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Dramatic Publishing

THE ADVENTURES OF HARLEQUIN

by
William Glennon



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INTRODUCTION

William Glennon's play is an attempt to recapture for children the wit and style of the Renaissance *commedia dell' arte* (the term means professional comedy), a unique style of theatre which was born in Italy in the early part of the sixteenth century, was imported into France and Spain, and dominated the popular stage of Western Europe for more than two hundred years, its circle of influence including such diverse literary figures as Calderon, Molière, Marivaux, Goldoni, and Sheridan.

The Renaissance *comedia* (sometimes called *comedia all' improvviso*, or improvised comedy) was non-literary. The actors themselves created the plays, having been furnished by the playwright with nothing more than a *sogetto* (a bare outline of the action with short descriptions of each of the scenes to be performed). Into this *sogetto* the actor inserted his own eccentric mannerisms (which he used in play after play), his own *concetti* (memorized stock speeches appropriate to his function in the plot), and his own *lazzi* (traditional pieces of comic pantomime which had no direct connection with the action and which could therefore be used in one performance after another).

Most of the *comedia sogetti* were built around a series of standard masks (or stock characters) including the five who appear in Mr. Glennon's play. Pantalone was always portrayed as a Venetian merchant, his lean and birdlike figure encased in a skull cap, a red vest, pantaloons (the word derives from his name), and a *zimarra*, a large cloak which he puffed out behind him to exaggerate his nervous hen-like walk. Covering his face was a leather half-mask, grotesque and even faintly repulsive. His role in the early *sogetti* was a parody of old age: the decaying lover, hen-

pecked husband and foolish father, who exists only to be duped by his wife, his mistress, or his children. His equally ancient rival lover was, more often than not, Il Dottore, the bumbling pedant (frequently a doctor or a lawyer, but not a teacher) whose ostentatious misuse of Latin phrases and scholarly jargon revealed him to be a fit companion in senility to Pantalone. Il Dottore was always played as a native of Bologna (the site of a famous university), and he was dressed in an exaggeration of a scholar's robes with a grotesque half or full-faced mask.

Il Capitano, the bragging soldier, was usually represented as a Spaniard, a pointed jibe at the Castillian mercenaries who overran Italy during the sixteenth century. Il Capitano, a role made famous by the great actor, Francesco Andreini, is based on the traditional Roman figure, Miles Gloriosus, the soldier who boasts of his valor in exaggerated terms, but flies in terror at the first sign of a fight. The Captain's face was also hidden by a mask, this one replete with a prominent nose and a flamboyant mustache. He wore military dress, ridiculously exaggerated, and carried a large sword which he brandished heroically for as long as he remained unchallenged. Isabella (her name is borrowed from the greatest of all *comedia* actresses, Isabella Andreini) was the *inamorata* of the company, the leading lady whose affections were the prize for which Pantalone and Il Dottore and the rest contended. The lovers in the *comedia* were the only characters who were not masked. They were dressed in the height of current fashion, and their *concetti* were always elegant and witty. An actress playing the *inamorata* had to possess considerable charm and skill. While her part was not as flamboyant as those of the comedians, it was nevertheless the axis around which all the intrigues revolved.

