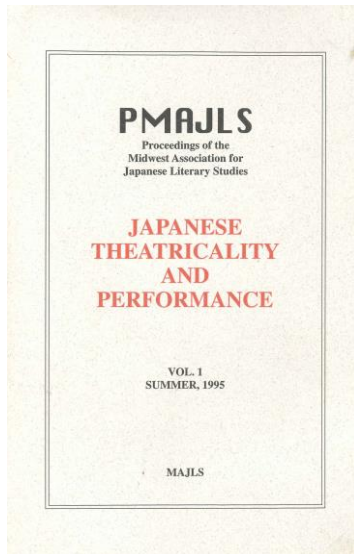


“*Commedia dell’arte* and *Kyōgen*: Two Popular Theatres on Opposite Sides of the Silk Road”

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**COMMEDIA DELL'ARTE AND KYŌGEN:
TWO POPULAR THEATRES ON OPPOSITE
SIDES OF THE SILK ROAD**

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In this paper I would like to emphasize the possible contiguities of two theatrical forms: *Commedia dell'Arte* and the *Kyōgen*, born and developed at the opposite extremes in that corridor of relations that since the dawn of time has been known as "the Silk Road." Though, as an actor, I normally find myself more an object of research than an investigator, I would like to develop on this occasion an argument on the basis of my professional experiences. I would like to show how elements of contiguity between two theatrical forms can exist, forms that have many elements in common: the mask, the use of the body in an extra-daily manner, the professionalism of the actors who practice it, the privilege for the actor's art more than that of the author, common roots in popular theatre, the fixity of the characters and their comic and grotesque temperaments, the similarity of the dramatic setting, etc. I would like to point out that even though these two forms did not have true contacts with one another, they have probably "influenced" each other indirectly. Because of the lack of documentation, my argument will remain hypothetical, but the two theaters surely display the genetic units characteristic to the same theatrical genre ('genetic' in the sense of what Eugenio Barba calls '*universalia*'). This

hypothesis would lead me to be free from the Eurocentrist and ethnocentrist distinction between "West" and "East"; instead, I would be encouraged to imagine how the dialogue has taken place in a fertile way between opposite sides of the Silk Road.

At the beginning of my research there was uncertainty, stemming from my theatrical practices as an actor of the *Commedia dell'Arte*. My original encounter with the *Commedia dell'Arte* was casual as often are the episodes which deeply mark our artistic careers. I found myself, at once and with great pleasure, immersed in an important tradition of European (and in particular, Italian) popular theater. The tradition left, however, no traces during the last two centuries. I have tried to restore and recreate this theater. At the beginning I was concerned about the way of combining different theatrical elements together; in the West, they represent separate values such as recitation, dance, song, mime. I noticed that as an actor of the *Commedia dell'Arte*, I needed a method allowing me to "simultaneously" practice all these elements so as to develop the feeling of coherence specific to the *genre* I was working on. I then realized that the theatrical form I was practicing required me to go beyond the typical Western necessity of having a close relationship between the author and the actor, who is seen as the interpreter of the text.

In order to perform, the actor has to go beyond the text. Following faithfully the historical documents in our possession, realized that our theatrical works had to be created on the basis of "*canovacci*" (scenarios), which included a dramatic setting, which without dialogue, showed only the dramatic situation; relationships among the characters, and , directions regarding each actor's entrances and exits upon the stage: These scenarios leave room for the actors to use their

repertoire to fill in the empty or even missing "gaps"¹ through improvisation. In the *Commedia dell'Arte* improvisation is, to a certain extent, analogous with the techniques of Eastern actors, yet it does not occur in the initial phase but in the final one, that is, in the creative process of the actor. Traditionally, the comedians of *Arte* all had their own breviaries, also called "*Centone*"² which contained the scenes, the monologues, the "*lazzi*" (gags), the dialogues with the other characters, the songs: They were transmitted to the new generations of comic artists rather like a handbook that contained the secrets of this particular theatrical tradition. It was from the "*Centoni*" that the actors got their *repertoire* and were able to compose *canovacci*, using always the same scenes and the scene gags.

