

For an anti-history of the modern spectacle: first notes about the *ciarlatani* theater

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ABSTRACT

Based on the limited remaining documents, a true and own show modern market was registered with the new *cerretani-ciarlatani*, the charlatans of the square, which took the role of popular therapists through several scenic features such as the *zanni*'s masks. These *ciarlatani*-shows constituted a framework to promote and explore fun expectations of a public no longer elitist, with a comic ending – mask shows. The *ciarlatani* became comedians and use comedy as an effective way to attract costumers to buy their goods, leaving a huge legacy in the history of shows in public places.

Keywords: Modern spectacle. *Ciarlatani* theater. History of theater.

ITALIAN ABSTRACT

Sulla base dei limitati documenti rimasti, c'è stata un vero e proprio mercato moderno dello spettacolo, con nuovi cerretani-ciarlatani, ciarlatani di piazza, che ha assunto il ruolo di terapeuti popolare attraverso varie risorse teatrale come le maschere di Zanni. Questi ciarlatani-spettacoli erano una struttura per fornire ed esplorare le aspettative di divertimento di un pubblico non più elitaria, con un finale comico - spettacoli anche di maschere, i ciarlatani diventano comici e servire la commedia come un mezzo efficace per attirare le vendite dei loro prodotti e lasciare un'eredità enorme nella storia dei luoghi pubblici spettacoli.

Italian Keywords: Spettacolo moderno. Teatro dei *ciarlatani*. Storia del teatro.

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Figure 1.
Charlatan in
a picture from
1616-1618,
private collection,
New York.

By outlining the history of fraudulent medicine between the Middle Age and the Renaissance, Piero Camporesi notes that “the fifteenth century was a golden age for the *cerretani*, and so was a big part of the sixteenth century; but [...] happy seasons do not last forever.” A complex network of factors changed profoundly the Italian society after the Council of Trent:

A new and more strict ecclesiastical organization that came out of the Council of Trent, reorganization of public assistance and even charity institutions kept by cities and lay communities, [...] population growth, decrease of real wages and the corresponding increase in the cost of living, a consequence of revolution in prices, put on the European stage new amounts of poor people [...]. The new ones, [...] very often coming from the middle class, the petty bourgeoisie and artisans, pushed and driven to the streets becoming vagrants of hunger and poverty, [...] suffocated and thrown to crisis due to beggary that we could define as 'classic' (CAMPORESÌ, 1973, pp. XCII-XCVI).

Along with cultural and social change, there is a counterpoint to a terminology mutation, which, before, tended to confuse the simulator beggar (*cerretani*) with those who offer dubious remedies for all sorts of diseases (*ciurmatore*, *ciarlatano*); later on, the progressive was established from the *ciarlatano* word – of which *cerretano* will be destined to become a synonymous with a subordinate function – to define anyone who proposes to the widest public, on the streets or squares, spectacular attractions and medicines of dubious legality:

It seems likely that, in the 15th century, there was a distinction between *cerretano* (simulator) and *ciurmatore* (*ciarlatano*); [...] In, *Speculum* [1485 A.D.] the *cerretanus* terminology was always used, except on chapter V [...] in which appears [...] *ciarlatanus*, as a synonym of the frequent word [...]. Therefore, it is reasonable to infer that both terms began to be uniformized

and merged at the same meaning: the process had to be really fast, since some decades later they appeared reversed in their meaning. Actually, Machiavel adopts *ceretano* meaning *ciarlatano* (charlatan) [...]. While change in historical and social conditions is dying in the consciousness of speakers regarding the former meaning attached to this “unlikely” beggary, the old term *ceretano* becomes commonly used to indicate its most recent function and effectively turns into an alternative synonym (although of equal value) of the word *ciarlatano*³ (CAMPORESI, 1973, p. CXIV-CXV).

3.
Idem, p. CXIV-CXV.

This set of phenomena is developed on the Italian peninsula along a chronological arch that goes from the beginning of the 16th century, up to the period immediately after the Council of Trent. Aproximately twenty years after the last one, Tommaso Garzoni, in the book *Universal Square of all the professions of the world* (1585), homologates without any reservation *ceretani* and *ciumatori* (impostors), however, at the same time, he offers a surprisingly new definition. It is no longer about people who are specialists in various forms of religious alms and fraudulent medicines, but about “creators of spectacles”:

[...] whoever wants to tell in detail about all the ways that the ceretani adopt to make their “sale,” ends up doing diverse things. Just to talk about some of them, at a part of the square, you see our gallant Fortunato Frittata [...] entertaining the group every night [...]; faking short stories, finding stories; forming dialogues; [...] singing impromptu; frowning together; making peace; laughing out loud; alternating several forms; [...] and, finally, putting out their recipients to be sold, wishing to convince with their most gentle lines.[...] among so many stories, he sketches a popular one in the correct Tuscan and while he tells it, a prostitute rises on the stage, as Mr. Graziano whinnies like a donkey puppet: the people surrounds him and stay put to see and hear him, [...] and at this point, the prostitute prepares a circle on the stage and next, she gets on her knees and hands to catch a ring outside the circle and then, by throwing her body behind, she grabs a coin of two crossed swords. She spreads herself around, awaking a strange desire on people through her arbitrary lasciviousness [...]. Now, Zan della Vigna has to come to the front for his performance [...], by making people laugh while watching monkeys’ and other baboons’ gestures [...]. Among many others, Master Paolo di Arezzo appears in the square with a long, stretched large standard, where you see Saint Paul on one side with a sword in hand, and on the other side, there is a pile of snakes whistling, almost biting, like a painting, whoever look at them (GARZONI, 1991, pp. 15-18).

The wide and very detailed painting of a 16th-century ideal square described by Garzoni illustrates a *cerretani-cimadori* world, where there is almost no more room for the now anachronistic imitators of the *boccagiano* Monk Cipolla. The new protagonists of market places are driven by a common goal: “to make their trade,” managing to sell miraculous medicines (such as those from Malta land, an antidote for viper poison) in large quantities of recipients (*bussoli*). However, what impresses the observer the most is the ghostly matrix of performances and attractions staged for self-publicizing purposes by these particular “creators of spectacles:” fable tellers, singing and music improvisers, storytelling, comical monologue and dialogue performances, acrobatic virtuosity, short theatrical scenes, illusionism and sleight of hand games, female exhibitions mixed with contortion movements and postures elaborated to stimulate spectators’ lasciviousness, in addition to processional movements and complete parades with flags embellished with images of impressive special effects.

All manufactured in bright colors of an endless festival of fixed characters and acknowledged popular masks: the “handsome” Fortunato, Zan Frittata, puppets and dolls, Dr. Graziano, several women named *soubrettes*, Zan della Vigna etc. The witness’ view remains almost indifferent to the “therapeutic” elimination tendency (so obvious according to Garzoni, mainly due to captious and fraudulent characteristics), which must have a unique purpose for all these activities. Instead, the result is to be almost hypnotized by the fascinating kaleidoscope of performances placed on the work of similar individuals who, on one hand, pretended to have dubious or nonexistent medical abilities and, on the other hand, are considered for all purposes genuine and valid “creators of spectacles.”

In this regard, it is very significant that the author of the square, trying to create a true and own universal encyclopedia of contemporary occupations, ends up dividing the new show specialists into three voices and distinct items of their works: old and modern playwrights, along with professional actors/authors (such as Adriano Valerini and Isabella Andreini), in the pseudoclassic “histrion” category; all those who use games of illusion and sleight of hand are in the infamous circle of “magicians/wizards” and “sorcerers;” a confused mass of self-called healers, who offer all kinds of performances in open spaces on market

days, within a specific class of “creator of spectacles” (to be understood as real heirs of “cerretanism” transported to the *ciarlanteria*/charlatanism).

The obvious precariousness of the category system adopted by Garzoni constituted a first temporary response to a cultural and anthropological change of that period. On one hand, a diffuse sensibility that was configured, which dissolved impulses that led masses to practice almost by conditioning reflex a Christian piety in which the begging scope was considered sacred, and any form of religious alms – even fraudulent – could be successful if combined with the superstitious beliefs lived without reservation. On the other hand, from the mid-16th century, there was a progressive threat of a true and own show modern market: conceived and structured to promote and explore fun expectations of an audience no longer elitist, but also potentially tending to incorporate the immensity of social strata. The eloquent signs of the ultimate phenomenon consists in the creation of the first “fraternal company” of professional actors (Pádua in 1545), and the first testimonies (those contained in the *Rime burlesque* by Anton Francesco Grazzini, a little later in the middle of the century); specifications are offered to paying viewers based on the presence of masks and use of mimic-verbal improvisation techniques. Summing up: from these set of factors, the *Commedia dell'Arte* textbook will be created.