Most of the principal characters had comic servants, called *zanni*, whose robust clowning was always in great demand by the public. The *zanni* were of two types: the wise clown (like Trapola) who, like the cunning slaves of Plautus, delights in outwitting his master, and the stupid clown (like Pulcinella: English Punch), whose innocent, doltish blunders kept him in continual trouble. The *zanni* were individualized; an actor chose a character and a costume at the beginning of his career and continued to perform that character and wear that costume in play after play, bringing to a traditional figure his own eccentricities of voice and movement. Arlecchino (English: Harlequin) was, of course, the most famous of the *zanni*. His costume of many-colored patches was apparently first worn by Tristano Martinelli, sometime before 1588. As Martinelli played the part, Arlecchino was one of the stupid *zanni*, a sun-toughened native of Bergamo, whose clumsy mistakes and coarse by-play gave a slightly sinister quality to the role, a quality which was reflected in the small rat-like eyes and wart-ridden forehead on his dark brown mask. Mr. Glennon's Harlequin bears little resemblance to the original Martinelli creation; it more nearly represents the role as it was played in the seventeenth century by Giuseppe-Domenico Biancolelli (1640-88), who spent most of his life in France, where as Dominique, he exerted a powerful influence on Molière. Biancolelli, an athlete and dancer, made the role an essentially acrobatic performance, transforming the traditional figure into a boyish, charming, innocent, skillful, athletic, whimsical, unfailingly clever and adventurous. It is this Harlequin that has remained with us through the centuries, a curiously attractive, enigmatic creature, a perpetual symbol of the fantasy-life that all of us would like to lead.

Some of the *commedia* companies were unpretentious troupes of the sort Mr. Glennon describes, traveling from place to place, performing their improvised farces on rude platforms before a hastily-gathered audience of rustics and townspeople. Some of the companies, on the other hand, were accomplished and successful, sponsored by one of the courts of Italy and performing on stages designed by the most advanced scene painters of the age. But whatever their size or skill, the *commedia* players gave the impression of artlessness and spontaneity. It is this freedom of spirit which the producer of *The Adventures of Harlequin* should attempt to suggest. It is a spirit which appeals to the eternal child in all of us.

R.G. Allen
Director of University Theatre
University of Pittsburgh

THE ADVENTURES OF HARLEQUIN

A Play in Two Acts
For Nine Men and Five Women

CHARACTERS

| | | |
|--------------------|-------|--|
| HARLEQUIN (QUINO*) | | a young boy anxious to join a band of Strolling Players |
| LUIGI | | his best friend |
| MAMA | | his mother |
| RENATO | | his brother |
| TINA | | his sister |
| PANTALONE | } |the Players |
| DOTORRE | | |
| CAPITANO | | |
| ISABELLA | } |friends of Harlequin |
| MARCO | | |
| ANNA | | |
| MARIA | | |
| THE MAYOR | | |
| DANIELLO | | The mayor's son |

*Pronounced Kee-no

TIME: The 16th century.
PLACE: A small town in Italy.

ACT ONE

AT RISE: *Music in the background. There is no scenery.*

HARLEQUIN enters, dressed as a poor Italian peasant of the 16th Century. What he lacks in intellect, he makes up with his agility and engaging wit.

HARLEQUIN. Well, now, time to pretend! *(He executes a kind of dance-pantomime with music in the background, pretending to be a servant. At first, he is asleep, then awakens suddenly when he hears a summons. He rushes to get a tray of food for his imaginary master, approaches, carrying the heavily-laden tray and when about to present it, drops it. As he is trying to apologize for his carelessness and at the same time attempting to pick up the food, he receives a terrific kick from his "master" which sends him sprawling. Again he tries to retrieve the food and also avoid further blows. Attempting to appease his enraged employer, he juggles various "items"—obviously dropping them and breaking them. He is no amateur.)*

(At this point, LUIGI enters through the theatre, stops as he sees HARLEQUIN so engaged. LUIGI watches for a moment.)

LUIGI. What are you doing, Quino? *(HARLEQUIN shows no particular surprise. He "Shhs" LUIGI and starts the*

