When Jacques Lecoq asked me to join the faculty of the École Lecoq and teach alongside him, it was in part because my company, The Moving Picture Mime Show, had developed and produced a number of successful performance pieces in styles of mask work from larval to commedia, and in an updated version of pantomime blanche that would be called ‘cartoon mime’. This production success would not have been possible without our exposure to masks, and the dramatic level they inhabit, that we learned at the École Jacques Lecoq.

In the first year of the École, students are exposed to the use of mask in its many forms, as a tool for the actor. They come to understand and to feel what mask brings to a performance in terms of heightened dramatic impact. In the second year of training, the students attempt to achieve that ‘dramatic level of the mask’ in various historically significant styles of theatre. Greek tragedy, melodrama, ‘pantomime blanche’, Commedia dell’arte, clown, and more recently, bouffon – these styles are reference points for the actor to experience corporeally. After graduation, they are encouraged to use, mix, or invent whatever style suits their nature and the piece they are making.

In the case of The Moving Picture Mime Show, our aesthetic ran to the exaggerations and fast-paced rhythms of Chuck Jones cartoons (Road Runner, etc.), whose absurd imagery lent itself to the language of pantomime blanche, which we therefore adopted (and bent a bit), adding onomatopoeic vocal sound effects (The Seven Samurai, Creatures from the Swamp, The Lottery). For highly detailed character studies, the larval mask was our tool of choice (The Exam, Handle with Care, ...), and when we wanted characters to be able to talk and yet still have access to the level of absurd and exaggerated comedy, we used commedia-style masks (Passionate Leave). All of these were distinctly ‘Moving Picture Mime Show’ in style, and yet too, they all were built on the experience of their stylistic precursors in the work at the École Lecoq.

Perhaps at this point it would be prudent to point out that the theatrical term ‘the mask’ can refer to the actual mask that the actor is wearing on their head, as well as to the character (mask and actor’s body beneath it) that is experienced by the audience as a living being on stage. In most cases, the meaning of the term is clear from its context. In some writing, the latter meaning of the term is capitalized, but that seems to connote an unnecessary ‘Sacredness’. I prefer (as did Lecoq) to treat the mask as simply a tool of theatre craft, not to be revered,
but to be understood, worked with, and respected – like props, swords, flying harnesses, and other actors.

In the Lecoq pedagogy, the concept and use of the mask is paramount. It begins in the first year, with an introduction to the Neutral Mask (here I think the capitals are appropriate, since the use of ‘neutral’ in this case is a term of art). Then, after the students’ bodies are conditioned to embodying (or ‘identifying with’) various non-human things (elements, trees, colors, etc.), larval masks are introduced, with their strict articulation and playfulness.

Later, in the second year, as various historical styles are presented (Greek tragedy, melodrama, . . . ), the students are introduced to both the mask-work of commedia and the tiniest mask, the clown nose.

The use of mask in theatre is like the use of poetry in language. It operates on another level than realism, a level at which each element takes on greater significance, and, when successful, is therefore the richer for it. Its spectrum of movement runs from the carefully chosen naturalistic movement of full character masks to the more exaggerated movements of larval and commedia masks. And, like poetry, it does not work if it does not seem natural, right, ‘juste’. If it seems pompous, or artificial (like the use of the word ‘juste’ in an English essay), the audience is aware of the actor trying to be something they are not. But when the actor can avoid doing ‘what is not the mask’, then the audience sees only the mask moving, and the effect is achieved.

The mask elevates the significance of what occurs in the dramatic space. To maintain this effect, the actor must be able to command both movement and stillness: to move only as the mask would move, and to remain dramatically alive through moments of stillness, without becoming ‘fixed’ like a statue. As all life is a dance between movement and stillness, the one leading always to the other, each following the other in succession, the palette of the movement (and mask) actor is to play with the rhythm and emphasis of the dance between the two. In immobility is emphasis, and in movement is the rhythm and flow.

An important part of playing theatrical masks is the ability to articulate and orchestrate the rhythms of the mask’s movement (the movement of the actor’s head) and the movement of the actor’s body – while still maintaining the credible integration of the two. This attention to articulation is important because the audience can only ‘read’ the emotional attitude of the mask when it is momentarily at rest. When the mask is moved quickly, the magic of its believability is momentarily interrupted/blurred until it arrives at the next attitude of relative stillness, when it can be read again. This, when deftly done, is much like the image-retention that occurs between frames of an animated film. And this is why the actor must be as aware as a film animator of the separate rhythms of the mask and the body in the whole movement pattern – like a piano player being aware of the separate rhythms of their two hands: each is specific, but they fit together to play the whole.

