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THE REDISCOVERY OF
THE MASK

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The ‘rediscovery and rehabilitation’ of the mask (De Marinis, 1995: 15) as both an element of dramaturgy and a pedagogical tool for the actor can be traced from the early years of the twentieth century. Theatre visionaries Edward Gordon Craig and Antonin Artaud both proposed the rediscovery of masks as an intrinsic element of their vision for a renewed and rejuvenated theatre. During the early years of the century, Russian practitioners and theorists such as Vsevolod Meyerhold also adopted the mask as a paradigm for their plans to renew and rejuvenate a ‘theatre of art.’ But it was the practice-led innovations with masks at the Parisian actor training school established by Jacques Copeau, the École du Vieux-Colombier, that significantly influenced the principal mask pedagogues of the twentieth century: Michel Saint-Denis, Keith Johnstone, and Jacques Lecoq. Saint-Denis’ teaching system became institutionalised in the US, the UK, Canada, and France, whilst ex-students of Lecoq’s school include high-profile mask innovators such as Julie Taymor and the founders of the Swiss-based company Mummenschanz.

Beginning with a discussion of the role of Craig, Artaud, and Copeau in the rediscovery of the mask during the early decades of the twentieth century, this chapter then draws attention to several key practitioners who influenced the cultural and theatrical context within which Lecoq came to prominence – Italian theatre director Giorgio Strehler, who directly influenced Lecoq’s work with Commedia dell’arte masks, and Michel Saint-Denis and Keith Johnstone who, together with Lecoq, were arguably the leading mask pedagogues of the mid-late twentieth century.

Visions, theories, and innovations with masks

Edward Gordon Craig and Antonin Artaud were theorist-practitioners of the early twentieth century whose calls for the return of masks to preeminence formed an intrinsic part of their vision for a new theatre (Artaud, 1977; Craig, 1977a). Their theoretical legacy has proved a reservoir of inspiration and discussion for the academics and creative practitioners who have followed them.

Edward Gordon Craig (1872–1966) was the son of the eminent English actress, Ellen Terry. In the latter years of the nineteenth century, Craig acted in productions at leading West End playhouses and with various provincial touring companies, but by the early 1900s
had turned his attention to scenic design and directing. It was at this time that he began expressing the need, as he saw it, for new styles of representation in the theatre. He was critical of actors and of the acting conventions of the late Victorian and Edwardian stage, which he regarded as driven by the cult of personality, vanity, and an excessive display of emotion. He wanted the established conventions of the theatre stripped away to reveal its basic physical elements. Much of the inspiration for his ideas about how the theatre should be renewed came from classical Greek theatre, where symbolism and ritual were fundamental. In 1900, a Japanese Noh company performed in London, and Craig was impressed with the style of masks used by the performers, seeing in them a link with the symbolic masks of ancient Greek theatre. The masks he had created for his early productions, *Dido and Aeneas* (1900) and *The Masque of Love* (1901), had been large, full-face masks, grotesque and quite possibly heavy and cumbersome. By comparison, the full-face masks of the Noh were refined and beautifully crafted, depicting archetypal representations of the human face and embodying psychological states or moral qualities. The acting style of the performers was codified and rooted in gestural simplicity, laden with spiritual significance. By depersonalising the actor and presenting instead masks that were symbolic embodiments, Craig saw the potential to ‘work in those materials with which we can calculate. Man is not one of those materials’ (Craig, 1977b: 38).

Craig's vision was for a highly stylised form of theatre imbued with symbolic action and gesture, where the performer was in complete control of his/her physical and emotional range and at all times subordinate to the dramatic intention of the piece. His desire for an actor who could be controlled absolutely culminated in his call for an Über-Marionette, a result of his belief that the level of control he wanted performers to exhibit both of their face and of their body was an ‘impossible state of perfection’ (Craig, 1977b: 43). Christopher Innes has suggested that ‘[Craig’s] real aim was to create a Western equivalent to the highly trained actors of the Noh drama, which in his view exemplified the same intrinsic qualities as the theatre of ancient Greece’ (Innes, 1983: 126). In his theatrical practice, however, Craig's call for the preeminence of mask performance remained an unrealised feature of his theatrical vision.

