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# Commedia by Zabbo

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# *Commedia by Zabbo*

A one-woman Commedia  
Dell'arte Show

*Written, Directed, and Performed by*

*Laura Zabbo*

# Honors Thesis: *Commedia By Zabbo*

By Laura Zabbo

3 May 2012

## INTRODUZIONE

On April Fool's Day, 2012, *Commedia by Zabbo*, a one woman Commedia Dell'arte show opened for the Department of Dramatic Arts at the University of Connecticut. *Commedia by Zabbo* is a complete manifestation of the journey of one determined Italian-American girl (with great comedic timing) trying to bridge together two countries and two disciplines. The story in *Commedia by Zabbo* was revealed to the audience by the main character, Zanni Zabbo, who took the audience through a captivating and hysterically funny tale that was finely tapered to the setting. The completion of *Commedia by Zabbo* truly brought a tradition that began in Italy to Storrs, Connecticut, and made it relevant, entertaining, and purposeful. This detailed memoir is a reflection of the journey that led to *Commedia by Zabbo*, the process of creating it, and how and why it is relevant and influential to American actors and artists of all disciplines.

The decision to study Commedia Dell'arte, and in Italy was decided in the spring of 2011 after three years of BFA Acting training. Familiar with my strengths and my weaknesses as a performer, the one thing that continued to be a problem at faculty evaluations was a disconnect between the head and the

body. The faculty believes *acting is reacting*, and that I was “stuck in my head”. Thinking too much leaves the body behind and it was necessary to find a way that would spark my body into genuine response. This led to researching different physical disciplines where the work starts with the physical body and the thought and emotion springs from that. Upon researching Commedia Dell’arte training, I came across the world renowned Antonio Fava and his month long intensive training in Reggio Emilia, Italy titled “Stage Internazionale 2011.”

One day at the Dean’s Student Advisory Council meeting, Dean Woods discussed the opportunity to receive grant money for certain projects or endeavors that would expand and embellish the student’s discipline in a positive and creative way. I jumped at this chance that would afford me the opportunity to work with Antonio Fava on my physical body as a mover and actor, and finally travel to a country I had wanted to visit. This would be something huge for my craft and my career, and I would be immersed in a language that I had studied for years. This was a ticket to my Italian roots, and a ticket to become more “rooted” as an American actress with an Italian flare. I applied for the Zachs Award, but received an even larger grant, the Anonymous Award, through a recommendation by Vincent Cardinal and Karen Ryker. Dean Woods chose me, and I was on my way to Italy

## REGGIO EMILIA, ITALIA

This memoir is an account of the actual trip to Italy and the experience while there. It truly has a lot to do with the decision to write *Commedia by Zabbo* and the actual performance. The best way to describe the journey to Italy and the days leading up to the flight is with the word *terrifying*. I was not *terrified* of the actual flight (I had flown a few times before in my life), but *terrified* of the journey ahead, and being **alone**. I had never even taken a train or a bus by myself in the *United States*, and I was now embarking on an eight hour flight with a layover in Amsterdam, arriving in Milan, taking a shuttle to a train station, and then getting on a train to Reggio Emilia, Italy where I would then have to find my way to Antonio Fava's office. all **alone**. The decision to get on that plane in Boston was hard, but something deep inside of me knew that this was what I needed in my life at that point in time, and something "out-of-body" calmed me and reassured me that I would be OK. My mother...not so much: she didn't sleep for a month.

The anticipation of something is always far worse than the actual experience, but not here. It was *terrifying*. When I arrived in Amsterdam, I was happily greeted by signs and signals in English. I sat down, and by the grace of God connected my laptop to the free Wi-Fi they offered in the airport. For a moment, the world seemed tangible and connecting with my family and friends, easily doable. While sitting there waiting for my next flight to Milan, I wrote this journal entry:

*Saturday July 23<sup>rd</sup>. 1:25 AM U.S., 7:25 AM Amsterdam. Arrivaderci, America. Salve, Italia!*

*Day 1 of what can really be called...an adventure. The airport in Boston was not as bad as I had expected.*

*I hate seeing my mother cry or even be the least bit upset, but I think she's doing better now. I*

*anticipated too much, as expected. Got a little flustered because my flight plans were switched around a*

*little bit. So here I am in Amsterdam. Strange landing because I didn't have a nighttime. It went from*

