

ZANNI

TEACHER RESOURCE

MTRIARK THEATRE

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 <ZANNI BASIC>

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!"

ZANNI SNEAK <GRANDE ZANNI>

Zanni uses the sneak when they don't want to be detected. Perhaps they are stealing from the master or delivering a love letter to an easily angry lover or maybe they're trying to avoid being seen by someone they find annoying.

1. Stand in Zanni Basic (page 1)
2. Extended leg comes up in front, weight on back foot, chest caves in (keeping head up)
3. Place foot back down just in front of the back foot (chest returns up)
4. Repeat the action with the back leg coming up.
5. Arms alternate back and forth with legs
6. Mask faces the audience as Zanni sneaks.

SNEAKY COMEDY

Potential comedy can be found in Zanni's attempt at being sneaky. Zanni isn't a naturally stealthy character and might find themselves talking loudly about how sneaky they are or tripping over loud objects. Of course, Zanni, being an accidental genius will often get away with this because of the stupidity of other characters.



Zanni sneak (front)



Zanni sneak (profile)



Zanni run (front)



Zanni run (profile)

ZANNI RUN <ZANNI TWO STEP>

So Zanni tried to sneak into their masters bedroom and then was caught! What do they do?! They run. The Zanni two step is a high energy run using the balls of the feet and kicking the feet out front. Here's a breakdown of how to do it.

1. Stand in Zanni Basic (page 1)
2. Kick the back leg up and through (keep the feet facing out like in primativo) and let it come back landing just slightly in front and to the side of the foot on the ground.
3. As the first leg touches down, kick the other leg up and through.
4. Repeat the action over and again.

BIG ACTION/SMALL SPACE

Remember that Commedia took place on small stages originally, because of this, actors had to make the most of the time they had on stage. It should be possible to take **7-10 steps** in each metre of distance travelled on stage. Encourage your students, when performing, to make the distance each step takes them as small as possible.

ZANNI THREE STEP

This is an everyday walk for Zanni. Whether they are going to the market or going to answer the door, the Zanni three step is a buoyant and motivated walk that shows off Zanni's agility and work ethic. This walk is the most difficult of Zanni's walks and is really tough to describe in words. Imagine it with the same energy as someone skipping combined with the float of a waltz. The basics of this walk are detailed below:

1. Stand in Zanni Basic (page 1)
2. Lift the **front** foot slightly and place it slightly forward of its original position.
3. Lift the **back** foot slightly and place it slightly forward of its original position.
4. Lift the **front** foot again and place it back slightly forward again.
5. Swing the back leg through and place it in front now.
6. Repeat by lifting and placing the back foot again (**repeating steps 3-5**). The walk has the same rhythm of a waltz with the forward momentum of skipping. To make it easier for students count 1/2/3/1/2/3.

Things to look out for:

- Make sure the arms are active through this, with space under and hands activated and energised (no velociraptor hands!)
- Movement needs to be forward propelled, body weight constantly moving forward even as the back foot is lifted. The only way to achieve this is to make sure the feet are being placed under the actors centre of gravity.
- Watch out that the feet don't cross in front of one another while moving because you might trip yourself and have a slapstick moment you didn't plan for.

MAKE IT YOUR OWN

These movements are scaffolds for performance. They are not the performance themselves! Use them like a jazz musician would improvise around a musical structure, or a painter might use a colour. They aren't rules to be kept, they're inspiration for your own performative creativity. Students should embrace the way their bodies adapt and use the movements, no two Zanni are the same!

You can apply this rule across the board! As long as the audience can recognise the stock character as the archetype they represent you're free to improvise and change what you need



EYEBALL HEAD EXERCISE

This is an exercise for discovering the curiosity that motivates Zanni...

Ask students to imagine that their head is a giant eyeball with the pupil on their nose. They should scan the room with their eyeball head to look for food. When they locate it use the walks they've learned to go to the food.

While exploring the many ways of moving and playing Zanni, maintain this sense of curiosity.

APPLICATION <LAZZI>

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.

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.



CONTAGION LAZZO

A group of Zanni sit together in a group, perhaps they've found some time to rest and take a break from their master's constant demands. Very slowly, one of the Zanni begins to (for example):

- | | | | |
|---------|--------|-------------------|----------------|
| • Cry | • Sigh | • Get VERY hungry | • Fall in love |
| • Laugh | • Fart | • Get Itchy | • Yawn |

The other Zanni's notice this and begin to feel the same way until all are emoting at an extremely heightened level. It could even get to the point where the Zanni are having a competition around the contagion. Eg. Who can cry the loudest.

THE CHAIR LAZZO

A great lazzo opportunity is zanni moving objects. They try to move object logically but fail to do so.

- Two Zanni need to move a chair for Magnifico.
- Try pulling at opposite ends.
- Try to pick it up while one stands on it.
- Try scaring or tickling it and end up tickling and scaring each other.
- Chair can be picked up and moved to a separate spot by an exhausted Zanni in taking a break. Then moved back to the exact spot it was in before to continue to try to move it

BATTOCIO <SLAPSTICK>

A battocio is a wooden prop used by performers (primarily Zanni) in Commedia dell'Arte to punctuate movement and physical gags with loud noise. In construction, it's two pieces of wood connected at the base to make a handle with space left at the top. The wood contacts when the battocio is smacked on a solid surface (like someone's bum), making a loud bang sound.

Zanni uses the battocio and will often have it attached around their waste, sitting looped into a belt or cord. It is used for many purposes but it's primary use is to make loud noises. This purpose gives it the name we know it by now, the slapstick. Here is a basic breakdown on how to use the battocio/slapstick to smack another actor:

1. Stand in Zanni Basic (page 1) with battocio in hand
2. Lift front leg up and raise the battocio to the side (both hands on the hilt)
3. Bring the battocio down onto the victims rump, lower your foot to the ground as you do so.
4. When you hit your victim, add some slight recoil. It is the victim's job to elaborate on the hit with a reaction worthy of the sound the battocio makes.



Battocio (slap)



Battocio (ultimate prop)

ULTIMATE PROP

The battocio isn't just a stage weapon, it can function as almost anything. A spyglass, trumpet, hairbrush, lawnmower, beard trimmer, nose plucker (the list is endless). This is an exercise for exploring the many ways to use a Battocio in performance.

Students split into groups of three. Over the course of 5 minutes they should find TEN different ways to use the battocio as anything other than an implement for slapping.

LAZZO/LAZZI

When using the battocio remember basic safety - only hit the meaty bits of the body (parts with no important organs - ie. Bum and thighs). You shouldn't improvise on-stage violence so encourage your students to rehearse any slapstick thoroughly. If you don't have access to traditional battocio for workshops, use a lightweight, rolled up newspaper instead.

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.