

He Was Adaptable

Goldoni and 'The Servant of Two Masters'

By David Hlavsa

Truth has always been my favorite virtue. I have always found my account in it; it has saved me from the necessity of studying falsehood, and the mortification of blushing.

—Carlo Goldoni (1707-1793)

In a Venetian piazza stands a statue of a man wearing a bemused smile and an 18th-century coat bulging with manuscripts. This casual bystander is Carlo Goldoni, the man who reformed the Italian theatre. While other reformers throughout history have been reviled for their honesty — in their own time and occasionally by posterity as well — Goldoni has escaped relatively unscathed. Scholars examining his life, after raising an eyebrow or two about his youthful indiscretions, all come to a single conclusion in the end: Goldoni was about the nicest guy one could ever hope to meet. Venetians still call him "Papa Goldoni," and like a good parent, he was honest but never brutal.

Truth was not only his saving grace, it was his calling. Up until the time he wrote *The Servant of Two Masters*, at age 39, Goldoni was a lawyer by profession. He was unusually forthright, concerning himself not only with his clients' legal rights and responsibilities, but also with their moral well-being. Consequently, he had difficulty making a living.

But when he abandoned the law to write for the stage, he became an even more effective advocate. Using the power of laughter to win his case, Goldoni took on the human race as his client, and Venice was his courtroom.

The island of Venice, like that of present-day Manhattan, was an extremely compact city-state. Interaction between the social strata was, of necessity, more common than elsewhere, and while a tremendous social and monetary gap existed between the nobility and the rising class of merchants, middle- and upper-class Venetians — like today's New Yorkers —

were unified in the idea that their rapidly declining city was the center of intelligent life as they knew it. Bourgeois and noble shared a common "soft, lisping" dialect which identified one and all, erroneously or not, as the Italian elite.

Venice had always been a city of mirth. The local clergy, according to one historian, "vied in leniency with public opinion." During festivals, which were frequent, social barriers could temporarily be erased simply by wearing a cloak and mask. But this misrule was never more than a festival aberration, especially where the lower class was concerned. Servants and laborers, though lifted some in dignity by the rising bourgeois above them, were treated more like animals than human beings. Whether it was ever permissible to deceive or disobey even the most unjust master would have been a matter hotly disputed in many circles.

While Goldoni was neither a revolutionary nor an intellectual, he was a man of good humor and great empathy. Where he saw injustice, he wrote about it. His great warmth towards the lower class is remarkable in an age where the nobility thought nothing of spitting from their theatre boxes onto the spectators below.

Composing his first play at the age of eight, Goldoni was extremely prolific. Over the course of a literary career that spanned 78 years, he wrote tragedies, religious poems, satirical ballads and libretti for opera. Still, he is best known for his comedies.

He described his writing as "without elegance and without pretension, but animated by zeal for my art, and inspired by a love of truth." To the modern reader, this seems unremarkable. In an age of realism, of movies and television, we expect authors to at least make their work credible. It was not always so.

At the time, Italy's theatre audience, for the most part, had a choice between



Carlo Goldoni.

the Dull and the Crude. The classicists, highly imitative and tightly bound by their particular misinterpretations of Aristotle, turned out stifling dramas aimed at pleasing mainly their noble patrons and each other. They relentlessly attacked Goldoni and his work. Recounting this period of his memoirs, the ever-tactful Goldoni makes only oblique references to his enemies: "I had prejudices to overcome."

On the other hand, the *commedia dell'arte*, an ancient, popular improvisational form had, by all accounts, become tasteless and tired, full of irrelevant *lazzi* (prearranged physical comedy routines), gratuitous sexual references and sloppy acting. Goldoni first wrote *The Servant of Two Masters*

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The Change Point

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as a sketch, a scenario for the *com-media*, but soon filled in the blanks and scripted the play to preclude indiscriminate improvisation. He had no intention of exterminating the *com-media*; he just wanted to clean it up a bit, but in doing so, he hastened its demise and revived the Italian theatre. By his own naive sincerity and keen eye for human behavior, he began to evolve a form of drama entirely new to Italy: comedy of character.

Suddenly, characters like Truffaldino (aka "Truffles" at this evening's performance) were motivated, animated with needs beyond the immediate objective of getting the audience to laugh. As Goldoni was a man of sense and appetite, so his characters' desires are tangible. Truffaldino's hunger is real. His schemes to satisfy it may be amusing, but in the end his problem is not just a comic "bit." We see cause and effect, the logic of need behind every ridiculous move. Though the

clever servant in literature dates back to the ancient Greeks, Goldoni gave him a wit and complexity hitherto unknown.

The nobility did not fare as well. Goldoni rarely wrote upper-class characters at all and finally, when he didn't have anything nice to say, abandoned the practice altogether. Even in depicting the most egregious of wrongs, he seldom lost empathy for any of his characters. Rarely do his plays contain stick figures or effigies. His sharpest barbs were reserved for his own class (miserly or inflexible merchants, empty-headed young men and women of means, unscrupulous tradesmen, pretentious socialites, et al), and then his mockery is that of a gentle man prodding his family into better behavior.

