

National Theatre Collection

One Man, Two Guvnors – Rehearsal Insights

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About

This pack supports the National Theatre's production of *One Man, Two Guvnors*, directed by Nicholas Hytner, which opened on 24th May 2011 at the National's Lyttelton Theatre in London.

These materials were prepared during rehearsals by staff director Adam Penford. They provide background context to the play and author, as well as introducing the process of creating, rehearsing and staging this production.

Carlo Goldoni

Carlo Goldoni

Carlo Goldoni was born in 1707 into a middle-class family in Venice. As a child, he was fascinated by theatre, playing with puppets and writing his first play at the age of twelve. His father attempted to distract him from a dishonourable career in the theatre by sending him away to study at various schools, but each time Goldoni either ran away or got expelled. During one of these incidents, he joined a company of touring actors and travelled back to Venice, the adventures he experienced on this journey solidified his love of theatrical life.



Eventually, in 1731, he graduated from law school and started practising in Padua. The lure of the theatre was too strong however, and the following year he was back in Venice, writing. Goldoni's path to stardom was not smooth; his first play, a tragedy called *Amalasunta* [1733], was a flop. He threw the manuscript in the fire, and wrote a tragicomedy, *Belisario* [1734], the success of which launched his career.

Over the next ten years, Goldoni took up a succession of resident dramatist roles at various large theatres and opera houses, writing opera librettos and tragic works, before discovering comedy was his ideal form. His first major comedy, *L'uomo di mondo* (*The Man of the World*), premiered in 1738 and he followed it with a succession of hits, including, in 1746, *Il Servitore di Due Padroni* (*The Servant of Two Masters*). The play was written for a famous harlequin called Antonio Sacchi, (whose stage name, Truffaldino, is the servant's name in the play) and based on an existing old plot. In 1748, Goldoni joined Girolamo Medebac's

Carlo Goldoni

company, who were resident at the Sant'Angelo theatre in Venice. Medebac was a famous theatrical manager who had assembled a cast of eminent actors, and Goldoni wrote a series of plays, experimenting with form and honing his skills. It was whilst he was installed with this company that Goldoni achieved his now infamous challenge of writing sixteen comedies in two seasons; a play a week. Goldoni's relationship with Medebac deteriorated over rows about royalties, and in 1753 he defected to the Vendramin family at the rival Teatro San Luca, where he stayed until 1762.

These years were dogged by a rivalry with fellow playwright, Carlo Gozzi [1720-1806], which played out publicly in the press and divided Venetian theatre audiences. Gozzi felt Goldoni was destroying the traditions of Commedia dell'arte and making the form banal; Goldoni, in turn, believed Gozzi's work to be too fantastical and therefore artificial. By 1762, Goldoni was tired of the dispute and accepted an invitation to direct Italian plays at the French court of Louis XV [1710-1774]. After his contract ended, he stayed at court to teach Italian to the royal family, and was subsequently granted a pension for life. Unfortunately, the French Revolution [1789-1799], interrupted these payments and Goldoni lived out the rest of his life in poverty. He died in 1793, having never returned to Venice.

Goldoni lived a colourful life, he was often involved in disputes over money and women, and many of his experiences ended up in his plays. His memoirs, published in 1787, are full of amusing anecdotes, although many have questioned the accuracy of some of these adventures, suspecting he preferred a good story over the truth. He wrote 200 plays, including 150 comedies, redefining Italian theatre.

Commedia dell'Arte

Commedia dell'Arte

Commedia dell'arte is shortened from 'commedia dell'arte all'improvviso', meaning 'comedy through the art/craft of improvisation', but also translates as 'comedy of the guild'; Europe's first professional theatre. Previously, theatre had been provided by amateur academics, writing and performing their own plays (known as 'commedia erudite'; 'learned comedy'). Commedia originated in Italy in the mid-16th century with companies consisting of ten or so touring players, often playing improvised outdoor venues. The more prestigious companies had patrons amongst the nobility and the rest relied on carnival organisers hiring their services, or audiences tipping them. The actors specialised in playing particular stock characters and wore masks depicting these personalities. Unlike British theatre, where Shakespeare's heroines were being played by young male actors, commedia used actresses; attempts by the church to ban actresses for their corruptive influences never succeeded.

