

Goldoni at the Venetian Bar

By Sean O'Brien

Truffaldino: "If you only want to know who I am, I'll tell you in two words. I am the servant of my master."



Canaletto, The Entrance to the Grand Canal c. 1730

Introduction

The comedies of Carlo Goldoni (1707-1793) have entertained and fascinated audiences for centuries and enjoy regular productions on main stages around the globe including the West End and Broadway.

The Servant of Two Masters is perhaps his most well-loved play and the finest example of his dramatic art. At the opening of the play the servant character, Truffaldino, seeks to fill his perpetually hungry belly by taking on a second job and continues to perform the Sisyphean task of keeping two masters simultaneously pleased as well as ignorant of the other's existence. Yet every one of his hard-fought successes amplifies the dramatic dilemma – these same two are in fact lovers separated by tragic circumstance and are desperate to be reunited. The denouement of course arrives with their reunion and order is restored with Truffaldino serving the happy couple, reduced to surviving on a single income again.



In comparison to his theatrical career, little of the limelight has fallen on Goldoni's career as an attorney and advocate at the Bar in Venice. As the following extracts from his *Memoirs* (1787) show¹, despite the passage of time and cultural idiosyncrasies, Goldoni's reflections on that period of his life still have

contemporary resonance, in particular the vicissitudes of beginning at the Bar.

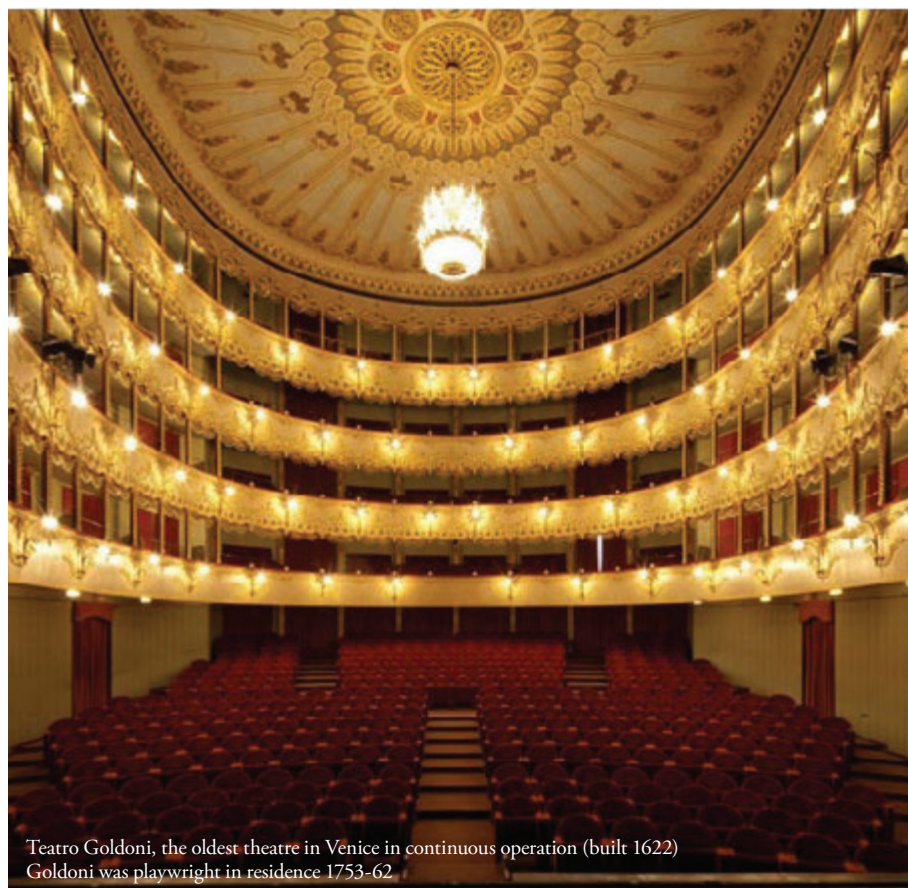
Goldoni's theatrical legacy

For those unfamiliar with Goldoni's theatrical legacy, some brief background might be appreciated. The primary reason for an abiding interest in his plays is the original way in which he revitalised the classical architecture of comic theatre, using the largely improvisational and physical form of *Commedia dell'Arte* ('the *Commedia*').

