

‘L’essència del teatre són l’Arlequí i la Colombina’: The *commedia dell’arte* in the Work of Joan Brossa

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The *commedia dell’arte* first emerged in Renaissance Italy. It was a comic genre, performed by itinerant troupes, who travelled the country playing to all kinds of audiences. Some of its servant characters became household names, and remain so today. In its original form, the *commedia* was earthy, sometimes coarse, and irreverent, mocking authority figures. Although the *commedia* originated in Italy, from the late sixteenth century onwards itinerant Italian troupes took their plays to other European countries, particularly France. In due course, the genre was transformed, and by the mid-nineteenth century it was often viewed as an antidote to bourgeois culture and to high art. It came to epitomise popular culture as practitioners tried to reconnect to ancient roots and discard the realist/ naturalist approach in favour of a tradition that for them symbolised the universal essence of theatre.

Of all his Catalan contemporaries it is Joan Brossa (1919-98) who has been most influenced by the *commedia dell’arte* and who has best understood its wide-ranging dramatic possibilities. Three of its stock characters (Harlequin, Columbine and Pierrot) form part of several of his full-length plays, but it is his large collection of shorter pieces where its appearance is most frequent: *Accions espectacle* from *Postteatre* (written between 1946 and 1962), *Fregolisme o monòlegs de transformació* (1965-66), *Strip-tease i teatre irregular* (1966-67) and even *Accions musicals* (1962-78). However, the *commedia dell’arte* appears not only in his plays but also in his poetry, prose and visual art, while the script of a film that contains *commedia* characters is based on Brossa’s work. This article examines selected manifestations of *commedia* in Brossa and suggests how it elucidates key characteristics of his œuvre.

In some of Brossa’s poems and plays the characters fulfil the same role as in the original *commedia dell’arte*, for example in ‘Pantomima’ (in *Cau de poemes* (1960), which forms part of *Poemes de seny i cabell: triada de llibres, 1957- 1963*), in which Arlequí is

not the cunning, amoral figure so beloved of writers and artists in the early twentieth century, but is much closer to the simple servant – obsessed with food – of the Renaissance period, where he is a foil to his fellow Bergamasque, the cunning Brighella. The Pierrot of ‘Pantomima’ is the lonely, frustrated individual found so often in Romantic and post-Romantic poetry. Pierrot asks Arlequí to take a love poem he has written to Colombina, but Arlequí forgets all about his task and instead asks Colombina for food. When he returns to Pierrot, the latter ‘vol saber el resultat / de l’encàrrec, i Arlequí/ li ensenya el menjar embolicat/ amb el paper on hi ha escrita/ la poesia d’amor’ (Brossa 1977: 310).

On the face of it, ‘Pantomima’ is a simple pantomime or *commedia dell’arte* sketch. However, the poem ends with an image that connects obliquely with the action: ‘Un pati/ guarnit amb farolets/ venecians’. Venice was one of the chief *commedia* centres of the Renaissance period and the setting for the famous annual carnival. The little lamps could well represent the lights of a theatre, thus highlighting the theatricality of the poem. The image of the courtyard lit in the Venetian style is repeated in ‘Pot-Pourri’ (in *El saltamartí*, 1963, which forms part of *Poemes de seny i cabell: triada de llibres*), the first section of which underlines the links between Catalan and Italian forms of popular entertainment: ‘El pati/ il·luminat a la veneciana/ té un aspecte molt agradable./ I és que el poble català./ en això de divertir-se, /s’assembla a l’italià:/ ho fa de debò’ (Brossa 1977: 680). Significantly, it is the *commedia dell’arte* that provides the link between the two cultures. Another poem in which the *commedia dell’arte* characters retain their traditional features is ‘Serenata’ (in *Sonets de vaitot (1965-1966)*, which forms part of *Rua de llibres (1964-1970)*), a sonnet, where Pierrot is the white-faced, frustrated, suffering lover of a coquettish Colombina, who, typically, chooses the roguish Arlequí over him (Brossa 1980: 287).

