

Cast of Characters

in order of appearance

TILLY AND POLLY; *clowns (male)* Mute
COUNT MANCINI; *a shabby aristocrat* Tenor
BRIQUET; *ringmaster and owner of the circus* Bass-Baritone
ZINIDA; *lion-tamer and Briquet's wife* Dramatic Soprano
PANTALOOON; *a gentleman turned clown* Baritone
CONSUELO; *The Bareback Tango Queen* Soprano
BEZANO; *bareback rider, Consuelo's trainer and partner* Tenor
BARON REGNARD; *a stolid aristocrat, from commerce* Bass-Baritone
CHORUS: *clowns, barker, tall man, small man, fat lady, acrobats, dancers,
and other circus personnel*

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Place: Paris
Time: 1910

The scene for all three acts is the combined office, rehearsal room, and lounging room of a small circus established in Paris. There are five or six chairs, two or three small tables; center, a sofa; and right front, a portable desk. Rear center is a window opening on the ring; it is high and small. Rear right is a ramp leading to the ring through an archway. Left front is a door leading to the streets. On the walls are posters of "Briquet's Continental Circus," some depicting ZINIDA AND HER LIONS, others of CONSUELO, THE BAREBACK TANGO QUEEN.

The appearance of the stage varies for the various acts as follows:

ACT I. A poster depicting ZINIDA AND HER LIONS should be in a prominent position. Other posters may be used to dress the set but the above-mentioned one should predominate.

ACT II. About two weeks later. The poster of ZINIDA and her lions from the First Act should now be replaced by an equally prominent one of the new clown, PANTALOOON, HE WHO GETS SLAPPED. The choral scene which opens the Second Act of the opera may be played before a scrim which represents an area around the Barker's box outside the circus tent. The alternate text should then be used and part of the chorus may be costumed as customers. The scrim would then be raised just before the duet between Pantaloon and Mancini.

ACT III. A week later. The scene is the same except that it is now much more lively and colorful. There is a new clearness and order of things, and new splashes of color everywhere. Two roustabouts at the back are replacing the poster of Pantaloon with a huge poster announcing the benefit performance for and final appearance of CONSUELO, THE BAREBACK TANGO QUEEN. At the discretion of the stage director, however, Pantaloon's Ballad which opens Act III may be sung before the same scrim that was used in Act II in which case lighting suggesting moonlight should be thrown on the scrim. Naturally the roustabouts would, in this case, be dispensed with and the poster would simply be in place when the scrim is raised.

ACT I. Tilly and Polly, clowns in Briquet's Continental Circus, are rehearsing their act when Briquet and Count Mancini enter arguing. Mancini, by threatening to remove his daughter Consuelo, the Bareback Tango Queen, from the circus, attempts to wheedle an advance on Consuelo's salary. Briquet's wife, Zinida, the Lion Tamer, enters and joins the argument; finally they agree on a small advance.

While they are involved in this transaction, a stranger, aristocratic in appearance, comes in quietly by the street door. When questioned by Briquet he expresses his wish to become a clown. Prodded by Zinida, Briquet reluctantly hires him as Pantaloon—He Who Gets Slapped. Consuelo and her partner Bezano enter and are introduced to Pantaloon.

Mancini reminds Consuelo of their luncheon date with Baron Regnard. When she says that she must rehearse with Bezano and cannot go he stalks out furious and tells her to make her own excuses to the Baron. As Consuelo and Bezano start back toward the ring Zinida tries in vain to get the latter's attention.

Pantaloon tries to cover an awkward moment by asking whether the two young people are in love, but Zinida tells him to tend to his own affairs. Briquet asks Pantaloon for his real name; it is needed for the authorities. Reluctantly Pantaloon shows his credentials, which greatly impress Zinida and Briquet. Zinida tells her husband to show Pantaloon around the circus and to send Bezano in to her.

Zinida restlessly waits for Bezano. When he comes in she violently expresses her passion for him and her jealousy of Consuelo. Finally losing control she throws herself at Bezano, but he forcibly rejects her. Bezano abruptly returns to the ring as Baron Regnard arrives for his date with Consuelo.

Zinida goes to fetch her, and the Baron while waiting examines a fine string of pearls. Consuelo arrives and politely tells him that she cannot join him for lunch. The Baron, irritated and disappointed, finally offers a surprise to Consuelo, who is naively pleased at the thought of a present. He places the pearls around her neck, and then embraces her and pleads his love. After a struggle, during which the string of pearls is broken, Consuelo in tears is forced to cry out that the Baron is repellent to her and that she tolerates him only because of her father.

ACT II. The chorus of circus artists, during an intermission in their performance, sings of the splendors and excitements of the circus with its animals, freaks, acrobats, and above all the daring tightrope walker.