same scene again, falling asleep, hearing his master call, taking the tray, etc. LUIGI watches with interest and begins to comment.) You're asleep? That's easy. Somebody calls you. Your master? Oh, you're a servant. He's hungry. So you take him some food, eh? Oops! You dropped the tray. I'll bet he's going to... ouch! He's not very kind kicking you that way. Are you all right? Let me help. *(Together they pantomime restoring the various items to the tray.)* Here. A big orange. And a banana. Two bananas. Why don't you take the day off? *(HARLEQUIN takes the tray of food, drops it on his master's head, and they both make a run for it, circling the stage, laughing. Once they stop, they pantomime peeling and eating a banana during the following.)* Pretending again, huh? *(HARLEQUIN nods.)* Like the Strolling Players? *(HARLEQUIN nods.)* But you just pretend by yourself. The players put on shows for everyone. That's different. *(LUIGI watches HARLEQUIN "eat" the banana, toss the skin away, get up, bid farewell, start moving away and slip on the skin and crash to the ground.)* Watch it! *(HARLEQUIN sighs, gets up and starts to leave.)* I'm not much in a mood for pretending today. I'd rather have a real banana. See you later! *(HARLEQUIN immediately begins an elaborate scene of grief—he weeps, wails, indicates his heart is breaking.)* Let me guess. You're glad to see me go. No? Well, what? *(HARLEQUIN increases the tempo and drama of his great sorrow.)* How touching! I thought you were only pretending to be so sad, but you really are heartbroken, eh? I can't bear to see such grief. I'll stay. *(HARLEQUIN changes quickly from his crying to near-hysterical laughter—not making any sounds during any of this business, just pantomime.)* Here. We

don't have to pretend. Some fresh bread my mother made this morning. Half for me and half for you.

HARLEQUIN. Ah, my great, good friend, Luigi, I can but offer my most humble heart-felt thanks! (*With a great bow, and they sit on the apron.*)

LUIGI. He speaks! What next!

HARLEQUIN (*eating*). Just what I needed.

LUIGI. No food at home?

HARLEQUIN. Some, I guess. But I left early so I could work on a new act.

LUIGI. Pretending you're a servant?

HARLEQUIN. Was it funny?

LUIGI. You keep this up and you'll be a real servant someday. If you're lucky.

HARLEQUIN. I will not. I'll be an actor. I keep telling you.

LUIGI. Eat the bread.

HARLEQUIN. Watch this. (*He pantomimes sewing LUIGI's hands together.*)

LUIGI. That's acting?

HARLEQUIN. I mean it, Luigi, I *am* going to be an actor.

LUIGI. By yourself?

HARLEQUIN. No, with the Strolling Players.

LUIGI. Do tell.

HARLEQUIN. And we'll go everywhere, all over, putting on shows.

LUIGI. If my hands weren't sewn together I'd offer a little applause.

HARLEQUIN. Making everyone happy.

LUIGI. Including your mama?

HARLEQUIN. My mama?

LUIGI. Yes, your mama *and* your sister, *and* your brother...

(MAMA, HARLEQUIN's mother, TINA, his younger sister, and RENATO, his brother, enter to music.)

LUIGI. Will they be happy if you leave them to become an actor with the Strolling Players?

HARLEQUIN. Well, I'm not sure...

LUIGI. Oh? *(The music rises and HARLEQUIN's FAMILY execute a brief dance-pantomime, searching for him. The following is heard during the pantomime.)*

MAMA. That boy!

TINA. That boy!

RENATO. That boy!

MAMA. That boy. I've got to find that boy! *(The music stops for a moment for the following.)* That boy!

TINA. That boy!

RENATO. That boy!

MAMA. That boy. I've got to find that boy!

(HARLEQUIN and LUIGI join them, unseen, while the THREE of them clap a quick impatient rhythm.)

MAMA. Absolutely no concern for me, and I'm his mother.

TINA. Absolutely no concern for me and I'm his sister.

RENATO. Absolutely no concern for me and I'm his brother.

ALL. Absolutely no concern for us or any other. *(They ALL continue the search—the FIVE of them, moving about from one part of the stage to the other, as music rises in the background. After a moment, they stop and LUIGI and HARLEQUIN hide.)*

RENATO. Mama, what are you going to do when you find him?

MAMA. You'll see!

TINA. Running off before breakfast.

MAMA. The idea—and it's not the first time.

RENATO. I had to do his chores this morning.

MAMA. You're a good boy, Renato.