*light to light, and the sun is shining now even brighter through the windows past the coffee shop. I*

*ordered a medium cappuccino, and I'm waiting at the bright yellow table upstairs until I'm ready to*

*board. I was proudly greeted by good ole Rondald McDonald as the escalator approached the next level.*

*Nice to see a familiar face. And the people here can EAT. I really thought it was an American thing, but*

*man, these tiny blonde European girls can really pack down the burgers and chicken nuggets, and at*

*7:00AM! Surprising...*

*Off to Milano soon...*

After arriving in Milan I found my first opportunity to speak in Italian. I was sure that my years of studying the language and brushing up in the months before the trip would serve me now. Nope. I opened my mouth and complete and absolute gibberish came out. The Italian security guard on the receiving end was less than friendly. And so was the teller when I finally made my way to the booth to buy my bus ticket to the Milan Central Train Station. She, luckily but snidely, spoke to me in English and pointed me in the right direction. I truly did not know if I was in the right place, but I somehow drew up the nerve to speak to the bus driver and prayed to God it was the right bus. I got on the bus and for the first time since I left Boston, absolutely crumbled. I

balled my eyes out as silently as I could, feeling desperate, alone, and again, *terrified*. I told myself over and over again, “Pull it together, Laura, because you *must*” until I believed it and stopped crying. When the bus arrived at the Milan Central Train Station, I immediately noticed that Vodafone store and there, I found my Godsend. I’ll never forget the sweet little Italian man who owned the store. I think he could see in my eyes my desperation for a device that would connect me to home, and to Dina, Fava’s wife and manager, in Reggio Emilia. He spoke English and was so genuinely nice to me. I told him about my experience at the airport, and his response was, “Try New York”. I laughed and said “Fair enough”. I bought the phone, and together, we made sure it worked. I called my mother back in Rhode Island, and for another moment, the world was small again.

When I made it to Reggio Emilia, I could only think to myself “How on Earth did you make it here alive?” I called Dina who was to pick me up and take me to what I thought would be dorm-like housing with the rest of the class. I was sadly mistaken, and Dina drove me to this apartment building on the outskirts of the city. Dina was the epitome of cute Italian mom, but Dina’s behavior was my first real taste that the Italian way of life is drastically different than what I was used to in the United States, and with my own mother. Dina dropped me off at my apartment where two other Italian girls (who could not speak English) lived every day, said “You should get to the market soon because they close in an hour for the weekend!”, and left. And here, I had my second complete breakdown in Italy.

After I had recovered, I, utterly embarrassed, opened the door to my room, stepped out, and was greeted by Martina, and in her broken English and my broken Italian, she consoled me and offered to take me to the supermarket with her car. Someone I had just met, who I could barely speak to, connected with me, cared for me, and took care of me for those few moments. It meant the world to me. And I had to trust her because I had no other option. We went to the market, which was remarkably similar to our own supermarkets, and returned home. Regardless, it wasn't long though, before I called Dina and requested (desperately) that she place an American in the room next to mine. She did, and I met Lori from Florida. The next day, Lori and I clumsily made our way through the streets of Reggio Emilia with our maps (which were completely inaccurate), and arrived 5 minutes late for the first day of class. It's OK though, we were just trying to fit in. Italians are always late.

### **A Recap of Reggio Emilia**

There are some things worth mentioning about Reggio Emilia, and the time spent outside of class with people from all over the world. The first two weeks were utterly brutal. Being thrown into a country, a culture, and a language that was foreign and was *terrifying*, it took every ounce of me to stick-it-out and prevent myself from taking the next flight home. But I knew that I had to put myself through this. I had to be an adult and learn that I could, in fact, survive on my own and do just fine. And I am so glad I did. I learned things about myself that I never would have known if I hadn't made it through this struggle. And I learned so many interesting things, some good and some



bad, about myself, and about the Italian culture that I had always felt connected to in some way.

I had always identified myself as “an Italian girl”. It wasn’t long before I realized how far from the truth that actually is. I am, in fact, an American girl. The Italian life and culture were mind-blowing to me, from the missing smoke alarms and fire escapes, to the daily fender benders that no one noticed, to the business open hours and the way in which the men behave. I discovered that Internet access is “liquid gold”, and coffee is rocket fuel. Reggio Emilia was not the picturesque Italy I’ve always imagined with vineyards, ancient ruins, beautiful coastlines, and gelato. It was a normal, middle class Northern Italian town, with normal, everyday Italians, and a normal everyday life. And this, I think, was a greater experience than any I could have had eating gelato on a beach. There were the gems of Reggio Emilia, like the piazza where they played old Italian movies, the enormous, brightly lit water fountain, and these little spinach pastries that were native to the city. I will never forget my experience there, the friendships I made, and *hopefully*, the bit of the Italian language I spoke while I was there.