Antonin Artaud (1896–1948) found inspiration for his visions for a renewed theatre in the topeng (mask performance) and wayang (puppetry) of Bali. In his first manifesto on the Theatre of Cruelty published in 1931, Artaud imagined a theatre that stylistically employed a ‘tangible stage language’ (Artaud, 1977: 73) and suggested that the human body ought to be ‘raised to the dignity of signs’ (Artaud, 1977: 72). He proposed masks as elements of the stage language, ‘independently of their psychological use’ (Artaud, 1977: 73) and that ‘puppets, huge masks, objects of strange proportions appear by the same right as verbal imagery, stressing the physical aspect of all imagery and expression’ (Artaud, 1977: 75). The suggestiveness of Artaud’s visions prefigure late-twentieth-century productions of directors such as Philippe Genty or Julie Taymor.

It is as important now as it was of old and is in no way to be included among the things we have to put aside as old fashioned, must in no way be looked upon merely as a curiosity, for, its existence is vital to the Art of the Theatre . . . [t]he Mask, the symbol of the human face . . . the face of the actor carries no such conviction: it is over-full of fleeting expression . . . on this account not material with which to make a work of art . . . [t]he Mask must return to the stage to restore expression . . . the visible expression of the mind.

(Craig, 1977a: 5–6, 8)
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integral components of the rich visual imagery that is central to the productions of both Taymor and Genty. This is no coincidence, however, as there is a traceable line of influence from Artaud through Jean-Marie Conty to Lecoq and Taymor, whilst Genty employs many Lecoq alumni in his company.

During the early years of the twentieth century, Copeau, Stanislavsky, Meyerhold, and Craig all acknowledged that the new sort of actor required to inhabit the theatre they individually envisioned could only be met by the development of a wholly new actor training system. Copeau, Stanislavsky, and Meyerhold each established training schools where they developed their unique methods for training actors. The systems developed by Meyerhold in Russia and Copeau in France both involved the use of masks, but the type of masks used within each school and the methods for approaching and working with these masks varied.

As the result of his association with the literary society called the Nouvelle Revue Française, the social circle of Jacques Copeau (1879–1949) included André Gide and the notable Modernist painters and sculptors working in Paris during the early years of the twentieth century (Evans, 2006). When he established the Théâtre du Vieux-Colombier in Paris in 1913, he was essentially an outsider to theatre practice. He believed, however, that only those who were not intrinsically connected to the contemporary theatre could revitalise it from its current state, which he regarded as debased and decadent. In the manifesto accompanying the establishment of the Théâtre du Vieux-Colombier, Copeau called for a ‘renovation’ of theatre (Copeau, 1970: 217) and articulated his aim to establish a school where actors would be trained in a wholly new way. World War I interrupted the work of Copeau’s newly established theatre, and in 1915, he visited contemporary practitioners who were also investigating methods for renovating theatre and performance. He met with Craig in Italy, who introduced him to Asian masks and those of the Commedia dell’arte, and he visited Emile Jaques-Dalcroze in Geneva, who introduced Copeau to his technique of teaching music to children through movement and dance known as eurythmics (Leigh, 1979). Through Jaques-Dalcroze, Copeau was then introduced to Adolph Appia, a pioneering theorist of the use of light in stage design. It was after this trip that Copeau mentioned masks for the first time in his notebooks of 1915 (Leabhart, 1995). When activity resumed at the Théâtre du Vieux-Colombier in 1919, the mask, and an emphasis on the physicality of the actor, were essential components of Copeau’s methods.

By 1921 Copeau had opened his school, L’École du Vieux-Colombier, where he continued to refine his methods for training actors and continued to develop the ideals that were to shape his theatre practice. The school operated for only three years and trained only one group of apprentice actors who, at the time of the initial intake, were young people with no prior experience in theatre. However, the significance of the training that he and his colleagues developed during this brief period reverberated through acting programs in Europe, Britain, and the US throughout the twentieth century. The practical research undertaken by Copeau and his colleagues concerning improvisation and the mask constitutes a considerable part of contemporary pedagogical strategies for actor training. As Leabhart has observed: ‘Although now taken for granted in actor training, like so many of Copeau’s innovations, improvisation was an unheard of technique of which there was no living tradition in the French theatre of the early 1900s’ (Leabhart, 1995: 5).

