MASK: AFFECT AND EFFECT

A function of theatre is the participation in the existence of other beings . . . to recognize oneself. This is delegated in our society to the actor.

– Alessandro Pizzorno

The theatre’s twin masks of comedy and tragedy originated as the representations of Dionysus, father of drama, god of wine, and patron deity of Greek drama festivals. The linking of comedy and tragedy in one god is typical of the paradoxes and dualities that surround Dionysus and the mask, both symbols of drama. For one, there is his own double theatre mask. Then, unlike other deities, he was a god who came down from Olympus and moved among mortal men. Also, the mask is a man-made object, yet it inspires fear and exaltation – as though it was beyond mortal touch. It is presence and absence. It is death and life. The mask is a complete object in itself, but it lacks a reverse side; thus it invites a living participant to wear and thereby complete it. And much more.

Masks have long been associated with theatre as it emerged from ritual, from sympathetic magic, from religion, from shamanism, from festivals, from totems. Greek tragedy and then comedic farce used the mask, as did Chinese, Japanese, and other Asian theatre. In the 16th century the
Commedia dell’arte characters were as unchanging as the masks they bore. Recently there has been a revival of the use of masks in more contemporary theatre. Gordon Craig sparked interest, especially in Commedia dell’arte, through his stage work and in a periodical he called, appropriately enough, *The Mask*, 1908-1929. In 1923 Kenneth Macgowan saw a spirit of religion calling the mask back to the stage. Playwrights Eugene O’Neill and W. B. Yeats responded to its theatricality and used masks in their plays in the early 1900’s. Literal or figurative masked characters populated the plays of Jean Genet, Claude van Itallie, John Arden, Michel de Ghelderode, Bertolt Brecht in the 1950’s and 1960’s, and in most of the current street, action and radical theatres like Bread and Puppet Theatre in New York, the San Francisco Mime Troupe, El Teatro Campesino and Epic West on the West Coast. We also see certain stage productions in which the director employs masks, even though the playwright did not call for them. So masks, both as symbol and in practice, have been part of theatre since its beginnings.

But what happens behind the mask? What effect does it have on the actor? The impact of mask, not upon the spectator but on the actor, has been very little examined, and its use as a training technique and rehearsal tool is not widely known or understood. Masks were not used in European acting training until the early 1920’s, beginning with Jacques Copeau at the Vieux Colombier in Paris, and in America much later than that.1 Jean Dorcy, who studied with Copeau and who has written extensively on mime and theatre, recounts that important circumstance too briefly in *J’Aime la Mime*: “By the intuition of genius Copeau, who seemed to us to be still very close to childhood games, encouraged our bents and let us invent and develop our little dramas. In the depths of that laboratory the mask was born.” From their experiences, specific uses of the mask as a

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1 See Sears Eldridge’s documentation, 1975, listed in bibliography
part of actor training were then developed; they found that it helped the
actors to use their bodies more expressively, to eliminate any unconscious
physical mannerisms which could hamper them, and to reach a simple,
broad, objective style of play. Mask work helped prepare actors for
classical acting or for tragedy, and enabled them to participate in the
desired style of a given production. Michel Saint-Denis, who belonged to
the school of Copeau and who later established some of the world’s most
prestigious acting schools, summarizes the purpose and the effect of the
mask in *Theatre, The Rediscovery of Style*:

> To us, a mask was a temporary instrument which we offered to
> the curiosity of the young actor, in the hope that it might help his
> concentration, strengthen his inner feelings, diminish his self-
> consciousness, and help him to develop his powers of outward expression.

He describes some of the effect of the mask as demanding of the actor
only controlled, strong and utterly simple actions; it brings about
the desired state of warm heart with cool head; it absorbs the actor’s
personality while at the same time only the actor can bring a mask to life.

Perhaps the role of the mask in primitive religion, shamanism, and ancient
drama unconsciously affects our reactions to the mask today, but such a
discussion is beyond the scope of this work. Instead, we turn our attention
to how the mask works for the actor, rather than why it works.