The presence of the *commedia dell’arte* – a theatrical genre – in Brossa’s poetry continues a well-established tradition that was particularly strong in nineteenth-century France, as such poets as Théodore de Banville, Paul Verlaine and Jules Laforgue explored it, particularly the Pierrot figure. Brossa considered all of his work – be it actual poems, drama, prose or artwork (and, indirectly, music) – to be

poetry: his plays bear the collective title of *Poesia escènica* and his artwork *Poesia visual* and *Poemes objecte*. The *commedia dell'arte* features in all three forms, with considerable overlap between them as far as their presentation of *commedia* is concerned. If his theatre is poetic, then some of his poetry is conceived in terms of theatre, with the *commedia* prominent in this conception. A case in point is 'Poema amb fons negre' (in *Poemes civils*, 1960, which forms part of *Poemes de seny i cabell: triada de llibres*), whose very title suggests theatre, while the poem itself resembles a stage direction:

A la dreta del poema, un sofà
marró. Al mig del poema,
Pierrot estirat damunt els versos.
Travessa el poema Arlequí amb
Un colom negre a la mà.
Entra al poema Colombina
i arrenca del sofà dotzenes
d'agulles de fer mitja.
Se'n va
(Brossa 1977: 379)

One notes the interaction between daily life (sofa, knitting needles) and the poetic form itself (poem, lines): here is a common feature of Brossa's work, namely that the quotidian is poetic. The image of Pierrot lying on the lines (rather than on the sofa) emphasises the role of the imagination, which is key to Brossa's work. Exaggeration is another notable feature of this poem. Colombina does not pull one needle from the sofa, which is what one might expect if this were a play in the naturalist idiom, but dozens of them. This is like a magician's trick, something that, as we will discover in due course, is close to Brossa's heart.

Another poem, 'Escena' (in *Cent per cent* (1967), which forms part of *Rua de llibres*) is a schematic representation of characters' positions on the stage. There are four characters in all: Arlequí, Pierrot, Colombina, and Leopoldo Fregoli.¹ They are each

¹ The significance of this Italian transformation artist will be discussed later.

given a number, and are placed within the drawing of the stage as follows: Fregoli is on his own top left, while the others are all situated to the right of the drawing, with Pierrot at the top, Arlequí at the bottom and Colombina in the middle (and slightly more towards the centre than the other two) (Brossa 1980: 358). In this poem Brossa clearly has in mind the physical space of the theatre, which is connected in a rather mysterious, thought-provoking way with the *commedia dell'arte*.

A curious variation on the intrusion of *commedia* into Brossa's artistic world is the poem 'Poema i menú', illustrated with drawings by Joan Ponç (Bordons 2010: 130-33). Here, Arlequí, Pierrot and Colombina present the menu: Arlequí offers the cocktail, Pierrot and Colombina the first course, and Arlequí the main course and dessert. The poem concludes with the three of them in unison offering coffee, cigars and liqueurs. The idea seems to be that eating in a restaurant can be a theatrical experience: a Catalan example pursued to spectacular effect by Ferran Adrià's El Bulli.

Two other art forms cultivated by Brossa in which *commedia* characters appear are music and visual art. Included in the former category is 'Concert irregular' (from *Accions musicals*), in collaboration with the pianist Carles Santos. In the programme to the premiere of this piece, Brossa writes:

Amb el buf d'un cert esperit de Frègoli, Arlequí, Pierrot i Colombina – el pianista, el piano i la cantatriu – s'inflen i es desinflen a la font d'un espectacle on la fantasia gratuïta i la imitació servil reculen davant la imaginació creadora. Per què un fet tan corrent en literatura i pintura no es dona més sovint en el teatre? (Brossa: 1968)

This note underlines the importance of the imagination, and of Leopoldo Fregoli, here once more associated with the *commedia dell'arte* trio. It also highlights how, for Brossa, literature, painting, music and theatre are inextricably linked, and conveys his regret that the theatre lacks the innovation and creativity to permit such fluidity.