*See Figure 1.0*

## LA FORMAZIONE

The training. The class was thrown into the fire immediately on the first Monday of the training intensive. There were roughly 35 people from 12 different countries with ages ranging from 20-65 that made up the class. It was

interesting to see the little pockets of people formed around those who could speak the same language. The American group, comprised of 6 in total, was easy to gravitate towards. Soon, Fava explained (in four languages, one right after the other) how the class would operate. Our first class each day would be with Fava, and day by day, he would teach the basics of Commedia Dell'arte and go through each of the characters that exists in the Northern style of Commedia. The Northern style differs from the Southern style in the traditional teaching methods, the traditional characters and their behaviors, and the foundation of stories that contemporary artists build upon. Antonio is a strong believer and advocator of the Northern style, its connection to tradition, and its physicality. The dispute between Northern and Southern Commedia Dell'arte artists continues to separate the North and South of Italy, as do so many other aspects such as politics, economics, language, music, food, and so on.

After Fava's lesson each morning, the group would be split into two groups which were to remain the groups for the entirety of the month. "Gruppo B" would do Gestures class first, and then switch to Acrobatics second. Every day for 4 weeks, this is how the class operated. The days lasted for 10 hours, with an hour lunch break in between. After lunch, the two groups would have Canovaccio (student written and directed Commedia Dell'arte pieces) or Improvisation with Fava. Canovaccio can be translated as a more structured and planned out piece of Commedia Dell'arte work, written and directed by the students, and built on the foundation of traditional Commedia story-lines, characters, and their interactions with each other. On the days when we had

Canovaccio, Gruppo B would split further into 3 or 4 groups, and have 3 hours to develop a Commedia piece that would be performed at 6:00PM that day for a public audience.

### **Class with Antonio:**

Each morning, the class as a whole, both “Gruppo A” and Gruppo B” would begin with Antonio Fava himself. Antonio Fava is a world renowned actor, director, and master of Northern Commedia Dell’arte. He is author of the book *The Comic Mask in the Commedia Dell’arte*, and designs and constructs traditional leather Commedia masks, many of which are on display in museums across the world. Fava is known for “sticking to tradition” and at first, is very rigid with the characters and their movements. He is fluent in Italian, Spanish, French, and English, and each day he would translate everything he said into all four languages. Fava would usually begin the class with the introduction of a Commedia character. On the first day of class, Fava introduced Zanni, the base character in Commedia. He would teach us not only the pure physicality of the character, but also the character’s history, the character’s mindset, and their gestures and behaviors. Fava moved through each of the Northern characters along with other Commedia Dell’arte lessons like the use of props, Commedia combat, and the traditional Commedia Dell’arte situations and story-lines.

## *The Characters*

### **ZANNI**

Zanni is the base character in Commedia Dell'arte, and the first character taught in the Commedia Dell'arte intensive. Many of the other characters use and draw upon the Zanni physicality and movements. Zanni has a sad life. He is servant to all, and tries with a good and open heart, but always causes chaos inadvertently. On the upside, Zanni inadvertently solves the obstacle as well. Zanni is a masked character.

*Zanni Movments*: Base Position, Zanni Big, Zanni Tired, Zanni Military, Zanni 2-time step, Zanni Proud, Zanni 3-time step, Zanni happy, Zanni jump, Zanni spin, and so on...

*See Figure 2.0*

### **1<sup>ST</sup> ZANNI**

1<sup>st</sup> Zannis have the ability to think semi-critically. They are one step above Zanni in that they are more aware of their thoughts and surroundings. They do all the Zanni base moves as well.

(Infarinato) Pedrolino: Moves like a feminine bird, and is unmasked. He has a painted on white face and red lips, and is typically played by a male actor. Pedrolino often serves as La Signora's personal servant.

Brighella: Also moves like a bird, but his movements are more drastic and physical than Pedrolino's. When Brighella moves, his knees go high up in the air. Brighella's trademark is his base position, where he stands on one leg, perched like bird.

