Familiar faces at the Hoe Theatre

The Hoe Theatre has been adorned in recent years by a 14th square mural of some of the stage characters you could see in the past. The mural, created by Robert Lembarsky, features the faces of Famous faces:

- The wild-eyed man with a telescope (center) is the artist himself, holding a manuscript from one of the plays that inspired the mural's theme.
- Next to him is a fisherman, Diggory. Neither the V-sign nor the faces were original protests; just jokes, says the artist.
- The character on the right is Pop Lashbrook, familiar to many Plymouthians as a newspaper seller and one of the mainstays at the Hoe Theatre, which he attends four times a week.
- Tony (right) and War Jack, two Plymouth Harps, dressed as Pirates.
Colombine may be viewed — at one moment — as the archetypal flirt, at another moment she is less vacillatory, more determined to assert her own identity, not only as Colombine but as woman.

It is this tendency towards self-assertion that makes her so attractive to the members of the Commedia as well as to her audience.

But this self-assertion that is tolerated by an audience that finds her sexually attractive, try as she might she will not be able to evade the role she must play in a world whose demands operate through biological necessity.

Colombine (alias Petia) is discovered in the arms of a lover, Ternin.Russante, her husband begs her to return, saying as he speaks through the window, that he will 'forgive her fault.'

Colombine has the alertness to see it less as a 'fault,' but rather his own inability to adapt to the facts of life; we leave her with the last words:

"I care nothing about your forgiveness; I do not need it. At home it is I who have to labour and I am sick of it. Whilst you are glued to a chair and never do anything I must set my hands to everything. Go and seek another servant to clean your pots and pans, and to do your house-work. Do you think that I, who am as fresh and lively as a fish, shall submit to having no society but yours?

I am here, and here I remain. I am sorry about your honour; but you have brought this upon yourself."

See: Pizlo p.165; see Also: Pizlo p.125; p.131.
Harlequin pretends to be a poor soldier and begs for alms. Cinthio approaches.
Harlequin raises his cap: 'Sir', he says, 'Please help a poor dumb man.' Cinthio smiles: 'You are dumb then, my friend?' 'Oh yes, sir', replies Harlequin innocently, and on Cinthio's asking him how he can be dumb when he is able to talk, he eagerly gives his explanation: 'But sir, if I were not to reply to you that would be rude; I am well brought up, I know how one should act.' In the very moment of saying this, however, he suddenly appreciates his error and quickly adds 'But you are right, sir; I made a mistake - I meant to say I am deaf.' 'Deaf!' cries Cinthio. 'That can't be!' 'Oh yes, I assure you, sir,' Harlequin answers, 'I cannot hear even a cannon go off.' 'But at any rate,' says Cinthio, 'you understand what is being said to you, especially if somebody calls you to give you some money.' 'Most certainly, sir,' is Harlequin's quick reply, and he goes on to claim that once more he had made a slight mistake; he really should have said he was blind.

A cry and a sudden leap, a flash of variegated colour - yellow, red, blue - triangles contorting in rich lamp-light; disorganised patchwork casting light from torches, camp-fires and the moon.
Witty, servile, paradoxically clever but foolish and vulnerable; and always the mask of a negro.
The significance of this mask will be returned to later, and it is one that reflects an aspect of Harlequin that makes him perhaps the strangest and most intriguing of the group.
Harlequin is a cheat, a liar, he procures for others, and tries to reap the benefits himself. He is athletic and agile, but frightened of violence.
The man who does not really wish to hurt anyone, but who cares not really if he does. He attracts situations by deceiving himself and others; amusing colourful and at times clever, he is able to adapt himself to the moments opportunity when exploitation is at hand.
From the 16th century onwards he becomes known in one context alone.
He is the romantic lover par excellence, a dancer, insolent, and gay, a passionate gallant able to play all the fashionable games, and to create a sense of intensity and import in all and every trivial escapade.

