

Olga Partan. *Vagabonding Masks. The Italian Commedia dell'Arte in the Russian Artistic Imagination* (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2017). ISBN: 978-1-61811-571-3 (hardcover), 978-1-61811-572-0 (e-book). 294 pp.; 24 illus. \$79.00.

Reviewed by: Elena Yushkova, Independent Scholar, Russia

Olga Partan's research is interdisciplinary and innovative. She investigates "the three-century-long history of the Italian masks vagabonding through Russian culture" (p. 263) from the first appearance of Harlequin and his fellow masks during the time of the Empress Anna Ioannovna until the last example known to the author at the very beginning of the twenty first century. Analyzing numerous "visual and textual allusions" to Italian *commedia dell'arte* in Russian classical literature, performance art, and popular culture, the author shows the "impact of the *commedia* on Russian culture through its Russification and gradual transformations" during three centuries that extends beyond the widely studied "Russian modernism infatuation with the *commedia dell'arte*" (p. 13). The book is arranged chronologically and uses "a cross-cultural and cross-disciplinary approach" (p. 25). Russian literature of the 18th century, literature of the 19th century, Russian and Western medieval folk theater, Silver Age studies, Nabokov literary works, and finally (not expected at all) Soviet and Russian *Estrada* (popular music and culture) are masterfully combined in the book. Thus, the author shows the development of Russian culture from a new perspective—of *commedia dell'arte* elements and spirit present in it. The separate case studies are well connected, even when they seem completely incompatible (like the chapter on Vladimir Nabokov and the following piece on Soviet pop-star Alla Pugacheva).

Scholars generally recognize that the extreme popularity of the genre and its tremendous influence on all kind of arts during the Silver Age derived from European modernism. Pantomimes of the 1910s, performances by Vsevolod Meyerhold, Alexander Tairov, Evgenii Vakhtangov, the carnival of Nikolai Evreinov within and outside the theater (in real life as well), lyrics and plays by Alexander Blok, and prose by Andrey Bely – all these achievements of the epoch refer to the *commedia dell'arte*. However, Olga Partan reveals its much deeper roots in Russia. She manages to connect the various epochs in which she finds evidence of the *commedia dell'arte*, and the motif of echo constantly appears in all chapters: Blok's *Puppet Show* refers to Sumarokov's productions, Nabokov's last novel harkens back to performances of the Silver Age, and Russian pop-culture "Empress" Alla Pugacheva easily breaks Soviet taboos with her *Arlekino* image. The author shows that "Russian artists experimented with this ancient form to produce innovation and break preexisting canons" (p. 19). Finding traces of Italian masks in works of art and literature of different epochs, Partan notes that these kinds of productions can be defined as "harlequinized art and literature" (p. 21). Using the name of Harlequin and Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of carnivalization of literature, Partan introduces her own term "to denote the transposition of the Italian *commedia dell'arte* into the literature and other arts" (p. 19).

Partan rehabilitates eighteenth-century playwright Vasily Tredyakovsky, whose work was thrown into the shadow by his more successful rival Alexander Sumarokov. She argues that the contribution of Tredyakovsky, who not only translated numerous Italian *commedia* for the Russian stage, but technically adapted them and provided a new direction for the development of

the Russian theater, wasn't less significant than that of Sumarokov's, who is widely recognized as a father of Russian drama.

The author also reconsiders nineteenth-century Russian literature through the prism of the Italian *commedia*, finding its references in the works of Pushkin, Gogol, Dostoevsky, and Chekhov. For instance, she shows that Pushkin referred to Harlequin in his poem inspired by the Emperor Alexander I's bust in the Caucasus. The poet, Partan claims, describes an imaginary Italian mask covering half of Alexander's face to make "his facial expression undetectable and totally static while only his smiling lips are exposed to the public" (p. 117). Similarly, Dostoevsky's hero in *Notes from a Dead House* watches a strange performance in Siberian exile that reminds him of ancient Italian scenarios circulated in Russian theater from the eighteenth century (first adapted by the court theater, then by low culture street performances). Even Chekhov's plot of *Uncle Vanya* derives from a traditional Italian performance where "Columbine in the modernist interpretation - is married to an old fool, Dottore", Astrov acts as a Harlequin, and Voinitsky is "the idiotic loser Pierrot" (p. 129).

Partan includes a special and detailed analysis of Gogol's works that moves beyond the critical realism even further than contemporary scholars have asserted. She finds traits of Pulcinella in Akakii Akakievich's personality, for instance, his duality and contradictory nature, and the *Overcoat* contains numerous "textual allusions to the nineteenth-century metamorphosis of Pulcinella" (p. 142). Relying on contemporaries' reminiscences that Gogol "visited Naples and most likely attended the famous Neapolitan pulcinellate" (p. 140), and "was regularly exposed to the high and low spheres of the Italian performing arts through his attending operas, street performances, and carnival festivities" (p. 136), Partan reveals Gogol's passion for Italian culture and its deep penetration in all his works.

The author then provides a detailed analysis of the theater innovations of the early twentieth century influenced by *commedia dell'arte*, from Meyerhold's *Puppet Show* (*Balagantchik*) and Diaghilev's *Ballet Russes* performances to Vakhtangov's *Princess Turandot*. Describing the battle between Stanislavsky and his rebelling students who rejected the realistic theater of *experience* and juxtaposed the theater of *representation*, Partan probably exaggerates Stanislavsky's naturalism, while contemporary scholars have already reconsidered his method from a more spiritual perspective. In the chapter devoted to Vakhtangov, the readers see a detailed analysis of his classical *Princess Turandot* restored by his disciples in the Soviet period.

From the Silver Age, the author logically moves to Vladimir Nabokov, who grew up in the atmosphere of the Italian comedy of masks and who encrypted his childhood impressions in his last work, his pseudo-autobiography entitled *LATH* (*Look at the Harlequins!*). His numerous sophisticated games with the readers also refer to *commedia dell'arte* and its magic transformations.

A little surprising in this classical context seems a chapter devoted to the Russian pop-star Alla Pugacheva, whom the author considers a powerful female jester of Soviet times. Partan portrays Pugacheva as an influential cultural phenomenon, "the jester-empress of Estrada both onstage and off" (p. 255). Taking into consideration Partan's idea about the wide circulation of the *commedia* in both high and low cultures in Russia and her argument about the political and social importance of such a cult figure as Pugacheva, the reader cannot help but agree with the author, although for the Russian academic community the role of the singer may seem a little exaggerated.

The final chapter returns to the theatrical *commedia dell'arte*, examining the performance by Italian stage director Giorgio Strehler, whose troupe successfully toured in Russia in 2001 and brought real Italian techniques to the country again after the long and successful development of Russian psychological theater. This tour gave a totally new direction to the new Russian theater of the twenty-first century, orienting it toward accentuated theatricality.

Partan easily combines a variety of different fields in the overall picture of Russian culture's infatuation with the *commedia dell'arte*. The author enthusiastically and fascinatingly surfs in the immense world of literature and art, substantiating her very interesting and innovative hypothesis that the impact of Italian *commedia dell'arte* on Russian culture was significant not only during the epoch of Russian modernism, but from its very first performances in early modern Russia until the beginning of the twenty first century.