



Befriending the Commedia dell'Arte of Flaminio Scala: The Comic Scenarios (Toronto Italian Studies)

By Natalie Schmitt



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The most important theatrical movement in sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century Europe, the *commedia dell'arte* has inspired playwrights, artists, and musicians including Molière, Dario Fo, Picasso, and Stravinsky. Because of its stock characters, improvised dialogue, and extravagant theatricalism, the *commedia dell'arte* is often assumed to be a superficial comic style. With *Befriending the Commedia dell'Arte of Flaminio Scala*, Natalie Crohn Schmitt demolishes that assumption.

By reconstructing the *commedia dell'arte* scenarios published by troupe manager Flaminio Scala (1547–1624), Schmitt demonstrates that in its Golden Age the *commedia dell'arte* relied as much on craftsmanship as on improvisation and that Scala's scenarios are a treasure trove of social commentary on early modern daily life in Italy.

In the book, Schmitt makes use of her intensive research into the social and cultural history of sixteenth-century Italy and the aesthetic principles of the period. She combines this research with her insights drawn from studying with contemporary *commedia dell'arte* performers and from directing a production of one of Scala's scenarios. The result is a new perspective on the *commedia dell'arte* that illuminates the style's full richness.

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Editorial Review

Review

In "this book, Schmitt reveals a unique point of view: to 'befriend' the text, as she explains, is to analyze sympathetically and give due deference to the author. But Schmitt does much more.... In contextualizing these texts within sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Italian culture, Schmitt frames Scala's scenarios - material that is by definition incomplete - in a way that will open up new conversations about commedia dell'arte to both historians and practitioners. Certainly her cogent and engaging style will appeal to both." - Jenna Soleo-Shanks, *Comparative Drama*, 49, 2 240-242.

Chicago's Second City is over 50 years old, but the birth of improvisation comedy dates back to at least the 16th century. The commedia dell'arte was one of the most important theatrical movements in early modern Europe, inspiring artists including Molière, Picasso, and Stravinsky. Yet, much like contemporary improv, the genre is widely viewed as superficial. Natalie Crohn Schmitt debunks this perception, using the work of Flaminio Scala to illustrate the commedia dell'arte's rich craftsmanship and social commentary. - *University of Chicago Magazine*, Nov-Dec, 2014, p. 53.

In a consummate piece of scholarly writing, citations are aptly chosen, social history is seamlessly supported by examples drawn from Scala's scenarios, and the result is a delight to read. Given its clarity, this book would be useful for teaching modern students of theater history, literature, Italian and Mediterranean cultural studies. - Gloria Allaire, *Sixteenth Century Journal*, 47, 2, 524-5.

This book offers a fresh perspective on not only the four specific scenarios of focus, but on the opus of Flaminio Scala and, by extension, on the commedia dell'arte. It highlights the wealth of cultural, historical, and political information embedded within these scenarios, and is, therefore, an asset to any scholar of Italian studies, Renaissance studies, theatre, performance, the commedia dell'arte, and many other areas of research and interest. - Joanne Granata, *Quaderni d'italianistica* 36, 1, 250-52.

Professor Schmitt's beautiful and incisively detailed book goes a long way to celebrate their [Scala's scenarios] inspirational genius. - Peter Jordan, *Theatre Research International*, 41, 2, 187-188.

I recommend the sound methodology, as well as the rich dramaturgical information, that this book provides to anyone considering bringing one of Scala's *Commedia dell'arte* scenarios to life.-Thomas Heck, *Theatre Journal*, 67, 4, 763-64.

Schmitt leaves us with a rich dramaturgical document to foster our respect for Scala's commedia dell'arte. . . . - Rosalind Kerr, *Renaissance Quarterly*, 68, 4, 1502-1504.

a rich view of how the scenarios of this compilation can be read and understood as documents of performance history. - Erith Jaffe-Berg, *Commedia dell'Arte and the Mediterranean*, Routledge, 2015.

Review

“Natalie Schmitt’s research in *Befriending the Commedia dell’Arte of Flaminio Scala* offers a genuinely new take on important material. The readership for this book should extend beyond Italian studies scholars and those interested in Renaissance studies to include scholars of theatre history and early modern performance.”

Maria Galli Stampino, Department of Modern Languages and Literatures, University of Miami

From the Back Cover

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