As for the use of the mask, it may be viewed today as a mere matter of theatrical stylization with a fixed characterization of an established theatrical *genre*. It should be noted that the mask originally represented realistic "types," from the society where the *Commedia dell'Arte* performed (I am talking about Italy in the 16th century, as well as *mutatis mutandis* nowadays). This typification of human characters helped this theater be accepted by a diversity of audience from Finland to Portugal. The principle of "reduction" to a social category in a "mask" and therefore to a "human hero" and of "amplification"³ through the actor's stylization made the *Commedia dell'Arte* an universal theatrical *genre*, and above all a popular *genre*.

¹ The *Tenshō Kyōgen Bon*, whose first draft is thought to be dated around 1578, is a collection of *Kyōgen* scenarios. The parallel comes automatically with the collection of scenarios (*canovacci*) of the *Commedia dell'Arte*.

² Vito Pandolfi, *La Commedia dell'Arte*, Vol. 1, Sansoni, Firenze, 1957.

³ André Lascombes, *Rôle, Type, Masques, Structures et fonction du personnage populaire dans le théâtre anglais du Moyen Âge*, in *Figures théâtrales du peuple*, CNRS, Paris, 1985.

But there were also some other characteristics that made the *Commedia dell'Arte* popular among different audiences. The use of languages--starting from daily life and transforming into an exquisite theatrical form--stylized staged realities, even putting them in a grotesque light. The masks of the *Commedia dell'Arte*,⁴ invited actors to use their bodies and voices in a manner defamiliarized from the standard of daily reality. While I was practicing, I also realized that it is a theatre of great energy, in which the "energy" of the actor is explosive. From one side, it is at the service of the character; on the other side, it is also addressed to create a close and direct relationship with the audience⁵.

At the same time, however, I noticed that I did not have specified "elements of action," in order to build those bodies and voices as something belonging to a European theatrical tradition. I had to put pieces of my personal *savoir faire* together, or to rely on general fragments from ruling performing disciplines. I felt a strong envy of those generations of actors who, only two centuries ago in Europe, got the elements of their secrets through their apprenticeship, and through the ritual of receiving from other actors the mask they performed with.⁶ I then started to learn from

⁴ By "mask" it is not meant here as only the object but the whole character which is featured through the use of a mask.

⁵ In the *Commedia dell'Arte* the tight and direct relationship with the audience is fundamental. We could also talk about a "privileged relationship." We have also to remember the popular origins of this *genre* that, from the squares of Northern Italy in the 16th century, spread to the Courts of the biggest European monarchies.

⁶ In the tradition of the *Commedia dell'Arte* it was a custom to celebrate the *début* of a new actor on the stage with a ceremony called "the passage of the mask" through which the new comedian "dressed" for the first time on the stage in the mask used before by another actor. This ceremony followed a long period of apprenticeship by the young actor. It was a sort of "initiation's laic rite" and of welcome which all the company took part in.

iconographic documents of the period of the origins of the *Commedia dell'Arte*, like for example the *Recueil Fossard*.⁷ Even though obviously they were influenced by the interpretation of the artist that had engraved them, those papers helped me understand a great deal the original construction of the bodies made by the actors. From careful observation of the papers of the *Recueil Fossard*, I reconstructed a "grammar" of the body which I believe these founding actors used so as to transform their bodies into grotesque, "fictional bodies." It should be added that each actor's efforts to readapt the series of "rules of action"⁸ for their own was probably a part of this theater's tradition.

It testifies either to the closeness and restrictiveness of the *Commedia dell'Arte* companies or to the necessity of an apprenticeship before the entry of a new actor to the company and, above all, to the stage. This ceremony often occurred in the same theatre, in front of an audience, at the end of a performance, the last one performed by the former "owner" of the mask.

⁷ P.-L. Ducharte and Van Buggenhoudt, *Recueil de plusieurs fragments des premières comédies italiennes qui ont été représentées sous le règne de Henri III. Recueil, dit de Fossard, conservé au Musée National de Stockholm, présenté par Agne Beijer, conservateur du Musée National de Drottingholm, suivi des compositions de rhétorique de M. Don Arlequin présentées par P.-L. Ducharte*, Librairie Théâtrale, Paris, 1928.