'*Commedia dell'Arte*' literally translates as 'comedy of the professional' – a term first coined by Goldoni in one of his plays. This was the earliest form of professional Western theatre, with a company recorded in 1545.

Interestingly, it was also in the *Commedia* that female actors first took to the stage in 1566, nearly one hundred years before a woman took to a London stage.

The *Commedia* was typically performed outdoors to audiences who had likely never set foot in a theatre before. The stage was



Some of the stock characters of the Commedia – note, at top left, Il Dottore, a doctor of law or medicine, a pompous and verbose quack. Third from top left is Arlecchino or Harlequin, the mischievous servant character



Harley Quinn from DC Comics, distant cousin of Harlequin and Arlecchino, battling patriarchy in a mask of dark mascara

populated by masters, their perpetually hungry servants ('Zanni') and aristocratic lovers ('Innamorati'). The latter were the only characters not masked.

These stock character 'types' were recognisable by their individual masks and behaviours rather than inner psychology. Importantly, they were instantly known to the audience as belonging to either the ruling or servant class. Much fun was made of the master 'Il Dottore', a doctor of law or medicine. An expert on everything, he required little invitation to embark upon a lengthy discourse on any topic, his speech liberally dispersed with inapt Latin phrases.

The skeletal plots, revolving primarily around master-servant relationships and the thwarted attempts of young lovers to be together, served primarily to set up 'lazzi' or bits of comic business. The actors selected from a palette of lazzi to be played in the moment and to be extended, shortened or repeated to suit the audience's mood and response. A deep vein of humour was mined by zanni such as Harlequin (in France) or Arlecchino (in Italy), challenging and subverting the power relations between masters and servants.

Goldoni's skilful transposition of the ephemeral scenarios of the Commedia into his plays gave enduring life to characters such as Harlequin and Punch (Pulchinella) within our collective cultural imagination.

But what of the drama of Goldoni's legal career?

Goldoni and the Law

Goldoni's reflections on his legal career, contained in his *Memoirs*, evoke a sense of the familiar and of strangeness in equal measure.

Clerkship in Venice

In 1722 Goldoni undertook a clerkship with his uncle Idric, an attorney in Venice. By his own account:

I acquitted myself tolerably well in my employment with the Attorney at Venice. I possessed great facility in giving a summary and abstract of a law suit, and my uncle would fain have kept me, but I was recalled by a letter from my father.

University studies ... and expulsion

In 1723, Goldoni obtained a letter of introduction to a law professor at the Collegio Ghislieri in Pavia, Milan. However, before he could formally commence studies at the university there was an administrative hurdle to overcome, namely, his age:

I was two years under the age requisite for my reception into the college. I know not to what saint I was beholden for the miracle; but I do know well, that I went to bed one night only sixteen, and rose next morning two years older...

He derived great stimulation from the law professor's library, dividing his studies between the institutes of Roman law and a rich collection of ancient and modern comedies.

His time at the university ended two years later when he was expelled for a series of misdeeds, most notably possession of firearms on campus and authoring a scandalous satire aimed at prominent local families.

Goldoni's legal career was resurrected by a cousin who was a notary procuring him a place at the University of Modena where he could complete his studies and, 'afterwards be entered as an advocate'.



Chioggia or 'Little Venice'



Feltre in winter, the Dolomites rising in the background

However, during his time in Modena, Goldoni suffered a debilitating depressive episode. He attributed the cause to witnessing a cleric who was known to him being publicly denounced on the scaffold for making sexually explicit comments to a female parishioner while administering the sacrament. Devoting himself to prayer and attending church regularly, Goldoni announced to his father his plan to enter a monastery. His father responded by arranging a trip to Venice on the promise of introducing him to the Order of the Capuchins.