Brossa also includes *commedia dell'arte* figures in his artwork. In 'Bet' (1991) Harlequin's mask is superimposed on two cards, the Ace of Clubs and the Ace of Hearts from the English pack.

The *commedia* is associated with the card game, an image so common in Brossa's work. Another of Brossa's pieces from *Poemes objecte*, 'Colombina,' consists of a round plate superimposed on red lips, suggesting a woman's face. At the bottom of the plate, to the left of the lips, there is a black spot, while the presence of the plate suggests a traditional link between the *commedia* and the act of eating, recalling 'Poema i menú'.

The *commedia dell'arte*, of course, is quintessentially a popular theatrical form. Brossa's own work is deeply rooted in popular Catalan theatre of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, while the *commedia* is an example of a broader, international source of popular inspiration for him. In a 1996 interview he said: 'Per a mi els personatges clàssics del teatre no són ni els de Shakespeare ni els dels grecs: l'essència del teatre són l'Arlequí i la Colombina. La Commedia dell'Arte és una cosa lúdica com psicològica' (Noguero 1996: 44). In an earlier interview he had claimed that 'El teatro del pueblo no es el realismo de Brecht; es el Arlequín y Colombina. El pueblo quiere la *mascarada*' (Moix 1967: s.p.). The Bakhtinian connotations of this statement, extolling as it does, the carnivalesque, are quite clear. During the 1960s and 1970s a number of Catalan playwrights used Brechtian techniques in their work: here Brossa rejects Brechtian theatre and, implicitly, perhaps one of the chief theatrical currents of the country in which he was writing. As far as Brossa is concerned, the popular roots of theatre are more apposite than Brechtianism which, it seems, lacks the playfulness whose virtue he extols. The *commedia* is one example of such roots: others include carnival, circus, music-hall, magic, mime, silent cinema and the puppet show. For Brossa, a particularly attractive and interesting exponent of popular paratheatre is the Italian transformation artist Leopoldo Fregoli (1867-1936), whom Brossa had seen perform in Barcelona in the pre-Civil War period and of whom he was a great admirer.² Indeed, as has been noted, he dedicated a

² See Gasch 1972; and Planas 1999.

collection of his short pieces to this artist,³ while in 'Escena' he is placed on the stage alongside Brossa's favourite three *commedia* figures. In the 1967 interview referred to earlier Brossa explains that the true distancing effect was achieved not by Brecht but by Fregoli, because, as the actor performed different roles (within his frequent costume changes), the audience distanced itself from the various characters Fregoli created at high speed. In 'La bella italiana' (from *Strip-tease i teatre irregular*) the Actor, who reads an eulogy to Fregoli as the artiste strips, stresses that the transformation artist seems to dominate several paratheatrical genres: 'pertot arreu només es parla del transformista Frègoli, de les peces de Frègoli, mim, ballarí, cantant, acròbata i prestidigitador' (Brossa 1973-83: VI, 254). For Brossa, Fregoli was also the precursor of the 'dinamismo y mutabilidad del cine' (Moix 1967: s.p.)

It is unsurprising, perhaps, that the collection that features *commedia dell'arte* characters most prominently is *Fregolisme o monòlegs de transformació*. The piece in which the link between *commedia dell'arte* and *fregolisme* is most apparent is 'Tricuspis'. Arlequí and Pierrot play a game of tug-of-war with a rope, which is actually wider than the stage. Neither of them is able to win and Colombina comes on stage, unseen by the two male characters. She cuts the rope and laughs as the two rivals fall offstage. She herself goes offstage, returns with Pierrot's costume and places it in a suitcase before repeating the process with Arlequí's costume. Finally, the transformation artist who has played all three *commedia* roles comes onstage: 'Va amb pantalons negres ajustats fins el genoll; el frac i el barret de copa, vermells, li muden de color cada vegada que reapareix per rebre els aplaudiments' (Brossa 1973-83: VI, 151). For Planas, 'Tricuspis' constitueix una peça excepcionalment representativa del recull de *Fregolisme o monòlegs de transformació*, perquè evidencia el grau d'assoliment de les possibilitats dramàtiques que li són pròpies, a més de fregar, amb extrema i meritòria senzillesa, la perfecció quant a la utilització de les particularitats tècniques del gènere' (Planas 2002: 193). 'Tricuspis' contains the delicate irony that