⁸ In that period the actors had surely faced a problem very similar to those in this century: the construction or, rather, the re-construction of the work of the professional actor. It does not mean to recover forms and *genres* historically fallen into disgrace for whatever reasons but to regain the central role of the actor and his capacity to deepen and sharpen his own instruments into these *genres*. It is not fortuitous that great personalities of contemporary theatre turned their attention to the *Commedia dell'Arte* in order to regain, on one side, the spirit of a theatre considered as actual (maybe making it contemporary) and, on the other side, the principles of *savoir-faire* of the actor. I think, in this sense, about the previous work of the Théâtre du Soleil and of Ariane Mnouchkine that later became the performance "L'Âge d'Or" (1975), where the adaptation to our contemporaneity of the masks of *Commedia dell'Arte* also involved an investigation on the usage of the masks by the actors to give life to a proceeding work.

We have to keep in mind that the *Commedia dell'Arte* was not only a theatrical phenomenon, but a cultural phenomenon as well. In 1545, the first contract was documented, linking some actors in a professional company in Padua, not far from Venice to this theater; then, in the second half of the 16th century, different companies worked successfully throughout Europe.⁹ Great cultural and commercial success ensued, giving this theatrical genre a "fashionable" status, whose popularity spread all over Europe in an astonishingly rapid pace. The actors of that time must have been able to create grammars of the body capable of masking their own body so as to offer the audience universal images of stage characters, easily recognized and transmittable across a long span of time (at least two centuries). European theatrical tradition knew, therefore, some durable theater which lasted for centuries and it consisted of a well codified set of characteristics as follows: the fixity of the characters; the dynamism of the dramaturgy that always responded, at least, to the same dramatic setting; the rules of recitation with improvisation; the use of the body in a dimension ulterior to the daily concept of realism; and the mask as an element which can unify or differ from the other theatrical forms.

My practice also freed me from a sort of false paradox. The "rules of the game" used in the *Commedia dell'Arte* (the rules of improvisation, the mask, the use of the body, its codification, its grammar), were not restricted; rather, once acquired and mastered, they gave actors a freedom of interpretation much wider than the "caged" freedom, understood in the form of simple arbitrariness or a total absence of rules, by typical Western theatres. In contrast, I

⁹ In F. Taviani and M. Schino, *Il segreto della Commedia dell'Arte*, Sansoni, Firenze, 1982.

found examples of the controlled improvisation in the Eastern traditional theatre as something still intactly respected.

I think that the "fascination" of the East by many Western artists during the first half of this century was often derived from the power of a certain exoticism¹⁰ or of a mystification of the East.¹¹ My premise here resides in that it is only in the second half of the century that we have developed close and fruitful links among artists coming from the two extremes of the Eurasiatic continent. In his practice, the Eastern traditional actor is said to "use an organic corpus proven by 'absolute advises,' that means by rules that are similar to the laws of a code. These codify a closed action style to which all the actors of that *genre* have to conform."¹² The study and the practice under the guidance (and the friendship) of a master of art of Kyogen such as Nomura Kosuke, the last descendent of the chief of the Izumi school, convinced me to re-discover our Western tradition of the *Commedia dell'Arte* under a global and pluricentral context of the tradition of comedic theater in general.

Practicing together, we realized how both theatres had a series of elements in common in relation to the construction of the body: the prevalence of its organic language (the spinal column, the breath, and the center); the use of corporal

¹⁰ N. Savarese, *Teatro e spettacolo fra Oriente e Occidente*, Laterza, Bari, 1992, XXIV.

¹¹ *Ibidem*, XVIII. For this purpose, it will be sufficient to remember that, with disarming ingenuity, Mejerhold suggested, as subjects of research and of teaching for his "Laboratory," his interest in the *Commedia dell'Arte* and the Japanese Theatre. For the former, he sent his collaborator Konstantin Miklasevskji to Italy to do some documentary research. About the Japanese Theatre there is no evidence of his direct knowledge.

¹² E. Barba, N. Savarese, *Anatomia dell'attore. Un dizionario di antropologia teatrale*, Roma-Cazilhac-Hostelbro, 1985, 4.

tensions in the construction of the fictional body¹³ and the "law of the vectorial contrasts" that supports it,¹⁴ and the

