

# A celebration of Commedia dell'Arte at North Melbourne Primary School

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What are Lady Harlequin, Harlequin, a witch and Elon Musk doing together in Italy? Finding a way to help the planet fight climate change!



North Melbourne Primary School student, Taehee, wearing a traditional mask provided by Make A Scene. (Photos: North Melbourne Primary School)

Before you become too alarmed, this is not a breaking news story but the plot of a *Commedia dell'Arte* show produced by the Year 6 students at North Melbourne Primary School.

The performance sees traditional *Commedia dell'Arte* characters brush shoulders with 21<sup>st</sup>-century celebrities and takes the audience on a journey around Italy, from Venice to Campania and the villas of Hollywood stars on Lake Como.

The play touches on important social issues through the use of satire and comedy, inspired by the timeless genre created in Italy several centuries ago.

It was written by Rosa Campagnaro, artistic director of education theatre company Make A Scene, in collaboration with students and teachers at North Melbourne Primary School, including Italian teacher Rosalba Bisignano.

The collaboration came about thanks to the Creative Workers in Schools program, delivered by Regional Arts Victoria to support artists during the pandemic.

The program supported 150 creative workers to undertake a six-month paid residency in a Victorian government primary or secondary school in Term 1 or 2, 2021.

Every week between late January and June, Campagnaro worked with the school's five Year 6 classes, as well as teachers of Italian, drama, art and physical education.

Campagnaro described the experience as “challenging but invaluable”.

After showing the students her now well-established production, *Venice in Love*, the artist began to dissect the secrets of *Commedia dell'Arte*, incorporating the Italian language where possible.

She introduced the students to the genre's seven main characters, who embody different stereotypes and clichés: Arlecchino (Harlequin),

Pulcinella (Punch), Pantalone (Pantaloon), Capitano (Captain), Dottore (Doctor), Strega/Stregone (Witch/Sorcerer) and Zanni (Zane).

The group also made traditionally-painted masks with cardboard and clay and participated in workshops with circus-comedy specialists, Dummies Corp.



***Robbie, Rishika and William during a workshop with Dummies Corp***

Bisignano said the project gave students an opportunity to practise their Italian language skills in a specific context, learning new words and expressions while applying what they had learnt in practical activities with Campagnaro.

After the initial phase, there was a day of brainstorming to select the theme of the production, with a focus on relevance and currency.

The students analysed the comedic elements of a show as well as how *Commedia dell'Arte* always incorporates a socio-political commentary of the time in which it is written.

They then listed the issues that are most important to them, including poverty, LGBTQA + rights and environmental issues such as ocean pollution and food waste.

In the end, combating climate change was chosen as the main theme.

“It was nice to see the students’ interest grow during the research phase, when they discovered issues such as the high tides in Venice or the acid rain that hit Italy,” Bisignano said.

“In addition, Rosa encouraged them to keep a diary with ideas and reflections on what they’d learned, as well as sketches and notes on the characters and the show in general.”

Thus was born the story of Arlecchino and Arlecchina, managers of a pizzeria in Venice that is flooded due to a high tide.

In search of a solution, the pair find themselves making pizza in Naples, discussing climate policies in Rome and learning about renewable energy from Elon Musk on Lake Como.

The five classes worked on different scenes, focusing on a particular stage of the journey and delving into a specific Italian region and its famous sites.

The students also took turns improvising in the classroom; Bisignano and Campagnaro took note of the funniest jokes and scenes that they came up with and they were included in the script.

The students were the real heroes of the project and even the most reluctant ones were engaged in the creative endeavour, as it led to meaningful learning in a fun and authentic context.

All students were involved in some way, with those less eager to perform taking on roles behind the scenes.

The initiative was a resounding success that everyone gained something from: it provided Campagnaro with a regular income during this difficult time for performing artists, while the teachers worked as a team and learnt a great deal from the professional performer.

“It was wonderful to go back to doing something tangible, practical and physical after so many months of online teaching,” Bisignano said.

Unfortunately, Melbourne’s recent lockdowns have put a hold on the live performance; despite this twist, the students are proud of and passionate about their project, which is a true celebration of Italian history and culture.

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