How did he come to be so charitable? In his memoirs, Goldoni wrote:

My mother brought me into the world with little pain, and this in-



An Italian comedy troupe performs in a Verona arena in 1772.

creased her love for me; my first appearance was not, as usual, announced by cries, and this gentleness seemed then an indication of the pacific character which from that day forward I ever preserved.

Perhaps his amiability was in fact congenital. On the other hand, perhaps his capacity to forgive his countrymen even as he chided them was born of his own youthful profligacy.

The early chapters of Goldoni's memoirs read like a picaresque novel. Passing from one misadventure to the next, he roamed the length of the Italian peninsula. He tried his level best to be responsible but, time and again, was led into temptation. Fond of music, food, wine and gambling, Goldoni's first try at law school ended abruptly when he left his studies for an impromptu voyage with a troupe of itinerant actors. Sternly rebuked but ultimately forgiven by his parents, he resumed his studies at another university but was thrown out (and almost killed) for writing a satire of prominent townspeople — an incident he would regret for the rest of his days.

Furthermore, he displayed a certain weakness for the ladies — especially, he notes, for actresses who played serving-maid types — and his treatment of them was often less than exemplary. In fact, his duplicitous behavior forced him to leave Venice for several years rather than honor a marriage contract.

He, in turn, was frequently deceived by the wiles of con artists and adventuresses. At one point, Goldoni, furious at his unfaithful lover, an actress, confronted her. Vowing to do the honorable thing, she bade him adieu and attempted to stab herself with a dagger. Goldoni, overcome with remorse, forgave her all, only to hear later that his innamorata had been overheard in a local tavern laughing about the episode with his rival.

Goldoni retaliated by writing a role so perfect for her that the manager of her theatrical troupe told her to play it or quit the company. She was thus com-



A 17th-century engraving of Truffaldino. The wily servant was a stock character in commedia dell'arte productions, but it took Goldoni to give him a wit and complexity hitherto unknown.

pelled to knowingly depict and parody her own actions and faults. Goldoni notes that she was quite good in the part.

His handling of this event is telling. While Goldoni could lash out in anger, he was always best rewarded when he obeyed the laws of decorum so essential to 18th-century Venetian life. Behavior in Goldoni's world was narrowly proscribed. Everything had its proper time and place, and while life behind closed doors could certainly be less inhibited — sometimes, in fact, it was rather wild — one was expected to be quite formal in public. Luckily, Goldoni was usually clever enough to be effective in his literary indictments without a single breach of good manners.

But finally what stands out most about Goldoni's memoirs is his consistent refusal to place blame on anyone but himself. He does not kiss and tell, and his story is tactfully expurgated to protect both the innocent and the guilty. As he never considered himself beyond reproach, he was able to invest

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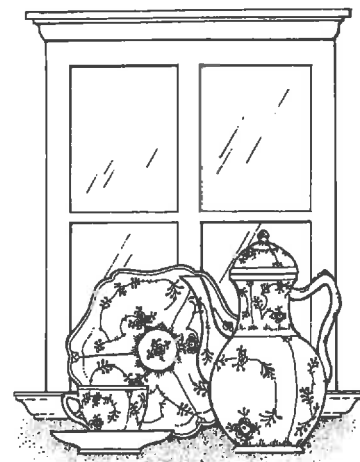
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Italian comedies were often performed before a forced-perspective backdrop of a street.

heartfelt empathy in his most reprehensible characters — even when they were drawn directly from people who had done him personal harm. No wonder then that Goldoni is still revered.

Ironically, most of his work has fallen by the wayside. He wrote hundreds of plays: few are read today and even fewer staged. The quality of his writing varied tremendously; his best plays survive, but, for the most part, the extraordinary liveliness of his art died out with the passing of his century and his Venice. Oftentimes, the humor and pathos of his work were, like the *com-media*, based on events and customs so immediate, so tied to his life and time, that they have simply gone stale.

The Servant of Two Masters is an exception. One reason for the play's continued popularity is that it is ripe for adaptation. Its central premises ring true through barriers of time and language, but its stage directions and topical allusions are relatively sparse. This visual ambiguity has allowed for a certain comedic and physical freedom, a spontaneity within the suppor-

tive confines of structure.

In appropriating the structure and some of the substance of *Servant for The Rep's* ensemble, writer/director Daniel Sullivan is following a long tradition. The play was often translated, adapted and refitted during Goldoni's lifetime. In fact directors and playwrights throughout the last three centuries have tailored the play to their own acting companies and for their own audiences.

A good adaptation brings the truth of the past into the here and now, the living moment. Goldoni strove to help his audience examine their immediate physical and social environment, to help them see the concrete reality of the world as he knew it. A sensual (and sensible) man, he affirmed life, not static "high" art. It seems only fitting to bring his *Servant of Two Masters* into the world as we know it.

David Hlavsa, a director and actor, will teach playwriting and play analysis at the Northwest Actors Studio this spring.

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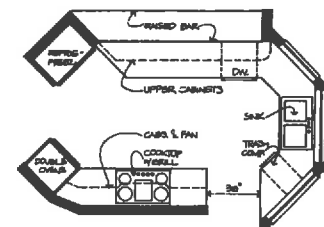


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