

Devising Commedia as An Antiracist Practice in

Jordan Rosin
Directing Program Debut Panel
ATHE Conference, Aug. 7, 2021



The Artful
Token

Collaborators



Mask by Tony Fuemmeler
Photo by Jordan Rosin

Producer/Director	Jordan Rosin
Casting Director	F. Binta Barry
Commedia Mask Maker.....	Tony Fuemmeler
Commedia Dell'Arte Consultant	Fabio Motta
Dramaturg/Casting & Cultural Consultant	Devair Jeffries
Virtual Production Designer.....	Jake Traynor
Faculty Supervisor to	
Virtual Production Designer.....	Tatiana Vintu
Stage Manager	Rachel Kilgore
Grad. Student in	
Properties Design & Management	Alex Munn

Central Research Question:

“What are the limits and opportunities of Contemporary Commedia as an antiracist/anti-oppressive practice?”

Contextual Overview

Contemporary Commedia

Antiracist Theatre

Contextual Overview: Contemporary Commedia

The Actor-Creator

“Regarding the role of the actor in the Commedia dell’Arte, I want to turn my attention to the nature of the dramatic quality and originality that distinguish this style of theatre from all others known to us. This dramatic quality and originality are not determined, as some people seem to believe, by the use of masks or by the appearance of the characters in fixed stereotypes, but by a genuinely revolutionary approach to making theatre, and by **the unique role assumed by the actors**. ... The entire theatrical structure rests on their shoulders: the actor-performer is author, producer, storyteller, director...”

(Fo *The Tricks of the Trade* p 13)

Contextual Overview: Contemporary Commedia

The Function of Commedia

“There are masters and there are servants, but the idea is not to change society. It is **to shed light on human nature** through its comedy, made up of the deceptions and compromises which are indispensable to the survival of the characters.”

(Lecoq, *The Moving Body* p. 116)

Contextual Overview: Contemporary Commedia

Late 20th Century

“Their influence [Strehler, Grassi, Lecoq, Sartori, Fo, and others’] spawned a new generation of artists with a deep interest in the Commedia, notably, Théâtre du Soleil, the Bread and Puppet Theatre, the San Francisco Mime Troup, the TAG, etc.

Many, if not most, of these artists and groups were also politically engaged activists who imagined theatre generally and Commedia specifically as a potential force in political struggles. Their interest was in utilizing the Commedia to provoke **a comic critique of existing power relationships: against war, against racism, fascism, sexism and capitalism itself.**”

(McGehee, “The Pre-Eminence of the Actor in Renaissance Context: Subverting the social order” 10)



Love Axe-Tually at Dell'Arte International (2017).
Photo by Alex Blouin, pictured (L to R): Jordan Rosin, Evan Grande, & Mick Vonk

Contextual Overview: Antiracist Theatre

Nicole Brewer's Antiracist Theatre

“ART is defined as **practices and policies that actively acknowledge and interrogate racism, anti-Blackness, and other discriminatory practice, while promoting anti-racist ideas, values, and policies that counter the oppression of any people during the education or production of theatre.**”

...

“My work now openly acknowledges racism. But **anti-racist theatre is not just about racism; it's about eliminating all forms of oppression and creating authentic belonging.**”

(Brewer, “Why ‘Equity...’ is Obsolete”)

Jordan's Antiracist Theatre Ethos

(A perpetual work-in-progress last revised 2020/08/14.)

I **believe** that the stories of global majority people (especially Black & Indigenous folx) should be seen, understood, supported, and celebrated.

As a white theatre-maker, I **practice** this ethos by producing, directing, and facilitating actor-created theatre which models and promotes shared leadership and collective decision-making, while allowing actors to draw on their own unique cultural resources as inspiration.

I **support** this ethos and practice with anti-oppressive politics and a commitment to self-education around issues of racism, ableism, sexism, classism along with ongoing training in Theatrical Intimacy and Anti-Racism.