It has been observed however, that his response to woman may not have been quite as virile and positive as popularly imagined.
Instinctively, he felt that all woman were shrews, if not now, then later. If not with him, then with someone else; what after all, was the difference.
Their availability was in no way connected with him, but rather, with their own inherent weakness and willingness to hand themselves to almost anyone.
If he was refused, well, what of it? he had only to look a little taller, a little darker, change his stance, quote a certain poem, and everything would go well.
He knew this to be true, so it was unnecessary to take the trouble. No wife was faithful; it all depended on the circumstances. Fidelity was absurd, all women were alone; it was just a matter of timing. They need not frighten him, because he knew that it was they who were afraid, not of him, but of life, of change.
And that was all that Harlequin needed, that knowledge made it all so easy.

He was an short, fundamentally contemptuous of woman, in much the same way as he probably was of men.
His 'innocence' for that is what he in part believed, relinquished him of all responsibility. His 'love' for them was unreal, a tricky thing, so like wise their affections for him were of the same stuff. They seemed unhappy? Even miserable? So, what matter? He didn't believe it, and if they wished to be unhappy for months every year, well let them; it helps them to pass the time. You should not tempt a simple lad whose standard of honour is that of a child's; he would say; and the woman that pined for him would soon be pining for someone else.
It was human after all, quite a normal thing, hardly a serious matter.

Traditionally Harlequin's role was to court and marry Columbine, and their history of mutual affection, with the silent Pierrot in the background is well known to many. But so many times they are faithless to each other, so many times they become quite independent. He and she, the archetypal flirts, who are drawn together, because they are reflecting the same truth; their vulnerability to events, to whims and fancies, console each other with the recurring knowledge of all things fading away.

A further suggestion, and one with fascinating possibilities, is that his basic contempt for woman was that he deceived himself about his own nature. Time and again the scenarios display his interest in womans clothes, in fashion, and feminine things. Life and his profession forced him to womanize, it was expected, but really he was only interested in them. His ease and affability with women, was due more to their similarities than their differences. They were able to confide in him, they loved to listen to his advice on matters of love, and he was able to provide solace and opinions indefinitely, because, somehow there was nothing to lose. He dresses in women's clothes, advises Columbine on every detail of make-up and fashion, and in a Dutch scenario of the 16th century is even depicted as being the 'mother' of a child.

The popular conception of a Prince Charmant Harlequin is uncertain, because harlequin is the result of his own 'publicity campaign'.

'The thin ambiguity is the key to Harlequin's character. He could never really be himself because he was never quite certain what that self was. He was able to emphasize about the variety of rolls he played, that is in the conventional sense, because he was real in his unreality: indeed he exaggerated each self because there was no 'real self' in Harlequin.'


The undertone of homosexuality in Harlequin's character may be seen as symbolic of his being 'neither this nor that'. He has spent centuries behaving superficially, avoiding all personal assessment. At every turn he backs away from what the world calls reality, until his own identity becomes as fluid that it adapts itself to every whim and fancy.

In a sense, we are all Harlequins. In deceiving ourselves we deceive others, and it is this pattern that gave Harlequin an unreal quality.

This quality may be likened to what we all feel at times, that we do not really exist at all, except as whimsical paper-tigers in 'other people's' fantasies.

Apart from Harlequin's servility already alluded to, the slaves or negro's mask that he wears helps also to articulate the darker or sinister side of his nature, that side that cannot be relied upon, that may go willy-nilly according to unknown dictates. One very interesting observation about Harlequin which may be entered here is the amazing contrast between his image as we now respond to it, and that image from which he was born in antiquity. Today he flits about in Peter Pan fashion, a century or two ago, he had more panache, more daring, though he was still weak and vulnerable to every incident. But earlier still, in the middle ages, a number of individuals wearing patchwork garments appear to have wondered about communicating by signs and cryptic words.

