

“One Servant, Two Masters” – background information for the APS production

“1S2M” is a script descended from a translation of Carlo Goldoni’s play “Il Servitor di Due Padroni” – commonly translated as “The Servant of Two Masters” – written around the middle of the 18th Century. The original play was itself a descendant of the Italian Renaissance tradition of “Commedia dell’Arte”. In this, actors would specialise in a stock character, and generally only ever play that role in various basic plots, with much physical comedy, improvisation and references to local people and situations as the troupes travelled around. Goldoni perhaps recognised the limitations of this genre, and when he wrote and re-wrote “Il Servitor”, he changed the script into something far more recognisable as a modern play. But it is interesting to see that some of Goldoni’s characters are still very obviously straight out of the Commedia tradition:

Harlequin appears typically as a crafty, false and boastful valet. His main objective is to fulfil his carnal desires, to eat and to fornicate, often by resorting to trickery and deception. There are clear elements of this in Truffaldino (although T is actually very likeable!)

Pantalone (the name is not even changed by Goldoni) typically represents wealth and business. He is often hunchbacked, and is comically obsessed with amassing and retaining wealth. When not thinking about money, he focuses on his child’s love-life.

Il Dottore – obviously Dr Lombardi in our play. is generally an elderly man who serves as an obstacle to the young lovers. He is portrayed as an egotistical know-all, given to lengthy ramblings that frequently slip into Latin.

Brighella (also keeps the same name) A servant, but unlike Harlequin (Truffaldino), he has risen through the ranks of servitude to become an innkeeper or tavern owner.

Columbine This is Smeraldina in our play. Uneducated, and of low social status, she is intelligent and aware. Often serves as a confidante to the lovers, giving her greater insight into their intentions.

The young lovers, (collectively known as the Innamorati - Silvio and Clarice in our play. An attractive young couple, with a fervent desire to be together. Their actions can be absurdly melodramatic, and they are often driven to the point of hysteria if they are kept apart from each other. But their emotions are always genuine. (Beatrice and Florindo can also be seen as Innamorati, though they are generally more mature and in control of their destiny. However their attempted suicides are clearly highly melodramatic!)

Whoever ends up playing these roles ought to find it interesting to be aware of their historical traditions in Commedia – but should not be the slightest bit intimidated or even guided by them!

Also, the plot of “Il Servitor” owes much of its themes and content to Commedia, where the story commonly involved:

- Two young lovers who want to marry.
- Their path blocked by a greedy father or foolish guardian.
- Clever servants who trick the older characters.
- Confusion, disguises, mistaken identities, and comic misunderstandings.
- A happy ending, often with marriages or reconciliations.

My intention is that “1S2M” should pay a small amount of lip-service to Commedia, partly through Truffaldino’s costume, and possibly also by a (very limited) use of masks – a highly recognisable feature of Commedia tradition and Venetian culture. I also want the production to have an unmistakeably Italian feel, through the set, music, lighting and pronunciation of names and places.

Translations of “Il Servitor” have been very popular in modern times. For example, the basic storyline was adapted to become the hugely successful “One Man, Two Guv’nors” not long ago. APS’s “One Servant, Two Masters” (1S2M) sticks fairly closely to the original translated script, but has been adapted to suit our physical environment, to encourage pace and brevity, and above all to focus on the generation of laughter!

Martin Williams