TINA. I did them yesterday.

MAMA. You're a good girl, Tina.

LUIGI. I'll do them tomorrow.

MAMA. You're a good boy...Who said that?

LUIGI (*hiding HARLEQUIN*). I did.

MAMA. Luigi! Have you see that boy?

LUIGI. That boy?

MAMA. Yes. That boy. My boy.

LUIGI. Well...

MAMA. You just wait till I find him. Just wait.

RENATO. What are you going to do, Mama?

TINA. Yes, what, Mama? When you find him...what will you do?

MAMA. Why, I'll...I'll...

HARLEQUIN (*jumping out from behind LUIGI*). It's my mama, my beautiful, beautiful mama!

MAMA (*completely melted and overcome with warmth*).

It's my boy! My beautiful, beautiful boy! (*They rush together with a wildly emotional embrace and are quickly joined by TINA and RENATO—ALL carrying on as though years, not minutes, have separated them. LUIGI moves to one side, first amazed, then amused. Though HARLEQUIN may have started the greeting with mock emotion, what happens is absolutely genuine and they ALL enjoy the moment.*) Now, tell me, where have you been?

RENATO. It doesn't matter, Mama, all the chores are done!

MAMA. I want to know. Where have you been? When I wake up, I go to see if my three little angels are still fast asleep. I peek in the room. And there, Tina, my little angel, sound asleep—dreaming nice dreams. She is smiling, so I smile too. And then I peek again. There! My fine big angel Renato, sleeping quietly. And in his sleep he sighs. I sigh too. And then I peek once more. My dear, sweet Quino? That devil! He is gone. And I scream, “Where are you, you devil? Off playing again?”

RENATO. She woke us up.

TINA. She screamed so loud I fell out of bed.

MAMA (*to HARLEQUIN*). So tell me, where were you?

Where were you when you should have been sleeping?

When you should have been doing the chores with your brother and sister? Huh?

LUIGI. If I interrupt here, would it help?

MAMA. No. (*To HARLEQUIN*.) Well?

HARLEQUIN. I got up early and left the house...

MAMA. I'm listening. With both my ears I'm listening.

HARLEQUIN. So I could work.

MAMA. So you could work. What kind of work?

HARLEQUIN. Learning how to dance and sing and act...Pretend, really, like the Strolling Players!

MAMA. That's work? (*HARLEQUIN nods and executes a quick dance step.*) Well, suppose we go home and play some *games*. Like chopping wood and milking the cow, and sweeping the floor.

TINA. Mama, we've done all that.

MAMA. No! My poor little boy has been working since sunup. I must see that he plays for awhile. A brand new game. I call it, “Mending clothes to earn money for food.” Come along! There'll be a needle apiece.

HARLEQUIN. Mama, look!

MAMA. What?

HARLEQUIN. An old lady with clothes to mend.

MAMA. Where? (*HARLEQUIN slips the shawl from around her shoulder, moves out in the house, puts it on, and returns as an old lady.*)

HARLEQUIN (*new voice*). "This tattered shawl needs mending. 'Twas once so nice and new. Please use your magic needle and I'll give some coins to you!"

MAMA. Here, now, you...

RENATO. She's really old.

TINA. About a hundred.

MAMA. Don't encourage him.

HARLEQUIN. "Needle running in and out, zippity, zippity, zip. Patching up each little hole, each little tiny rip."

MAMA (*beginning to melt again*). Zippity, zippity, zip...

HARLEQUIN. "Pray, lady fair, take the thread, and find the needle's eye..."

MAMA. Maybe he knows more about sewing than I do, huh?

HARLEQUIN. "...dum diddle diddie, dum diddle diddie, easy as pie."

LUIGI, TINA, RENATO (*together*). Dum diddle diddie, dum diddle diddie, easy as pie.

HARLEQUIN (*himself again*). You're the greatest seamstress in all of Italy, Mama.

MAMA. Well...