These two changes – which are held in a background scenario designed and conditioned by the counterpoint between the dawn of the Protestant Reformation (1517), and noon of the Catholic Counter-Reformation (1563) – contain within their interior a phenomenon that in some way is related to the religious dimension of culture: it proposes a comic end for them – mask shows, what appears to be an enigmatic “return of the repressed” in the Italian panorama of the period. While the new actors -authors of Fraternal *misterie* companies (professionals) are inventing a “comedy of *zanni*” that excludes the believable of Renaissance characters (replacing it with the surreal verve of a demonic mask recognized by the non-Christian imagination of the Middle Ages), the new *cerretani-ciarlatani*, charlatans of the square, take on the role of popular therapists who use the *zanni*, Pantalones, Dottores, Captains etc. to establish – through figures impregnated by demonic auras – a tempting and playful dialogue with their audience.



8. Istrioni e ciarlatani in Piazza San Marco, Venezia.

Figure 2.
 Histrions and ciarlatani in
 San Marco square, Venice.

In the first case, guidelines and objectives of the operation must be marked by clear intent (not the ones that made it lay) merely aesthetic of fun. In the second one – as exemplary demonstrated, among others, performing techniques of *serpentari* (man of the snakes), of Saint Paul – it is clear that *ciarlataneschi* spectators are placed with malice on the ridge that separates them and join the confusion of disinterested comic-artistic use of the mask, in addition to a competent exploration of the sacred aura also surrounding it: their shamanic model ancient values.



Figure 3.
 Ciarlatano di sao Paolo
 with snakes.

This complex network of phenomena is the basis of difficulties that Tommaso Garzoni confront when he pretends to develop an exhaustive panorama about all those who make show arts “their jobs” in 1585, and that puts the *cerretani-ciurmadori* on the bright focal point of the transforming world. Sixty-five years later, on the contrary, the Jesuit Domenico Ottonelli, engaging in the same matter, could create a register clear and simple as well (although quite surprising, considering the criteria that guide its classificatory logic):

[...] I make a distinction of all reciters in two orders: one regards those who are commonly called comedians, and these make their performances inside residences, in rooms, living rooms or places assigned. The other way regards those who call themselves *ciarlatani*/charlatans. They present their entertainments and games/presentations on public places, streets or passage squares; [...] reciters/narrators [...] are also named participants of the “gentlemen of the Academy,” and others who sometimes perform some dilettante actions in the theater; [...] The *ciarlatani* become comedians and use comedy as an effective way to attract people to the stage, where they make a space to sell their goods and *bus-solotti* (OTTONELLI, 1652, p. 2).

Therefore, for Ottonelli, it should be obvious for anyone that there are three specifications for theater: that one (of Renaissance origin, and now considered subordinate) of dilettantes (amateurs) primarily practiced in academies and aristocratic circles; that one to which professional actors give life gathered in active companies in enclosed spaces normally used for theater; that one of the *ciarlatani* who perform their entertainments and games/representations in squares, using “comedy as an effective way to attract people to the stage.” As he considered performances of dilettantes as a mere accessory sub-phenomenon, the Jesuit assigned equal dignity and importance to the *commediantes* and the *ciarlatani*. Then, he concerned about specifying that the first distinctive trait of *ciarlatanesca*/charlatanistic theater, is given by proliferation – in itself – of an infinite number of “wonderful games/ performances” designed or used “to attract.” These include, above all, the sort of wide number of sketches displayed by *ciarlatani* with solitary or in-pair masks, which comical effect – according to Ottonelli – must be classified into four items: “1– [...] Ridiculous satire; 2– Facetious; 3– Comical and 4– Obscene” (OTTONELLI, 1652, p. 442). Therefore, it constitutes a major component of the almost endless proliferation of numbers of attractions thus exemplified:

[...] walking or dancing on a rope; Hercules' strength demonstration; flip performance; flying from one place to another with a tightrope; throwing guns in different ways; walking with hands and feet up; making an animal dance and jump, or even a woman dressed as a man; fooling people's eyes with various hand tricks; raising a huge weight just using the hair strength; hurting some part of the body, and then healing it (OTTONELLI, 1652, p. 440).

Within a similar set of short performances, assuming a role absolutely important with truths and their own complex representations fed by sophisticated specialized languages of the scene, we can mention: shadow theater, puppets, dolls, scenarios where there is action – with musical accompaniment – small automatic machines, another “half arm” that moves “because of [...] hidden counterweights,” moving on the stage that hosts them through “some wood with carving in the form of channels, and that serve as streets” (OTTONELLI, 1652, p. 466). However, it seems to be specially both common and obvious the presence of real and own mask comedies based on improvisation, which Ottonelli struggles to specify in a large page whether the peculiar trade relation functionality of “miraculous medicines” proposed by the *ciarlatani*, or all factors that are useful to show how spectacles on the squares must be considered verifiable almost without reserve regarding those created by the renowned comic *dell'Arte* in their “rooms”:

[...] after closing the boxes and lifting the pillars, the stage turns instead to the scene, each *ciarlatano* into a comedian, and a dramatic recitation begins where the use of the comic will entertain the audience for about two hours with party and laughter (OTTONELLI, 1652, p. 456).

