



Sample Lesson Plan - The Zanni

This plan has been developed as an introductory resource by Matriark Theatre for teachers. It gives a basic introduction to Zanni with tips for teaching Commedia to High School students.

INTRODUCTION

The Zanni is a servant, the lowest in the social strata and a transient, surviving each day taking odd jobs to earn a bit of food and a bed to lie down. The Zanni was the first of the Commedia stock characters and is the foundation for all other characters. Zanni are typically divided into two categories with higher status Zanni being the '1st Zanni', and lower, the '2nd Zanni'. It is here we get the comic duo relationship seen in comedy ever since (Laurel & Hardy, Stooges, Pythons etc.).

- **NAMES:** Possible names include: Pulchinella, Arlecchino, Truffaldino, Brighella, Pedrolino.
- **LOGICAL:** "If my money not in this pocket, it must be in the other!"
- **STUPID:** thinking is hard work. Eg. Einstein has 3 or 4 billion brain cells, Zanni have 3 or 4 brain cells and two are sleeping.
- **ANIMALISTIC:** Zanni is always looking for food and a bed.
- **PURPOSE:** To fulfill the requests of their master. A master might be Pantelone, Dottore, a Lover, Capitano or anyone else willing to provide food or lodgings in exchange for work. It is rare that instructions are followed with any precision - if a Zanni gets it right it is probably by accident.

TECHNIQUE - STANCES

Start by getting students familiar with the stance and the nature of the Zanni.

PREPARING YOUR BODY <PRIMATIVO>

1. Stand neutrally with heels touching or close at a right angle.
2. Bend your knees.
3. Chest open and bum poking out. Should make an 'S' shape.
4. Arms slightly bent at elbows (space between side and arm).
5. Head looks around like a giant eyeball with the nose as the pupil.

HOW ZANNI STANDS

This is the stance that Zanni takes in performance - it is relaxed and ready, an extension of the way we naturally stand and wait. Commedia is like a cartoon version of real life... on steroids!

1. Start in Primitivo, extend one leg so it points out, bending the opposite leg.
2. Keep whole foot on floor and head moves looking around like a giant eyeball.



THE SWITCH

Get students to 'switch' their extended foot using a little hop, this is an essential Zanni stock movement, showing their restless and impulsive nature.

1. When teaching the Zanni 'switch' ask students to first step through the movement in slow motion. The extended leg lifts up from the knee and is placed back centre so heels touch (Primitivo), the opposite leg lifts from the knee up and is placed extended.
2. Make sure students lift their knees up high. While learning, get students to place their palms at waist height facing down, their knees must touch their palms on the switch.
3. When foot is placed down use arms to accentuate it. Like a big "Ta DAAA!"

APPLICATION

Now that you've given your students a foundation for the Zanni you can move to a discovery of movement through performance. A foundational concept of Commedia is the Lazzo.

LAZZI

A lazzo (plural: Lazzi) is a rehearsed comic moment in Commedia. Historically, performers would improvise around a pre-determined plot line (cannavacio), however, certain comic action would be rehearsed. This could be anything, like a song & dance or acrobatic moment, or even a simple rehearsed moment of interaction between characters. These moments are crucial to understanding Commedia and structured improvisation.

THE PANTRY LAZZO

This is a tried and true Lazzo that we have used in our workshops for years to teach the physical comedy of the Zanni.

- Some Zanni have snuck into Pantelone's cellar during the night to secretly feast on its contents.
- The cellar is full of hazards (ie. things that can easily fall, squeaky floorboards etc.) and the Zanni must negotiate these (*Mission Impossible* style).
- When they finally reach the feast something happens (Pantelone calls, something scares them, someone farts really loudly etc.) and they all escape before they're caught.

Students have twenty minutes to prepare and then present for their peers.



THINGS TO REMEMBER

- **VOICE:** Encourage students to use their voices (students can get intimidated making bold vocal offers) and to share everything with the audience (Commedia is played out front - there is no fourth wall!).
- **PHYSICAL BODIES:** Keep it physical, if students become talking heads on stage then ask them if they can express the relationship, idea or conflict in a physical way.
- **STRUCTURING LESSONS:** Commedia is brilliant in its simplicity and the more systematically you can work through each character the easier it will be for students.

WHAT'S NEXT?

From here you can teach students the basic movements of the Zanni (as explained in our online teacher resource found at matriarktheatre.com) and then move onto teaching the other stock characters. Matriark is available for shows and workshops throughout the year, visit matriarktheatre.com for more info.