Serveta (Colombina): Female 1<sup>st</sup> Zanni. Her signature move is a "flirty kick" and a more curvy step. Columbina is always unmasked and often played by a female actress.

*See Figure 3.0*

## **INNAMORATI**

Innamorati are the Commedia Dell'arte lovers. Since the beginning of time they have loved each other and would do anything to marry the one they love. Common names for the lovers are Flavio and Isabella. They are always extremely elegant in their movement and speech, and move with their chests and hearts in the lead. They

have androgynous masks used for disguise, but are, for the most part, unmasked.

*See Figure 4.0*

## **II CAPITANO**

Il Capitano does everything the *best*. He thinks he is the king of the universe! He has conquered all nations, and captured all Turks. All of these are lies, of course. Il Capitano puts on a big front. But when a mouse runs by, he is a big scaredy-cat. He flexes his muscles for the audience, plays tricks, and walks with his chest out and with a wide stance. He often holds a “weapon”. His mask has a large, phallic-like nose.

*See Figure 5.0*

## **LA SINGORA**

La Signora is the female counterpart to Il Capitano. She wears an obnoxious wig and orders around the Zannis. She pretends to be lovely and sweet, but changes mood at the drop of a dime. She is unmasked and is typically played by a female actor. She walks with her chest pushed out and a curve to her hips.

*See Figure 6.0*

## **PANTALONE**

Pantalone is the old miser-like character in the Commedia world.

His stance starts off like the Zanni base position, but with a drastic collapse of the spine in the forward direction. He does all Zanni moves, but in the Pantalone body. He is money-hungry and masked, typically with white beard and eyebrows. Pantalone often fakes heart-attacks to get his way.

*See Figure 7.0*

## **II DOTTORE**

Il Dottore is the other old man in Commedia Dell'arte. Dottore's stance also starts off like Zanni's, but his spine is off the axis and pushed in the backwards direction. His arms move like a bird as he walks, and he is known for his continuous and ever-lasting monologues about every and any topic. He is a masked character, often with a white moustache.

*See Figure 8.0*

These are the Commedia Dell'arte Characters of the North. The Southern discipline includes familiar characters like Arlechino. All of the characters in Commedia Dell'arte are exaggerations of ourselves in our normal lives, and serve as a way to recognize certain traits within ourselves, and laugh at them.

## *Commedia Combat*

The combat in Commedia Dell'arte is made to look unrealistic and comic. When La Signora slaps Zanni, she slaps him showing a clear distance from her hand to his face, and Zanni responds with an unrealistic spin. Sometimes, Commedia Combat includes weapons like the *slapstick* or *batone*. Much of the combat in Commedia happens unintentionally.

## *Props*

Props are pretty minimal in the Commedia world. Zanni (and only Zanni) uses the *batoccio*, or slapstick as a prop. The batoccio is basically two wooden paddles bound by a leather handle used to slap Zannis, creating a loud and deliberate sound. The batoccio can become many things for the Zanni, like a hair comb or a utensil, but it does not have the unlimited versatility to become *anything*. It can be used as a tangible object, but not as a rocket ship or a violin that produces music. The batoccio is mostly used for slapping other Zannis, but never anyone higher than a Zanni (unless it is unintentional). Antonio teaches the safe and professional way to use the batoccio. Il Capitano usually carries the *batone*, or wooden stick, which serves as his “weapon. Other props can embellish a story like food, costume pieces, and other props that help tell the story. However, for the most part, the sets and prop lists are minimalistic.



### *Traditional Stories/Lazzi*

Many of the stories played in Commedia Dell'arte are traditional ones that continue to be developed and manipulated across time and space. However, there are some basic and fundamental ideas that comprise most stories and never change. For example, Flavio must always love Isabella, and vice versa. Pantalone is always a miser. Il Dottore never shuts up. La Signora and Il Capitano are always each other's pompous counterparts. And Zannis are always the servant to all, good-willed, and both cause the chaos and solve it inadvertently. There are also more specific story-lines that serve as foundations. For example, Flavio and Isabella love each other, and Pantalone will not let them get married because of money, or because he is in love with Isabella. It is easy to see the connection between the Commedia Dell'arte basics, and many stories that continue to be revamped and retold in the contemporary world.