There were no written scripts in commedia; companies improvised their shows along predetermined plot scenarios, knowing the rough structure of the narrative. Each actor knew where their character's story began and concluded, and therefore the various plot-points they needed to hit in order to complete their character's journey. They memorised speeches, songs, poems and sections of dialogue so they could recall them on stage as necessary. Commedia also had roots in the art of touring jongleurs, wandering entertainers, who performed a mix of acrobatics, songs and audience interaction (not dissimilar from the likes of contemporary street performers in Covent Garden). From jongleurs, commedia inherited lazzi, comic verbal or physical set pieces, which they studied and honed, incorporating them into the action when applicable.

Goldoni's earliest writings for the theatre consisted of sections of dialogue for the players to improvise with, but he soon recognised that in order to become a playwright like the European writers he admired

Commedia dell'Arte

such as Moliere [1622-1673], then he needed total control over the whole play. He began writing full scripts and banned masks which he felt were an unnecessary barrier between performer and audience, his changes met with resistance from the actors who resented handing control of their art over to a new party. Commedia as a form was 200 years old however, and becoming stale; Goldoni determined to explore real Italian life onstage, and the audiences responded. His plays often had a satirical edge, commenting on contemporary issues and relationships, and he fairly portrayed people from different classes, condemning the immoral whether they were poor or rich.

Background

One Man, Two Guvnors - Background

One Man, Two Guvnors is an adaptation of *The Servant of Two Masters*. Richard Bean, the playwright, has altered the names of characters, relocated the geographical setting, and changed various plotting points, but the play is still recognisably based upon Goldoni's original. Richard and the director, Nick Hytner, set out to find a contemporary equivalent for Goldoni's play. This involved two objectives: firstly, to locate an updated equivalent of 1740s Florence, which became 1960s Brighton [see Richard's interview on page 13]; and secondly, to find a British style of theatre comparable to commedia through which to tell the story. The production incorporates elements of variety, music hall, pantomime, stand-up comedy, and end-of-the-pier shows; all of which, in varying degrees, owe something to the genre of commedia.

1963, Brighton

Not only did relocating the play to 1963 in Brighton allow the show's creators to explore the popular entertainment which would have been on offer in a British seaside town, it also fulfilled a dramatic function. *The Servant of Two Masters* was located in Florence, with the lovers fleeing from Turin; Richard Bean was able to designate that his lovers fled from London to Brighton. This allowed him to involve the characters in the criminal underworld of the East End (the Kray twins were at the height of their fame in the 1960s) and therefore explain why the characters carry weapons (in 1740s, Italy, most men would carry swords) which is essential to the plot.

Improvisation

Commedia has its origins in improvisation and this has been retained in *One Man, Two Guvnors* when the central character, Francis, interacts with the audience. By getting audience members on to stage to help him move the trunk, or asking them for suggestions on where he should take Dolly on their first date, the production is combining traditional commedia with twentieth century comedy. In the tradition of stand-up comedians, James Corden, the actor playing Francis, has several stock

Background

responses written by Richard Bean and himself which cover most eventualities, but often James improvises in the moment and this allows the play to feel fresh like commedia would have done.



Music, Song and Dance

Traditional commedia would include song and dance. The innamorati (lovers) would frequently sing duets, they memorised popular contemporary songs, and some characters would play instruments, such as the guitar. Many performers had honed the popular form of madrigali, a specific genre of song with close chromatics and difficult harmonies. *One Man, Two Guvnors* makes similar use of music by having a band in the auditorium that play as the audience enter before the production and during the interval. They take the form of a 1960s band, similar to the Beatles, and take to the stage between scenes. At various points, the actors themselves come on stage during these numbers and play a speciality act such as the car horns, the xylophone, or ukulele. This deliberately evokes the era of variety and music hall which was popular in the early half of the twentieth century, particularly in seaside towns such as Brighton where *One Man, Two Guvnors* is located.

