

The Neutral Mask: its position in Western
actor training, and its application to the
creative processes of the actor

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I hereby certify that the work embodied in this dissertation is the result of original research and has not been submitted for a higher degree to any other University or Institution.

(Signed) _____

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Abstract

This dissertation begins with a discussion of the rediscovery and rehabilitation of masks as tools of performance and pedagogy in Western theatre over the past century, considering the work of various theorists, directors, teachers and performers in whose work the mask occupies a significant position. Discussion then focuses on the development of the neutral mask as an object and as a paradigm of pedagogy for the actor over the past eighty years and undertakes a comparative investigation of the concept of neutrality as a performant state. The discussion takes in the teaching of Jacques Copeau, Etienne Decroux and Jacques Lecoq, and extends to the theories of Eugenio Barba, considering the possible parallels between Barba's 'pre-expressive' state and the state of neutrality which the mask assists to develop in the actor. The dissertation further proposes that the term 'performative liminality' is an appropriate term to adopt for this performant state, and makes this proposal with reference to the theories of anthropologist Victor Turner regarding the liminal state. The practice-as-research component of the project sought to investigate and document the various uses of the neutral mask and its application to the creative processes of the actor, and aimed to provide qualitative analysis and evaluation of the neutral mask when used in a developmental workshop environment. The dissertation contains a full account of the practice component of the project and details the processes used to investigate the neutral mask, offering analysis drawn from the inside experiences of the actors and the outside observations of the researcher. Within that analysis is a consideration of the neutral mask as a tool for developing the scenic presence of the actor.

Introduction

This dissertation is the result of a Master of Creative Arts research project which focussed on the neutral mask. The aim of the practice component of the project was to investigate and document the various uses of the neutral mask and its application to the creative processes of the actor, seeking to provide qualitative analysis and evaluation of the neutral mask when used in a developmental workshop environment. The project sought initially to answer the following question:

— Is the neutral mask a tool for developing the scenic presence of the actor?

The dissertation discusses the development of the neutral mask as an object and as a paradigm of pedagogy for the actor over the past eighty years, and undertakes a comparative investigation of the concept of neutrality as a performant state. The discussion considers the teaching of Jacques Copeau, Etienne Decroux and Jacques Lecoq, and extends to the theories of Eugenio Barba, considering the possible parallels between Barba's 'pre-expressive' state and the state of neutrality which the mask assists to develop in the actor. The dissertation further proposes that the term 'performative liminality' is an appropriate term to adopt for this performant state, and makes this proposal with reference to the theories of anthropologist Victor Turner regarding the liminal state.¹ The dissertation contains a full account of the practice-as-research component of the project together with the resulting analysis and concludes with suggestions of further areas for future investigation.

The available literature in English about the neutral mask focuses primarily on the teaching of Jacques Lecoq². The literature conveys the significance of the neutral mask to Lecoq's forty-odd years of teaching, and considers the implications of Lecoq's work with regard to critical theory, but strategies for approaching and working with this mask in actor training are generalised. Thomas Leabhart's *Modern and Post-Modern Mime* (1989) and Mira Felner's *Apostles of Silence* (1985) each devote a chapter to Lecoq's teaching syllabus. Felner also offers a detailed analysis of each element of Lecoq's teaching and suggests points of critical theory which intersect with Lecoq's philosophy. Frost and Yarrow's *Improvisation in Drama* (1990) considers Lecoq's work within the broader scope of improvisation in training and its influence on emergent theatre styles, while also detailing the various subject areas of the Lecoq syllabus. Chamberlain and Yarrow's *Jacques Lecoq and the British Theatre* (2002) is a collection of essays about the influence of Lecoq's teaching upon new British theatre over the past twenty years, while in Lecoq's own *The Moving Body* (2000), written shortly before his death in 1999, he discusses the development of his school which began with one student in 1956, and talks broadly about his philosophy and teaching methods with regard to each section of the syllabus. In the section about the neutral mask he explains the key exercises which he applies to the work with the mask, and some of these exercises are mentioned in the Eldredge and Huston essay "Actor Training in the Neutral Mask" (1978) which also discusses the benefits to the actor of working with the neutral mask.