Lazzi are another traditional aspect included in all Commedia Dell'arte performances. Lazzi, or a lazzo (singular) are improvised rhythmic or patterned bits that embellish the story. Many lazzi are accidental in the Commedia world. For example, a group of Zannis fall asleep together and create their own rhythmic and musical beat from their outrageous sleeping sounds. Lazzi are always physical, comedic, and often begin by improvisation and develop further through the rehearsal process. *See Figure 9.0*

## **Gestures Class:**

“Gruppo B” would go to Gestures right after working with Fava. One of Fava’s interns and disciples, Valentina, taught the Gestures class in which she would reinforce and drill what the lesson that Fava had just taught that day. Valentina would have the class jump right in, encouraging the engagement of the whole body. Occasionally, she would correct posture or our footwork, but most of the class was designed to be experimental and free. There were no mirrors in the entire theatre, save for the bathrooms. And each day, at the end of Gestures, the class would split into smaller groups and improvise movement and dialogue with each other to create little Commedia *lazzi* and scenes. During this time, “Gruppo B” slowly but surely, across language and culture barriers, developed a connection and a foundation from which lasting friendships were formed.

## **Acrobatics**

Here’s where that word “*terrifying*” comes in again. Acrobatics was taught by the lovely and equally menacing Marcella. In this class, we practiced and learned the “simple” acrobatics necessary for advanced Commedia Dell’arte training. The class started with moves like forward rolls and cartwheels but later moved on to more tricky movements that involved balance, and the other members of the class. For instance, the class learned how to forward roll while continuing to hold a tray of food or a drawn “weapon”, and how to apply the acrobatics to the Commedia Dell’arte lessons and the Canovacci.

## **Improvisation**

Two days a week, “Gruppo B” would study improvisation with Fava after lunch. I really pushed myself to volunteer because I wanted to get as much out of the experience as possible. We all said and did stupid things during the improvisation, but this class directly led to my ability to create the story-lines and lazzi that appeared in my one-woman show, *Commedia by Zabbo*. Fava would give us prompts that were based on certain traditional Commedia Dell’arte story-lines and situations, and we were to literally go up on stage and *create* a performance. He explained that most Commedia Dell’arte shows are first built upon pure physical and vocal improvisation with a foundation of tradition beneath them.

## **Canovaccio**

The other two days of the week, Gruppo B had to work on a Canovaccio. We would start Canovaccio with Fava’s prompt, and begin first with improvisation. From there, the group would “set” certain dialogue or blocking that worked to tell our story, and produce little 10-15 minute pieces in a matter of only three hours. My UCONN education helped me to connect this method of working with Auto-Cour, a method from Jaques Leqoc and used in our training with Greg Webster. Because of this, I was prepared for this kind of work while in Italy. In our last few days in Reggio Emilia, we were given the time to work solely on our “final Canovaccio, which was to be performed for a

much larger public crowd. Our final Canovaccio was followed by a celebration dinner (at Midnight...Italians are nuts), and for me personally, my flight back to the States.

*See figure 10.0*

## II MISER

During Connecticut Repertory Theatre's auditions for the Fall semester, Karen Ryker, directing Moliere's *The Miser*, asked me to experiment with some Commedia Dell'arte movement because Moliere's stock characters are all based on Commedia characters. She listed some of the characters in *The Miser*, and asked me which Commedia characters I thought best matched them. I began to improvise, like Fava had taught us, and played La Fleche like a Zanni, and Frosine like La Signora. Karen loved my physicality and my interpretations of the characters, and later asked me to do a workshop with the cast of *The Miser* demonstrating how Moliere draws upon traditional Commedia Dell'arte.

In the first 2 weeks of *The Miser* rehearsal, I came up with a demo/workshop to do with the cast. The first section of the workshop included a physical demonstration and explanation of the Northern Commedia Dell'arte characters. In the second section, the cast would have the opportunity to physicalize on their own. It was important that they be free and open with their physical work and creating their own embodiment of the core commedia characters. The next step was to physically and emotionally connect their Moliere characters to the Commedia characters they felt the closest to. It was

really fun to see them openly experiment and create, just like the training experience in Italy. The strong connection between Commedia Dell'arte and other disciplines happened right then and there.