"This strange figure is known to have operated in Spain and elsewhere in Europe. The same given the silent teacher who performed strange movements, incidentally, was 'zaghia', a plural 'zaghia', pronounced with guttural 'h' and European 'g' as 'zaghiai', 'Harlequins').

This is an Arabic play upon the words for "great door" and "confused speech." There can be little doubt that his appearance to the uninitiated is perpetuated in the Harlequin." (1)

Harlequin's earlier ancestors may have come from a company of Greek comedians; he may indeed be of African extraction, he may be an isolated European invention, but always he danced, jumped around, became talking of as that fellow who was "always in the air." We may leave Harlequin with the last word:

"I was very naive, not to say stupid, my masters; but with age, experience and wit came to my assistance, and today I have all that I need and none to spare." (5)

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Of all the members of the commedia dell'arte none is more terrifying and more serious than Polichinelle. We may take the bragging, illusions, and melancholies of all the 'family' with a pinch of salt; we may smile knowingly at a remark here and an action there, but it is all permissible, all half-truth. But Polichinelle; with Polichinelle we may not smile, unless in laughing we are prepared to lose our very life. Polichinelle is dangerous, he was the only man that Columbine truly feared, he came from a force, or a condition that she could not understand; Polichinelle had about him the feel of the satanic.

We are to imagine that he has just strutted across the stage, large, chumping, he carries a great stick, a brutal looking cudgel; an enormous black nose, red cheeks, and two massive humps behind and to the fore. Swaggering in cocksure motion he screams out the raucous hen-cry:

"M-R-R-R-R-R-R-R-R...., M-R-R-R-R-R-R-R...., Yes, my children! Here I am! and I, Polichinelle, with my big stick! Here I am! The little man is still alive you see. I come to amuse you, as pleasantly as I can, for certain people have told me that you are sad! Now, why should you be sad? Is not life a pleasant thing, an idle jest, a veritable farce, in which all the world is the theatre and where there is plenty to excite your laughter, if you will but take the trouble to look?

It is getting on for 4,000 years, my children, that I have been parading my humps about the surface of the globe, among men who are no whit less ferocious and savage than tigers and crocodiles; and it is getting on for 4,000 years that I have been laughing, until I have had a pain in my back. Is it not droll, is it not very droll, tell me, to see upon such a little space as that which we call the world, this ant-heap of creatures, each of which, taken separately, conceives itself to be privileged by all nature? Ask one of these atoms if it would change its skin with its neighbour. Ah no, be easy, its own skin pleases it too well. But ask if it would change its purse with that of its neighbour. 'Oh yes, if his is bigger than mine', it will answer you. And each one strives, comes, goes, amasses, stirs up, rolls, grovels, and gives more thought to tomorrow than to yesterday. You would suppose to look at them that they must live for ever. They are all mad!

.... That is the law; to make and to unmake. Behold me this fellow, who plagues his brains to discover some means of attracting the attention of some other unfortunate who do not wish to be turned aside from the road which they follow, which their fathers followed, and which their children will follow. He has had some sort of a notion to disturb his neighbours; they seize him, shut him up, or have him burnt or drowned. Is it not droll?

Ah! You would have laughed to have seen thousands of human carcasses hanging from the trees by the roadside after I know not what jests had gone through the minds of some lunatics. I never laughed so much as some fifteen centuries ago. There were whole roasting of people whose tort it was to be weaker than those who were stronger at the time. It was very amusing to see them rent and devoured by wild animals.

Ah! You're going to call me a dull fellow, a fool, and to tell me that I have not understood what I have seen. Fish! My children! It is best to laugh at things, for the children of these disembowelled wretches avenged themselves later on.

After this splendid self-introduction, we are quick to realise that he is the eternal policeman, the authority figure in any social unit. He may be relied upon in any position of power, because he will not be swayed by petty considerations. Morality - of any kind - such concepts as guilt, conscience, are for him pathetic compromises with nature's wild force, even evil dynamic.