¹³ The fundamental tension in the body of the traditional actor is in that zone of the body defined as *koshi*, for us, the coccyx. Muscular tension is created by tension at the meeting point of the intersecting lines that divide the body horizontally and vertically. The muscular tension in this point, and only at this one, provokes a kind of suspension of the actor between the sky and the earth. Also the weight of the actor is displaced forward; the axis of gravity does not pass through the heels, as it does in a daily or in a theatrically realistic posture, but it is fixed in the front part of the feet. The spinal column is erect and the chin inwards, creating in this way a straight line that starts at the base of the cranium and arrives at the coccyx, to create a stylized action of vectorial opposition with the line that starts from the coccyx. The tension in the center of the body (*koshi*) and the vectorial opposition between up and down is not only typical of the Japanese traditional theatre. The same principle can be found also in other Eastern performing traditional arts. For the Japanese traditional actor, it means that to start from the *koshi*, the fundamental tension is capable of transfiguring his body and even his voice. The voice in fact is emitted by stretching the zone of the coccyx and pulling downwards. It allows the actor to direct the voice horizontally in line with the centre of the body. Every movement of the actor feels the effects of this vectorial opposition. Also the actor's walk is a composition of vectorial contrasts: the foot slips on the ground being "drawn" backward from a force opposite to that one that moves it forward; the anterior part of the foot heaves being "held" from the opposite vector that compels it downward. The same *kata* (patterns) used by the actor to turn 90° or 180°, the *kakeru* and the *negiru*, are created by the contrast between a circular and a linear movement: the opposition between the vector in the right direction and the vector in the left one provokes the movement of the actor due to the necessity to force the opposition itself. In this sense, Nomura Kosuke likes to give a metaphor illustrative of this process: the most important thing is not only the action itself of seeing but the tension that exists between the envy of seeing and the fact of seeing. Therefore any movement becomes organically tight and suspended because a sheaf of rays starts from the centre of the body and it is projected in any direction of space in compliance with forces vectorially opposed.

¹⁴ "There are various aspects of harmonic contrasts in the movement of the Japanese classical actor. The movement expresses temporal and spatial dimensions: the actor alternately moves and become immobile. In addition, he creates contrasting spatial messages through his body, in his movements and postures...The actor directs his energy in opposite directions." (Zvi Serper, *Harmony and contrasts in the Japanese Classical Theatre: Acting, Drama and Space*, Tel Aviv University, 1990,13). Zvi Serper in his study on harmony and contrast in the Japanese traditional theatre affirms an undeniable Confucian influence in this process of vectorial opposition, observing that any opposition can be brought again

principle of opposition of powers which rules the balance of the actor on the stage and amplifies his scenic presence.¹⁵ Of course, the Kyōgen master's knowledge is secular, while ours is the result of trial and errors.

to the primordial contrast between *yin* and *yang*, as well as the contrast that exists in the concept of *kyo-jitsu* between full and empty. Without doubt, this kind of influence is undeniable; it is the sacred origin of the Japanese theatre. But I think that it is as undeniable as an absolutely profane thesis because this law of the use of body in the Japanese theater represents the general theatrics that creates an "exceptional event" through the special "disfigurement" of an actor's body. This kind of "disfigurement," produced by the body's tensions and contrasts can be found in other theatrical cultures, but not necessarily tied by religious or philosophical links. I am persuaded, in this sense, that the necessity of the professional actor to distinguish himself from daily life, to make himself something different from the realistic body, to have to find technical solutions in the use of the voice in order to be able "to carry" it, is often due to the actor's techniques as well as, without any doubt, religious or philosophical motives. As an example, the *Nōgaku* (*Noh* and *Kyōgen*) was performed in the past mostly in open spaces with the necessity, therefore, of the actor to push the voice to the maximum limit while maintaining its purity. In the *Nōgaku* the use of the mask involves the necessity to push the voice downwards for the practical reason of to choking it. In this sense, the use of basical corporal tension (i.e., *koshi*) is also practised in other theatrical cultures such as in Bali, China or India, in the traditional theatres where the art of the actor capable of the "exceptional event" gets the upper hand over the actor who, from the *logos* and not from the body, starts his interpretation.

¹⁵*L'anthropologie théâtrale a montré que le principe d'opposition était le plus important, comme le principe même de la vie. Cette opposition existe dans la nature et régle notre présence biologique. C'est l'opposition qui nous pose sur la terre et l'épine dorsale qui nous pousse vers le haut et nous maintient debout dans cette opposition et trouve la première semence dramatique. L'opposition est tension. Le drame et le conflit sont tension. L'art est une relation de tensions.*" (Patricia Cardona, *Energie et vision du monde. Reflection sur la danse théâtre à partir de l'anthropologie théâtrale*, Bouffonneries n° 22/23, Lecture - Hostebro 1989). ("The anthropology of the theatre has shown that the principle of the opposition is the most important, as it is the principle of life itself. This opposition exists in nature and regulates our biological presence. It is the opposition that sets us on the earth and the spinal column that pushes us upward and that maintains us standing up in this opposition and finds the first dramatic origin. The opposition is tension. The drama and the conflict are tension. Art is a relation of tensions.")