HARLEQUIN. Just as I'll be the greatest actor. You'll see.

MAMA. And I'll see that you stop all this foolishness and get to work.

HARLEQUIN. I made up a new dance this morning. Watch.

MAMA. I am not going to waste any more time here, not another minute, and neither are you.

HARLEQUIN. The dance tells a story about a little boy...

MAMA. Who'd better get himself home, pronto.

HARLEQUIN. Who finds some gold...

MAMA. How much?

HARLEQUIN. A pot full!

MAMA. Where does he find it?

HARLEQUIN. At the end of the rainbow.

TINA. What does he do with the gold?

HARLEQUIN. Watch.

MAMA. The end of the rainbow. Don't bother.

TINA. Please, Mama.

MAMA. No.

RENATO. Pretty please?

MAMA. No.

HARLEQUIN. Pretty please, with sugar on it?

MAMA. No.

LUIGI. Pretty please, with sugar and cream and strawberries on it?

MAMA. Show us. *(They ALL laugh. Music is heard and HARLEQUIN begins the dance. The OTHERS settle down and then begin to comment as the dance continues.)* Out for a walk. Got it.

ALL. Ssshhh.

TINA. It's raining.

ALL. Sh!

LUIGI. He's found shelter.

ALL. Sh!

RENATO. But he's all wet.

ALL. Sh!

MAMA. Must have stopped raining. Quick storm.

ALL. Sh!

TINA. There's the rainbow. See. (*ALL turn with back to audience as HARLEQUIN crosses behind them.*)

MAMA. Where?

RENATO. There. Up there.

MAMA. I need help.

LUIGI. You've got to use your imagination.

MAMA. I left it at home. Wasn't that silly!

TINA. He's found it.

MAMA. What?

TINA. The gold, the gold at the end of the rainbow.

MAMA. He has, has he?

RENATO. Yes.

MAMA. Well, let's see what he's going to do with it.

(During this dance, the STROLLING PLAYERS, theatrically dressed, enter from the rear of the house and walk down the aisles and watch. They are called by the names of the characters they play: PANTALONE, DOTORRE, CAPITANO AND ISABELLA.)

TINA. He's giving it away!

MAMA. All of it? (*HARLEQUIN pantomimes giving them each some of the gold and they ALL laugh and join him in his dance. The PLAYERS then call out from the auditorium.*)

PANTALONE. We have competition, Dotorre, see?

DOTORRE. It must be a new band of players!

ISABELLA. A new band? What's the big idea? We're the only players around here. You, up there! What do you think you're doing? (*Those on stage stop and look with wonder.*)

MAMA. Are you talking to us?

PANTALONE. Yes, madam, we are!

DOTORRE. Are you the head of the troupe?

ISABELLA. Of course she is. She's a woman!

CAPITANO. Ha! I suppose *you* think you're the head of *this* troupe?

ISABELLA. I don't *think* I am—I am!

DOTORRE. You need your head examined. And I, Dotorre, will do it.

HARLEQUIN. Mama! It's the Players! The Strolling Players!

PANTALONE. You hear that? The boy knows who we are.

ISABELLA. Of course he does. Everyone knows us!

(Music starts, and they make a grand entrance on the stage, bowing, posing, upstaging each other, etc.)

PANTALONE *(reciting in an elegant manner)*.

Pantalone at your service; a dottering fool
sometimes,

A creature of mirth, of wealth and of worth

A stopper of terrible crimes.

DOTORRE. A stopper of terrible crimes? What rot!

He stops me from having fun!

It's easy to see, he's jealous of me,

Dotorre! The talented one.

ISABELLA. His talent is all in his bottles

With medicines filled up each day.

He thinks he's so smart, but he knows in his heart

Isabella's the star of the play.

CAPITANO. I, Capitano, am the greatest of all,

So brave and courageous and daring,

My enemies flee like a cat up a tree

When they see what a great sword I'm wearing.

(He tries in vain to get the sword out of the scabbard.)