"Nature not be compromised with, Polichinelle's nihilism confesses that of Nature's, and to maintain that combat was the only sense in life. One is not to be tempted to see in this something heroic, on the contrary, Polichinelle is not moved by heroes."

He had his weaknesses, woman and drink, on which he endlessly spent his money and constantly incurred debt. He was confident of his ability to seduce woman:

"I have no illusions about my physical attractions, but I have secret ways of charming the fair sex who are complex and strange in their whimsical infatuations. Women I like most after I have drunk my fill and beaten up a few nobodies."

The psychologist might argue that nature had left him deformed and so enraged himself upon a world that would not accept him so readily. But it is not so simple, Polichinelle has appeared all over the planet in various times, and occasionally in very 'good-looking' guise.

Polichinelle represents the man who will not and cannot accept faith as a suitable alternative to ignorance, rather like the Wandering Jew, he must re-appear at all times to wreak his vengeance upon the 'small men' of the world; upon the idolators, the artisans, the creative ones, the believers, in short - the deluded.

"But droller still, the drollest thing of all, is woman. Ah! Now there we have a strange animal! Oh, the vanity, the malice of these little beings, for whom I am still capable of committing follies! By Satan! It is good to watch men and women desiring each other, deceiving each other, hating each other. The two sexes have declared war, and yet neither can live without the other. Ask a man what he thinks of a woman. He will reply: 'They are vain and untruthful.' Ask a woman what she thinks of men. She will say: 'They are egotistical and perfidious.' Come, come! There is truth on both sides, because with gold either may be bought! Be rich and you shall be honoured, loved and flattered; you shall be followed, even young if you please; you shall find love, consideration and honours. Be poor and you shall not be worth a string of onions!"
He was able to control by force, the curbing of revolutions was his ideal trade. He had the intelligence to justify all and any of his brutality by the use and exploitation of the law.

He was ready and able to ensure submission from his listener; it was a pre-requisite for the recipient of Falstaff's 'be thankful for the enlightenment'.

"I can see from here one or two who do not share my opinion. They say please themselves; they are still young. If, like me, they had seen whole cities disappear under volcanic ashes, if their ship had been searched by the hot lava of Vesuvius ... if they had told the poorest nations of the world that they were no better than savages and brutes, they would think differently, and they would consider the matter carefully, before contradicting me.

His 'big stick' was the law, and there was an end to the matter.

This stick could take on any disguise, and at times it would seem as though he had been momentarily diverted of his thoughtlessness, by some 'good' force; but it was an illusion that would last only a moment, before Falstaff would leap joyfully from the new 'good' to demonstrate again how adept he was at disguises.

"Is my conscience wide and easy? Of course it is!

That which belongs to others belongs to me; and I have only to stoop as to fill my hat with the gold and the wealth of my neighbours. You find that wrong? It is my right of view; I have such a concept for you that I am only concerned with what they say think or say of me."

It appears that Rome fathered Poulhelmou's parents in the form of two buffoons called Noah and Bucuo, the one showed, intelligent, and aggressive, the other a basset and a thief. From Noah he inherited his long thin legs, his humped back, hooked nose and protruding stomach, from Bucuo, his reputation for the cutting phrase and the cruel tongue. The identification with the chicken comes also from this period, Poulhelmou's strutting has been likened to the hen-step, or, more recently, the goose-step. He could mock and taunt like no other of the Royal Guards, and his grotesque manner must have been almost hypnotic. It is not difficult to find equivalents in history.

"Take care! I have never been insulted with impunity, and I am never more to be feared than when I am laughing. You do not deserve that I should waste my weary words upon you, because that which should make you laugh, seems instead, to annoy you, what? Would you weep because everything goes wrong? . . . . I am laughter incarnate, laughter triumphs!"

So much the worse for those few of paper compositions which are to be overthrown by the first breath that blows, I am of wood and iron, and as old as the world!"
Scholarship has recently uncovered further details about a member of the Harlequinade 'family' hitherto a mystery. Pneobnis, Pneobis, Pnebus, or, more popularly the Pneob, has remained virtually unrecorded in the characterizations, scenarios and illustrations of the Commedia dell'Arte.