Contextual Overview:

Antiracist Theatre

De-Codification

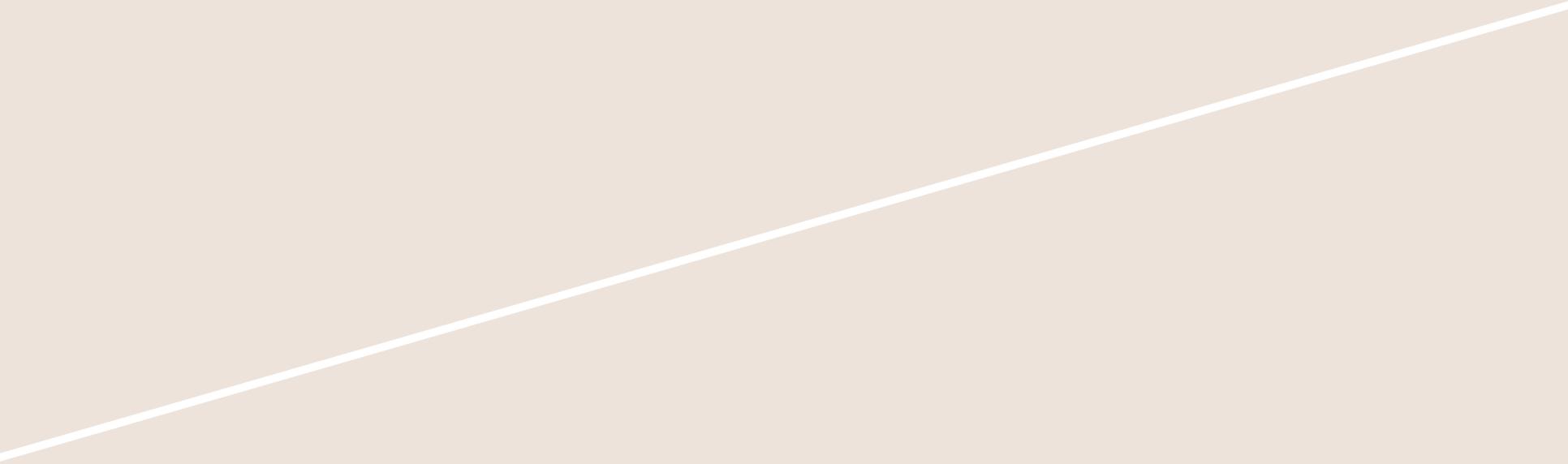
“One of the keys to white supremacy, or colonization, ... is codifying everything. ... Codification keeps existing power structures in place. When I teach, I explain everything for my students. ... so much of theatre training can be dis-empowering and designed to make students think about what they don't know. When in fact, so many of our students do know!”

(Dunn et al. “Training Theatre Students of Colour in the United States” 280)



Commedia Masks for *The Artful Token* by Tony Fuemmeler [tonyfuemmeler.com]

Account of Process



The Story

The Story of *The Artful Token*

As a contemporary adaptation of Carlo Goldoni's *La Vedova Scaltra*, *The Artful Token* follows Rosie, a gifted, Black university Sophomore student, whose major is—at the start of the play—*undecided*. She is quickly courted by four buffoonish professors, most of whom are far more interested in filling their department's diversity quotas than in getting to know who she is or what she has to offer. After being showered with extravagant gifts and confusing microaggressions, Rosie sets off to discover the truth. With the help of friends and a ridiculous disguise, she enacts a scheme to expose the professors' true intentions and find her path.

Dramaturg's Note

“The cast utilized Goldoni's script to address how inclusive programming must be carefully conceived for long term change that truly benefits people of color in all settings, including universities, rather than a publicity stunt to promote the perception of diversity” (Jeffries 7)

The Ume Group Devising Methodology

Creative Process / Devising Methodology

1. Training / Research
2. Creation / Devising
3. Editing, Organization, & Rehearsal
4. Performance

Guiding Principles

- Always Learning, Teaching, Creating & Performing
- Rotation of Roles
- Open Training
- Play
- Ritual/Ceremony

