

The zany story of where pants come from

by Sabine Eiche

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Did you know there's a thread tying your pants to an old Italian theatre tradition, a thread your pants share with the "Barber of Seville," "Marriage of Figaro," slapstick comedy, Punch and Judy, and Shakespeare?

This thread begins in Italy in the 1500s with the *commedia dell'arte*, a popular form of street theatre. It was all improvised buffoonery with professional actors. Plots and characters soon became stock. The masks and costumes readily identified the characters, acting out plots fueled by love, jealousy and intrigue, in which foolish old men, scoundrelly servants, deceitful wives, and maids of easy virtue tossed sallies to and fro.

The best-known characters are Pantalone, Pulcinella, and the Zanni figures Arlecchino and Brighella.

Zanni (Venetian for Gianni) is a collective name given to the servants in the *commedia dell'arte*. They were ludicrous characters, behaving like clowns, mimicking the manners of their masters. Soon the English picked up the word Zanni, changing it to zany, to refer to the same kind of buffoonish character. Shakespeare used it in that sense in "Love's Labour's Lost" (Biron in Act V, Scene II) and in "Twelfth Night" (Malvolio in Act I, Scene V). We now use zany more often as an adjective than a noun, to describe the unconventional, unexpected or idiosyncratic.

In "The Barber of Seville" and the "Marriage of Figaro" (set to music by Rossini and Mozart respectively), Beaumarchais based the character of Figaro on the Zanni called Brighella. While Brighella's name hasn't been translated into

English, that of another Zanni has – Arlecchino, whom we call Harlequin. He's the physically nimble but dull-witted servant dressed in a multi-coloured, patchwork costume, who famously uses two wooden slats to make a smacking noise when hitting someone, a comic routine that's the origin of our word slapstick.

Pulcinella was a mean and crafty Neapolitan hunchback, pretending to be stupid and speaking with a peculiar voice. The English turned Pulcinella into Mr. Punch, husband of Judy, in the Punch and Judy puppet shows still delighting audiences after 350 years.

The character of Pantalone was a decrepit, miserly Venetian merchant dressed in a type of tight-fitting trousers. We derive the word pantaloons from his name. By 1841, pantaloons was abbreviated to pants – which means trousers in American English, but underpants in British English.

Pantalone was originally a generic nickname for a Venetian – like Canuck for a Canadian – because of their devotion to the martyr Saint Pantaleone. Eventually the French took the nickname Pantalone and applied it to the type of hose traditionally worn by Venetians (“pantalone” became the Italian word for pants/trousers). And there you have an extra bit of zaniness about the history of your pants that most English dictionaries don't mention.