At 12 noon on April the 1st 1791, Professor Guardi of Naples was leafing through several manuscripts in an effort to gather further information about the 17th century horticulture. On Folio 17 recto of MS, Cat, no. III, was found the following reference:

"... and thereon we kept close to the passage seeking herbes of many kindes; whilst bending love, our friende Mr Pecorini cried out ejoy! ejoy! What is this! Whereupon all ranne to the spot of our friende, and did ask him to expaline himeselfe. And he did poyn to a Gallie deepe in a yecke of eyther in which we espied a sight of much curiositie. Our Astonishment was wedded with much morit whereas or strange figure came a sleeping from the bowels of the eyther crying out with a fearefulle boyes: This man yf man he was/ could not be solaced and would take no kindnesse for his hounses sake. There was much and great merry-making amongst us all, but was playne to all that the cause of our delightes was deeple melancholique.

Our merrie-making was enhanced by his garbe and his bearing and above all the manner in which he did disperson himselfe; wherby cannot be described in words, nor, rather was something to be seeme to be believed.

Before we had answer to cure sundry questions he was up and away over the hilles and dailes makinng much aquakinge sounde as would a greteley upste gadderall. We did note that he was one of a travellinge bande of minstrells come to entretaine in Napoli as is oftimes the fashion in these troubles days. But we wonderd at his maner for he dide communicat much to

us in his strange waye but yet communicatinge little or nothyng and we did eache of us returne home with a sorrie bent of minde and a gentill hearie melancholique..."
The perfect mime, silence incarnate; the mysterious 'anonymous' with which all poetic collections commence, is here exemplified in 'Signor Peeph'. Our empathy for Peeph may no further observed through the famous verse of a late Italian scenario allegedly by the hand of Peeph himself. In 1717, a pot-pourri of anecdotes was published under the title of 'Quiets and Pleasantries of the Arliquiniadis'. At its conclusion is a detailed description of incidents at a local carnival where a theatrical company were entertaining.

The conclusion of these notes will find few items more suitable than Peep's own symbolic words and actions.

"... the whole group would clamour: ring bells
and draw down upon itself the attention of the world.

"Runners of many colours, bells of many sounds, and
great leaptings and rumblings that one would think the
whole platform to collapse from such calisthenics.

Of a sudden, silence would reign as becalmed sea in the
deep of night. From the midst of the savages would rise up
the strange noise of a cockerel, and, answering following the
noise as a donkey would a carrot, there emerged from the
still thronging the strangest of the company.

Strange, for his manner, strange, for his noise, and
strangest of all for his conspicuous absence until now.
With a scratch he leaps to the forestage with thin
naked legs and a great cloak. Growing all the while, he surveys the crowd, and, of a
sudden speaks:

"The sight of a leaping Peeph brings joy.
The sight of a weeping Peeph brings pain.
For he that leaps will be the toy
Of him that weeps and goes insane.

Leap not, oh leaper, for it is not yet the time.
Thou'st leap and weep you will never end this rhyme.'"

Silence spreads heavy o'er audience and actors, and Peeph
does his great dance, leaping from feet to foot in clumsy
steeped and crooked fashion he encircles acrobats and savages
alike who, at the third round, join in with a might vocal roar
and clangour.

Hysteria governs, like a flock of insane geese in a ring of fire
they leap and jump till the platform might shake to bits. Chaos
makes way for nothing; and suddenly, Peeph is gone.

Nayhap he is in amongst the actors, nayhap, amongst the
audience; as I watch them now, ... I no longer know who is who."
There are a variety of mythologies regarding the Phoeb's relations with Death, the Fool and Old Age. All these themes are invariably described within the aura of autumnal and catacombs atmospheres.

Below: an artist's impression of a typical formula; Phoeb in the crypt of Mont St. Michel.