

# *Oliver!*

Directed by Ryan McNeil  
April 2012  
The Historic Missouri Theatre

## Commedia dell'Arte Stock Characters<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Information about the stock characters comes from a websites of modern *Commedia dell'arte* troupes and from John Rudin's book *Commedia dell'Arte: An Actor's Handbook*. (Routledge 1994).

# An Introduction to *Commedia dell'Arte*

*Commedia dell'Arte* is a theatrical form that originated in Italy in around the middle of the fifteenth century in marketplaces where actors would gather and perform scenes for the public. It means “Comedy of the Artists,” meaning that the artists (actors) were in charge of creating the characters and stories. From these performances and from the costumes and masks worn at Carnival celebrations, certain **stock characters** began to form that people started to recognize from performance to performance.

The actors did not read lines, but used **improvisation** (making up their lines on the spot) to move the story along. Each character represented a different aspect of life and always looked and acted a certain way. These characters became very famous around Italy throughout the 17th and 18th centuries and found their way into many plays and performances written and created in Europe.

We still see versions of these characters today. In this show, *Oliver!*, I have identified the characters that seem to “match up” with the stock characters of *Commedia dell'Arte* and we will use these ideas to help us create interesting and believable people on stage. Enjoy!

Ryan McNeil

Director

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**Performing Arts in Children's Education**

# Oliver



<b>Stock Character</b>	<b>Pedrolino</b>
<b>Description</b>	Pedrolino is an innocent character. He is moonstruck and naive. He only shows his feelings with he is alone. He is stoic in the face of misery. He is always tired and totally honest. He is full of remorse at the slightest harm to others.
<b>Costume</b>	He wears baggy, white clothes with a large collar and black buttons. He has a pointed white hat or floppy white hat.
<b>Face</b>	His face is white and cherubic. Traditionally his face would be tinted with flour.
<b>Movement</b>	His feet stay in third position with not much movement in his knees. His elbows are bent, hands stay up and active. He walks in direct, straight lines, his head moves like a chick with elbows up..
<b>Speech</b>	His voice is light and lilting.
<b>Animal</b>	He is all human.

# Fagin



Stock Character	Pantalone
<b>Description</b>	Pantalone is the top of the pecking order. He is the old miser and is motivated by money. He is the god of the dying year at the festival of Carnivale. He is lean and scrawny. His motives (money, greed) are so obvious he almost appears virtuous.
<b>Costume</b>	Wears tight-fitting red trousers or stockings, a short, tight-fitting jacket and long, loose black cloak with plain sleeves, a red woolen skullcap and yellow turkish slippers. He carries a dagger and wears a gold necklace with a medallion.
<b>Face</b>	Has a long hooked nose with bushy eyebrows and mustache. He has a pointed beard coming forward as if to meet his pointy nose.
<b>Movement</b>	He is hunched over to protect his money and give him an old look. His feet stay together with toes apart. Knees are bent and facing apart. Hands flutter continuously unless under his cloak.
<b>Speech</b>	His voice is a high pitched squawk.
<b>Animal</b>	Chicken or Turkey

# Artful Dodger



Stock Character	Arlecchino
Description	Usually a servant, often of Pantalone (Fagin). He is never the loser. He never just “does” something, everything is an event. He is not brilliant, but always has a solution or “knows” the answer, whether he actually does or not.
Costume	He wears a tight-fitting, long jacket and trousers covered with random, odd-shaped patches of green, yellow, red and brown patches with a black belt over it. He wears black flat shoes and a soft hat with a feather. Carries a slapstick.
Face	Wears a black mask covering the eyes and nose.
Movement	Stays in a lowered position. Feet stay in fourth position with hands on the hips or with thumb in the belt. He walks with the <i>zanni</i> walks, but is very graceful.. He also has a three step walk.
Speech	Guttural. All or nothing, not a lot of pauses.
Animal	Like a cat or a monkey.

# Nancy



Stock Character	Columbina
Description	The only lucid, rational person in <i>commedia dell'arte</i> . She can read and write and has no negative attributes. She is the still center of the turning wheel. Looks after Arlecchino (Dodger). Her affections towards men show through her physicality. She is strong and attractive.
Costume	She is fairly well-dressed. Mob cap and apron with a “folly” dress underneath. Neckline of bodice low and frilled. Carries a basket.
Face	Eyes are wide and well made-up.
Movement	One knee is bent, the other extended. She tilts slightly forward at the hips to show best features. She gives a little flick of the foot at the end of the <i>zanni</i> walk. Moves while speaking, shifts balance from one foot to the other so she can move quickly. Anks on hips, holding apron, or making significant gestures. Throws her hands up when excited.
Speech	Sharp, gossipy, with frequent variations of pitch.
Animal	Dove

# Bill Sykes



Stock Character	Brighella
Description	Brighella is always the boss. He is never a victim and always maintains his status. Astute and always ready and quick-witted, he is a criminal. He is amoral, not evil. He is cynical and pitiless and never repents for his crimes. He's a habitual liar who looks out only for himself. Has flair and know-how. He is always hungry or thirsty and will do anything to get food or drink or make money. He is persuasive and rakish.
Costume	White jacket with full trousers with green braid frogging down the side. He wears a white cap with green border. Has a belt with a purse and dagger.
Face	Dark, olive skin and sparse mustache and beard.
Movement	He is lithe and cat-like, moves without effort. Seems to disappear into corners. He uses the <i>zanni</i> walks but leads with the hips and elbows bending to the same side as the knees.
Speech	Melodious. Commands attention.
Animal	Half-dog, half-chicken