Back in Venice, Goldoni rediscovered his love of theatre. According to the French writer Caraccioli, writing at around this time, Venetians attended the theatres from six to eleven almost every evening, and were more occupied with theatre than worldly affairs or intellectual debate.² As Goldoni's father might have hoped, dining regularly with friends and attending the theatres of Venice resulted in Goldoni abandoning his plans for a monastic life.

Position in the Criminal Chancellery

At the age of twenty-one, Goldoni's father's connections secured him a paralegal position in the Criminal Chancellery.

He acquitted himself so well at the task of preparing criminal investigation reports that

he was promoted to the position of Coadjutor, directly under the Criminal Chancellor. Goldoni's career then seemed settled:

Hitherto I had looked only on employments at a distance; but now I held one which pleased and suited me. I resolved with myself never to quit it; but man proposes, and God disposes.

Between 1727 and 1732 he worked in the Criminal Chancellery in Chioggia and travelled on circuit with the Criminal Chancellor to the northern province of Feltre.

Goldoni's explication of the examiner's art is enlightened by humanistic principles:

The law has prescribed to criminals certain forms of interrogation ... it is necessary to know a little, or endeavour to conjecture the character and mind of the man about to be examined; and observing a medium between rigour and humanity, an endeavour is made to discover the truth without constraining the individual.

It is highly doubtful that such principles guided examinations undertaken before the secret state court, the Consiglio dei Dieci (Council of Ten). Sitting in the Doge's Palace, its function was to judge acts of treason, from which there was no appeal.

Defending his doctoral thesis and readership

The death of his father caused Goldoni to change tack and set out on the path towards becoming an Advocate. The obvious city in which to pursue this career was Venice, where his uncle was an attorney.

But first he needed to obtain a licence from the University of Padua by successfully defending his doctoral thesis.

Having his birthplace in the region, Goldoni was entitled to defend a doctoral thesis *viva voce* and obtain a licence without undertaking a course of studies at the university. To help prepare for the exam he engaged an old friend, Signore Radi, as tutor. Radi assured Goldoni that, "*all I had to pass through was nothing but ceremony*".

Upon attending the university prior to the examination, they learned to their mutual surprise of a new regulation aimed at bringing rigour to the examination process. No longer, it seemed, did the university produce, '*doctors without doctrine*'. The following day:

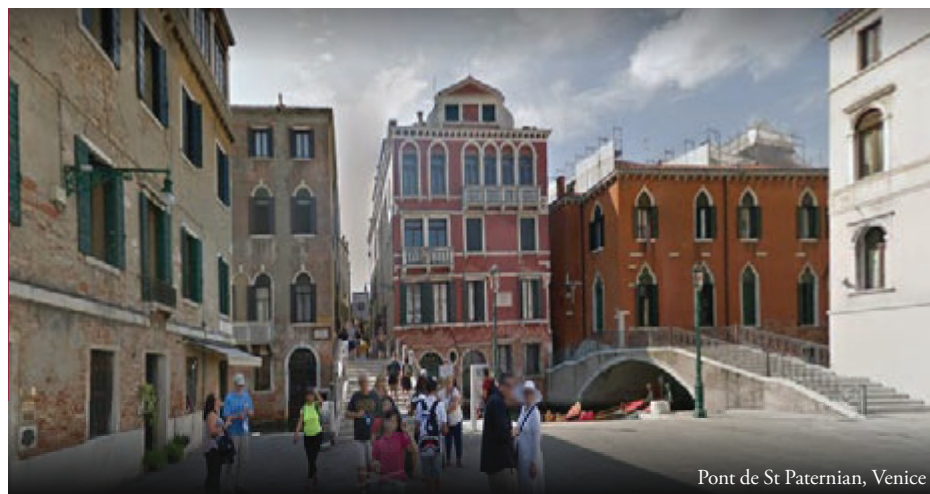
... we repaired to the university to see the points which fate should allot me drawn from the urn. The civil-law point turned on intestate successions, and that of the canon-law on bigamy.