The most important factor in the effectiveness of the mask is the impulse
to identify physically with it, that is, to assume its outer form. The
identification can be conscious or not. On putting on a mask, the actor
often feels that his own features, hidden behind the mask, are drawn into
a semblance of its traits. One smiles with its smile, one frowns with its
frown. The identification extends to the body, for with one’s own face arranged in a particular way, the body too feels an impulse to complete the identification. A pinched face might call forth a contraction in the chest; a noble facial aspect might lift the head and ribcage. So the body is drawn into posture and gesture which harmonize with the actual face, which is identifying with the mask face.

This total configuration of the person, the face and body in harmony with the mask, is a key element in the training process. A body that can respond to various masks is an expressive body. A body that can unself-consciously give itself to the total identification, with total commitment, is capable of range, sensitivity, and theatrical dimension.

Something else of great importance also occurs: the physical configuration of the body creates a pathway into the interior of a characterization suggested by the mask. Makeup, acting as a mask, can have a similar effect. Michael Chekhov, director and teacher, advises the actor to put on a face as though it were makeup. “The more you can imagine your face as resembling that of the person you have under scrutiny,” he said in To the Director and Playwright, “the more will you be able to experience what this person experiences. For by thus penetrating his psychology, you open the door to a truer knowledge of his inner life.” The Kabuki actor studies himself in costume and makeup for a time before making his entrance, for “one feels like the bamboo when one looks at the bamboo.” The principle of identification and its attendant evoking of the psyche is not a new phenomenon, and extends beyond theatre. An English psychologist imitated her patients’ gestures and postures as a means of realizing their states of mind; she made herself receptive and suggestible, and applied the motor-ideo (from the motion to its motivating idea) type of imitation to bring herself closer to them. And in Literature As Experience, Bacon
and Breen observe that to learn something about an object, animate or inanimate, it is necessary to assume the attitude [form] of the object.

In studying tribal rituals, anthropologists have noted that masks can confer a sense of freedom upon the wearer, that the concealment of one’s own identity permits one an added freedom. Margaret Mead, in her study *Masks and Man*, found that “those who wear the masks are able to assume new roles, to move with a license or a dignity, a ferocity or a frozen grace unattainable without a mask.”

The mask helps the actor too to assume new roles and to move in ways appropriate to the role; the mask gives him added impetus, and he is free to go further in the direction suggested by the mask, to make larger choices. He also feels a freedom from inhibition and self-consciousness – perhaps a kind of courage – and freedom from the limitations of habitual ways of moving and reacting, so that something quite different, even unexpected, can filter through the body and stand revealed.

Because the mask confers freedom it is safe; it is an object to hide behind physically, and a characterization to hide behind emotionally. But the mask both hides and reveals. When the face is hidden the wearer feels entirely hidden something of an ostrich effect – so the body is left free to respond expressively, unself-consciously. In this way the mask can act as a medium through which both strengths and weaknesses of the actor can be seen. An actor can don a mask, assume its dimension, and achieve an unsuspected presence and power, unknown even to himself. On the other hand, it is a valuable corrective in that it reveals pitilessly any faults or inadequacies instance or movement. Minor posture problems or ineffective choices of movement, usually not noticeable, become glaringly obvious. The slightest droop in the chest, or tension in a shoulder, is magnified and
seems suddenly to spring into view. The mask, dramatic in itself, throws into relief anything around it, making it appear larger than life if it is consistent with the mask, and overtly incongruous if it is not. Yet in spite of the revelation flowing from the mask, the safety and protection it offers remain intact and are not compromised.

A first lesson the actor learns is to get out of the way, as it were, to let him or herself be influenced by the mask; not to impose anything upon it but instead to be receptive to it. Getting out of the way means simply doing nothing at first, nothing of one’s own habits of walking, standing, sitting, gesturing. A state of receptivity, of being available, is thereby created, an empty, fallow place where something can come from the mask to the wearer. As some students observed, it almost leads one by the hand!