Full masks

The full-face masks explored in the Lecoq pedagogy fall into three basic categories: larval, expressive, and utilitarian. The utilitarian masks are, in my experience, of use only as pedagogical tools, encouraging the actor to explore the dramatic and character implications of abstract movements suggested by the forms of such masks as the baseball catcher’s mask, hockey mask, welder’s mask, etc. While interesting and provocative in exploration, they remain of extremely limited use in a dramatic performance.
Larval masks

Larval masks are large, whole-head masks based on the masks used in the Carnivale in Basel, Switzerland. Their features are relatively unformed, yet pronounced enough to suggest a definite shape – a beak-like nose, a doughty pillow of a head, a profile like the prow of a ship, etc., – like a Japanese brush-artist doing a drawing in three strokes of the pen. The eyes, if they are indicated, are designed to reinforce the cartoon-like image of the face that the audience projects onto the form of the mask. As the mask form is so exaggerated (and usually larger than the performer's head), the eyes are often not in the most helpful place for the actor to see through. Thus, the actor must learn to manipulate his or her head with a sense of where the mask is looking rather than where the actor's eyes may be pointing. This requires and encourages an awareness of the actor moving their body in a conscious, deliberate way at a technical remove from his or her own personal emotional expression – like a puppeteer expressing emotion through the movement of their hands and arms. This is, in a very real sense, an extension of the discovery that begins with the Neutral Mask, where one learns that in order to move like the mask, one must learn how to move organically, naturally (though 'abnormally' for the actor); to respond genuinely to urges and interests, but as the mask, not as the actor. On a subtle level, this is what actors do when playing (human) characters that are not themselves. But in the case of the larval mask, the actor is playing a different animal, a different being. It is, in a way, like learning to think of your body and mask as the puppet that you manipulate to create the image and movement you want the audience to read.

And 'read' is an appropriate term for the action, since larval mask work really emphasizes the grammar of an audience's process of understanding action. For this reason, it is a great tool for developing a sense of the value of articulation of actions.

A look, a turn, a movement toward something – each separate action makes a statement that the audience reads to follow the emotional state and intention of the larval mask character. And the way in which each movement is done conveys its own modifier to the action (suspicious vs. startled, etc.). Thus, the larval mask is the absolute boot camp of training in the practice of articulation, and the knack of making use of all the possible nuances of mask characters' movements in interaction with the space around them and with other characters.

This capacity to sustain the audience's interest in the dramatic implication of each articulated movement, and to get the most value out of each gesture, can be a delight for the audience. And for the actor, at first, it can seem an excruciatingly minute Noh-like enforcement of technical demands on their performance. But the process becomes much easier when one can simply 'become' the mask and 'allow' its behavior to flow naturally as a response to the dramatic situation. Like mime technique, after some practice, the technical aspects can become second nature, and the transformation to an ease of performance can take place. The style imposes a certain specificity and articulation (like the grammatical rules of a language), but the actor, with practice, rehearsal, and experience, can feel as natural expressing themselves through the mask as through any other style.

There are some essential dramaturgical constraints in the development of a larval mask piece: they cannot do the things that human beings do most – they can't talk, and they can't eat. So it is a bit of a trick to write a play of any length in which these two activities do not occur. But it is possible. And when it is achieved, the effect can be breathtaking for an audience. The most fertile ground for larval masks seems to be in the area of games and
other contests (even the contest of living together, or the struggle to overcome life’s small challenges). This is perhaps because struggle can so easily be physicalized, and thus made comprehensible to the audience. Certainly discovery and exploration are what first develop in improvisation, but in order for a piece to be sustained and have a narrative arc, it helps to find a way to depict some conflict or obstacle to overcome.

I have been lucky enough to participate in two very successful pieces in this style, both with The Moving Picture Mime Show. The first is a 20-minute piece about three students taking an examination at school under a headmaster’s gaze (The Examination). The second (Handle with Care) is a longer piece (40 minutes) set in an old-folks’ home, in which we see the small struggles for autonomy, hierarchy, and dignity played out among two old geezers and the nurse in charge of them.

Both of these pieces, incidentally, illustrate a principle that seems generally to hold true in all mask work: that the effect of the mask is supported and enhanced by the use of costumes, props, and scenery, rather than leaving these things (mimed) to the audience’s imagination. If the play does not require instant changes of the imaginary circumstances (and full-mask pieces usually don’t, tending toward limited locations and perhaps the odd flashback), these concrete props and costumes do more to help the audience believe in the illusion than is lost in the accommodation of quick costume and/or set changes.

**Expressive/character masks**

If larval mask is a three-stroke sketch, then character mask is the detailed Durer engraving of character. Larval masks are ‘beings’ that remind us of ourselves in their behavior; character masks are clearly human people. The facial features are more recognizable, and of relatively normal proportions, although still slightly exaggerated for effect. They are realistic enough to convey a well-defined expression at rest, but they are artfully selected and highlighted so the expression may appear to change during the course of the play.