Chamber of the Council of Ten in the Doge's Palace



Palazzo Bo (1493) in the University of Padua (est. 1222)



Pont de St Paternian, Venice

I equipped myself in my professional gown, the same as that of the patricians, enveloped my head in an immense wig, and waited with great impatience for the day of my presentation in court.

That same evening Goldoni's studies were interrupted by the arrival of friends who challenged him to a game of cards. In the early hours of the morning the game was halted by a knock at the door. It was Goldoni's promoter, Signore Pighi, come to collect him for the examination. He describes what transpired that day:

... I gave a dissertation on the whole extent of intestate successions, which met with universal applause; and seeing the success of my boldness, I made an instantaneous transition from the civil to the canon law, and undertook the article of bigamy, which I treated like the other. I went through the laws of the Greeks and Romans, and cited councils. I was fortunate in the questions which fell to my lot; for I knew them by heart; and on this occasion I acquired an immortal honour.

Having been made a licentiate, Goldoni returned to Venice and commenced a two-year readership with an Advocate recommended by his uncle as, 'one of the best pleaders and chamber-counsel in the republic.'

In 1732 he completed his readership.

Finding lodgings and chambers

The next step towards formal admission as an Advocate in Venice was to secure his lodgings and be in chambers:

The advocates at Venice must have their lodgings and be at their chambers in the quarter della Roba. I took apartments at Saint Paternian ... I equipped myself in my professional gown, the same as that of the patricians, enveloped my head in an immense wig, and waited with great impatience for the day of my presentation in court.

Admission ceremony in the Doge's Palace

In 1732 Goldoni attended the ceremony for his admission to the Bar in the Doge's Palace:

This presentation does not take place without ceremony ... I went ... to the bottom of the great staircase in the great

hall of the courts, and for half an hour I was obliged to make so many bows and contortions that my back was almost broken, and my wig resembled the mane of a lion. Everyone who passed me, had something to say respecting me; some observed, that I was a lad with some expression in my countenance; others, that I was a new sweeper of the courts; some embraced me, and others laughed in my face.

At length I ascended, and sent my servant in quest of a gondola, not daring to make my appearance in the open street in my then equipment ...

Plunging into the chaos of the Bar

While waiting for his servant to arrive with the gondola, Goldoni reflected with some trepidation on his choice of profession:

There are generally two hundred and forty advocates in the list at Venice; of these there are from ten to twelve in the first rank, twenty perhaps in the second, and all the rest are obliged to hunt for clients, and the petty fogging [sic] attorneys are willing enough to become their hounds on the condition of sharing together the prey. I was in apprehension for myself, as I was last on the list, and I regretted the chanceries which I had abandoned.

But then, on the other hand, I saw no profession so lucrative and honourable as that of an advocate. A noble Venetian, a patrician, a member of the republic, who would not deign to become merchant, banker, notary, physician, or professor of a university, has no hesitation in embracing the profession of an advocate, which he follows in the courts, and he calls the other advocates his brothers. Everything depended on good fortune: and why was I to be less fortunate than another? The attempt required to be made, and it was incumbent on me to plunge into the chaos of the bar, where perseverance and probity lead to the temple of fortune.

A peddler of bad causes

Immediately following his admission ceremony, Goldoni was approached by a well-dressed woman of an 'inferior order' with a 'profusion of gold about her neck, ears, arms, and fingers'. She professed to know not only Goldoni but every person in the building from the Doge down to the clerks of court. Goldoni gleaned that her servant parents worked within the precincts of the Doge's Palace and, in the course of performing their duties, obtained valuable information about matters before the court which they traded as a lucrative side-hustle. Goldoni's conversation with her on the topic of soliciting law suits is worth setting out in full:

... So you follow the footsteps of your mother?

