

THE UNHAPPY MISER

By

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A Commedia dell'arte for Today

This is a commedia dell'arte that either children or adults can perform. Definitely suitable for middle school students.

The play encourages slapstick antics, even acrobatics! It encourages anachronisms. It is a theatre history learning experience as well, as the actors and audience enjoy the characters of this genre, which the Marx Brothers obviously revered.

THE UNHAPPY MISER

Characters

Pantaloonie - the miser

Columbina - the miser's maid (later Clive and a gypsy)

Harloquino - the miser's other servant

Professor Nitwitsky - the miser's friend

Capitano Braggadocio - the miser's guard

Mistress Loveajesta - the miser's maid's aunt!

The set is a small stage with a curtain. Behind the curtain are step-ladders so that characters can peer over the top (as when they look out the "windows"). This doubles as Pantaloonie's house and Loveajesta's inn. There is a tree stump.

There are 3 scenes, but no scene changes are necessary. Lights can simply be dimmed to indicate a change in time and place.

Props are minimal: Pantaloonie's walking stick, duster for Columbina, 2 goblets and a wine bottle, long straw, basket of food for the journey, Professor's Nitwitsky's books, instruments and map, Braggadoccio's hat (with feather) and sword, Loveajesta's broom. Apples.

Costumes: Each character has one costume, except for Columbina who disguises herself as a boy and a gypsy.

THE UNHAPPY MISER

Flute music (suggestion: **Jean**-Pierre Rampel). Bare stage except for a raised platform with a curtain. Behind the curtain are ladders for the "window" scenes. PANTALOOONIE, bent over and using a walking stick emerges from behind the curtain.

PANTALOOONIE

My name is Pantaloonie and this is my house (points to platform). I am rich (holds up money bag) and famous (holds up newspaper with his name in the headlines) and have everything I need.. except Happiness. And I don't know why.

As he exits through the center split of the curtain, COLUMBINA enters with a feather duster and a stool.

COLUMBINA

My name is Columbina, servant to Pantaloonie. I keep the household neat and in order, but it's work, work, work. I never seem to finish. And it's twice as hard in Pantaloonie's house because he is always so sad even though he is very, very rich. I don't get it, do you? It is much easier to work in a happy house, isn't it? But morning, noon and night he's nothing but GLUM, GLUM, GLUM. And no matter how hard I try, I can't make him happy or laugh. I dance for him (she does), sing songs for him (she sings), but nothing seems to work.

Harloquino pokes his head through the curtain and puts his finger to his lips. He tiptoes behind Columbina and give her a little kick, sending her somersaulting across the floor.

HARLOQUINO

Good morning, Columbina.

COLUMBINA

How dare you. I'll give you a what for.

HARLOQUINO

Come on, that's just my way of saying, Good Morning.

COLUMBINA (Winds up her arm and hits him on the head with her feather duster - he falls down) And that's just my way of saying, Good Night.

HARLOQUINO
Oh, you broke my head. Come on, help me up.

COLUMBINA
I'll help you with my foot.

She sends him somersaulting across the floor.

HARLOQUINO
While you're kicking people around, why don't you give that Capitano Braggadocio a little help out the door?

COLUMBINA (coyly)
Whatever do you mean?

HARLOQUINO
You know what I mean. Feeding him in the kitchen, flirting with him in the pantry.

COLUMBINA (Teasing)
But Capitano Braggadocio is so handsome, so brave, so...

HARLOQUINO
So STUPID!??

COLUMBINA
You'd be a poor match for the Capitano. Why, even I could beat you with my feather duster. En garde, you clown.

Columbina's feather duster tickles Harloquino.

HARLOQUINO (laughs uncontrollably)
No, no, stop it. Please, stop it.

COLUMBINA
Say: Capitano is a brave man. Say it.

HARLOQUINO
Never. (She tickles him) Stop, please. Okay. The Capitano is...

PANTALOONIE (Off)

What's going on? What's all that laughing. It's giving me a headache.

