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 Lecoq. 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. 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 proccessual 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.


4 _ibid._


7 Wadsworth, Y., _ibid._, p. 5.
Chapter One

The Rediscovery and Rehabilitation of Masks in 20th Century Theatre

The “rediscovery and rehabilitation” of the mask as a performance and pedagogical tool can be traced throughout the history of western theatre in the 20th century. It is not difficult to adopt the view that all the threads lead in an unbroken line back to Jacques Copeau (1879-1949), his Théâtre du Vieux Colombier (1913-1924) and the associated actor training school, École du Vieux Colombier. The school was the genesis of the careers of Etienne Decroux, Jean Dasté and Charles Dullin, Jean-Louis Barrault and the two major mask pedagogists of the century, Jacques Lecoq and Michel St Denis. The teaching system of the latter became institutionalised in the USA, Great Britain, Canada and France, while ex-students of Lecoq’s school include Julie Taymor, Ariane Mnouchkine, and Steven Berkoff, along with members of the companies Mummenschanz (Switzerland), Théâtre de Complicité (England), Théâtre de la Jeune Lune (Minneapolis) and Footsbarn (France). Contemporaneous to Copeau, renovators of the theatre in Italy and Russia were also adopting the mask as a paradigm of their various plans for a renewed and rejuvenated “theatre of art”. The reverberations of the practice and research with a range of masks by these early 20th century theatre visionaries have resonated throughout actor training programs and performance styles to the present time.
Visions and theories

Copeau, Stanislavsky, Meyerhold and Craig are names synonymous with the theatrical ferment associated with the early 20\textsuperscript{th} century. In seeking to create new forms of theatre and to redefine the art of the theatre, these practitioners all recognised the need for a new style of actor. This actor needed to be a creator and communicator, a richly skilled technician capable of accessing and developing his/her emotional, imaginative and physical instrument. For Meyerhold, Stanislavsky and Copeau, the primacy of the actor in the dramatic event was at the centre of their vision for the necessary renewal of the theatre.

There are two principal theatre visionaries and theorists of the early 20\textsuperscript{th} century whose calls for the return of masks to pre-eminence formed an intrinsic part of their vision for a new theatre, Edward Gordon Craig and Antonin Artaud. What sets both of these men apart from the other practitioners already mentioned is the fact that they achieved relatively little in terms of creative output on the stage or as teachers, yet their theories and writings have proved a reservoir of inspiration and discussion for 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 part of the 19\textsuperscript{th} century he acted in productions at leading West-end playhouses and with various provincial touring companies, but by the early 1900s he had turned his attention to scenic design and directing. It was at this time that he began writing about the need for new styles of representation in the theatre and of his desire to
see the established conventions of the theatre stripped away to reveal its basic physical elements. He was critical of the actors and acting conventions of the late Victorian and Edwardian stage, expressing the opinion that vanity and an excessive display of emotion defined their style and that the cult of personality was what attracted audiences to the theatre. 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 to the form. 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 which he had created for some of his early productions 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 which embodied 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 which were symbolic embodiments, Craig saw the potential to “work in those materials with which we can calculate. Man is not one of those materials.” In the essay “A Note on Masks” he made the following comments about the importance of the mask to theatre:

“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…The Mask, the symbol of the human face. It is this sense of being beyond reality which permeates all great art…the face of the actor carries no such conviction: it is over-
full of fleeting expression…frail, restless; disturbed and disturbing…on this account not material with which to make a work of art…The Mask must return to the stage to restore expression…the visible expression of the mind.”

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 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”. In his book about Craig, Christopher Innes advances the following opinion: “[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.”

Craig never fully realised his proposed use of masks in his “Art of the Theatre”, and his call for the pre-eminence of mask performance remained an unrealised paradigm of his theatrical vision. Nevertheless, it is interesting to note echoes in productions much later in the century which are suggestive of his ideas, and that his summons for the Über-Marionette is a fundamental point of departure for anyone considering the positioning of the actor in the theatrical event.

Antonin Artaud (1896-1948) found inspiration for his vision for a renewed theatre in the topeng (mask performance) and wayang (puppetry) of Bali. In his first manifesto on the Theatre of Cruelty, Artaud imagined a theatre which stylistically employed a “tangible stage language” and he suggested that the human body ought to be “raised to the dignity of signs”, inspiration for this was to come from “hieroglyphic characters”
which were to be used to “transcribe these signs legibly” and to “compose exact symbols on stage that are immediately legible”. He proposed that masks be used to participate in the tangible stage language, “independently of their psychological use” and also proposed that in his new theatre “puppets, huge masks, objects of strange proportions appear by the same right as verbal imagery, stressing the physical aspect of all imagery and expression.”