The Ume Group Devising Methodology

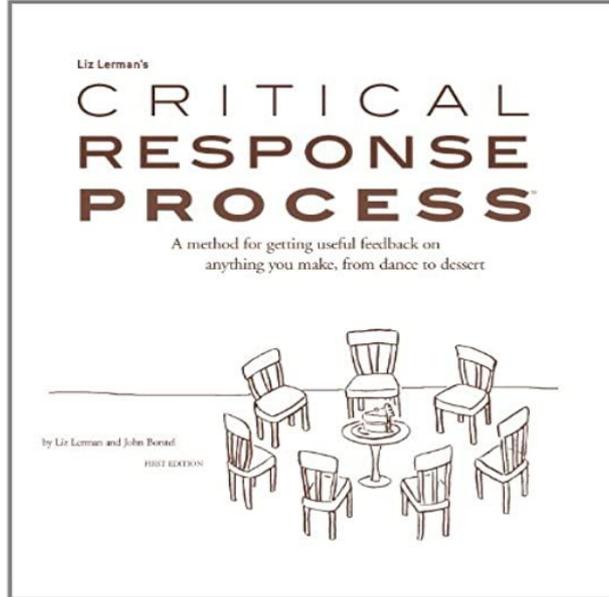
Open Training

“Frequent time to train as a company. It’s called “open” because the topics are completely open and it’s open to be led by anyone, from interns to senior company members. From specific physical, vocal, and/or acting techniques to dance forms, martial arts, stretching, and self-care, no topic is off the table for Open Training. Often these events are “open” to the general community, though not necessarily. It is also a time for less experienced company members to practice their skill as teachers / guides.”

(“The Ume Group - Devising Principles / Methodology” 1)

Consent & Boundaries

Liz Lerman's Critical Response Process



Theatrical Intimacy Education's Best Practices



Liz Lerman's Critical Response Process (CRP)

4 Phases

1. Statements of Meaning
2. Artist as Questioner
3. Neutral Questions
(from the Audience)
4. Permissioned Opinions

Planned Parenthood Model of Consent (F.R.I.E.S.)

(as Consent-Forward Context for CRP)

- Freely Given
- Reversible
- Informed
- Enthusiastic
- Specific

TIE's Boundary Disclosure Form



Sample Audition Disclosure Form

Theatrical Intimacy

Note: All theatrical intimacy will be choreographed.

Are you open to the following:

	Yes	No	More Information Needed
Performing or witnessing realistic theatrical intimacy?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Kissing?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Performing or witnessing stylized theatrical intimacy?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Performing or witnessing simulated sexual assault?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Performing or witnessing stylized simulated sexual assault?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Performing or witnessing non-sexual physical contact with others?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Performing text discussing or alluding to sexual intimacy?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Violence

Note: All violence will be choreographed.

Are you open to the following:

	Yes	No	More Information Needed
Performing or witnessing simulated acts of violence?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Performing or witnessing situations involving theatrical firearms?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Performing or witnessing simulated self-harm?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Nudity

Are you open to the following:

	Yes	No	More Information Needed
	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

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Theatrical Intimacy Education's Boundary Disclosure Form
(Pace, *Staging Sex* 102-4)

Boundary Tools (cont'd)