What we found fascinating was the discovery of how the two theatres both attempted to offer the maximum "waste" of energy, to the extent of the absolute lack of energy-saving. I found here, particularly interesting, the technical closeness. Nomura and I agreed to note how in both theatres the necessity of the absolute dominion of the energy¹⁶ from the actor was emphasized in order to utilize his own body in an extra-daily way. But if in *Commedia dell'Arte* it is a sort of "explosive" energy, open, in the sense that it tends, first of all, to create a close and direct, and thereby privileged, relation with the audience, it is not the case that happens in *Kyogen*, at least in the refined and, to a certain extent, sublimated form we see today.¹⁷

Here, the energy for an actor to create an extra-daily body, is interiorized and exhausted for the construction of *yūgen*, or enchantment and mystery, and production of the "visional effect" that Zeami called *kempu*.¹⁸ According to Nomura Kosuke, an image to explain the basic concept of

¹⁶ The term "energy" is used so often that its meaning does not depend only on the context but also on the person who uses it. By "energy" I mean here the endowment of the actor to go beyond his daily capacities. But in the practice of the Eastern actors the term "energy", or that which we could imprecisely translate with this word, hides some practical indications, of the actor's life. So we have in Japanese *ki-ai*, *kokoro*, *io-in*, *koshi*, in Balinese *taksā*, *virasa*, *chikara*, in Chinese *kung-fu*, *shin toeng*, in Sanskrit *prana*, *shakti* (E. Barba, N. Savarese, *Anatomia...*, op. cit., 8).

¹⁷ With the "reform" of Okura Toraaki (1597-1662) in his work *Warambe gusa*, the *Kyōgen* approaches the principles of *Noh* prescribed by Zeami: it is made sublime by limiting the most disinhibited characteristics of its origins. The same Okura Toraaki collected the scenarios of *Kyōgen* defining the textual component as it has been defined ever today. (Benito Ortolani, *The Japanese Theatre. From Shamanistic ritual to contemporary pluralism*, Leiden-New York-København-Köln 1990, 145-146).

¹⁸ For a deeper definition of the notion of *kempu*, look at the critical edition of the Zeami's *Sandō* by Professor Shelley Fenno Quinn in *Monumenta Nipponica*, vol. 48, n. 1, Spring 1993, 59 (see note 13).

"implosive energy"¹⁹ is that of a triangle, which is actually a plane figure that can exist limitlessly inside of a circle. Thus, the triangle, viewed in combination with the circle, contains a set of opposing elements: straight and round lines; rigidity

¹⁹ This seems to be a pure theoretical expedient, but it is in reality the element capable to show us, watching a *Nōgaku* performance, how in the absolute lack of action, a whole universe is moving: It is in the retention and not in the explosion that lies one of the "secrets" of the Japanese traditional theatre, in its retained power. The actor is here seen as a corporal element suspended in space by a series of vectorial forces that vanish and balance each other. The actor projects his organic energy towards his interior to reveal images of the first creator of the universe, images founded on the body and not on the *logos*. "*L'incontro tra lo sciamanismo e lo spettacolo genera la figura di un attore che fa spettacolo di sé e dei propri poteri, ma porta nella sua stessa presenza, gli echi e le connotazioni di colui che può uscire dai limiti dell'umano e comunicare con il divino.*" ("The meeting between the shamanism and the performance generates the figure of an actor who performs of himself and of his own powers, but who bears in his same presence, the echoes and the connotations of who can lie beyond the human limits and communicate with the divinity.") (G. Ottaviani, *L'attore e lo sciamano*, Bulzoni, Roma 1984, 11). Therefore, a performance of *Nōgaku* results in a total experience on the energetic level, as well as on the interior plane, for the actor who is paradoxically himself the dramatic event. "*Noh* is always the creation of the performer and the audience, an act of invocation of spirits, the transmutation of drama into reality. Therefore, the performer is always a *someone* and around that central someone is created the universe called *Noh*. The performer is not there as a part of an event; rather, the arrival of the performer through the magic of transformation is the dramatic event." (Kunio Komparu, *The Noh Theater. Principles and Perspectives*, New York - Tokyo - Kyoto, 1983, 8) The *Noh* actor, as well as the *Kyōgen* actor, becomes for the audience a partner almost like a devotee of a "religious" group in the relationship existing during the rite. The energy of the performer/devotee is implosive; the theatrical sign is cryptic because it is a symbol; and the audience has to master a code to let the sign go beyond the barrier interposed between the threshold of the significant and of the significance (*signifiant/signifié*). Through his own technical and artistic capacities (his own energy used in an implosive, extra-daily way), the actor transforms into an aesthetic sign which before was a mystic-religious experience officiated by a shaman. The actor copies the power of the shaman (historically he takes his place) in the aesthetic plan: he translates into a theatrically, and therefore, in a spectacular way, the religious event. The implosive energy accords itself furthermore with the thought of the Confucian school that finds in the contrast between the yin and the yang, the principle of motion and quietness (Zvi Serper, *op. cit.*, 8).