In her study of Copeau’s school for actors, Barbara Kusler Leigh makes the point that, through the evolving experimentation at the school, Copeau was seeking a method of teaching as well as a doctrine (Leigh, 1979); and that much of the experimentation towards defining a teaching method took place via improvisation in the apprentices’ class. In 1921, the apprentices began to experiment with rudimentary masks in their improvisations, and it was
the class referred to as ‘the mask’ which can be identified as directly influencing the career of Etienne Decroux (Decroux, 1974) and the subsequent actor training systems of Michel Saint-Denis, and later, Jacques Lecoq. Productions of the Théâtre du Vieux-Colombier had employed masks periodically in performance, but the use of masks in a training situation and as a basis for improvisation was unprecedented.

At first, pieces of fabric were used to cover the face so as to throw focus onto the articulation of the body as the primary means of expression and communication. Then the students began experimenting with masks that they fashioned as best they could out of papier maché and cardboard. The masks were, however, too small and too fussy, so the sculptor Albert Marque was invited to come and guide this work. He helped the students create masks that were not objects of design, but instead were faces without expression. They were made specifically for each individual by creating a positive cast of the face from which all signifying expression was then removed. Staff and students referred to them as ‘inexpressive’ masks, early precursors of the now more familiar ‘neutral’ mask.

Students were slowly permitted to advance ‘from the motionless, silent stage of the neutral mask to choral dramatizations with movement which over time included more complex masks’ (De Marinis, 1995: 20), but de Marinis makes the point that

Copeau considered the mask to be more a pedagogical instrument than a means of expression or even less the basis of an autonomous theatrical form . . . the mask enters into Copeau’s pedagogical/theatrical vision with a double, decisive, but always instrumental purpose: 1) to contribute with all other means to the birth of a new type of actor, with expanded capacities, complete . . . having rediscovered both his innate expressive possibilities and having recovered the primal, infantile instinct du jeu . . . 2) to encourage access to the authenticity of dramatic interpretation, that is, to that ideal condition of sincerity.

(De Marinis, 1995: 26)

De Marinis also notes: ‘Copeau always maintained that the mask was only a method of restoration, a stage in the training process, a means and not an end in itself’ (De Marinis, 1995: 26–27).

Copeau dissolved his theatre in 1924 and moved his school to the countryside in Burgundy. Some of the actors and students who moved with him to Burgundy formed the company Les Copiaus amongst whom was Michel Saint-Denis (1897–1971), the nephew, assistant, and long-time student of Copeau. Saint-Denis described the Burgundy period (1924–29) as a time of experimentation and development during which the company was able to ‘experiment with various ways of improvisation, later adding comic and character improvisations with and without masks’ (Saint-Denis, 1982: 26). During this five-year period, Les Copiaus pursued a masked and improvised performance style that evolved far beyond the initiation to mask provided by Copeau’s training methods. Photos reproduced in Saint-Denis (1982) and Leabhart (1995) show the actors using a range of masks, all of them fashioned from papier maché. Some cover most of the face with a section for the mouth and chin cut away from the bottom edge to the upper lip – so they are speaking masks; others cover the whole face but have open mouths in the ancient Greek style; and some are half masks. Whilst Saint-Denis does not imply that the experiment in Burgundy aimed to re-create or re-imagine the Commedia dell’arte in style or structure, Les Copiaus nevertheless appear to have referenced commedia in their popular theatre shows through the use of character, improvisation, and comic playing
Rediscovery of Commedia dell’arte

In Russia, elements of Commedia dell’arte had become assimilated into certain folk theatre forms (Donnells-O’Malley, 1991); and during the early stages of the twentieth century, Meyerhold and other Russian theatre practitioners were experimenting with commedia as a possible basis of training for the actor. They were drawn to the improvisational nature of the form and its inherent openness to the introduction of acrobatic and other physical skills from the popular theatre. Meyerhold opened his training studio in 1913, where one of the subjects was the history and technique of the Commedia dell’arte, ‘the only theatrical form to be given such prominence’ at the studio (Anderson, 1998: 167). Within a decade, Russian theatre directors were using commedia techniques as a base for their productions – as, for example, Vakhtangov’s Princess Turandot (1922) and Meyerhold’s Harlequin, The Marriage Broker (1922).

