

## *On the Way of the Harlequin*

By

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I can't sleep again -- something about mirrors and the shock of the Harlequin as he vanishes into one, suddenly invisible, and then, possibly, in my illusional dream world, as the Trickster of *Armour*, he reappears and makes ready to go back out into his real world -- with his triangle black face-mask and diamond-studded costume and little hat and the red-lipped mouth -- a Stage. That's when I wake up. It's time for me to visit, humbly, the world of the *Commedia Del Arte*, the world of the *Harlequin* and his fellow players, established long ago by troubadours and bards and the singers who remembered by heart the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* and *Gilgamesh* and *Job* -- a place by the fire, where we listen in terror about the fragility of the known and unknown: "What are we, really?," asks the *Harlequin*, as he stands there, still, silent, sadly smiling, like a Clown. He's about to get the shit kicked out of him in exchange for a witty, salacious remark.

I walk down the hall of my home, from the bedroom to to my office, my hands held in front of me like a cartoon mouse, out of fear of walking into something in the dark. The electricity is off. "I have come to tell you," says the *Harlequin* from his place of hiding in the mirror, "what you already sense, which is that we are bound to experience, and to observe, a process of decay beyond our control, i.e., the dying of ourselves as we die. Meanwhile, we make a living playing stock characters on a Stage -- a platform on the street or a courtyard, or a plaza. We know the stories, the *lazzi*, and so does the audience, so we put ourselves out there at the definite risk of personal harm.

The current of life doesn't stop, the *Harlequin* seems to ask. but does it flow up and down? Like steam and rain? Is there a force, from above, cathartic, made possible only by the Stage?" In my present, personal, state, as you can imagine, I have no clear response. I suspect that your awareness is as puny as mine -- but we all share the *Harlequin's* question, which is a serious one -- a question concerning the mercilessness of Time, plus a certain ironic, Comedic, sense of Justice.

The *Harlequin* continues: "Does this current flow in two directions, like electricity, or is there a third, a reconciling force, say, inextricable from the iambic, or dactylic, pulse of life? And what does that have to do with the practice of the raucus art of *Commedia*?" Is there another current, like the *Harlequin* proposes, coming from above via the stage? When I have a certain experience, say, of freedom, of truthfulness, of presence, even, have I beaten the Angel of Terror, for a moment?

Even as I expect to bear the inevitable beating I'm going to get from *Pantaloone* and *Flaminia*, and the rest of these weird characters, in about one second.

The *Harlequin*, if he's like me (and he apparently was), is a very flawed piece of work with a head full of habitual lies, half-truths, and delusions – but when he is there, onstage, he is transformed. He has the ability to swear sweetly, speak loving lies, spin away like a dancer, take an ironic stance, and stand there innocently. He is saying, through his momentary, obervant silence, that it is the Stage that speaks, not him. And, whatever happens, brutally or not, it happens there, in front of an audience, and is therefore, hopefully, protected by the gods.

The *Harlequin* stands there and takes in his situation, and prepares himself for a whack on the head. His eyes and ears, as in Vaudeville, are tuned to the audience. His wide attention is both on being where he is, on the stage, and also on the frail attention of the audience. And he keeps a wary eye on his fellow, improvising, thespians. He hopes, for the sake of his living, that the stage in fact will speak through him, if only he is true to himself as the *Harlequin* (*Arlequino*).

The true *Harlequin*, in my imagination, for a minute, is a still creature, in repose, and if he takes a step on stage, or raises his foot, or blinks an eye, he knows, or hopes, that these moves are a hundred times more impressive than, say, walking to the store. Indeed, it is so consequential, that, when he walks, onstage, someone, somewhere in the Land of Theater, world-wide – trips and breaks a leg. For the same reason, he chooses his words carefully, and artfully, when he speaks at all. No words can be wasted, the street-wise audience is not patient, and he understands that the essence of his presentation is in his joy and suffering expressed by silence, a silence that awaits speech, which is soon on its way in the form of a nasty curse. Trickster that he is, with the help of the gods (and the gullibility of his friends), he'll get out of danger—using his mouth and his head and his acrobatic agility -- and be saved. Until next time.

An ally of the Harlequin, to my mind, is his knowledge of the songs. He is connected to the Bards of old. Or so I imagine him.

That's *Desire* lingering there, in *Commedia*, afloat in the theater air, *Desire* harnessed to a higher goal, the goal of *Catharsis*, that the *Harlequin*, maybe, subconsciously, tries to evoke. Unknowingly, it seems, in the old *Commedia*, which was rough and bawdy stuff, but one can't know nowadays. The god of the clowns, the god of the *Commedia*, of falling down and getting back up – they, the gods, must have been with them onstage as they beat each other silly, physically and verbally.

The Harlequin finds an opening to the Audience. Things go wrong, unknown levels are revealed, and contradictions stab his heart. But Out he comes, beaten but unbowed, and he stands there quietly in the glow of the Stage. For a second. He might throw back the tomato you throw at him, or eat it.

Says the *Harlequin*, silently, in that moment, with a kindly grin, "Be in your own body and don't say anything without being aware of the consequences of speech or movement. Everyone is in a 'naturalistic' trance. We can barely notice the smallest of our manifestations. So I do little, and stand still." And his narrow eyes blink with compassion for the human situation. Then *Pantaloon* utters an insult, picks him up and throws him down. The *Harlequin* lies there, leans on his elbow, and smiles.

He enjoys his performance, especially if there is a paying audience, a performance -- stock but improvised -- which always happens Now for him, until the next Now. The stage, he senses dimly, is a place where the Word (Logos) can find embodiment. This premise goes all the way back to Ancient Greece. The Audience has created the wiring, the means of transmission, to the Unknowable, what Aristotle called *Catharsis*. Not a situation. but a change of understanding, a "coming to" of something.

"The Art of the Actor," the *Harlequin*, on the *Commedia* stage, appears to be saying, "Is to take his punishment, stay out of the way, and be on Time."

When the lights, the electricity, go out -- there is the *Harlequin* of old, in a mirror, in search of a theater, a Stage, and his violent companions. Theirs is not so much a business as it is a necessary activity for the social life of people, a way of bringing levels of meaning to bear on experience, which goes by, ordinarily, in the trance that the *Harlequin* spoke of earlier, and which he challenges, along with his *Commedia* comrades, by his deliberate, self-knowing, almost sacrificial, antics.

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