and softness; fiction and realism; and power and tension, and so forth. Such an ambivalently dynamic balance characterizes the base of a *Nōgaku*. actor's energy which allows him to produce a quiet, yet powerful, movement. In the composition of rigidity and softness, of tension and relaxation, lies the principle of the *yūgen*, the beauty in the balance. The image portrayed by Nomura Kosuke consists of an equilateral triangle parallel to the ground and perpendicular to the breast of the actor of *Nōgaku*. For an actor of *Noh*, let me say that this triangle (the image of implosive energy) is pictured in such a way that its directedness towards the audience is internalized in its 'angles,' while its 'sides' are actually pointed towards the actor's own breast. In the case of a *Kyōgen* actor, we may say the visible direction of the acting energy points towards the audience. Inside this implosive power, we can see here a clear separation from a power that does not turn at all towards the audience (in *Noh*) and another one, which even though it is closed in an equilateral triangle, finds a way of releasing its energy towards the audience (in *Kyōgen*). If in *Noh* the question is to put the energy of the actor in an internal balance of powers that, in a vectorial way, are in opposition, then in *Kyōgen*, the question becomes how to connect introverted energy for acting with the actor's energy to open himself up towards the audience. In the forms of *Kyōgen* that I dare define as "the origins," which can be seen today in the *Mibu-Kyōgen* at the Temple of *Mibu-dera*²⁰ in

²⁰ Twice a year, in February and April, at the *Mibudera* Temple in Kyoto the *Mibu-Kyōgen* is performed, a sort of archaic *Kyōgen*, a comic pantomime whose themes are narrowly similar to those of the *Kyōgen* "of art." It is played by non-professional actors. The relationship with the audience here is direct. During the whole day, a group of non-professional actors repeats alternatively the same farce. Therefore the same *kata* (patterns) are maintained in the rotation of the same actors who perform as musicians and as actors. In the *Mibu-Kyōgen*, the "triangle" is opened in a forward

Kyoto, the energy's directedness toward the audience is more visibly stressed.

The analogy with the *Commedia dell'Arte* is here more evident. Actors in the *Mibu-Kyōgen* display a direct and intimate relationship with the audience. The scenario itself is structured elastically so that an actor can improvise in response to the audience's reactions. Parallelism with the *Commedia dell'Arte* must be allowed here. They are both popular theatres, demonstrating a similar necessity to build non-realistic and fantastic bodies; universally semiotized notion of body led these comedians to develop a grotesque use of the body, which is also linked with the mask as a tool. We can also notice between the two theaters similar techniques related to body movements, to the direct way of approaching the audience, as well as similarly flexible dramatic structures and a common emphasis on improvisation. Furthermore, the use of rigid patterns in improvisation, as well as the fixity of characters, are common in both theaters, together with the actors' professionalism (of course, not in the case of *Mibu-Kyōgen* actors nowadays).

It is interesting to note on this occasion that there are, all along the Silk Road, a variety of "improvisational theatres" with similar characteristics: from the Indian continent to Pakistan, to Persia and the Anatolian plain; we find the *Karagöz* and the *Orta-oyonu* in Turkey, the *Ru-hozi* in Persia, the *Bhavai* in India.²¹ Should we speak of cultural

direction; the pattern is lightly modified in relation to the audience's reaction, the energy is still impulsive but it is opened towards the people.