The clear definition of the character mask is an advantage in that the audience can more easily ‘see’ the character to begin with. However, it is also a disadvantage in that it makes it more difficult to convince the audience to ‘see’ changing emotional states in a mask that is so clearly defined. Generally speaking, it is relatively easy to portray the ‘first image’ of the mask.

![Figure 15.1](image1.png) Jacques Lecoq with an expressive mask. © Patrick Lecoq.
Masks, pantomime blanche, cartoon mime

(that which appears most readily to the eye) by adopting a body and behavior that conforms to the emotional attitude that the mask suggests.

However, in order for a mask to live for more than a brief period on stage, it must be able to change. In life, things – particularly living things – change in response to their surrounding events. So in order for a mask to be believable to the audience, they must be able to see it change in response to what it encounters. This is more difficult the more the features of a mask are fixed. So for each mask, the actor must (with the help of their colleagues) ‘discover’ the mask – find the emotional attitudes it can convey, and how it can move between them.

To discover the range of the character mask, it is easiest to begin with the ‘contra-mask’ – the opposite attitude to the initially obvious one. Thus, if a mask appears haughty and arrogant (i.e. high forehead, high eyebrows), the actor should try to discover how (with body and gesture) they can make it appear to be humble and meek. In addition to what might come first to mind, a straight spine and rigid posture, they should explore the effect of stooped and yielding attitudes as well. Here, as in all mask work, manipulating the context in which the mask is seen is a particularly helpful technique. Creating a dramatic space (a physical or emotional environment) in the scene that would favor the intended character or emotional attitude will help the audience. In the example above, perhaps ‘lost in a foreign subway system’ might be a good choice to try. Certainly one could, as in the case of the classic British military colonel, maintain an attitude of rigid, haughty arrogance even in such a situation, but it would also be easy to imagine (identify with) the feeling, body, and emotional attitude of being lost, worried, and uncertain – helping the audience see the contra-mask in action instead of the primary image of the character mask.

From there, depending on the range of the mask, the actor will try to find other aspects of the range of human response that can be made to ‘work’ for the mask in question. The more such aspects are discovered (the more physical ‘attitudes’), the broader the actor’s range of physical and emotional ‘attitudes’. And from that range, they can choose the melody of their acting score by moving from one ‘note’ to the other, as the narrative suggests, in the sequence and rhythm of their choice.

For the actor, the challenge is always allowing the body to move as the mask would move rather than as the actor. And dramaturgically, the issue is finding a narrative that will be ‘playable’ using the limited range of emotional attitudes that is offered by the design of each particular mask.

Interestingly, particularly for the larval masks, much of the magical delight for the audience actually comes from the simultaneous experience of both sides of a theatrical paradox: a belief in the imaginary world of the mask and an understanding that the mask is ‘not real’.

The paradox of this contradictory yet harmonious experience is a rare novelty in entertainment (the cinema usually delivering its effect as a unified total-immersion experience), and it therefore constitutes an area in which live theatre offers a niche of experience that cannot be better produced in the movies. The thrill of this paradoxical experience is uniquely satisfying to the audience. Why? Because it is they who are creating the magic, in their own imaginations, by the act of believing – and that engagement, that empowerment, is most pleasing to them. Indeed, this act of enchantment by our own imaginations is where our delight in the storytelling arts began.

Pantomime blanche

This theatre of imagination is brought to its apotheosis in the style of pantomime blanche (in English: ‘white pantomime’ – after the white face of its most well-known practitioner,
Deburaud’s Pierrot). In this style, the actor does not traditionally wear a mask (although the white face of Pierrot could be considered a mask). However, the precision of gesture and command of the body that it requires (as well as the use of the face as a mask) are so arresting and entralling that a ‘dimension of the mask’ is created in the performance space of similar intensity to that of an actual mask. In this case, the actor’s body, usually without appreciable supporting props, scenery, or costumes, serves as storyteller to the audience, describing objects in mid-air, portraying various characters, and enacting everything that the audience should imagine in the dramatic space before them. Their body and movement must conform to the demands of whatever aspect of the narrative they are enacting at the time – character, material, object-in-movement, . . . whatever. Thus, fluidity of movement is at a premium here, and fluidity of imagination as well.

And that is the whole point of the style – since, more than any other style except cinema (which is a bit more expensive), it allows the performer to instantly change the audience’s point of view, focus, even location; it is nimble enough to follow the actor’s imagination anywhere it might surprisingly decide to take them. (For example, from the selection of a box of eggs at the supermarket to a quick flashback to the emergence of the egg itself from the chicken – or even the torrid chicken-love affair that gave birth to it. . . .) These digressions, these musical grace-notes, if you will, can be most delightful to the audience, and the style of pantomime blanche has the power to deliver them.