Pantaloon, Briquet, and Mancini enter. The Count commends the clown for his brilliant show, but Briquet chides him for extending his mockery to the dangerous subjects of religion, patriotism, and marriage. Pantaloon, still in the spirit of his act, extends his fantasies even farther by bringing the world of the audience as well as that of the ring into the play he improvises.

As the bell rings, the chorus departs, singing once more of the pleasures of the audience. Mancini detains Pantaloon, saying—as one gentleman to another—that he desperately needs money to buy off his latest mistress. Pantaloon takes this chance to ask about Consuelo and about Mancini's antecedents. The answers are impatient and vague, but Pantaloon is able to gather that Mancini is a fraudulent count and that Consuelo is not his daughter. As guarantee for his loan Mancini offers his certainty that the Baron will marry Consuelo: the Baron, moved now not only by an old lecher's lust but also by his desire to ally himself with a genuinely noble title, has committed himself to the marriage in a letter.

The two are interrupted by Briquet staggering out of the ring, unable to bear any longer Zinida's mad recklessness with her lions. The dead silence from the ring is broken by a crash of yells and applause. Zinida comes slowly down the ramp, in a mixture of ecstasy and shock, having triumphed over her red lion but having been clawed by him. She is followed by a number of the performers, including Consuelo and Bezano. Her words are only for Bezano: all that she has been doing is for proof that her red lion really loves her, that she is capable of being loved

When Bezano, without a word, turns on his heel and goes off, her triumphant light is extinguished and she walks off as though dead.

Consuelo remains alone with Pantaloon. Saddened and puzzled by what she has just witnessed, Consuelo starts to ask whether love is always this unhappy thing that it seems to be for Zinida or that it is likely to be for her in her forthcoming marriage with the Baron. Before he can answer she abruptly turns to playful questions. Pantaloon's response embraces both the serious and the playful. He answers her in terms of a palm-reading fantasy about her destiny, in which he warns her about the destructive danger of marrying the Baron. When she asks about Bezano, Pantaloon grudgingly admits that she might be happy with him. He then turns to the mystery of her origin, and his fantasy becomes serious. In hypnotic tones he tells her that like Venus she rose from the sea, and must return to the sea if she is not to be doomed. Consuelo, caught up in the fantasy, asks how she can return. Pantaloon, completely under the spell of his own imagination, says that he, he is the old sea god come down to carry her back—and attempts to kiss her.

This abruptly breaks the spell for Consuelo: she slaps him. At this he recalls—or realizes—that this fantasy is only another of his plays, but before he can explain further he is interrupted by Zinida, who had come back from the ring and had been watching the end of this little scene.

In a violent diatribe (yet somehow tinged with sympathy), she mocks Pantaloon and reveals the frustrations of his earlier attempts to reform the world about him. Consuelo, provoked by Zinida's attack, rises to his defense. Sobered by this, Zinida finally wonders only why he has continually put himself into the position of being slapped. Pantaloon, seeming to reflect on his whole life, can only reply: "Am I not Pantaloon—He Who Gets Slapped?"

ACT III. While the circus is being readied for a gala performance celebrating the forthcoming marriage of Consuelo to the Baron, Pantaloon sings his ballad symbolically expressing the fate of Consuelo and himself. The trumpets announce the entrance of the wedding procession; he abruptly ends this mood and pretends to be far gone in drunkenness. Against the background of the wedding-chorus a quintet of the major characters express their individual thoughts about this marriage: Consuelo her grief, Mancini his opportunistic triumph, Zinida her cynical prophecy of the horns that await the Baron, Briquet his disappointment at losing a star performer, and Bezano his utter despair.

Pantaloon breaks in, saying that he has arranged a little entertainment in the style of the medieval court ceremonies. After a burlesqued overture his play-within-a-play unfolds itself. Pantaloon takes the role of a slinking and conniving Mancini, while Tilly is an over-coy and simpering Consuelo to Polly's spiderish and lecherous Baron. The playlet farcically reveals the plots and deceptions of Mancini. When the real Baron Regnard finally realizes through Pantaloon's play that Consuelo is a nameless waif and that Mancini is a fake count, he lashes out violently against Pantaloon, against Mancini and against the whole trumpery circus—and then storms out.

Mancini confesses his frauds, entrusts Consuelo to the care of the circus folk, and departs. For a moment Consuelo is desolate, until she and Bezano realize that at last they are free to seek each other. In a tango-duet they proclaim their love and hope.

The performers jubilantly return to the ring, to give a benefit performance for the Tango King and Queen. Zinida and Briquet finally give full acceptance to the wisdom as well as the clownish talents of Pantaloon, as they too go up the ramp to the ring.

Pantaloon, alone on the stage, sings to the poster picturing Consuelo: she is the Queen of Beauty for whom he is the fool, ever-loving and ever deserving to be slapped. Tilly and Polly come to fetch him, but he tells them that he is leaving—there is nothing remaining for him here. He takes off his clown costume, revealing his street clothes underneath, and quietly departs by the street door through which he had first entered.