A significant nexus of creative talents involved in the rediscovery of commedia in the twentieth century occurred in Italy during the social reconstruction after World War II. The people involved included theatre director Giorgio Strehler, mask-maker Amleto Sartori, theatre teacher Jacques Lecoq, and various performers, amongst whom was Dario Fo, a young actor with the Piccolo Teatro during its early years. Established in Milan in 1947 by Giorgio Strehler and Paolo Grassi, the Piccolo Teatro was founded on a strong anti-fascist ideology with priorities that included the attraction of working-class audiences and the establishment of a culture of ensemble playing.

For the Piccolo Teatro’s inaugural season, Strehler mounted Goldoni’s Arlecchino or The Servant of Two Masters. It was a play he was to come back to six times in his career.

Strehler was particularly hard on the actors in this show, forcing them to wear masks which were clumsily made and very uncomfortable. Created out of stiff cardboard and lint, they pressed into the skin, constricted the eyelashes and by the end of each show, because of the excessive perspiration, were inevitably reduced to shreds. The masks were uncomfortable in two senses: the physical and the psychological. Marcello Moretti, Strehler’s first–great–Arlecchino, resolved the problem crudely by refusing to wear the mask and painting one on his face instead.

(Hirst, 1993: 42)

Only in the second production of The Servant of Two Masters (1952) did Moretti come to accept ‘the tyranny of the mask’ when Strehler invited Sartori to create flexible, comfortable leather masks for the performers (Hirst, 1993: 43).

It is possible that the Piccolo Teatro’s renewal of Commedia dell’arte may not have reached fullness without the involvement of Sartori and his rediscovery of the traditional forms of mask-making. He was able to produce refined, flexible, comfortable masks in leather, which is an actor-friendly material because it breathes, moulds to the face, adjusts to body temperature, and soaks up the excess sweat that an actor may pour into it in the course of a performance.

Amleto Sartori was a sculptor before turning his skills to the lost traditions of leather theatre masks, which occurred when he was introduced to Jacques Lecoq in 1948 when Lecoq was working as a teacher and creative practitioner at the University of Padua. Lecoq learned mask performance in France from Jean Dasté, the son-in-law of Jacques Copeau (Dasté and
his wife Marie-Hélène, née Copeau, were members of the apprentice group trained at the L’École du Vieux-Colombier 1921–1924), but Lecoq reflected that he discovered Commedia dell’arte during his time in Padua (Lecoq, 2000: 6). He needed masks for his teaching at the university and was given the use of Sartori’s sculpture workshop, where he went about the task of making masks in papier mâché. Sartori offered to turn his skill to the problem of mask-making (Fo, 1991: 66), and so began a long period of experimental research into the masks of the commedia, its characters, and the construction techniques using leather, which had been forgotten for more than two centuries.

From the beginning of his school in Paris in 1956, Lecoq taught commedia with the Sartori masks, but a few years before his death, he reflected:

Sadly, over the course of time, a so-called ‘Italian’ style of performance, which is nothing but clichés, has begun to spread. Young actors have often done short courses in commedia and the playing has become lifeless . . . For these reasons I have been led to turn the problem inside out, to discover what lies beneath, that is to say la comédie humaine (the human comedy). From this point on, using a much broader field of reference, we have rediscovered our creative freedom.

(Lecoq, 2000: 108)

Mask pedagogues of the mid–late twentieth century

Jacques Copeau, Michel Saint-Denis, Jacques Lecoq, and Keith Johnstone are possibly the most significant proponents of mask pedagogy of the twentieth century, responsible for the dissemination of the major content of mask teaching over that period. Fortunately, three of them have written books about their methods and the particular viewpoints that have shaped their systems (Johnstone, 1979; Lecoq, 2000; Saint-Denis, 1982), while Copeau and his colleagues kept thorough notebooks and registers concerning their goals and training methods.