The reader is given an overall retrieval of the pedagogue's work which is compact and brief while the information imparted about working with the neutral mask specifically is impressionistic and opaque. It is conceivable that there may be a

multitude of ways in which different practitioners could bring their experience to bear upon this task, but there is a lack of specific documentation and resulting analysis in the literature. Also lacking from the available literature is a significant representation of the observations, experiences and reflections of actors as they explore the processes of the neutral mask. It was also my aim to record the observations and reflections of the actors in the research group as they worked through the various processes of the neutral mask.

Any discussion of the actor's expressive state, or of various levels of expression within the actor's range, must take into consideration the work of performance theorist and director, Eugenio Barba. The theories of Barba, together with the transcultural study of performers which he terms Theatre Anthropology, are largely concerned with the performer's achievement of scenic presence at the physiological level, and Barba has identified this organisational level of the performer's craft as 'pre-expressive'. He has proposed that this state is an operative level which, by abstraction, the performer can separate from the various levels of their craft and work on "in a situation of analytical research and during the technical work of composition."³ Barba postulates that the 'pre-expressive' state is the condition where the performer is no longer in their daily idiom of physical existence but not yet involved in any form of expression.⁴ As a result of my consideration of the possible relationship between neutral mask and Barba's analysis of theatrical presence the research project also sought to answer the following question:

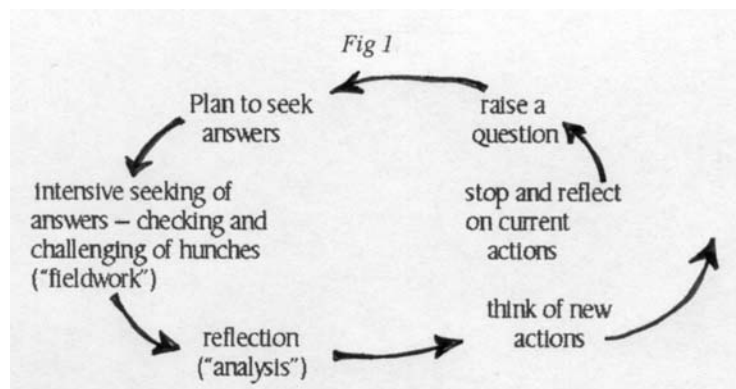
— What are the parallels between the physiological analysis of the performer's scenic presence made by Eugenio Barba and Theatre Anthropology, and the effect of the neutral mask on the actor?

While I was confident that my first question could be addressed within the framework of the project, I was aware from the outset that the second question may be too large or problematic to be addressed within the scope of the project. In seeking to investigate the parallels between the physiological analysis of the performer's scenic presence made by Barba, and the effect of the neutral mask on the actor, I needed to formulate a strategy pertaining to the problem inherent in paralleling these two. On one side of the equation is the neutral mask, an artefact whose potential uses to the actor can only be discovered through investigative process work. On the other side is Barba's detailed analysis of the constituent elements of the performer's scenic presence which he terms recurring principles.⁵ My strategy was to undertake investigations into the neutral mask with the actors of the research group, and when the analysis of this work had been made, to then extend a comparison of these findings to the specific analysis of scenic presence made by Barba and Theatre Anthropology.

The framework of the neutral mask research project was thirteen weekly three-hour workshop sessions and the research group consisted of nine drama students ranging in age from nineteen to thirty one, all of whom expressed a curiosity about masks and working through the body to develop corporeal awareness. The project was predicated upon a fundamental understanding that actors develop their expressive and physical range through personal process work. At the outset I anticipated that the project would be processual and evolutionary by nature and that the collaboration of the participants would be essential to the unfolding of the research. I further anticipated that new questions would emerge and require attention in the course of the project and that the participants would help to shape and define the research as it proceeded. The recognition

that the project would be characterised by the three qualities of process, collaboration and evolution led me to choose the research method of Participatory Action Research.⁶ The model of this research method is a rolling spiral with three distinct phases to each revolution, the designation of the phases being Plan, Act, Reflect, (Fig 1)⁷ and in this instance each spiral of the model corresponds to one weekly workshop.