Pantaloonie enters. Harloquino does not see him as he swats at Columbina and misses her but hits Pantaloonie as he enters.

PANTALOONIE

Ooof. Harloquino, you rascal.

Columbina starts to dust as though nothing has happened.

COLUMBINA

Sir, Harloquino suffers from these fits and you really shouldn't punish him for something he can't help. It's a kind of sickness that can only be cured by not letting him have any FOOD for a day or so. The more days the better.

HARLOQUINO

No Food!! I'd sooner die!

PANTALOONIE

QUIET. My good friend, Professor Nitwitsky is coming to see me today. He may have a cure for my unhappiness.

COLUMBINA

Are you ill, Pantaloonie?

PANTALOONIE

I'm sick, sick, sick. And I'm sadder and more unhappy today than usual because I'm sick of being sad.

COLUMBINA (To audience)

How sad can one man be?

PANTALOONIE

So I asked the Professor to come over. I cannot go on being sad a day longer.

HARLOQUINO

But sir, I have the cure for sadness.

PANTALOONIE

You do?

HARLOQUINO

Certainly. Whenever you are sad, just be happy and the sadness will go away.

PROFESSOR (From off)

Hello, hello, indeed, hello.

PROFESSOR (OS)

Someone come and help me. I've got my arms full of wonderful books.

PANTALOONIE

Columbina, it's Professor Nitwitsky. Go and help. (As Columbina exits, to Harloquino) And you, no tricks while the Professor is here. Go hide yourself some place until I call you.

Harloquino goes to the door. Columbina holds the curtains aside for PROFESSOR NITWISKY. The Professor is dressed in an old black professorial robe. The Professor collides with Harloquino. They do a couple of turnstile movements and then Harloquino disappears into the house. The Professor spins and books and a large black leather bag go flying. The Professor lands in Pantaloonie's arms.

PROFESSOR

My friend, Pantaloonie, I am so happy to see you and so happy that you are so sad that you want me to see you. Indeed, I am.

PANTALOONIE

Yes, Professor Nitwitsky, I am too. Columbina, bring some of my very expensive wine for Professor Nitwitsky, for he is Professor in the Department of Everything, Nothing and All Else.

PROFESSOR

Many thanks, Pantaloonie. Indeed, I am in need of a thirst-quenching beverage. Carrying books is an arduous task and as the most learned and ancient philosophers have often pointed out, when one drinks, one is no longer thirsty. Indeed, it is the truth.

PANTALOONIE

Most true, most true, Professor Nitwitsky. I have a wine which is so light and dry. A wonderful wine that cost me an arm and a leg. You'll hardly know you're drinking it, it's so light.

Columbina enters with a bottle and two goblets on a tray. Pantaloonie and the Professor go on the platform in front of the curtain. Pantaloonie gives the professor a goblet.

PANTALOONIE

Ah, here we are. (Pours wine into the goblets.) For you, Professor and for me.

PROFESSOR

A thousand thanks, indeed, Pantaloonie. A toast. (He raises his goblet as Harloquino peeks over the top of the curtain with a very long straw and drains the Professor's goblet.) Indeed and indeed, with the aid of my vast and superior knowledge of all things, great and small, and with the help of my many beautifully bound books, may we soon find the nature of your sickness and soon dispel the cause thereof.

They drink.

PROFESSOR

You are right, Pantaloonie, a very dry wine indeed, and very light.

PANTALOONIE

The very best. Very light. Another goblet of my very expensive wine, Professor Nitwitsky?

PROFESSOR

Yes, don't mind if I do, indeed.

Pantaloonie pours another goblet full.

PANTALOONIE

A toast: to my good friend, who has great knowledge of all things small and not so small, and who will aid me in my search to find a cure for my unhappiness and not charge me too much.

During the toast, Harloquino uses the straw to drain the professor's goblet. Pantaloonie and the professor drink.

PANTALOONIE (A little tipsy)
A truly delicious... (forgets the word)

PROFESOR
Wine. Pantaloonie, this is the very driest and very lightest of wines I have ever drunk. Hardly tasted like anything, if you ask me.