The vague suggestiveness of these visions, wrested from the manifesto and considered at face value, can perhaps be regarded as pointers to the late 20th century productions of Compagnie Phillipe Genty and Julie Taymor whose productions are rich in visual imagery and clever staging. Their works employ masks and puppetry on a fantastic level, often placing the human actors in a position which is subordinate to the stage images and the complex technology which makes the productions possible. (Julie Taymor’s work has also been influenced by the indigenous mask and puppetry theatre of Indonesia and a discussion of the significance of masks in her work will be taken up later in this chapter.)

Copeau, Stanislavsky, Meyerhold and Craig all acknowledged that their need for a new style of actor to inhabit their new theatre could only be met by the development of a wholly new actor training system. Copeau, Stanislavsky and Meyerhold all established their own training schools where they were each able to investigate a wide range of methods for training young 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. While Stanislavsky’s body of work does not feature in this discussion (which focuses on the
mask as an accessory of the actor), it is feasible to argue that the transformational power of makeup and costume which is given prominence within the Stanislavsky training system can be seen as having a similar transformational effect on the actor as a mask.

Jacques Copeau (1878-1949) worked as a theatre critic in Denmark and in France and his involvement in literature and interest in contemporary thinking led to his association with the literary society called the Nouvelle Revue Francais (NRF). As a result of his association with the NRF his social circle included André Gide and the notable Modernist painters and sculptors working in Paris in the early years of the 20th century. When he established the Théâtre du Vieux-Colombier in Paris in 1913 he was essentially an outsider to theatre practice who believed that only those who were not intrinsically connected to the contemporary theatre could rejuvenate it from its current state, which he regarded as debased and decadent. In the manifesto which accompanied the establishment of the new theatre he called for a ‘renovation’ of the theatre7 and it was in this document that he spoke of his plan to establish a school for actors, and he envisioned that these actors would be trained in a wholly new way towards the realisation of his vision for the theatre. World War I interrupted the work of Copeau’s newly established theatre and in 1915 he went on a tour to visit some of his theatre contemporaries who were also investigating methods for changing theatre and performance practice. He visited Gordon Craig in Italy, who introduced him to a range of masks which included Asian masks and those of commedia dell’arte,8 and he visited Emile Jaques-Dalcroze in Geneva who introduced Copeau to his technique of teaching music to children through movement and dance (eurythmics).9 Through Jaques-Dalcroze, Copeau was then introduced to the designer Adolph Appia. It was after this trip that Copeau mentioned masks for the first
time in his notebooks of 1915\textsuperscript{10} and in his subsequent work with the Théâtre du Vieux Colombier the mask, and an emphasis on the physicality of the actor were essential features.

At the end of the war activity resumed at the Théâtre du Vieux Colombier in 1919 where one of Copeau’s first acts of renovation was to dispose of the proscenium and make the performing area an empty, open platform. It was a place for neither scenery nor technicians, a place for actors,\textsuperscript{11} and in this reductive return to simplicity Copeau believed he was introducing into his theatre the qualities which were typical of the playing spaces of the Greek theatre, the Elizabethan theatre and the commedia dell’arte:

He believed that from time to time it was necessary to return to the very womb of theatre, to seek renewal of inner strength through the spirit that had animated the theatre at certain fecund periods in the past and could again animate it in the future.\textsuperscript{12}

By 1921 Copeau had decided that it was futile to attempt to re-train and re-educate actors who had learned their craft in the Parisian theatres. Instead, he opened his school, L’École du Vieux-Colombier, where he continued to refine his methods for training actors as he continued to develop the ideals which were to shape his theatre. 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 professional theatre. However, the significance of the training methods which he and his colleagues developed in this brief period have reverberated through acting schools in Europe, Britain
and the USA up to the present time and the research of Copeau and his colleagues into improvisation and mask work constitutes a considerable part of what is today regarded as the staples of actor training.