Background

Themes

Richard Bean, after Goldoni, has retained the themes which were popular with commedia audiences in the 18th century. Plot lines included jealousy, old age, love and adultery, popular themes that still drive most television soap operas. These themselves originated in ancient Greek theatre and were passed on via the Romans and Renaissance to the present day. Scattered amongst the plotlines of commedia plays were old gags and punch lines, as well as contemporary jokes and satire. Richard Bean has incorporated a combination of jokes, some of which are reminiscent of the gags of end-of-the-pier stand-ups and some which are politically motivated. (As the play is set in the 1960s, he also plays with historification - jokes built around the dramatic irony of the audience being more knowledgeable than the characters – for example, Dolly's prediction in Act Two that one day there will be a liberal woman prime minister.)

Lazzi - Comic Set Pieces

Lazzi - Comic Set Pieces

Derived from the Italian 'lazzo', meaning 'joke', lazzi is a comic set piece which has been handed down through generations of commedia improvisations. Traditionally, the Harlequin character (played by James Corden in *One Man, Two Guvnors*) would have over 100 lazzi at his disposal. All the characters would recognise the lazzi so as soon as the Harlequin decided to perform one, they would immediately recognise the role they had to play in the improvisation. The examples of traditional lazzi below wouldn't look out of place in a Charlie Chaplin film, an episode of *Fawlty Towers*, or a pantomime.

Examples of Traditional Lazzi

Running-Around-The-Balcony Lazzo

Arlecchino, pursued, or to prove his identity as Arlecchino, leaps from the stage to the first spectator box and runs around the railing or the three sets of balconies.

Lazzo of unspilled Wine

Startled, Arlecchino, holding a full glass of wine, executes a complete backward somersault without spilling the wine.

Slapping Lazzo

A Zanni, with either his hands bound or holding plates of food, slaps another character in the face with his foot.

Innocent Bystander Lazzo

Arlecchino and Pedrolino meet each other face-to-face and are armed to the teeth. They heap abuse on each other, relying on others to hold them back physically. Finally, when the Captain seeks to separate them, they strike out at each other with the Captain receiving most of the blows.

Lazzi - Comic Set Pieces



Goldoni incorporated several lazzi in *The Servant of Two Masters* including the scene where Truffaldino uses bread to seal his master's letter which he has wrongly opened. It is believed this was a lazzi that the well-known actor, Antonio Sacchi, who originated the role, was famous for performing. In *One Man, Two Guvnors*, this lazzi has been altered to a set piece about Francis accidentally eating a letter.

Literal translation from Italian of Goldoni's *The Servant of Two Masters*

Truffaldino: I am pleased we're not going. I wanna see how this all pans out. I wanna test my abilities, serving these two masters. This letter, which is going to my other master, I don't wanna deliver it open like this. I'll try to fold it shut again. (He tries different ways of folding it, badly). Now I have to seal it. If only I knew how! I saw my Nan seal them with a bit of chewed-up bread. I'm gonna try it. (he pulls out a tiny piece of bread from his pocket). I feel bad using up this dear piece of bread; oh well, must be done (he chews on a little piece of the bread to soften it but swallows it involuntarily). Oh bloody hell! it's gone down. Now I have to take another bite (he does the same and swallows it). There is no way, this is just against nature. I'll try again (he chews, as before. His impulse is to swallow it but he stops, with great effort, and manages to pull it out of his mouth). Oh, here we go. I'll seal the letter (he seals it with the bread). I think it's come out pretty well. I'm just amazing!

Lazzi - Comic Set Pieces

The same scene in Richard Bean's *One Man, Two Guvnors*

(Enter Francis. Francis starts going through the letters of which there are four in all, two letters, and two authorisations.)

Francis: Authorisation letter. Let's put that in this pocket. Rachel Crabbe. Let's put that in this pocket for now. I'm good at this. I could work for the Post Office. That'd be three jobs. Authorisation. That goes in the authorisations pocket. Stanley Stubbers. *(Puts it in his mouth. Chews a little. Mumbling)* Don't really need these authorisation letters any more do I? *(He puts the authorisations in the same pocket as the Rachel letter.)*

So this pocket is now for Stanley Stubbers' letters. Good. What are these then? I'm getting confused now. Two authorisation letters. If there's two letters they definitely need their own pocket. What's this? Stanley Stubbers. That's the one that tasted quite good.