The response from the workshop was a greatly reassuring one. The cast was very enthusiastic and captivated by the workshop. Their responsiveness, their willingness to try something new, and their acceptance of my teaching and of my discipline was truly touching. They learned how to connect the Commedia characters to their own characters, and soon began to make other connections on their own. I worked with the cast as much as I could before and throughout their tech week, tweaking things and playing with blocking. Desmond Thorne, who played La Fleche, physicalized the movement most. La Fleche is clearly the Zanni of the bunch. It was a truly wonderful experience that allowed me to open my eyes and see that Commedia Dell'arte would take me further than just Reggio Emilia, Italy.

See Figures 11.0 and 11.1

## LO SCRITTO

During the month-long intensive in Italy, Fava brought in two guest Commedia Dell'arte artists who both performed their own, self-written and directed one-wo(man) shows. Merve Engin, who was from Turkey but trained by Fava, stood out the most. Her style and creative writing and direction were incredible. She played all of the Commedia Dell'arte characters, transitioned

between them strategically and effortlessly, and was relevant and hysterically funny as she deliberately broke in and out of the characters. My Commedia Dell'arte one-woman show was greatly influenced by Engin's performance in style and in technique.

I decided that I was going to write a show like Engin's, and perform and direct it myself. With Fava's training in technique and improvisation, creating a show in this light seemed doable. I was determined to do it. The first step was the script. It needed to be relevant to UCONN in 2012, and specifically, the life of a Drama student. Jokes started flooding in, along with Commedia Dell'arte characters that mimicked the mannerisms of the faculty and a story-line that would be based on tradition but manipulated in a fun and interesting way.

It was surprisingly a struggle to come up with a basic story-line that could be manipulated in such a way. It was imperative to the integrity of the discipline that Fava taught to stick closely to the tradition and the discipline, and embellish from there. I needed a way to elaborate on an already established Commedia story and manipulate it for my audience. Isabella became an aspiring actress, and the story developed from there. All of the other Commedia characters circled around this one small manipulation of the story, while staying true to their base physicality and mind set. The script started with a simple scene by scene breakdown and skeleton story. It was worked and reworked until finally, some sense was made and the story came alive. The story bore a beginning, middle, and end, and was heavily based on the traditional genre with a relevance to the setting. All was right in the world of

Commedia: Isabella loved Flavio, and vice versa. Pantalone was money-hungry, and prevented the marriage of Isabella and Flavio. There was an obstacle, and a good hearted Zanni trying to fix it, failing miserably. Capitano and La Signora were there too, of course, and so was Il Dottore, all within this new little world. In the end, all was resolved with a wedding. The script was born, but only as a foundation for improvisation and continuous modification. Within the script, the blocking was faintly conceptualized with the reality that the show was written for one woman.

As mentioned before, this script was merely a foundation to build on. It changed drastically throughout the process of improvisation and the discovery of new thoughts, ideas, and jokes. The script, including the dialogue and the movements, continued to change until and within the actual performance. This is because Commedia Dell'arte is fueled by the energy of the audience, what happens in the moment, and sheer improvisation. The following is one of the early phases of the script:

See Figure 12.0

## LE MASCHERE È GLI OGGETTI DI SCENA

The Masks and Props. When inquiring about Commedia Dell'arte masks, Bart Roccoberton of the Puppetry Department came forward with enthusiasm. He was excited about my idea and helped immensely to make it happen. He gathered masks from his students who had constructed Commedia Dell'arte masks in a previous class. Several generous students came forward, and there

was an array of choices. It is important to mention Antonio Fava's philosophy on the masks. Even being a master mask sculptor, Fava did not see the masks as anything "sacred". He strongly advocated treating the masks with the utmost care, but did not have any rules about touching the mask on its face or taking it off in front of an audience. This is vastly different from some of the more strict French disciplines that involve mask work. When studying with Antonio, the class barely worked with the masks on. The focus was primarily on the body and the physicality. The mask was to be used, of course, in a professional and technical way, but in training, Fava used the masks as an embellishment.

The masks that Bart Roccoberton's students constructed were made of neoprene, unlike Fava's leather masks. They were fitted and adjusted to my head for the *Commedia by Zabbo* performance with strategically placed foam padding to and rubber straps to secure the mask. Work with the actual masks began close to the end of the process because of the way Fava trained in Italy. It was not difficult to use the masks along with the physicality to create an interesting and captivating Commedia Dell'arte character. Along with the masks, a series of props represented certain characters. For instance, a moustache stick represented Flavio, a purple scarf marked Isabella, and sunglasses for La Signora. The idea was that when an object was personified, it became that character with its past and its personality. Aesthetic distance and imagination help make this technique come to life in a really funny and effective way.