This style, introduced in the second year of Lecoq training, serves as a high-bar of precision and clarity in gestural expression. It is, in its pure classical form, the style of which we see a short glimpse in the Marcel Carné film Les Enfants du Paradis.

It is a style of direct communication with the audience, and therein lies much of its charm and value to the actor. In this, it is a cousin to commedia, which also communicates directly with the audience, but in a form involving both gesture and speech. In classic pantomime blanche, the language of communication is completely gestural, though the gestures have greater specificity, articulation, and exaggeration than realistic gesture, thus amplifying their effect. The simplicity and apparent artlessness of these gestures can achieve a level of poetic beauty, or of surprising visual comedy when the gestures and imagery reach to the ridiculous and the absurd.

The creation of a piece in pantomime blanche presents two essential challenges: the technical challenge and the challenge to the imagination. The technical constraints of the style can be so daunting that it is possible to be completely overwhelmed by the obligatory actions required just to convey the story. But, as with any story, the objective is not just to successfully make it to the end, but rather the dramatic fun to be had along the way. So while one must be concerned with the rhythmic arc of the whole story (with one part of the brain), the performer should not miss the opportunity to let their imagination elaborate whatever aspect or detail they think will be interesting to the audience. This is a style in which the actor has the power to control every aspect of the performance: time, space, story, character, rhythm, pace, – even camera angle, visual scale, and level of detail, so it is a pity (for the audience) if the performer does not feel relaxed, comfortable, available (in French: disponible), enough in the style to make good use of the tools.

There is also, in this style, a dramaturgical constraint that derives from the style’s complete dependence on the audience constructing in their own minds the meaning of the imagery that is presented to them in empty space. So in order to facilitate their early recognition of what is going on, the style tends to favor the use (at least to begin with) of easily recognizable cultural clichés, and characters and objects with recognizable physical qualities. Clichés of
imagery, locale, and narrative tropes – the fat man, the pretty girl, the carnival, the western saloon – are easiest for the audience to grasp immediately, and subtleties or surprises to their expectations can proceed from there.

In practice, the style of pantomime blanche seems to have found a modern connection with the highly visual language of comic books and graphic novels. The dramatic imagery, the sparseness of text, and the emphasis on onomatopoeic sound effects all play well in the stylistic terrain around pantomime blanche. The most notable example of this (again – please forgive the immodesty) is the work of The Moving Picture Mime Show, whose Seven Samurai performance was widely toured and was admired for its energy, breathtaking pace, and incorporation of the imagery and spirit of Chuck Jones’ Road Runner cartoons in the telling of the classic Kurosawa epic samurai film of the same name. This co-habitation of styles old and new demonstrates a foundational pedagogical concept at the École Lecoq: the lessons of the great historical styles are to be made use of, not worshipped as holy and unchangeable, constrained by definition.

The takeaway

This refusal to be precious about style brings us back to the core pedagogical concept again: the historical styles are designed to be provocation, not stylistic template. They are points of reference to broaden the palette of stylistic choices that an actor (or company) might choose to express their theatrical imagination. Nothing could be more essential to the teaching pedagogy than this: the objective is not just to be able to perform in these styles (though that is a by-product of the training that is often convenient in the marketplace); the objective is to discover one’s own style(s) through exposure to the range of previous styles that have been successful.

Indeed, that most delightful and flexible of theatrical styles, Commedia dell’arte, gets much of its charm from its use of and irreverence for many aspects of theatrical style. However, all of the styles require and emphasize the link between the interior emotional state and the external expression of that state in the body that is at the heart of all credible acting. The value of working in these heightened styles is that they are ruthlessly diagnostic: if both the internal state and the external expression are not up to the ‘level of the mask’, the magic does not work. In order for the audience to believe in the mask, or in any heightened style, an actor must be able to perform at the level of the mask – and then, through the form, to express themselves in a language of artfully-chosen and gracefully-delivered gesture.

Notes

1 The Moving Picture Mime Show was a theatre company formed in 1978 by Toby Sedgwick, Paul Filipiak, and David Gaines in London that continued until 1988. During that time, they toured extensively and created a number of productions, in a range of styles, which developed and helped popularize the concepts and styles to which they were introduced at the École Lecoq.

2 This Seven Samurai, which was created by and for The Moving Picture Mime Show (an ensemble of three actors), was some 20 years later reworked by David Gaines (my very self) as a solo performance, with the addition of two specially designed masks, and the piece now works startlingly well in its current style – a mix of pantomime blanche and mask work. In this case, the masks are half masks, but in this wordless epic, they function largely as full masks.