³ Brossa dedicated another collection to Fregoli, *Poema sobre Frègoli i el seu teatre* (1965).

characterises *Poesia escènica*. It is essentially a humorous piece, which, for Planas, possesses a 'marcat esperit lúdic i antiretòric' (2002: 32).

Another *fregolisme*, 'La xauxa negra', is much less playful, more daringly critical and, to cite Planas once more, typical of Brossa's 'personal estètica de resistència' (2002: 32). Pierrot appears at the end of the play just as the General finishes reading Article 222 of the 'Código Penal'. Pierrot's appearance represents a carnivalesque mockery of the General, who speaks in a menacing 'official' tone. In 'La xauxa negra' Pierrot undertakes the transgressive role that characterises the *commedia dell'arte* in its original form and in its subsequent development in the Parisian Théâtres de la Foire.⁴ However, the end of the play is dramatically chilling:

Pierrot: (*redoblada de timbals. Per l'esquerra, amb les mans al darrera. Se situa immòbil al mig de l'escena, de cara al públic. Silenci.*) Visca Catalunya! (*Cau mort sota el soroll d'una descàrrega de fuselleria*) (Brossa 1973-83: vi, 160).

For John London, in this scene 'ens convertim en testimonis d'una tradició popular, revivificada nacionalment i negada per una

⁴ The Théâtres de la Foire originally replaced those of the Italian comedians when the latter were expelled from France at the end of the seventeenth century, but they became rivals when the Italians returned. The Théâtres de la Foire were constantly at loggerheads with the authorities and were forced, because of the numerous prohibitions placed upon them, to draw upon their inventive skills. For instance, at one stage dialogue was prohibited, so they turned to the use of dumb characters and mime. The musical side of the theatre developed, and, as time went on, the entertainment became more diversified. Acrobats and rope dancers became part of the scene and marionette shows were included alongside harlequinade spectacles. The Théâtres de la Foire became associated with low humour and were often the subject of scorn; but their contribution to the development of the *commedia* was extremely important, and they changed some of the masks, such as Pierrot and Pulcinella. An anthology of Foire plays is Connon & Evans: 1996.

força molt precisa que no pot suportar la seva llibertat' (London 2010: 87).

Had 'La xauxa negra' been performed, it would not have been difficult for a contemporary audience to understand the significance of this scene. Indeed, the actor-audience relationship – albeit hypothetical – is central to Brossa's theatre. In 'La xauxa negra', as in the concerts by singers of La Nova Cançó, the audience is expected to be complicit in the performance. Other pieces from *Accions spectacle*, however, seem to mock the audience, as the *commedia* characters invite the spectators to follow them along corridors and to enter and exit rooms, seemingly with the objective of confusing them. In 'La set' (from *Postteatre III*) a *commedia* character, Arlequí, nonplusses and teases the audience. Having made them move from one room to another, he slowly breaks three pitchers, two of which are full of water and one empty. He then invites a spectator to take a card from a pack, and tells him not to show it to the audience until he (Arlequí) has left the stage. The card turns out to be the *rei d'oros*, with the word 'fi' written on it (Brossa 1973-83, III, 405). Just as in other *Accions*, it seems that the audience has been deceived and left hanging in the air by this character. To an extent, this moving the audience around the theatre spaces seems to anticipate the performance spectacles of La Fura dels Baus or La Cubana, but Brossa's plays are much less frenetic and more playful than those of La Fura at least. Given the early date of the Brossa plays, it may be more appropriate to refer to the fusion between actors and audience anticipated in the 1930s by Artaud and put into practice by Grotowski and practitioners of theatrical 'happenings' in the late 1950s and early 1960s, and later developed by collectives such as Living Theatre.⁵ The card game recalls the Catalan magician/ performance artist Hausson's performances of Brossa's works and one is also reminded of an appearance of the Arlequins in *El cop desert*, Brossa's first, and to date, unedited, play, written in 1944: 'Al mig l'Arlequí I s'afanya a construir un castell de cartes. L'Arlequí II va traient les cartes d'un