The effect of the mask is predicated upon a separation from the imprint of the actor’s personality and from the wearer’s daily life. An actor without technique can often be effective on personality alone; in a mask that would not be possible because one is imposing one’s own personality upon the mask – an imposition it resists. Learning this lesson from the mask is learning that one can be expressive with the body alone, without the use of face or voice. Even when a particular mask utilizes elements of the wearer’s personality, which it inevitably does, the actor’s naturalistic movements and habitual gestures of real life present an incongruity, an inconsistency with the mask; it calls, rather, for movement larger than life, more important than minor or trivial actions. One cannot simply don a mask and go about one’s ordinary business.

The separation from daily life cannot take place under such circumstances. The mask does become, should become, a sacred object; in it the actor
feels a sense of magic, of grandeur and of mystery, too often lost in the slick, commercial shuffle and the wise-cracking exchange of the theatre.

How does a mask help to make the torso and its movements more expressive? With the face hidden and the voice stilled — the two most expressive features of the actor’s means — there is only one way for the performer to express anything: through the body and its movements. “If the face is hidden, the actor’s body becomes a whole face, expressing at a distance what the real face expresses close up,” said French writer Jean Cocteau. A director of Britain’s Royal Ballet commented, “Some critics have complained that one or two of these dancers have tremendous technique but lack personality when they dance at Covent Garden. But that changes; something wonderful happens to the same performers when they put on masks ... Facial immobility somehow forced an increase in balletic expression. The characters [in the ballet Peter Rabbit] had to act with their whole bodies, not just from the neck up. It gave everything a marvelous simplicity, and a sense of stylistic unity.”

It is also a quality of mask that it fills time and space. Cocteau, above, spoke of the effective distance of the whole body-become-face. Masks seems to invest the space around them with their presence, to charge the surrounding air with importance. Also, distance is needed in order to see the entire figure — a long shot rather than a closeup. Time too is charged; the mask requires a tempo different from that of daily life, and is highly effective with moments of immobility. The actor, accepting the mask’s investing of each gesture with importance, tends to eliminate nonessential movement; those that remain are thus clearer, simpler, and perhaps even enlarged or made minuscule, both of which dimensions are well supported by the mask.
Less equals more.

The principle of less equals more enforces an economy of movement, valuable for an actor to learn. At first one wants to compensate for the seeming static features of a mask by busy movement, not yet realizing that one should move less in order to let the mask “move”—or rather, become alive, not necessarily in motion but simply in its place on a live, sensitive body. Stillness helps, for the mask gives great presence. But even that presumed stasis of a mask is only a seeming immobility, for masks appear to change expression, a phenomenon noted in every group’s experience. Some of this is due to viewing angle; looking at a mask from a high or low point (chin lowered or chin lifted), or in three-quarter view or profile, often produces differing expressions. Sometimes changes of light will throw shadows that suggest moving “facial” features. Most frequently, however, the reason for the mask seeming to move is that we “read” into its face those expressions that we actually see in the body. A smiling mask can suddenly look pathetic if the actor’s chest droops slightly; the upturned mouth becomes fearful and tremulous. The Indian dancer Rajkumar Suddenhendra observed that “expression does not flow from my face to my body, but is transmitted from my body to my face.”

The sensitive actor approaches a mask, first by simply looking at it; here the identification begins. When he places the mask he remains still, emptying himself: his mind of plans, his body of customary rhythms and movements. He even empties his lungs of air so that something different can come to him with a fresh breath. He observes himself in a mirror, letting the identification pervade his body. He becomes immersed in it, then gradually searches for appropriate posture, walk, small gestures. A fusion of person and mask takes place that brings the Latin word persona (mask) round full circle. When that fusion is achieved, he feels a sense
of simplicity plus authority; he can “carry” the mask. The experience of Mary Wigman, innovator of modern dance in Germany in the 1930’s, corroborates this. In *The Language of Dance* she counsels that dancers, to achieve deep identification with a mask, contemplate it, observe themselves in mirrors, then slowly give the body the gait, posture, gesture of the mask.