The set was designed completely for necessity and functionality. It was necessary to create levels to help separate the world of each character. Wooden blocks were used for this reason. It was also necessary that the set was functional in the way that props and masks could be set up aesthetically and easily accessible. For example, the ladder acted as a sort of “prop closet” where props both came alive and went to rest in the Commedia world. The set was mostly symmetrical and minimalistic. It created a good amount of workable space for the actress, levels to work with, and paths for fluid transitions.

## II PIANIFICARE LO SPETTACOLO

The Blocking. The show was blocked pretty late in the process. The script took a lot of time to conceptualize, but once the story-line was fleshed out, improvisation began with the characters and their interactions. When writing the script, it was important to take into account that there would be only *one* performer playing all of the characters. The script needed to at least start to address the strategic placement of the masks and how the transitions would even be possible and dramatically sustaining. These transitions were the most difficult part of the blocking, along with the blocking of multiple characters at once. I drew from my experience in Italy and from Engin’s performance to figure out how to believably play more than one character at once and transition between them fluidly.

Using the script to work out the timing and placement of the transitions, I improvised the actual movements and how they linked together between

scenes and character changes. Much of the traveling and transitional movement turned out to be cyclical. It was the easiest way to “signify” to the audience that I was transitioning or that something new was happening. Many of the character changes were signified through literally spinning while switching masks and/or moving behind the ladder that was placed upstage center. The physicality of the individual characters themselves was directly drawn from my training in Reggio Emilia and the traditional discipline that Antonio Fava advocated.

## LO SPETTACOLO

Perfectly, *Commedia by Zabbo* opened on April Fools Day, 2012. The show began at 9:00PM to allow most of the Department of Dramatic Arts to attend. Since 8:00AM that morning, I had been setting up, warming up, and preparing for the show. But I knew that much of my behavior and dialogue was going to be fueled and transformed by the energy of the audience. By 8:45PM, roughly 45 people within the department showed up. The positive and open energy was electrifying.

The show began even as a few stragglers trickled in. I introduced the show first with Zanni Zabbo, and the crowd roared with laughter. Zanni Zabbo brought the audience up-to-speed on some of the Commedia Dell’arte basics, and on the story that was about to unfold. Then, I broke character for the first of many times in the performance and introduced myself as Laura and thanked

the audience for attending. When the time felt right, I began the story and transformed into Isabella.

Almost immediately I began improvising and working closely with the audience and what was happening in the moment. I found things within the audience to comment on, and completely new and spontaneous jokes came flooding in. I was truly reacting and responding to my surroundings both with my physicality and with the dialogue. And the roars of laughter both surprised and energized me. At one point, utterly exhausted, I broke character and asked the audience to keep laughing so that I could take a minute to breathe. This only made them laugh more. This style of performance was directly influenced by something that Engin used in her solo performance in Italy.

The script I had written and revised several times truly served as a solid foundation. I knew the action to action through-line of the story, where it had to go, and certain specific and comic bits I had previously planned, but much of what happened in the actual performance was spontaneous and improvised. I really attribute this to the traditional style and discipline that Fava taught. Fava believes that when you start with a rigid and traditional foundation with the physicalizations and mind sets of each of the Commedia Dell'arte characters, the ability to create and embellish the lives of the characters and the stories come with great ease. I believe this ten-fold.

My sheer ability to both physicalize and verbalize any of the Commedia Dell'arte characters, and rapidly switch between them, is because of the rigid and intensive training I endured while in Italy. The movements are deeply

ingrained in my body, and the characters' minds so easily accessible through the movement.

*Commedia by Zabbo* was a huge success, and an incredible accomplishment. Self-written, directed, designed, and performed, the show was a true expression of my training, my passion, my personality, and my heart. It made evident the true connection between tradition and contemporary and between two very distant and different cultures. *Commedia by Zabbo* ended epically with Pantalone's fabricated heart-attack, and with the lovable and *brutally honest*, Zanni Zabbo putting the story to rest and saying goodbye. But I know for sure that Zanni Zabbo, with his captivating ability to tell stories and bring laughter to the less than favorable parts of ourselves, will certainly be back.

See Figure 13.0 and 13.1 for show flyer and program

*See Figure 14.0 for production photos of Commedia by Zabbo*

*See Figure 15.0, the DVD*