⁵ John London describes Brossa's short pieces without dialogue as as 'quasi-happenings *avant la lettre*' (London 1992: 22).

cofre. Al fons cortina i quadres blancs i negres'.⁶ Two different games are in evidence here: cards and chess, the latter suggested by the squares, which could also evoke the Harlequin costume.

As has been observed, the *commedia dell'arte* in Brossa's work is linked to several popular paratheatrical genres. One of the most interesting of these is mime theatre, which is related to silent cinema and to magic. Like other paratheatrical forms, mime is a source of liberation from the limitations of the realist or naturalist idioms, while it also features strongly in Hausson's performances of Brossa's works, such as the *Espectacle Hausson*, which premiered (as *Gran sessió de màgia*) in Barcelona in 1987. In contrast to those of standard magic shows, Hausson did not speak at all during the performance. *Espectacle Hausson* is divided into two parts, each of which consists of a series of scenes or numbers, and *commedia* characters conclude several of these in the first part of the show.⁷ At the end of Scene 4 Arlequí makes shapes with nails, which he attaches to a canvas, while Scene 3 concludes with Pierrot measuring the stage. It is the audience's task to make the link between these banal actions of the *commedia* figures and the remaining individual scenes. The Doctor who appears in Scene 8 is the magician Hausson himself, disguised in a wig and false moustache. A magician is, in fact, a kind of Fregoli figure, and here Hausson uses mime to indicate the action. The scene ends on a humorous note when Pierrot talks to himself as he draws 'fumetti' (the bubbles that indicate the words of comic strip characters) from his pocket and places them on his lips. This is an action that Harpo Marx could easily have performed, while the cinema suggestion is maintained in the next Scene as Hausson emerges from a screen on the stage, 'seguint l'acció cinematogràfica'.

Brossa was a cinema buff, and was particularly fond of the great comic actors of silent cinema. In an interview he gave in 1995, in response to a question on conceptual art, he said:

⁶ For more analysis of this work see London 2010: 57, 74; and Planas 2002: 309-18.

⁷ I have consulted a typewritten copy of this work and of *El cop desert*. I am most grateful to Glòria Bordons for making me aware of their existence.

El trobo molt interessant. Tot això és el que ha vingut després. És com el cinema. Jo sempre dic que hi ha dos grans artistes: Buster Keaton abans de Freud i Harpo Marx després de Freud. Això és una mica igual: Picasso i Duchamp. El Duchamp és el Harpo Marx. (Ranz i Egea 1995)

It is interesting that of all the Marx Brothers Brossa should mention Harpo, the one who depends on mime to achieve comic effects, and some of Harpo's mime scenes recall those of Brossa's *commedia* characters. Harpo specialised in mocking pedants, driving them crazy by his disrespectful actions. One may recall the brilliantly comic scene in *Monkey Business* (1931) in which Harpo ridicules a member of the crew from the ship in which the Brothers are stowaways, and by whom he is being pursued, completely confusing his pursuer as he inserts himself into a Punch-and-Judy booth that is providing entertainment for the children on board the ship. This kind of disrespectful satire is a lot more frenetic than those carried out by Brossa's *commedia* characters, but, given Brossa's own comments in the 1995 interview, the Marxian inspiration seems clear enough.

