

**University of Theatre and Film Arts
Doctoral School**

Mask Characterization

The deconstruction of an experimental course

Abstract of the Doctoral Dissertation

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Lázár Balázs: Mask Characterization

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The dissertation's questions were posed through a theatrical workshop lead by the author entitled Mask Characterization:

- what is mask, what is its function and relationship to people and the theatre,
- what is the goal and enrichment of a mask workshop in acting school,
- what theoretical and practical background can be built on, and why and when can mask characterization be used,
- to what extent is a masked presentation physical or psychophysical theatre,
- through theatrical experiments made by the author examining the question can the Commedia dell'Arte born in the 16th century be resurrected and/or restored?

Theses of the dissertation:

- use of the mask and the masked complexes are as old as mankind and spread worldwide
- the mask is a paradox,
- the mask has a dual mirror nature,
- a masked actor's job is to transform the dead object of the mask into a live one by his acting,
- the Hungarian word "álarc" has a broader meaning than the mask's range
- in the rediscovery of the mask in the twentieth century Edward Gordon Craig and Jacques Copeau are the key figures
- in my experience a mask workshop could be the most productive for first-year students in acting and puppeteer training
- the French master teacher Jacques Lecoq's school of methodology and interpretations of the foundation of today's education the masked actor
- the mask characterization workshop develops self-awareness, imagination, creative and physical expression
- the masked actor's work is a psycho-physical process
- Étienne Decroux's body isolation exercises help in the exact expressions of the mask
- Commedia dell'Arte is total theatre
- Commedia dell'Arte could be adapted as a valid form for the present stage

The structure of the dissertation

At the beginning of my four chapter work I write of the origins of the mask, about the possible functions and roles it played in ancient civilizations, about the relationship between man and mask. Then I try to describe its dual reflecting nature and to extract the etymology of the words of mask and *álarc* in the Hungarian language. Afterwards I would like to present the connection between mask and theatre and the early 20th century rediscovery of the mask through the work of *Edwards Gordon Craig* and *Jacques Copeau* on mask, with special regard to the role and goals of mask in the modern education of actors. Then, just as all the other chapters finished with a short conclusion, I try to summarize the examined topic and its essence.

The second chapter will examine the topic of the neutral mask, from the definition to the origins, and to the presentation of the life and theatrical thoughts of the most significant developer of the method of work, *Jacques Lecoq*, and also indicating the influence of his peers. The main emphasis is of course on *Lecoq* and his school, the structure and working of which I shall present. After this I will discuss the actual exercises in Neutral Mask, not only presenting it, but sharing my more important experiences from the creating work environment to the basics of mask use.

In the third chapter we move from the starting point of neutral to characterization through the various exercises I used during my course with the character masks, the “black mask” and including the white noses and then the animal and emotional masks. I would like to clarify the concept of physical theatre and understand the antecedents of it in the work of *François Delsarte* and *Étienne Decroux*. Through a short presentation of the biomechanics of *Vsevolod Meyerhold* I will reflect on the late attempts at a physical approach by *Constantin Stanislavski*. Based on the completed exercises I will try to establish a system of rules for the use of masks which actors can use as directions in their discovery and work of masks. I end the chapter with one of *Decroux*'s basic body isolation exercises, which I learnt from his students and personal interpreter *Daniel Stein*. I would assert that the basic skill of body isolation is essential for learning the regular types of movement for Commedia dell'Arte.

In the fourth and final chapter we put the comic masks of Commedia on and have a short look at the history of Commedia Dell'Arte, at its precursors, main stylistic characteristics and artistic tools. We examine the rediscovery of Commedia's leather masks and look at why Commedia dell'Arte was a revolutionary theatrical style and to what extent it became a “theatrical industry”. I provide concrete exercises and detailed characteristics for the northern quartet of Commedia dell'Arte (*Arlecchino*, *Brighella*, *Pantalone*, *Dottore*), and also for the

lovers Capitano and Colombina. I will reveal why this genre is my theatrical ideal and how at the *University of Theatre and Film Arts in Budapest*, the *Vörösmarty Theatre of Székesfehérvár* and the *Utcaszak troupe* I experimented through theatre to find an answer to the question as to how this genre, born in the 16th century, could be resurrected or restored in the 21st century, in a way that would make it modern and yet without losing the original spirit of Commedia.