(Puts it in his mouth. Chews a little more.)

Mm.

(He takes a proper bite.)

Not bad for paper. Bit dry. Could do with a bit more ink.

(Really eats the letter.)

Other lazzi in *One Man, Two Guvnors* includes the trunk-carrying; Francis' fight with himself; the waiter opening the wine with a cork screw; and various food and drink related activities in the dinner scene (Act One, Scene Four).

Characters

Characters

Richard Bean has changed the names of Goldoni's characters, but he has predominantly retained the function of the character from the original source material. Commedia dell'arte characters were usually stock characters, often known by the same name (or at the most, a handful of names), because they always fulfilled the same purpose in the drama and exhibited the same characteristics.

Goldoni himself had adapted the traditional commedia characters for his own dramatic purposes (for example, Florindo – called Stanley Stubbers in *One Man, Two Guvvners* – is actually an amalgamation of two commedia characters: Il Capitano and Innamorati). Richard has striven to find a 1960s equivalent of Goldoni's original personalities.

Characters Table (main characters)

Truffaldino / Harlequin or zanni Tricky servant	Francis Henshall (James Corden) An Essex chancer, juggling two masters
Pantalone / Pantaloon Old, rich man, motivated by money	Charlie Clench (Fred Ridgeway) Gangster, tight with money
Brighella An upbeat, enterprising servant	Lloyd Boateng (Trevor Laird) Black ex-con, now runs a pub
Florindo / Il Capitano Blaggart, slightly cowardly	Stanley Stubbers (Oliver Chris) Public school nitwit
Smeraldina / Columbina Intelligent servant	Dolly (Suzie Toase) Feminist secretary
Dr Lombardi / Il Dottore (Doctor) Old academic	Harry Dangle (Martyn Ellis) Latin-speaking solicitor to the Clenches

Rehearsal Diary

Rehearsal Diary

Day One

Rehearsals traditionally begin with a 'meet and greet' session. Representatives from all departments at the theatre stand in a circle and introduce themselves to the new cast and creative team one-by-one. At the NT, this can take quite a while as there are so many departments - from marketing to armoury to digital media - the circle only just fits into the cavernous Rehearsal Room Two. After introductions, Nick explains his vision for the production; why he decided to direct the play, a brief history of commedia dell'arte, the period and location he's setting the play in. Then everyone crowds around the model box [a scale model of the set], and the designer, Mark Thompson, and Nick talk through the design scene by scene. The design is very handsome and as the flats [flat pieces of scenery] are manually slid and flown in and out, swiftly transforming locations, the excitement in the room grows. After lunch, only the cast and creative team remain for the first read-through of the play around tables. Some actors instinctively really perform at read-throughs, whilst others give a softer and less-acted reading; either way, there is lots of laughter, a promising sign for a comedy!



Rehearsal Diary

Weeks One and Two

Nick approaches each scene of the play in the same way. Firstly, the actors read through a scene aloud around tables, and then everyone discusses its content. As this is a new play, Nick is very keen to ensure that the plot is clear and logical. Writer, Richard Bean, is in rehearsals all the time during these early weeks and small rewrites occur constantly. After reading the scene, the actors try putting it on its feet. Nick is very hands-on and constantly jumps up to make suggestions of how actors could speak a particular line, or when and where they should move. There is a mark-up of the stage stuck to the floor, with lines designating where the flats and front cloth will be, to allow the actors to get used to the space. We also have rehearsal doors, furniture and props; the stage management team are on hand to grab anything we might need. Nick works through each scene in this way during the first two weeks, running the whole scene through once or twice when we get to the end. Whilst Nick is staging the scenes, the associate director, Cal McCrystal, a comedy specialist, is concentrating on rehearsing the comic set pieces. This includes working closely with James Corden on devising material for the trunk lazzi and staging the very physical and demanding dinner scene, which provides the climax of act one.

