

**Renaissance and Reformation**  
**Renaissance et Réforme**



**Schmitt, Natalie Crohn. Performing Commedia dell'Arte,  
1570–1630**

Rosalind Kerr

Volume 44, numéro 3, été 2021

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1085864ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v44i3.38038>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Iter Press

ISSN

0034-429X (imprimé)

2293-7374 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

Kerr, R. (2021). Compte rendu de [Schmitt, Natalie Crohn. Performing Commedia dell'Arte, 1570–1630]. *Renaissance and Reformation / Renaissance et Réforme*, 44(3), 322–324. <https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v44i3.38038>

© Canadian Society for Renaissance Studies / Société canadienne d'études de la Renaissance; Pacific Northwest Renaissance Society; Toronto Renaissance and Reformation Colloquium; Victoria University Centre for Renaissance and Reformation Studies, 2022

Ce document est protégé par la loi sur le droit d'auteur. L'utilisation des services d'Érudit (y compris la reproduction) est assujettie à sa politique d'utilisation que vous pouvez consulter en ligne.

<https://apropos.erudit.org/fr/usagers/politique-dutilisation/>

**é**rudit

Cet article est diffusé et préservé par Érudit.

Érudit est un consortium interuniversitaire sans but lucratif composé de l'Université de Montréal, l'Université Laval et l'Université du Québec à Montréal. Il a pour mission la promotion et la valorisation de la recherche.

<https://www.erudit.org/fr/>

**Schmitt, Natalie Crohn.**

***Performing Commedia dell'Arte, 1570–1630.***

New York: Routledge, 2020. Pp. viii, 112. ISBN 978-0-367-08565-0 (hardcover)  
US\$59.95.

Natalie Crohn Schmitt's new work makes a valuable addition to her previous *Befriending the Commedia dell'Arte of Flaminio Scala* which highlighted dimensions of the commedia dell'arte often overlooked, with close readings that paid attention to Scala's mastery of literary devices and rhetorical flourishes. In *Performing Commedia dell'Arte, 1570–1630* she goes much deeper in her analysis of the means and methods the actors employed: improvisation, acting styles, and masks. This review will outline her key findings as she works with original source materials that informed the practices.

The first chapter, "Improvisation," includes all the standard reasons why it was used by actors, from its practicality for travelling troupes eager to protect their own materials but avoid the censors, to its appeal to crowds who were impressed by the actors' daring skills in inventing actions and dialogue on the spot. She explains that improvisation was always contained within a limited framework, noting that the actors had to devote much of their time to building the action to advance the plot. Their speeches were also for the most part preplanned. Actors followed the rules of rhetoric laid out by Quintilian to build up a large repertoire of memorized materials and topics they could draw upon to suit whatever the occasion required. Rather than see improvisation in opposition to memorization, we need to recognize that the actors were probably practising the skill of *memoria rerum*, defined by Cicero as memorization—which, not being verbatim, allowed for adaptation. Understanding how much work the actors devoted to acquiring vast repertoires to build their improvisations enriches our respect for their powers and suggests a literary dimension we could explore further. Crohn Schmitt also argues the actors were able to improvise in groups larger than the usual two.

In chapter 2, on "acting styles," Crohn Schmitt covers the important topics of dialect, voice, and gesture. She explains the necessity of using dialects in this oral performance genre, given that everyone in Italy, no matter what their social class, spoke dialect; travelling players could not count on their audiences understanding the particular dialects they brought with them. The comic appeal of dialect use includes its spontaneity, authenticity, and realism—but we need

to be aware that it is also likely that audiences may often have found it very hard to follow. Hence, voice and gesture were often enhanced to make the meaning clearer. Crohn Schmitt notes that Quintilian's rules for oratorical delivery covering volume and tone were brought to bear on expressing passionate reactions. A new research direction is added with Emily Wilbourne's recent *Seventeenth-Century Opera and the Sound of the Commedia dell'arte* (2016), which makes valuable connections between the multiple sound dimensions of the *commedia dell'arte* and early opera.

Crohn Schmitt's section on "gesture" brings in interesting pictorial documentation from different sources, notably from the Corsini watercolour frontispieces, which show an impressive range of gestures indicating emotions and actions employed by the actors. Next, she evaluates books of gestures, including Bonifaccio's *L'arte de' cenni* (1615), but decides that the use of Bonifaccio's work is limited due to the lack of evidence of its dissemination. This underestimation misses out on Bonifaccio's comprehensive treatment of gesture as mute eloquence and his aim of modelling the ideal comportment of upper-class males to use their bodies to express their superior civility. Still, she makes good use of Quintilian's *Instituto oratoria* to inform her reading of the interrelationship between "words, gesture, and voice and between gestures" (40), which she applies to her readings of gestures in select Scala scenarios to illustrate how he captures the emotional trajectory of the action. These examples are generally very effective, although there is a short section about rules for breaking the fourth wall which is confusing, since the *commedia dell'arte* always addressed the audience directly.

Chapter 3, on "the use of masks," offers a rich compendium that goes far beyond treating the character masks and their functions to examining the extensive appearance of non-human masks. She consults the three main scenario collections: the thirty Locatelli scenarios available in print (in Kathleen Lea, *Italian Popular Comedy*, [1934] 1962, 555–674, and Anna Maria Testaverde, *I canovacci della commedia dell'arte*, 2007, 178–424); the one hundred in the Corsini, recently made available in print (Stefan Hulfeld, *Scenari più scelti d'istrioni*, 2014) with reproductions of the original watercolours; and finally, Scala's fifty, printed in 1611. She notes that the masked *zanni* and *vecchi* and the unmasked lovers were all considered to be masked characters, since even without a face mask, their costumes, props, manners, and gestures made their roles all highly recognizable to their audiences. In the comedies, she outlines

how important the masks were for portraying caricatures of actual citizens negotiating their place in the social network. Under the protection of the mask, characters could speak truth to power, as well as expose their own evil, if they were performing the oppressor roles, such as Pantalone. In the section on “other masks,” Crohn Schmitt looks at pastorals and tragicomedies to discover the host of gods, magicians, devils, demons, satyrs, nymphs, shepherds, wild men, and humans turned into animals that are represented in them. She posits that the extensive use of the mask was central to the long-lasting appeal of the commedia since masks were popular, recognizable, and compelling.

“The Coda” takes on the mythological question of the commedia dell’arte’s claim to have existed without pause since its beginnings. Crohn Schmitt admits that this is an impossibility, although she does profile four contemporary companies who all claim to have strong connections with the commedia. The first three—the San Francisco Mime Troupe, the El Teatro Campesino, and the Théâtre du Soleil—all began as collectives, use group improvisation, and have produced memorable shows dealing with various forms of social injustice. She offers details about her final example, The Improvised Shakespeare Company from Chicago, to show how much of the commedia’s spirit underpins their inspired improvisations. She leaves us wondering just how much of the commedia dell’arte is still with us. Her monograph would argue that it still invites intense interest in the means and methods of crafting performances that spoke to its audiences.

ROSALIND KERR

University of Alberta

<https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v44i3.38038>

**Scott, Amanda L.**

*The Basque Seroras: Local Religion, Gender, and Power in Northern Iberia, 1550–1800.*

Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2020. Pp. 246 + 10 ill., 2 maps. ISBN 978-1-5017-4749-6 (hardcover) US\$49.95.

This is a study about the role of women in Catholic communities and the cyclical nature of religious reform. From the late medieval period through the