The mystique of the mask is powerful. One immediately feels different behind it. When an actor is responding to the commands of the mask, he experiences a sense of wholeness, relaxation, and well-being. There is a calm sensation of being taken over by it. If he is improvising he finds himself doing unexpected things, feeling impelled to obey the choices suggested by the mask.

Its theatrical mystique has led to associated rituals. The Greek and Roman actors undertook along, silent communion with their masks before putting them on; there are a number of reliefs depicting such a scene, thus indicating its importance. There is a current ritual in the Noh theatre: a box containing the masks of the two merry old men is carried on stage. When the actor taking the traditional role of Okina enters, he bows low before the audience. The mask is taken out of the box and placed upon his face. After he has given his slow and dignified dance, the mask is taken off and put back with great respect. The humorous dance of Sanbaso is next given with the same procedure.

In Copeau’s school students donned the mask; the French terms are “coiffer,” to put on a hat, or “chausser,” to put on shoes, words that suggest the intimate harmony between mask and wearer. They treated the mask with much respect, almost ritualistically, as they held it in the left hand, looked at it for a time, then fitted it over the face while the
right hand adjusted the elastic – all to be done in one gesture, and all preparatory to performing the exercises. In this way they kept freshly before them the importance of that object, and entered into a receptive state of mind and body.

Whether or not one performs a rite, actors can be encouraged, as they watch others work, to hold a mask and let their hands become familiar with its features and textures; they should refrain from treating the mask casually, holding it or swinging it by its elastic. Once masked, they accept being under its influence; if it is necessary to clarify any questions, they lift the mask in order to speak. This sets up firmly the convention of being someone else whenever the mask is in place. In rehearsal, once a scene is stopped and the actors must talk, the mask is slipped to the top of the head and worn there for the necessary time. These conventions help to create the circumstances for the most effective work.

Actors are not the only artists to note the effect of masks. Playwright John Arden discovered that the actor in a mask cannot behave as though he were not wearing it. He also found an effect on his writing, that it demanded simple, pared-down language as it does simple, pared-down gesture; and that the mask is so powerful in itself that it needs what he called a more naked expression of emotion. Mary Wigman found that she could not move contrary to what the mask “decreed,” that she could not impose movement upon the mask but had to listen to its requirements. Eugene O’Neill watched rehearsals of his *Great God Brown*, a play done in masks, and commented that it was interesting to see how, after using their masks for a time, the actors reacted to the demand made by the masks that their bodies become alive and expressive. He observed that, once mastered, its lessons were retained by the body and the mind even when masks were not worn.
O’Neill also anticipated certain fears on the part of actors, fears which actually are expressed at times: that masks will depersonalize them and will deprive them of the very important element of facial play. His response is that, on the contrary, actors in masks would explore many undeveloped possibilities of expression, and “after all, masks did not extinguish the Greek actor, nor have they kept the action of the Asian theatre from being an art.” The fears are groundless, for whether used for performance or for training, the mask can offer self-knowledge, enlargement, objectivity, and profoundly moving experiences.

The next sections deal with certain specific types of masks. Teachers of mask work use a variety of kinds of masks. The dissertation by Sears Eldredge, referred to earlier, describes in detail several schools of mask teaching in the United States.
The wearer of the mask . . . is himself and yet someone else.
Madness has touched him . . . something of the mystery . . .
which resides in masks, and whose last descendant is the actor.
– Walter Otto

The universal mask is an inner one. It represents that which human
beings have in common, without the reactions and attitudes with which
individuals relate to the world. We start from birth, or before, to cope in
our various ways; those ways become our personalities, individual and
unique. But at each person’s center remains an inner core of what we share
with all humankind – the same senses, physiology, and survival needs.
We all relate to objects and situations around us, and the purpose of the
universal mask is to help us determine the simplest, minimal way to deal
with them, to do only that which is required by the object or situation itself
with nothing extra added, extra being gestures or energy not needed to
handle the object or respond to the situation. For example, the action of
shoveling requires certain actions: thrust, lever, lift, throw. An individual
may wipe the brow, hitch trousers, lean on the shovel, but none of these
are required to perform the act of shoveling.