Brossa himself provided the source for a 1989 film entitled *Entreacte*, directed by Manuel Cussó, with a script by Cussó and Pilar Parcerissas, based on Brossa's *Poesia escènica*. Brossa himself supervised the dialogues so as to ensure that the literary style of the original texts was maintained. This complex, strangely disturbing film explores such questions as repressed sexuality within the subconscious and whether modern science can understand emotions.⁸ The 'action' moves between the various activities of a family and revolves around a visit to a cinema palace by a husband, his wife and their eleven-year old daughter, leaving the baby-sitter in charge of their younger child. The film showcases various paratheatrical activities dear to Brossa, such as silent cinema, music-hall, circus and striptease. In the show that the family watches, Hausson (speaking this time) performs some card tricks and introduces a ventriloquist, who has the Inventor break

⁸ Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932) comes to mind. A cinematic precedent would seem to be Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* (1927) and, of course, *Les Enfants du Paradis*, Marcel Carné's 1945 evocation of the famous nineteenth-century Pierrot, Jean-Gaspard Deburau.

down on stage after exploring his obsession with a striptease artiste. The eleven-year-old girl goes out to buy some chewing-gum, and is met by the Inventor, who sees her as a kind of projection of the striptease artiste, who has rejected him. He takes the young girl to a circus and a funfare, but she ends up stabbing him with a pin she had taken from home before leaving for the theatre. This seems to be reminiscent of the violence from such early silents as Buñuel/Dalí's *Un chien andalou* (1929) or García Lorca's *Viaje a la luna* (1929-30), and also, curiously, seems to echo Pedro Almodóvar's *Matador* (1986), with its links between the stabbing of the Inventor and the bullfight poster, which features Cussó himself. Pierrot, Arlequí and Colombina form part of the circus to which the Inventor takes the girl, and the following words spoken by Pierrot typify Brossa's contribution to the genre:

Amics, avui em sembla que m'he pintat millor que mai. Em sé pintar de moltes maneres. Em dibuixo amb un pinzell dues ratlles obliqües als llavis i m'engrandeixo els ulls tot ennegrint-me'ls. Jo sóc dels qui sempre riuen i no ho vull pas dissimular. I el que faig és eixugar-me les llàgrimes de tant riure. És l'única vegada que ploro de debò.

Several features emerge from this brief extract: the close link between the *commedia dell'arte* and painting, the traditional overlap between the circus clown and Pierrot, the impossibility of separating comedy from tragedy, and a sense of distortion effected by the lip and eye painting, reminding us, perhaps, of the essentially non-naturalistic nature of the film. It ends with one of the female characters paying homage to transformism, a difficult art, she claims, that has been unjustly removed from the theatre. She eulogises Fregoli, who could play ten different characters by himself. As she delivers the homage, so she goes behind a screen, and emerges wearing a different costume each time, including a Pierrot one.

This rapid costume change not only evokes the work of Fregoli but is also suggestive of the complex issues of mask and personal identity that characterise the work of avant-garde artists and writers. Brossa was profoundly influenced by the historical avant-garde, whose traditions he continued in many ways. For example, in the

work of García Lorca – much admired by Brossa – the *commedia dell'arte* is associated with identity. In *El público* (1930), mask and costume are key to the avant-garde nature of the play (be it Surrealist or Expressionist).⁹ The very title of the play indicates what is one of its major themes, and Brossa, as is being observed, is similarly interested in the actor-audience relationship, an interest that finds perfect expression in the *commedia dell'arte* and in such other forms of popular culture as circus, music-hall, carnival or Fregoli's transformation spectacles.