The three phases of each revolution were correlated in my records in the following way: a plan was drawn up for each workshop session (Plan); the workshops took place (Act); a diarised record of each session was kept in which was detailed the activities of the session, the questions and discussion which arose, together with my reflective observations (Reflect); the questions and observations generated by the actors and myself each session in turn provided me with specific considerations as I planned the following workshop (Plan). As an extension of the reflection phase, three questionnaires were issued to the participants at salient points through the project (see Appendix 1). The purpose of the questionnaires was to gather qualitative information from the participants regarding their ongoing experience of the work. My position was as the catalyst and primary observer of the project and the questionnaires were key instruments in drawing together the inside experiences of the actors and the outside observations of



myself. In addition to these records, the sessions were documented with photographic stills and video recordings, and the participants also kept logbooks where they recorded the events of each workshop together with their reactions, sensations, questions and reflections about the activities of each session. These logbooks were also made available for the writing up of this research report.

Chapter one surveys the “rediscovery and rehabilitation” of masks as tools of performance and pedagogy in Western theatre over the past century. The chapter briefly discusses the work of various theorists, directors, teachers and performers in whose work the mask occupies a significant position, while also considering the variety of opinions held by these practitioners regarding the value and meaning of masks in the dramatic event or as tools for the actor in training.

Chapter two discusses the development of the neutral mask as an object and as a paradigm of pedagogy for the actor, and undertakes a comparative investigation of the concept of neutrality as a performant state. Within this discussion is a consideration of Barba’s theory concerning the ‘pre-expressive’ state together with a brief consideration of Turner’s theories regarding the liminal.

Chapter three presents the account of the practice component of the research project and details the processes used to investigate the neutral mask through the workshop series, while Chapter four is devoted to an analysis of the investigations undertaken with the neutral mask and addresses the primary questions upon which the research project was predicated.

NOTES

- ¹ Turner, V., *The Anthropology of Performance*, (PAJ Publications, New York, 1986), p. 26.
- ² Eldredge, S. and Huston, H., "Actor Training in the Neutral Mask", *The Drama Review*, vol. 22, no. 4, (1978), reprinted in Zarilli, P. (ed) *Acting (Re-)Considered*, (Routledge, London, 1995), pp. 121-128; Chamberlain F. and Yarrow, R., (eds) *Jacques Lecoq and the British Theatre*, (Routledge, London, 2002); Felner, M., *Apostles of Silence*, (Associated University Presses, London, 1985); Frost, A. and Yarrow, R., *Improvisation In Drama*, (Macmillan, London, 1990); Leabhart, T., *Modern and Post Modern Mime*, (Macmillan, Basingstoke, 1989); Lecoq, J., *The Moving Body*, (Methuen, London, 2000)
- ³ Barba, E. and Savarese, N., *A Dictionary of Theatre Anthropology*, (Routledge, London, 1991), p. 5.
- ⁴ *ibid.*
- ⁵ Barba, E., *The Paper Canoe*, (Routledge, London, 1995), p. 13.
- ⁶ For key texts on the research method of Participatory Action Research see Selener, D., *Participatory Action Research and Social Change*, (Cornell Participatory Action Research Network, Cornell University, Ithaca New York, 1998); Wadsworth, Y., 'What is Participatory Action Research?', Action Research International, Paper 2, (1998), available on-line:
<http://www.scu.edu.au/schools/gcm/ar/ari/p-ywadsworth98.html>
- ⁷ Wadsworth, Y., *ibid.*, p. 5.