Professional motivation and background

In the October of 1993, as a first year acting major, I had just begun attending the class of *Laszlo Marton* at the *College of Theatre and Film Arts* in Budapest (a university today), and we had just begun trying to learn the basics of acting, and the cornerstone of Hungarian acting, *Stanislavski's* system, when unexpectedly an opportunity for a unique workshop presented itself. The leadership of the college at the time invited *Jacques Lecoq*, one of modern theatre's most influential masters, to give a five day course in "the Attic", and our class was able to take part, this encounter proved to be decisive for me. These few days awakened me from "contemplation" of the situational exercises and opened new and playful dimensions for me, These inspired me to look at my future trade from a wider perspective. Despite the strong *Stanislavski* theatrical foundation gained at the college, and the various roles played on stages in and outside of Budapest, this week with Lecoq remained a voice in my head and I would have liked to learn more about the world beyond the gates he had opened. Thus at 25 years of age, with a *Fulbright Scholarship* I embarked on a year of studies in the United States, and this changed my thinking about theatre, including my poetic foundations.

In this study I write about the Mask course that I created and lead, and which – in a completely different form – I first taught at the invitation of *Máté Gábor* for his acting class in 2003, at the *University of Theatre and Film Arts*, and then following this, every year until 2015, within the *Faculty of Movement*, all the while continuously refining the material. Therefore what I write of as the theoretical background for the course titled Mask Characterization includes the most important theoretical questions, in depth, about the works of Jacques Copeau and Jacques Lecoq, who had the greatest influence on the development of my synthesis-centered, masked working method. I wrote of the concrete exercises with a current reflexion on theme and my experience as well so that my writings may also serve as a practical handbook.

I sought a unity between theory and practice, supplementing and strengthening each other. That is to say that I tried to meld the theoretical sources from *Dell'Arte International School of Physical Theatre* (Blue Lake, Ca, USA) and the Italian Stage *Internazionale Di Commedia* school in Reggio Emilia, and of course the mask experience gained at the *University*

of Theatre and Film Arts in Budapest. This approach was taken in order to knead this into a unified whole, and it was done through the psycho-physical method.

The Faculty of Movement's three week long intensive courses did not provide an opportunity for the students to better examine the topics, as it was the express wish of the faculty head at the time, *Ladányi Andrea*, that in the short time provided the students learn the basics of as many styles as possible. Therefore in assembling the Mask course I strove to show as many sides of Mask as is possible, in addition to the basics. There was Mask, with a capital M, because the mask, as an object becomes a mask during the characterization, the Mask is the attitude, a role that has to be played. Specialization was not the aim, rather to learn the forms 'alphabet' so that the students would then later be able to put together the words, sentences and presentations. Presentations in which the actors taking part have a high degree of physical control and knowledge.

In three weeks, twenty-four hours, of course, I could not get a point by point thesis derived from the road and along the Neutral Mask, through Character Mask to the Comic Mask of the *Commedia dell'Arte*, but I tried to summarize my work and working methods and explore the spiritual source of it. (In my writing mode I use the Neutral Mask and Character Mask as proper names, as distinguished from attributive structure, emphasizing their own entity. The writing method of *Commedia dell'Arte* follows English literature.)

All the above mentioned do not touch the core of the interpretation. The emphasis, in addition to the experiments, has been on my interpretation, the way I have taken various theatrical approaches, and the exercises of some masters and incorporated them and rethought them, that is to say used them as "guest text", to use a literary expression. I have tried to create a new quality according to creative directing principles. I have tried to plan and construct a "house" of my own by putting the existing "bricks" together, carving them, and building a working proportional structure. Its solutions, planning, and style is different than others and make it a unique creation.

I strive to deal with the topic of my doctoral dissertation intensively in the future at both theoretical and practical level – I hope this will continue through the possibility of the Hungarian University of Theatre and Film Arts – so my dissertation is considered only a last step of a work phase, a strong base of research process in the future.