No, Sir; I do something else.

And what is that?

I solicit law suits.

Solicit law-suits, I do not understand you.

I am as well known as Barabas: all the advocates and attorneys are well known to be my friends, and many people apply to me to procure them counsel and defenders. Those who have recourse to me, are not generally rich; and I apply to new comers, to persons without employment, who wish nothing better than to have an opportunity of making themselves known. Do you know, Sir, that, such as you see me, I have made the fortune of a good dozen of the most famous advocates at this bar. Come, Sir, take courage, with your good leave, I shall also be the making of you.

I was amused with listening to her; and as my servant did not arrive I continued the conversation:

Very well, Madam; have you any good affair at present?



Doge's Palace (left). Goldoni's admission ceremony was held here in 1732

Yes, Sir, I have several, and some of them excellent; I have a widow suspected of having concealed effects; another anxious that a contract of marriage drawn posterior to its date should be held good; I have girls who demand to be portioned; I have wives who wish a separation; and I have people of condition pursued by their creditors: you see you have only to choose.

My good woman,' said I to her, 'I have allowed you to speak, and I wish now to speak in my turn. I am young and entering on my career, and desirous of occasions of employment where I may appear to advantage; but the desire of labour and the itch of pleading will never induce me to undertake such bad causes as those you propose to me.

'Ah, ah,' said she, 'you despise my clients, because I told you there was nothing to be gained; but listen; you shall be well paid, and even paid beforehand if you choose.

I saw my servant at a distance; I rose, and said to the woman with a firm and determined tone:

"No, you are not acquainted with me; I am a man of honour."

She laid hold of my hand, and said with a serious air:

"Bravo! continue always to entertain the same sentiments."

"Ah, ah," said I to her, 'you change your language."

"O yes," said she, 'and the language which I now use is better than that I have quitted. Our conversation has not been without mystery; bear it in mind, and take care never to mention it. Adieu, Sir, be always prudent, and always honourable, and you will find your account in it."

Advocate without a superior cause

Goldoni the Advocate was not only ambitious but pragmatic, recognising that he could not rely on liberal promises and flattery to gain clients. Further knowing that he could not hope to establish a reputation as an advocate of any note without the opportunity of appearing in the superior courts:

I was now an advocate; my introduction to the bar had taken place, and the next thing was to procure clients. I attended every day in court, listening to the masters of the profession, and looking round everywhere to see if my physiognomy happened to take with anyone who might think proper to give me an opportunity of appearing in a cause of appeal.

A new advocate cannot shine and show himself off to advantage in the tribunals where causes originate; and it is in the superior courts alone that he can display his science, eloquence, voice, and grace; four means all equally necessary to place an advocate on the first rank at Venice.

My uncle Indric was liberal in his promises, and all my friends were incessantly flattering me; but in the meantime I was obliged to pass the whole of the afternoon and part of the evening in a closet, that I might not lose the first favourable instant.

The highest court in the Republic was the The Quarantia (Council of Forty or Supreme Court of Forty). Civil and criminal hearings were conducted in separate chambers within the Doge's Palace. The three leaders of the Supreme Court of Forty sat beside the Doge and Minor Council in the Serenissima Signoria, the highest governing body of the Republic.

Scale of fees

Waiting in his 'closet' for clients, Goldoni contemplated the fees to be earned from the numerous consultations (twenty to thirty) leading up to final hearing and the presentation of oral pleadings:

All this mounts to something very high: in my moments of solitude and ennui, I used to amuse myself with attempts to calculate it ...

The lot of beginners at the Bar

Goldoni realistically estimated that it would take three or four years to get a name or gain any money:

Nobody visited me but a few curious persons for the sake of sounding me, or litigants of a dangerous description. I listened patiently to them, and gave them my opinion; I did not keep my watch in my hand; I allowed them to stay as long as they chose; I accompanied them to the door, and they gave me nothing. This is the lot of all beginners, who must lay their account with waiting for three or four years before they can get a name, or gain any money.