Whilst these rehearsals are taking place in the main rehearsal room, the production machinery of the NT is grinding into motion. Actors are being grabbed when they're not being used to attend rehearsal calls in singing, dance, spoken voice, comic set pieces and stage fighting. Some of the actors, particularly James Corden, are required by the marketing and press departments to film segments for video trailers and give press interviews, either on the phone or in person. Mark Thompson also begins the process of designing costumes, starting with 'costume chats' with each member of the cast to discuss their ideas of how the character should look. Mark and the Costume Supervisor, Poppy, have photographs and newspaper cuttings of people in the 1960s as a starting point.

Rehearsal Diary

Weeks Four and Five

Once Nick has worked through each scene in the play in detail, he starts back on scene one again, adding another layer of detail to the performances and the staging. Sometimes decisions made in later scenes have a knock-on effect to the logic of earlier scenes and changes are made. Richard Bean starts delivering larger rewrites and we all abandon our original scripts, which are now full of crossed-out lines and hand-written additions, in favour of an updated version. A timeline appears along the back wall of the rehearsal room listing the events – both onstage and off - that happen during the twelve hours that is the play is set in. Nick also encourages all the actors to think about key things that occur in their characters' lives before the timeframe of the play starts [their 'back-story']; how old they are, where they were born, how long have they known the other characters in the play and how did they meet. We spend an afternoon in rehearsal 'hot-seating' where Nick interviews the actors in character about how they feel about the other characters in the play and the events that occur. This leads to improvisations of the key events; such as the moment Alan asked Charlie for his daughter Pauline's hand in marriage; and Francis and Rachel's car journey to Brighton. With a cast of comedy actors, the improvisations are very funny.

Week 6

During our last week of rehearsals, the four-piece band joins the cast in the rehearsal room so we can hone the scene changes and practise the songs. All this is designed to make the transition into the technical rehearsal in the theatre as smooth as possible. The rehearsal props, furniture and bits of costume are gradually replaced by the real things [they're called 'actuals']. Most importantly, real food for the dinner scene is tested. We have two full run-throughs of the show which audiences are invited to attend and Rehearsal Room Two is full to the seams with 100 A-Level students squeezed in. We use their reaction to gauge when a scene is too long, when the plot isn't clear and when the action isn't funny enough. New sets of rewrites and cuts are introduced after each run.

Rehearsal Diary

Technical Rehearsal

The ‘tech’ proves to be a relatively smooth process, especially when considering the complexity of the show’s design; a live band, sliding flats, flying flats, trapdoors, automation (which transports the microphones from substage to stage level). Over three days, we work through the whole play; often running complicated sequences (such as scene changes) several times. Paul Arditti, the sound designer, has a complicated job as he has to mix the band and singers for each musical number in order to get an attractive aural balance, as well as providing direct sound effects.



There are some complications such as the automation system, which makes a loud whirling noise which distracts from the dialogue when the mics are moved at the end and beginnings of scenes. It is decided in previews to only cue the automation after the dialogue has finished, and Grant Olding, the composer, has to extend the music to allow the mics time to travel before the singer is due to begin. Another major issue is the two doors, located on either side of the stage. These are used in most scenes and the action requires a lot of them. (Farces, or plays with farcical elements, are notorious for their reliance on doors). In different

Rehearsal Diary

scenes they have to open in a different directions (denoting external locations where doors open inwards, and internal rooms where doors open outwards), they are frequently slammed and crashed against by actors, must stay firmly shut once closed, but not be so heavy that the cast has trouble operating them. At several times during the tech the doors don't go according to plan.

Eventually, the decision is made to give the actors a tech session off (3 hours) in order to allow the production team to fit new lighter, but sturdier, doors, with more reliable catches. At the end of the tech, there are two dress rehearsals which go very well; although the decision is taken to change some sections of action and the cast have to implement changes in front of an audience during the first preview.

Previews

The first preview goes very smoothly and the audience response borders on hysterical. Rehearsals continue during the daytime throughout previews: scene changes are sharpened, alternative punch lines are tested and discarded, blocking is changed and cuts are made. The overall purpose, as it has been throughout the process, is to make the story as clear and funny as possible