Ottonelli's testimony certifies, on one hand, at every possible doubt that – in the middle of the 17th century – a key component, perhaps the most popular and widespread of the new show civilization, which was already stable in most places of Italy (and not deprived of similar demonstrations in other European countries), consists of a set of performances and representations offered to viewers in public squares, promoted and managed (sometimes by themselves, sometimes with sort of hired actors) within the complex whole and infamous microcosm of *ciarlataneria/charlatanism*.

In addition, at the peak of the period indicated, this widespread theatricality – and, according to the prevailing opinion, worthy alone of a haughty silence or depreciative convictions – at least in our Italian peninsula or on French soil, had the first authors capable of transmitting signifi-

cant printed testimonies of such occupation: Giulio Cesare Croce (1550–1509), for example; or the bad writers of that play-writing *littérature* which, from the second decade of the 17th century on, registered their mark in Paris, through *ciarlataneschi* dialogues between Tabarin and Mondor masks. This is not only about a wide range a phenomenon, but also destined to last until the middle of the subsequent century, culminating – in the French side – with the complex and rich history of the *Théâtres de la Foire* (which scope is to determine the history of a truly and unique alternative spectacle business that was “authorized”), and producing – by the Italian side, where this type of alternative phenomenology does not exist – still non significant manifestations. To mention as an example, there is the singular *ciarlatanesca/* charlatanistic experience of Buonafede Vitali (self-called anonymous): considered and recognized by Goldoni in 1733. More than a respectable doctor, he was a creator, used masks in his performances and was appreciated for his special theatricality to which the young aspiring playwright assigned useful dialogues, either as an apprentice or as having the role of “company’s poet” (TESSARI, 2013, p. 38).



Figure 4.
Théâtre de la Foire,
Saint Laurent,
watercolor from
1786, Paris.

Considering this broad field of the history of the show, which is an in-depth research object, only with respect to the origin and development of the Théâtre de la Foire, there is still no proper study that can retrieve a general satisfactory exegetical panorama (although exhausting). Since there is no interpretive proposal able to enlighten the meanings and functions – particularly regarding the suggestive and enigmatic relationship between the misconception and misunderstanding said to be therapeutic of the multiple *ciarlatanesche* activities – when in doubt, I use performances and comedy as indispensable tools gathered and claimed as playfully “calming,” and that folk-religious imagination that

refers to both masks and the many late rituals – pseudo-xamanic – typical of the *ciarlatani* ceremonies.

The same origin of certain practices regarding the after Renaissance *montambanchi* doctors (who perform on a stage) remain a mystery, and above all, it remains obscure important axes in the process that led them to inseparably merge to the practice of medicine among the lower classes and with a lively and spectacular attraction cloud is – above all – with performing practices of broad similarities with those of the *Commedia dell'Arte*. If phenomenology of terminological change from *cerretano* up to *ciarlatano* becomes satisfactorily clarified, it still remains the vague chronological range, between which we should verify the concrete historical events that could have changed it: a period of time starting at the end of the 15th century, although remaining impossible to determine with precision the exact moment of the culmination.

Based on the limited remaining documents, we can be sure that, in 1585, *ciarlatani* performances were an obvious fact widespread in the squares of Italy. Much more difficult is to guess a plausible date for the first manifest in such ways to be compared with those that will become a specific heritage after 1545, of the new professional actors. The most correct information seems to indicate that the *ciarlatani* performance concerns the last two decades of the 16th century, if we limit our analysis to the attractions described by Garzoni. To sum up, there is no comedy of masks, over stage platforms outdoors before.

However, despite of the doubts about this potential conviction, certain verses written by Anton Francesco Grazzini remain around the half of the century. His *Rime Burlesche* – in at least two cases – seems to regret with anger the favors granted by the Florentine youth naming (and also portray as fraudulent and “obscene”) the activities of the *cerretani* and *ciurmadori*, and intends to invite the public of the last one mentioned to attend the new *commedia*, whose protagonists are “Zanni masked actors:” “[...] certain is to retell his fatigue,/and this *cerretano* missed/fake liar and full of fraud and deceit” (GRAZZII, 1882, p. 48). However, how would it be possible for Lasca to propose a parallel confrontation between professional comedians and *cerretano-ciarlatani*, if the last had not offered their own audience the shows somehow similar and comparable to those of a Fraternal Company (and, perhaps, centered around the same masked figures)?

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