Pleading and winning a case in the first six months put Goldoni, in his view, ahead of others beginning at the Bar.

He used his time waiting for clients to create an astrological almanac with witty prognostications for each day of the year.

The continued absence of clients eventually pressed him to consider earning a living from playwrighting:

My closet brought me in nothing, and I was under the necessity of turning my time to some account ...

He initially rejected the idea of writing a comedy as that "*did not harmonize very much with the gravity of my gown*". Tragedy was, "more analogous to my profession ...". The lyrical tragedy, *Alomasonte*, which he

*My facts were true, my reasons
good, my voice sonorous, and
my eloquence not displeasing.
I spoke for two hours, and
on my conclusion I retired
bathed from head to foot.*



Supreme Court, Venice
Gabriel Bella (1730-1799)

commenced writing at this time, went on to be a great flop when it opened in Milan a few years later.

Destiny about to arrive

Coming to the rescue of Goldoni's stalled career, Uncle Indric briefed him in a substantial matter. A note of sarcasm sounds in his description of the magistracy:

... it came before the Avvogadori, a very grave magistracy, like that of the Roman tribunes of the people.

This case provided Goldoni with an opportunity to exhibit his advocacy skills against learned opposing counsel, with a little indulgence given by the court:

The advocate opposed to me was the celebrated Cordelina, the most learned and eloquent man at the bar of Venice; and I had to make an immediate answer without writing or time for meditation.

The day was appointed, and I repaired to the proper tribunal. My adversary spoke for an hour and a half; I listened to him without fear. On the conclusion of his harangue I began mine, in which I endeavoured, by a pathetic preamble, to conciliate the favour of my judge. This was my first exhibition, and I required indulgence. On entering upon the subject, I boldly attacked the harangue of Cordelina; my facts were true, my reasons good, my voice sonorous, and my eloquence not displeasing. I spoke for two hours, and on my conclusion I retired bathed from head to foot.

My servant waited for me in an adjoining room. I changed my linen; I was fatigued and exhausted. My uncle made his appearance, who exclaimed:

'My dear nephew, we have gained the action, and the adverse party is condemned in costs. Courage, my friend,' continued he; 'this first

attempt makes you known as a man who will get on, and you will not be in want of clients.'

Who would not conclude me very fortunate... Heavens! what a destiny. What a number of vicissitudes and reverses.

On the brink of a precipice: in love and in debt

Goldoni's personal and professional life collided when he proposed marriage but could not afford to pay for an expensive traditional Venetian wedding ceremony. Both love and a career at the Bar gave way to economic exigencies:

My closet yielded me little or nothing; I had contracted debts: I saw myself on the brink of a precipice, and I was in love! I mused, I reflected, I sustained a distressing conflict between love and reason; but at last the latter gained the victory over the dominion of the senses.

I communicated my situation to my mother, who, with tears in her eyes,

agreed with me, that some violent resolution was absolutely necessary, to avoid ruin. She mortgaged her property to pay my debts at Venice; I assigned over my Modena property for her maintenance, and I formed the resolution of departing.

In the moment when I had the most flattering prospects, after the successful appearance made by me in court in the midst of the acclamations of the bar, I quitted my country, my relations, my friends, my love, my hopes, and my profession ...

It is arguable that the ill-fated marriage proposal merely hastened his inevitable departure from Venice. But there can be little debate that the Bar's loss was comic theatre's great gain. **BN**

ENDNOTES

- 1 All extracts are from *Memoirs of Goldoni*, Henry Colburn, London, 1814 (English trans. John Black).
- 2 Marquis Louis-Antoine Caraccioli, *Lucidor, or Travels of a philosopher, through the various parts of Europe, Humorously describing the Manners and Customs. Interspersed with anecdotes and characters* (London, 1789), 76.



Chamber of the Forty (Criminal)

Photo: Nomadic Niko.