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.\(^\text{13}\)

In her doctoral thesis about the work of Copeau’s school for actors,\(^\text{14}\) 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,\(^\text{15}\) 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 which they referred to as “the mask” which can be identified as directly influencing the career of Etienne Decroux\(^\text{16}\) and the subsequent actor training systems of Michel St 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. The class was in fact a mime class, but mime as it had never been known or defined before, mime which was poles apart from the white pantomime style of silent performance common to the Parisian Boulevarde theatres of the 18\(^{\text{th}}\) and 19\(^{\text{th}}\) centuries. 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 which 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 to create masks which 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 which then had all signifying expression removed. Staff and students referred to them as ‘inexpressive’ masks but it is worthwhile to note that recent commentary about this aspect of the school’s teaching regularly refers to the masks as ‘neutral’ masks.

As students progressed in their studies at the Vieux Colombier, they 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,” but Marco de Marinis highlights 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, who would be capable of being the principle creative subject in the scene by virtue of 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 goes on to point out that “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.”19

Copeau dissolved his theatre in 1924 in order to focus solely on his training methods and he moved the school to the countryside in Burgundy where his involvement in the project was short-lived due to his poor health. Some of the actors and students from the Vieux Colombier who had moved to Burgundy formed themselves into a company, Les Copiaux, and amongst the members of the company was Michel St Denis who was the nephew, assistant and long time student of Copeau. In his book *Training For The Theatre*,20 St Denis describes the Burgundy period (1924-1929) 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. Over the course of five years we built up a large audience in the towns and villages around Beaune. Many in our audiences had never been to a theatre. They liked our repertory and our way of acting, which was mostly improvisational and which was generally more to be seen than heard. Our comic improvisations were instantly accepted by this audience. Because there was never a barrier between players and audiences, the spectators sensed how much they influenced the actors, how they could affect their performances, indeed, how at times they could lift the actors to a rare degree of exhilaration.21
After five years in Burgundy, Les Copiaux relocated to Paris in 1929 and reformed under the leadership of Michel St Denis, renaming themselves the Compagnie des Quinze. During the years in Burgundy the actors had pursued a masked and improvised performance style which evolved far beyond the initiation to mask which Copeau’s training system had provided. Photos of St Denis and his contemporaries performing show the actors using a range of mask styles, all of which they fashioned themselves from papier maché. Some of the masks cover most of the face with a section for the mouth and chin cut away from the bottom edge to the upper lip; clearly they are speaking masks, but much fuller in size than that which is now widely accepted as a half mask. Other photos show full face masks with open mouths in the ancient Greek style, and yet others are half masks. Copeau and the actors he taught were well aware of commedia dell’arte and the elements of character, improvisation and comic playing style which typified the genre. It is interesting to note that at no time does St Denis imply that the work in Burgundy approached the character types of the commedia dell’arte, or was intended to be a re-creation of the commedia in style or structure. Nevertheless, there appears to have been a referencing of the commedia in the popular theatre style of Les Copiaux.

A brief overview of commedia dell’arte in the 20th century

It is a general truth to state that mask practitioners and theorists of the past century acknowledge that masked performance has reached its most developed form in the Japanese Noh and in the topeng of Bali and Java. In European theatre, the summit of
mask performance technique is generally accepted to be the commedia dell’arte and in this chapter I will confine discussion to a brief consideration of the key points in the rediscovery and renewal of commedia in the past 100 years.

Maurice Sand’s *History of the Harlequinade* (1860) is thought to be the originating point for the revival of interest in commedia:

For the first time, perhaps, Sand defines the revived commedia dell’arte as a form of theatre which brings together scholarly research and practical experiment. He sees commedia, not as an isolated historical phenomenon, but as part of a non-literary tradition of popular theatre which can be traced back to ancient Greece, whose origins lay in improvisation.\(^{23}\)

Whether or not Sand’s image of commedia was any more or less historically correct than anyone else’s, his theory about its origins is echoed by Dario Fo one hundred and thirty years later. Fo also believes commedia is not an isolated phenomenon but rather a popular tradition stretching backwards through the *giullare* and minstrel traditions of Italy, back to the Attellan farces. Fo’s wide ranging conclusions about commedia performance and its history are a result of long term comparative research and analysis with scholars into the play scripts, lazzi, set pieces and other historical records at source. He regards commedia as having a contemporary influence:

*[it] has enormous implications for the comic output of the so-called minor theatre – the popular farces of the 19\(^{th}\) and 20\(^{th}\) centuries, variety theatre, curtain raisers,*
clown shows and even the sketches of silent cinema. No small part of commedia dell’arte material ended up in these forms of comic enterprise.24