PANTALOONIE
One more glass then, my good, good, good friend.

PROFESSOR
Pantaloonie, may I pour the last glass of this wondrous wine. I would like to examine it more closely. Indeed I would.

Professor takes the bottle and looks at it. Then as he looks at the goblet, he holds the bottle up high behind him, and as he does, Harloquino reaches down and lifts the bottle out of the Professor's hand. Not noticing, the Professor begins to pour and is completely surprised to find nothing in her hand.

PROFESSOR
GREAT GALAXIES! The wine is so light it flew right out of my hand.

They look around. By this time Harloquino has drained the bottle and giving a mighty hiccup, drops down behind the curtain. The Professor watches as Pantaloonie weaves toward a stool.

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PANTALOONIE

That seems like a very long trip and very long trips make me very, very unhappy. (Sits on the stool, dejected.)

PROFESSOR

And this journey will be beset with many dangers, if I read my map correctly. (Looks at map) Indeed and indeed, ooh ahhs. (Columbina and Harloquino echo his words.) But Pantaloonie, if I am to cure you, as I trust you wish me to, we must undertake this journey..

PANTALOONIE

Oh, well. All right. Anything to regain my happiness. Let's hope it doesn't cost much, Professor Nitwitsky.

PROFESSOR

Well, indeed. This is a very wise undertaking and I would also suggest we take with us some brave and courageous person to protect us on our way. Indeed I would recommend that.

COLUMBINA

Well, here I am.

PROFESSOR/PANTALOONIE/HARLOQUINOO

A woman?

COLUMBINA

YES, a woman. I'm as good as ten men

PANTALOONIE

Well, it's certain you are not the man we want.

COLUMBINA (To audience)

Ah, I know just the man they want. The biggest coward in the world, but if you hear him talk, you'd think he was the bravest and most handsome man that ever lived. (To Pantaloonie) Sir, I know just the man you need.

HARLOQUINO (Thinks she will name him)
You do?

COLUMBINA
Capitano Braggadocio.

PANTALOONIE
Do you think he would undertake this
perilous journey.

COLUMBINA
I'm sure he will. (To audience) If
you stuff him with food night and day
and pretend his stories are the best
you have ever heard.

PANTALOONIE
Where is this Capitano Braggadocio?

COLUMBINA
I can have him here in a wink. I'll be
back in a flash. (She exits)

HARLOQUINO
Sir, if I may say something. This man
is.

PANTALOONIE
QUIET. You may not say anything.

Columbina enters.

COLUMBINA
Here is the mighty and magnificent
Capitano Braggadocio.

She holds the curtain open. Capitano Braggadocio enters. He wears a sword, cap with feathers, etc. He crosses to Pantaloonie and makes a sweeping bow. The Professor has been reading a book and has his back to the Capitano so that the sword pokes him when the Capitano bows.

CAPITANO
Capitano Braggadocio, sir. An honor.

PROFESSOR
YOW!

All look at the professor.

PROFESSOR

Something stung me, (points to tush)
right here, indeed, right here.

PANTALOONIE

It must have been a bee.

The Capitano turns to Pantaloonie again, the professor goes back to his books. The Capitano bows and his sword sticks the professor again.

PROFESSOR

YOW! AND INDEED YOW AGAIN.

As Harloquino stands nearby by, the professor glares at him and returns to his book.

CAPITANO

Permit me to say..

Same action with the sword and the professor.

PROESSOR

YOW! YOW!

PANTALOONIE (Nearly losing it)

LET'S GET DOWN TO BUSINESS. Capitano Braggadocio, I have been told of your brave exploits,

CAPITANO

BRAVE! Hardly describes my deed, sir. When only a boy of 12, I was captured by pirates. I was forced to walk the plank. Fortunately, I landed on the back of a big blue whale that split the ship in two, gobbled up all the pirates and took me back to shore.

PANTALOONIE

That's all very interesting. We are planning a very dangerous journey.

PROFESSOR

A perilous journey, indeed.

