedia popular a s a result of its physical proximity to its audience.

Popularity also came about because of its irreverence and politically risque nature. The performances given to peasants were the most politically satirical, and this appealed to the peasants because it allowed them to laugh at the upper class. Commedia was additionally coarse and vulgar, a trait which appealed to many of the Italian peasantry. Naturally, the vulgarity was toned down along with a degree of political satire for coert performances. However, to the average person, commedia was often immature in its slapstick and sexual references, as well as its scattological humour. This is seen in the stock character Pulchinella, who’s natural home was the stage. He, therfore, “farted and belched” freely.

Commedia was for the people in the fact that it was a mirror to its society. It reflected class systems and social problems such as the treatment of servant by master, propety disputes and communication difficulties between generations of a family. The class system was reflected in the wealth and status of its stock characters, such as the high status of wealthy Pulchinella, and the low status of Arlecchino.

To perform, the commedia troupes roamed nomadically around the country in search of carnivals and markets in which to act. They came to the people, or to the courts they were playing in.

Commedia dell’arte is, by definition, by the people, as it is literally interpreted as “the comedy of the arts”, owned by the performer. Average Italian families comprised these troupes, making the connection between them and their public strong.

Subject matter in regards to thematic concerns was highly based on experiences of the people, and of satirizing the events. For example, the plague, and figures, such as Spanish invaders, made commedia a derivation of the people.

Commedia was certainly for the people, as the troupes played upon whatever they reacted heavily to, and their techniques, such as movement and grummelot, ensured enjoyment by all, even if they did not speak the dialect being used by the troupes. Commedia was aimed at entertaining the Italian public with its techniques, conventions and themes included in thier scenarios.

The universatility of this form derides from the ability it had to change and suit the people it was directed at, whilst not comprising in its essentials such as masks, improvisation, movement and acrobatics, stock characters, scenarios and lazzis.