²¹ "Ciò che, tuttavia, porta questi tipi di teatro allo stesso livello d'importanza e di popolarità della *Commedia dell'Arte* è non solo l'uso della maschera come tecnica dell'attore, ma anche lo stile di rappresentazione, che mostra un approccio d'insieme ed una struttura in grado di fondere le forme teatrali più disparate. Il teatro, in quanto istituzione sociale, è l'espressione delle tendenze artistiche e della consapevolezza collettiva di

syncretism? I think that the examples we have are excessively abundant and they point to the existence of strict similarities among theaters so diverse geographically and temporarily. I would like to stress in the end that we are talking about lively popular cultures, which are highly capable of exporting and disseminating their products.²² From the standpoint of a popular theater as a trading commodity, it seems very indicative that the *Commedia dell'Arte* was developed in the vicinity of the city of Venice, which was the most important

un popolo e deve, pertanto, favorirne il riconoscimento. È in questa qualità (un elemento di ritualità, se volete) che consiste l'essenza profonda del teatro. La potenza e il simbolismo della maschera assicurano al teatro alcuni effetti allucinatori che agiscono sulla coscienza del pubblico." ("What, however, brings this theatre to the same level of importance and of popularity of the *Commedia dell'Arte* is not only the use of the mask as an actor's technique but also the performance style, which shows an overall approach and structure capable of merging the most various theatrical forms. The theatre, as a social institution, is the expression of artistic tendencies and of the collective awareness of a people and has to support, therefore, the identification. It is in this quality (an element of rituality, if you like) that consists of the deep essence of the theatre. The power and the symbolism of the mask assure the theatre of some effects of hallucination that play on the consciousness of the audience.") (J. Adedeji, *La maschera come ombelico del teatro orientale ed occidentale*, in *Teatro, Oriente/Occidente*, a cura di A. Ottai, Roma, 1986, 95).

²² As an example. "*Come è possibile spiegare - senza far ricorso all'Oriente - l'apparizione improvvisa della maschera nera di cuoio (tipico, millenario prodotto della ritualità sciamanica d'Asia Centrale) in Occidente? Come i giustifica la presenza insistente di questo attributo così essenziale al gioco scenico della Commedia dell'Arte? Riapparizione, a secoli di distanza, della tecnica scenica plautina e menandrea? Sviluppo (mai dimostrato sul piano iconografico dei materiali, cuoio, legno, stoffe) dei travestimenti carnevalizi dell'Europa centrale?*" ("How is it possible to explain--without making reference to the East--the sudden apparition of the black leather mask (the typical and millenary result of shamanistic rituality in Central Asia) in the West? How is it possible to justify the insistent presence of this attribute so essential in the stage play of the *Commedia dell'Arte*? Is it perhaps the reappearance, several centuries later, of the Plautine and Menander stage techniques? Is it perhaps the development (never proved on the iconographical level of the materials, leather, wood, textiles) of the Carnival's disguises in Central Europe?") (E. Fulchignoni, *Le influenze orientali sulla Commedia dell'Arte - Per un'ipotesi di ricerca*, in *Teatro, Oriente/Occidente*, a cura di A. Ottai, Roma, 1986, 439).

European port for trade with the East. Since ancient times, (already in Herodotus we have evidence) cultures from the East never stopped contributing to the West. The game of the mimic-oral tradition was always one of the privileged vectors of civilization.²³ These facts seem to strongly suggest that it is not just pure fantasy that we may some day be able to demonstrate how these comedist theaters developed and influenced each other along the long route of the Silk Road. From my point of view, I find it sufficient, for the moment, to know that in the artistic field, comprehension among artists in global communities have now developed to such an extent that we can believe that our international experiences encourage us to enrich the future of each local theatrical movement.

Let me finally emphasize that since ancient times, there were two routes that allowed contact between East and the West. The first one was the Silk Road, which passed through China, Pamir, Turkestan, and then through the Iran lip to Europe; the second one was known as the Steppe's Road, which passed more through the Northern side, across Siberia. The cities of Nara and Venice were, and still are, the two extremes of both routes.

²³ E. Fulchignoni, *op. cit.*, 441.