# Mr. Bumble



Stock Character	Pulcinella/Punch
Description	Pulcinella is pot-bellied and stupid. He is very egotistical. He has a good-humored exterior but really doesn't care about human life. He delights in quarrels, but does not speak of his dastardly deeds. He can change his manner depending on the situation.
Costume	He wears a long baggy white blouse, tied around the waist with a leather belt that carries his stick and bag. He wears a white sugar-loaf cap (coppolone). He carries a cudgel and has a swazzle (buzzing whistle).
Face	Long, beaked nose. Furrowed brow with large wart on forehead.
Movement	Slow and top-heavy, contrasting with the speed of his thought and speech. Keeps weight on one leg with a high center of gravity. He makes broad, sparing gestures and he is an excellent mimic.
Speech	Sounds like a chicken squawking. He never knows when to shut up.
Animal	Rooster





# Widow Corney



Stock Character	Rosetta/Judy of "Punch and Judy"
<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Description</b></p>	<p>The wife of Pulccinella (Mr. Bumble).</p>
<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Costume</b></p>	<p>A sort of patched dress like Arlecchino.</p>
<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Face</b></p>	<p>TBA</p>
<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Movement</b></p>	<p>TBA</p>
<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Speech</b></p>	<p>TBA</p>
<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Animal</b></p>	<p>TBA</p>

# Mr. Brownlow



Stock Character	Il Dottore
Description	Il Dottore is a bachelor. He specializes in everything and can talk a load of baloney about it. He can be stingy, but not because he doesn't have money. He eats a lot and has a big belly. He is large and fat, in contrast with Pantalone (Fagin).
Costume	Black academic dress. Wears a long jacket with black coat overreaching to his heels, black shoes and stockings with a black skull-cap. Sometimes wears a white ruffle around the neck. Carries a white handkerchief.
Face	Reddened cheeks with a bulbous nose and bushy eyebrows.
Movement	He keeps his weight back on his heels with belly forward, hands gesturing in front. He walks in figure eights with tiny steps. His posture sinks while thinking and rises up when he has the answer. Takes up lots of space.
Speech	Brassy, like a trombone. Pronounces 's' as 'sh'
Animal	Pig.

# Mr./Mrs. Sowerberry



Stock Character	Cola/Cassandro
Description	Old man. A similar to Pantalone (Fagin). Can be ridiculous and acrobatic.
Costume	TBA
Face	TBA
Movement	TBA
Speech	TBA
Animal	TBA

# Bet



Stock Character	Servetta
<b>Description</b>	A maid. Basically a version of Columbina (Nancy).
<b>Costume</b>	Needs to look similar to Columbia (Nancy).
<b>Face</b>	TBA
<b>Movement</b>	TBA
<b>Speech</b>	TBA
<b>Animal</b>	TBA

# Noah



<b>Stock Character</b>	<b>Florindo</b>
<b>Description</b>	Young and attractive. Wore the latest fashions and heavy makeup. He is loyal, jealous, and fickle. Very vain and self-obsessed.
<b>Costume</b>	Dressed as a young scholar or cadet. Dressed well. Carries a handkerchief.
<b>Face</b>	Heavily made up to show vanity.
<b>Movement</b>	Lacks firm contact with the earth. Takes shallow breaths, and when the situation gets to be too much, he deflates totally. He teeters because he is unstable. Doesn't touch other characters. Frequently looks in a mirror. Anything out of place is very upsetting.
<b>Speech</b>	Traditionally fluid and flowery - we may change this in rehearsal.
<b>Animal</b>	Matches Smeraldina (Charlotte).

# Charlotte



Stock Character	Smeraldina
<b>Description</b>	Smeraldina is another version of Columbina. We will characterize her accordingly.
<b>Costume</b>	Could be dressed like a french maid. A servant, so wore an apron and cap.
<b>Face</b>	N/A
<b>Movement</b>	We will work this out in rehearsal.
<b>Speech</b>	Needs to match Florindo (Noah)
<b>Animal</b>	Matches Florindo (Noah).

# Dr. Grimwig



Stock Character	Tartaglia
Description	From italian verb 'to stammer.' He is corpulent (fat) and pot-bellied with no facial hair and bald. This character stammers and stutters and can get stuck on the most obscene syllable in a phrase. He can't see and may wear glasses.
Costume	Grey cloth cap, large calico collar, cloak and tunic in green with yellow stripes, white stockings and brown leather shoes.
Face	Huge thick glasses covering his face.
Movement	Walks with a waddle. Stands with his weight on heels, belly forward.
Speech	Stutters.
Animal	Owl

# Mrs. Bedwin



Stock Character	None
Description	Mrs. Bedwin represents a character not found in <i>Commedia dell'arte</i> . She is motherly and kind and does not have a character that corresponds with her. May be played by one of the Three Hags.
Costume	TBA
Face	TBA
Movement	TBA
Speech	TBA
Animal	None



# The Three Hags



Stock Character	“The Fates” from Greek Mythology
Description	In Greek mythology, the Three Fates or <i>moira</i> are a trio of old women who are in control of each human’s destiny. They are weavers and control (1) spinning the thread of life (birth), (2) measuring the thread of life (the length of life) and (3) cutting the thread of life (death.) These characters are also related to the Three Weird Sisters or Three Witches from <i>MacBeth</i> .
Costume	Usually portrayed as old, lame women.
Face	TBA
Movement	TBA
Speech	TBA
Animal	None.