In Russia, elements of commedia had slowly been assimilated into certain folk theatre forms25 and in the early stages of the 20th century Meyerhold and other Russian theatre practitioners were experimenting with commedia as a possible basis of training for the actor.26 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 (the same year as Copeau opened his theatre) 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.27

Perhaps the most significant nexus of creative talents involved in the renewal of commedia in the 20th century occurred in Italy in the social reconstruction after the Second World War. It involved the 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 in its early years. The Piccolo Teatro was set up in Milan in 1947 by Giorgio Strehler and theatre manager Paolo Grassi. It was founded on a strong anti-fascist ideology and had as a priority the attraction of working-class audiences and the establishment of a culture of ensemble playing. Its significance and uniqueness in the Italian theatrical landscape is due to it being the first ensemble theatre established in a country whose theatrical history favoured the star system. This traditional feature of Italian theatre is highlighted by Jo Farrel in the preface to Dario Fo’s book The Tricks of The Trade, where he makes the point that “the central figure of Italian theatre
has always been the performer rather than the writer…Italian theatre is dominated not by authors but by performers…”28 Strehler’s work is little known in the English-speaking theatre world, but his significance to European theatre is comparable to Peter Brook’s significance to the English theatre. As a director, his body of work spanned over fifty years in Italy, France and Germany, encompassed the stages of opera and theatre, and his canon, though broad, was regularly punctuated by the works of Shakespeare, Brecht and Goldoni.

In the Piccolo’s first season in 1947, 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.29 A

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A The practice of painting the mask onto the face was not uncommon in the early history of the commedia, and Dario Fo has also performed at times with the face painted mask of Arlecchino.
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 Amleto Sartori to create flexible, comfortable leather masks for the performers.  

Strehler and the performers of the Piccolo rediscovered and refined commedia, realising the form’s capacity for reflecting and absorbing society while acknowledging the humanity and psychology at its base. It is possible that the Piccolo’s form of commedia may not have reached its fullness without the involvement of Amleto Sartori and his rediscovery of the old skilful forms of mask making. He was able to produce refined, flexible, comfortable masks in leather, and leather 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 gifted portraitist in various sculpture materials before turning his skills to the lost tradition of leather theatre masks. His application to creating masks occurred as a result of being introduced to Jacques Lecoq in 1948 when Lecoq was working at the University of Padua as a teacher and creative practitioner. Lecoq had been taught mask performance in France by Jean Dasté, the son-in-law of Jacques Copeau. In his book *The Moving Body*, published shortly before his death in 1999, Lecoq states that it was during his time in Padua that he discovered commedia. He needed masks for his work at the University and was given the use of Sartori’s sculpture workshop where he went about the task of making masks in papier maché; this was the only method used at that time by anyone needing masks. At that point Sartori offered to turn his skill to the problem of mask making 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. After Amleto’s early death from cancer at age forty five, his son Donato maintained the heritage of cultural and technical knowledge and pursued further collaborations with Jean-Louis Barrault, the Neopolitan playwright Eduardo de Filippo, Strehler, Lecoq and Dario Fo.  

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 made this reflection:

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. The very name commedia began to irk me. 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. 

Commedia dell’arte has exerted a fascination on many performers and companies over the past century, perhaps because the form has an openness and a capacity for renewal and assimilation. Just as commedia altered to suit the tastes and contexts of its audiences during its long history, modern actors who set out to research and re-create the commedia have done so within the contemporary context of themselves and their audience, rather than the context of an antique relic, and commedia continues to be a form which offers up performative inspiration to actors and other theatre practitioners.
Mask pedagogists of significance

Michel St Denis, Jacques Lecoq, Keith Johnstone and Jacques Copeau are possibly the most significant proponents of mask pedagogy in the past century, singled out here because they are responsible for the dissemination to actors of the major content of mask teaching over that period. While there will always be a range of teachers specialising in one element or another of the mask as a tool for the actor, most approaches are exemplified in the work of these men. Fortunately, three of them have written books about their teaching methods and the particular outlook which has shaped their systems, while Copeau and his colleagues kept thorough notebooks and registers concerning their goals and training methods.