- **Self Care Cue: “Button”**
- **“Ouch”/”Oops”**

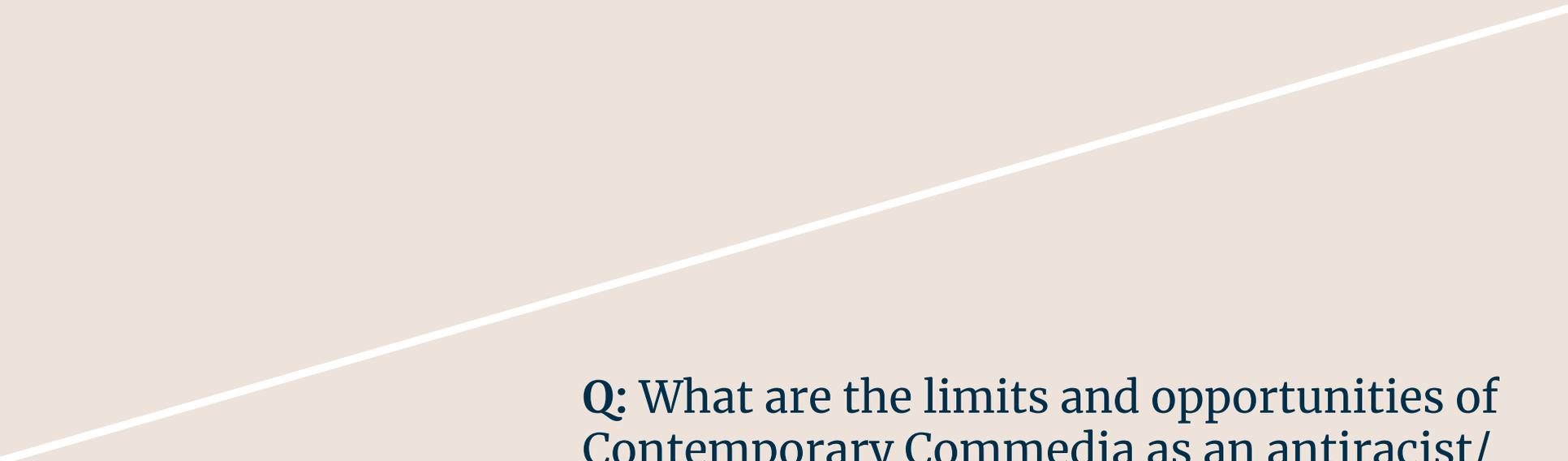
Collective Antiracist Theatre Ethos

We believe it's important to be aware of our own racial prejudice and the harmful effects of racism and to counter those effects through self-awareness, community, and comedy.

We practice this ethos by questioning & ridiculing ignorant perspectives that are destructive or unfounded; raising awareness for how microaggressions affect the people they're targeted towards; reducing harm by honoring folx' expressed boundaries around language.

We support this practice by using tools like "Ouch"/"Oops" & "Button" to help us navigate unintentional boundary-crossing; as well as by practicing open and transparent communication, seeking enthusiastic consent in our collaboration with one another, taking time off, resting, drinking water, and eating good food. ("Our Collective Antiracist Theatre Ethos")

Major Insights & Analysis



Q: What are the limits and opportunities of Contemporary Commedia as an antiracist/anti-oppressive practice?

Limitation & Opportunity: Harm Reduction via Content Warnings

Our Content Warning

“Commedia dell'Arte is a centuries-old art form that is uncensored in its delivery. Performances are often bawdy and body-based in humor and involve themes that may be inappropriate for younger viewers. This show furthermore may contain discussion or representation of racist and sexist language and behavior.”

Adapted from *Commedia Dell'Arte - Dell'Arte International*.

<https://dellarte.com/event/return-to-oz-dais-carlo-theatre-3-7-2-2/>.

Outstanding Questions

Did certain characters' behavior normalize stereotypes about Black people or successfully ridicule ignorant and racist perspectives?

Was our exploration of racial and gendered tokenism nuanced or clear enough to inspire viewers to treat each other with dignity or was it a discouraging depiction of Cancel Culture and reactive policy?

Opportunities: Focus on Mental Health, Agency, and Ease

As an improvised work...

- Not all parts of show need to be rehearsed equally (or at all)
- Facilitators can resist White Supremacy Cultural tendencies toward **urgency** and **perfectionism** (Okun 1-2)
- Light rehearsal schedule (3 hours per day, 4 days per week for 7 weeks PLUS days off / asynchronous)

As a devised/ collectively created work...

- Devising = Autonomy over images & representation (Luckett & Schaffer 26)

Limitations: Inequitable Distribution of Creative Labor

Relying on students of color to educate their peers or supply the bulk of the ideas in a devised project dealing with racism could certainly constitute an unfair burden of emotional and creative labor as well as possible source of harm.

*Thanks to F. Binta Barry, Kaja Dunn, Teniece Divya Johnson, & Laura Rikard for helping me to clarify some of the possible risks of this project while it was still early in its development.

Additional Discoveries



Liz Lerman's CRP &
Freddie Hendricks'
"Hyper Ego"

Mask Play on Zoom



Fabio Motta demonstrating work with the mask.
Screenshot by Jordan Rosin

Conclusion

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