Michel Saint-Denis’ Compagnie des Quinze performed in London in 1931, with the result that he was invited to assist in setting up the actor training school at the London Theatre Studio (1935–39), and subsequently invited to develop the actor training programs at The Old Vic Theatre School (1947–52), L’École Supérieure d’Art Dramatique in Strasbourg (1952–57), the National Theatre School of Canada (1960), and The Juilliard School Drama Division (1968). In his book Training for the Theatre, Saint-Denis is unequivocal in his attitude towards the role of the mask in actor training, relegating mask work to the category of silent improvisation during the first year of training. In his view, the mask is

a temporary instrument which we offer to the student in the hope that, through literally shielding his timidity, it may help his concentration, diminish his self-consciousness, strengthen his inner feelings and lead him to develop his physical powers of outward dramatic expression. Mask work is central to the training precisely because it enables the student to warm his feelings and cool his head; at the same time it permits him to experience, in its most startling form, the chemistry of acting. At the very moment when the actor’s feelings beneath the mask are at their height, the urgent necessity to control his physical actions compels him to detachment and lucidity.

(Saint-Denis, 1982: 170)
Saint-Denis advocated that four basic masks should be created specifically for this part of the training; they were to be full-face and therefore silent, and they were to ‘be of normal human size with distinct features, representing the four ages of man: adolescence, adulthood, mature age, old age’ (Saint-Denis, 1982: 170). In consideration of the extensive exploration and use of masks in his early performance career, it may seem surprising that Saint-Denis placed relatively small emphasis on mask training for the actor. However, during the period in which Saint-Denis was setting up the training schools mentioned above, the professional theatre domains of England, Canada, and the US had no history of the mask as either a performance or training tool. His establishment of the mask as a paradigm of actor training in these countries was the first act in a chain of internationally transmitted mask pedagogy that continues to the present day.

Keith Johnstone (b. 1933–) is internationally renowned for his innovative teaching of improvisation skills for the theatre and as the developer of the competitive Theatre Sports phenomenon. The use of masks has been an essential element of Johnstone’s teaching method, and he has facilitated companies of young actors in England and Canada to create shows with masked characters, developed through his methods of improvisation and story building. His own introduction to masks came indirectly through Michel Saint-Denis and occurred whilst Johnstone was working at the Royal Court Theatre under the directorship of George Devine. Devine had previously worked at the London Theatre School and the Old Vic Centre with Michel Saint-Denis, and it was Devine who introduced masks into the Royal Court acting classes – and thus to Keith Johnstone. In his book *Impro* (1979), Johnstone explains the particular methods he has developed for teaching mask work to actors and discusses his theories about the operation of the mask/actor interface. His opinion about the effect masks can have upon the actor revolves around the assumption that masks have shamanistic powers, and he speaks of masks as powerful agents of possession for the actor. He suggests that masks can assist the actor to enter into a highly suggestive state – similar to the state of spirit possession. Johnstone also believes that once the actor is possessed by the mask, the actor should be allowed free reign to any verbal, vocal, and physical activity that might be suggested by the mask. He regards free play as essential for enabling the actor to learn about the nature of any particular mask and emphasises that improvisation is the key to developing masked characters.

Counter to Johnstone, Lecoq’s more pragmatic approach resisted the notion that masks hold intrinsic powers of entrancement over the actor. When approaching expressive masks, he advised:

There is no point in contemplating the mask for hours, with heaven knows what mystic concentration, before performing. It must be jolted into life. Very quickly, we project it into a variety of situations: ‘it’s happy’, ‘it’s sad’, ‘it’s jealous’, ‘it’s athletic’. By pushing the mask in a number of different directions we are trying to see if it responds or not. You only really begin to know a mask when it resists this provocation.

(Lecoq, 2000: 55)

Intensifying and realigning Saint-Denis’ evaluation of the usefulness of masks in training programs, Lecoq’s pedagogical approach embodied a staunch commitment to the centrality of masks in actor training: ‘Whatever its dramatic style, all theatre profits from the experience an actor gains through masked performance’ (Lecoq, 2000: 53). His pedagogical principles moved far beyond Saint-Denis’ relegation of masks to first-year exercises, or as a tool to reduce
self-consciousness. As explored in detail in this volume, teaching at Lecoq's school integrated the use of a range of masks, including neutral, expressive, larval, and commedia, as well as the red clown nose and the grotesque body mask of the bouffon. Also explored elsewhere in this volume is the extraordinary legacy of Lecoq's explorations and teaching with masks to creative theatre artists around the globe.

References