There are other similarities between Brossa's work and Lorca's avant-garde theatre as far as the presence of *commedia* is concerned, and a brief examination of these will further contextualise Brossa's *commedia dell'arte* adaptations within a broader international context. To an extent the actions of the Arlequins in *El cop desert* recall Arlequín's role in Lorca's *Así que pasen cinco años* (1931). The following mini scene offers another illustration of possible similarities between *El cop desert* and Lorca's work:

Es projecta la silueta d'unes mans damunt el llenç el qual acaba d'ocultar l'escena rera l'Arlequí II. Entra un locutor de frac proveït d'un micròfon.
ARLEQUÍ II (Esbafat i delirant) –S'albiren muntanyes de ciment armat portant a les gorges la flor de lis dels cops d'ull magnètics.
Les mans s'ajunten i formen un cap de cavall. L'Arlequí I es debatega i fa un salt de peix desapareixent per la dreta.

The use of costume elements such as the dress coat is characteristic of avant-garde theatre and is a common image in *El público*. At the same time, the suggestion of shadow puppets ('silueta', 'les mans s'ajunten i formen un cap de cavall') is an example of yet another paratheatrical form, so common in Brossa's theatre, and similar to the *commedia dell'arte*. The horse and the fish are well-known sexual symbols in Lorca's work, while the Arlequí II's speech and the adverb 'delirant' seems to me to be especially significant, suggestive as it is of irrationality, highlighting the fact that

⁹ For an analysis of the *commedia dell'arte* in this work see George 1995: 153-62.

commedia dell'arte characters often have a symbolical significance for Brossa. The idea of the silhouette is repeated in two further stage directions: 'silueta d'un cap de dimoni' i 'el dimoni mou la boca. Silueta d'un conill' (p. 26). The rabbit is an animal image, while Harlequin has long been associated with the devil.

Yet another parallel with *El público* is contained in the opening stage direction of Brossa's *Quiriquibú*, which seems to anticipate Catalan director Lluís Pasqual's celebrated 1986-87 production of the Lorca play. Maria Delgado explains how Pasqual and Fabià Puigserver adapted the Teatro María Guerrero in Madrid in order to evoke, among other things, a circus:

Pasqual and his designer Fabià Puigserver removed the stage and stalls of the María Guerrero Theatre to provide a circular expansive playing area of sparkling blue sand that simultaneously evoked a circus ring, a lunar landscape, a beach and a corral (Delgado 2008: 160).

Quiriquibú opens thus:

La representació, en un circ. No disposant d'un circ veritable, es tractarà de substituir-ne la disposició al millor possible. Els actors es mouran en un espai entre el cercle de la primera fila de butaques i una portalada central amb cortina per on entren i surten. La Banda se situarà en un costat. Convé que el director es comuniqui amb l'escena o pista per una passarel·la. La il·luminació a base de focus fixos. Un equip de mossos de pista disposarà els accessoris abans de començar cada part. A la primera, per cada canvi de quadre s'apagaran els focus. Els músics de la banda, amb uniformes llampants (Brossa 1973-83: I: 62).

Apart from the similarities with *El público* in the circus setting and the active participation of the director, the stage direction demonstrates that Brossa was careful to provide detailed instructions not only on how the actors should move around the stage but also on questions of lighting and the attire of the musicians. As in Pasqual's *El público* the theatre is a fluid space, where no barrier exists between audience and actors, as the fourth wall is broken down. This is the very opposite of the idea of the well-made play performed in a

traditional, Italianate theatre. Although Brossa's plays have seldom been performed, at least during his lifetime, it is clear that he was more than a 'literary' author and was sharply aware of theatre mechanics.

There are other parallels between Lorca and Brossa as far as the *commedia dell'arte* is concerned. The image of the huge white glove in *Espectacle Hausson* recalls the opening stage direction of *El público*: 'Una gran mano impresa en la pared' (García Lorca 2006: 103). The cinematic connotations of these images seem to me to be evident, while the idea of transformation suggested in another image from the opening stage direction of *El público*, 'Las ventanas son radiografías', finds a striking parallel in Brossa's poem 'Una finestra' (in *Cent per tant* (1967), which forms part of *Rua de llibres* (1964-1970)): 'Una finestra pot ser convertida en un teatre de putxinel·lis' (Brossa 1980: 438). Here Brossa is evoking the type of puppet theatre performed at turn-of-the-century Barcelona venue Els 4 Gats and reminiscent of the Punch-and-Judy show in the Marx Brothers' *Monkey Business*. At the same time, of course, the 'putxinel·lis', are linked with the traditional *commedia dell'arte* figure, Pulcinella, once more suggesting the interchangeability of the diverse paratheatrical forms cultivated by Brossa.