CAPITANO

Danger! Journey? That reminds me of a story. As a mere boy of 10, I was in

the Spanish wars and beat armies right
and left as David slew Politath.

PROFESSOR

That's Goliath, I believe.

CAPITANO

I'm so ferocious I eat giants for
breakfast, dragons for lunch and clock
radios for dinner. AND, I have rescued
more damsels in distress from
cutthroats than I can count.

COLUMBINA (Aside)

How does a maiden get rescued from his
lies, I wonder.

CAPITANO

Ah, the ladies they adore me. (Looks
at Columbina) I am sorry for them
there isn't more of me to go around.

COLUMBINA (Aside, leaves)

Who would want him?

CAPITANO

Ah, but you wished to say something to
me about a dangerous journey, Mr.
Pantaloonie.

Columbina disguised as a young man, Clive, enters. A sign flips over curtain: **INN, MISTRESS LOVEAJESTA, Proprietress.**

COLUMBINA

Ahh my aunt's inn. (Calls out) Helloooo!
Mistress of the Inn. HELLLLOOO!

MISTRESS (Off)

Who's calling? Who's there?

COLUMBINA (To audience)

That's my auntie's voice, all right. I wonder if she will recognize me. Hey, Mistress LoveaJesta.

MISTRESS (At "window")

What's your business?

COLUMBINA

I hear you have free food here. And since I have no money...

MISTRESS

WHAT! No money? Then you've definitely come to the wrong Inn, young sir. I'm a poor woman, I don't feed every beggar that comes to my door. Now be off.

COLUMBINA

No, I think I'll just stay till you give me some food.

MISTRESS

Well, we'll just see about that.
(Disappears from window and enters through the door (slit in the curtain) with a broom.) NOW. Leave or must I use this broom to sweep you away?

COLUMBINA

You have to catch me first.

MISTRESS

I'll give you something to run for.
(Chase music.) Take that (Tries to hit with her broom but misses) And that.
(She misses again.) Oh, I'm out of breath.

COLUMBINA (Laughing)
Don't you recognize me, Auntie?

MISTRESS
Auntie!! I have no nephew.

COLUMBINA
No nephew?

MISTRESS
Only a niece.

COLUMBINA (Takes off cap)
And here she is!

MISTRESS
Columbina, you little minx. Don't you have anything better to do with your time than playing tricks on your aunt?

COLUMBINA
You're not the one I want to trick. And I need your help to do it.

MISTRESS
Me! Talk on. You know I'll do what I can, especially if there's a joke to be played on someone.

COLUMBINA
To be brief, my Pantaloonie is coming this way. I have persuaded him to stay the night here.

MISTRESS
He could not do better on any highway.

COLUMBINA
With him are: Professor Nitwitsky, who talks big words and walks in circles and Capitano Braggadocio who's full of hot air and is frightened of his own shadow.

MISTRESS
And that rascal Harloquino?

COLUMBINA
He's with them, too. And I'm pretending to be Clive.

MISTRESS

Oh, this is exciting. I'm always ready for jokes and fun. (To audience) That's why I'm called Mistress LoveaJesta.

COLUMBINA

Wait. There they are down the road. Make them welcome and I'll tell you my plans.

MISTRESS

Leave it all to me.

Enter Pantaloonie, the Professor, the Capitano and Harloquino.

PANTALOONIE

Ahh, Clive. This must be the Inn, and this must be..

MISTRESS

Mistress LoveaJesta, you do my humble inn an honor by staying in it.

CAPITANO

Ahh, good mistress, I understand you have good food such as pies and cakes and tarts..

MISTRESS (Coyly)

And cookies and grapes, figs and chickens roasted to a turn, watermelons, puddings of every kind.

CAPITANO

Company, halt. This is the place, Pantaloonie. This is definitely the place.

PROFESSOR

Indeed, it has a most favorable and flavorful aspect to it.

MISTRESS

If you will all come this way, I'll show you to your rooms. I'm sure you'd like to rest awhile before dinner.