These are brought to mind once more in the second number of *Espectacle Hausson*, which concludes with the performance of a ballerina dressed in a white tutu. The ballet could be considered one more paratheatrical form and again recalls *El público* and the numerous drawings of similar figures by Lorca.¹⁰ The number concludes thus: 'Entra Arlequí i fa dibuixos amb tot d'agulles de picar, que va clavant damunt una tela blanca'. As has been observed, the third number ends with the entry of Pierrot, who 'entra i pren les mides de l'escenari'. Significantly, Brossa specifies that this is a 'número còmic'. It is the audience's task to make the connection between Hausson's games and the appearances of the *commedia dell'arte* characters that conclude scenes from the first part of the show. Pierrot and Arlequí's actions are essentially banal, and this deliberate banality typifies Brossa's use of mime. His *commedia*

¹⁰ The most complete collection of Lorca's drawings is Hernández 1986.

undermines the tragic potentialities of a situation, replacing it with tragicomedy or farce as in so much drama of the twentieth century. The deliberate banality of the interventions of the *commedia dell'arte* characters in *Espectacle Hausson* is again in evidence in 'Saturne', from *Striptease i teatre irregular*. The originality of this striptease is that the string dress worn by the girl is gradually unwound by an old lady standing by her side. At the end of this brief spectacle, Pierrot enters an orange-painted room with a folding step-ladder and checks to see if the lines on the wall are vertical. He then removes the light bulbs and exits the stage carrying the stepladder (Brossa 1973-83, VI: 259). It is symptomatic that Pierrot, often the tragic victim in the Romantic and post-Romantic periods, is now no more than a stagehand, removing light bulbs instead of dying of a broken heart. The tragic has become tragicomic in this postmodern vision of the *commedia dell'arte*.¹¹

In conclusion, the *commedia dell'arte* for Brossa is one example of the paratheatrical tradition that for him is an integral part of theatre. Of course, his work is steeped in Catalan popular tradition, but the *commedia* acts as an Europeanising element, setting Catalan culture within a broader international context. He has a deep knowledge of the genre and its historical development, and of both its popular and its more erudite strands. One of the key aspects of this historical development is the way in which an essentially theatrical form morphed into other branches of the arts, including literature and painting. Brossa's oeuvre fits perfectly into this pattern, as he adapts the *commedia*, imbuing it with a broad poetic significance. Our study has demonstrated a number of parallels between his drama, poetry and artwork, while the cinematic undertones of his playlets without words are seized upon by the director of *Entreacte*, a film that exhibits clear parallels with some of the early avant-garde silents. Indeed, Brossa sees himself as a successor to the historical avant-garde, and the

¹¹ On postmodernism in Brossa, John London writes: 'Brossa accepta plenament la relació entre l'obra artística i l'espectador, i anima la participació performativa del segon. En aquest sentit, ja que Brossa té una visió teatral del món, es podria considerar fins i tot la seva obra visual profundament postmoderna' (London 2010: 109).

striking similarities between his and García Lorca's use of *commedia* figures highlight this sense of continuity. Some of his *commedia* works are also profoundly in tune with much post-Second-World-War theatre and chime with postmodernism. Above all, Brossa's adaptations of *commedia dell'arte* demonstrate the depth of his thinking about the theatre. For him the naturalist/ realist approach to theatre is limiting, and he finds in such genres as *commedia dell'arte* carnival, circus and mime qualities lacking in the theatre of his contemporary Catalonia.

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