Michel St Denis’ Compagnie De Quinze performed in London in 1931 and as a result of this event, St Denis was invited to assist in setting up the actor training school at the London Theatre Studio (1935-1939). Invitations to set up other schools followed and he was subsequently invited to develop the actor training programs at The Old Vic Theatre School (1947-1952), L’Ecole Superieure d’Art Dramatique in Strasbourg (1952-1957), the National Theatre School of Canada (1960), and The Juilliard School Drama Division (1968). In his book Training for the Theatre St Denis was unequivocal in his attitude to the mask in actor training and relegates mask work to the category of silent improvisation during the first year of training, regarding it as

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.\(^{37}\)

St Denis advised 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.”\(^{38}\) St Denis refers to the notion of possession of the actor by the mask, but his opinion is that it is possession accompanied by a double consciousness of self. “By the imposition of such an external object on one’s face, one will actually feel possessed by a foreign presence, without however being dispossessed of one’s own self.”\(^{39}\)

In view of the extensive exploration and use of masks in his early performance career it may appear surprising that St Denis placed relatively small emphasis on mask training for the actor. However, during the period in which St Denis was setting up the training schools mentioned above, the theatre environments of England, Canada and the USA 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 mask pedagogy which continues to the present day.
Keith Johnstone is probably best known for being the chief originator of Theatre Sports and an innovator in the area of teaching improvisational skills to student actors. His own introduction to masks came indirectly through Michel St Denis and occurred when Johnstone was working at the Royal Court Theatre at the time that it was under the directorship of George Devine. Prior to this time Devine had been at the London Theatre School and the Old Vic Centre with Michel St Denis and it was Devine who introduced masks into the Royal Court acting classes and to Keith Johnstone.

In his book *Impro*, 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 which masks can have upon the actor revolves around the assumption that masks have shamanistic powers and he talks 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 which is similar to the state of spirit possession, and that masks are tools which the actor can use to open a door into the raw and wild regions of the imagination. Johnstone also believes that once the actor is possessed by the mask and the door to their imagination is open, the actor should be allowed a licence to give 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 he emphasises that improvisation is the key to developing masked characters. In the early stages of mask work Johnstone treats all masks as if they have an intellect no greater than two and a half years, he gives them lots of props and costumes to play with and through side-prompting in improvisations, he gradually encourages the mask character to learn speech and social skills. Within the
safety of the rehearsal room, the characters become tempered enough to play with others
and scenario building begins. The use of masks has remained 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 which have developed through this
method of improvisation and story building.

Prior to coming to the theatre, Jacques Lecoq (1921-1999) was a gymnast and then a
physiotherapist working with the rehabilitation of soldiers after the Second World War.
He spent eight years working in theatre in Italy (1948-1956) and during that period was
invited by Giorgio Strehler to assist with setting up the theatre school of the Piccolo
Teatro (1952). In 1956 he returned to Paris and founded his own school which continues
to this day, and since his death in 1999 has been conducted under the direction of his wife
Fay.

The focus of the school’s teaching has always been mime, mask and movement but
Lecoq’s attitude to movement training for actors had an innovative slant:

The spinal column of the school is the analysis of movement. Analysis of movement
is not necessarily the analysis of the body, it is the analysis of all movement, even of
animals, of plants, of the dynamics of passion, of colours, of everything that moves.
We are trying to get to the bottom of movement.⁴⁰
In seeking to “get to the bottom of movement” he encouraged his actors to learn to assimilate and embody within their expressive range as many forms of movement observed within the natural world as possible.

In his book *The Moving Body*, Lecoq discussed the development of the school and talked broadly about his teaching methods which he evolved over a period of forty years. At the École Internationale de Théâtre Jacques Lecoq, the first year begins with “Psychological Play Without Words” then moves to work with the “Neutral Mask”. Lecoq commented many times that work with the neutral mask was the fundamental cornerstone of his teaching and described this mask as the fulcrum mask for all other masks. The students go on to explore the world and its movements through mime, exploring in turn what he defines as Elements, Materials, Poetry & Painting and Animals, and it is in the early sections of the course that the influence of Copeau appears to be very strong (“Copeau wanted his students to become astute observers of nature and of animals, performing exercises based on the birth of Spring, the growth of plants, wind in the trees, the sunrise.”41) The course moves on to “Expressive Masks” which signifies the beginning of character work and if the students are invited back for a second year, they explore the dramatic territories of “Gestural Langages” which encompass the various different styles of mime, melodrama, commedia dell’arte (using leather masks from the Sartori workshop), clowns (using the small red clown nose), tragedy, and the mysterious and ancient traditions of bouffons. Lecoq’s exploration of the bouffon is grounded in the world of the grotesque and in this section of the course the students wear padded costumes which distend and alter the shape of the body, operating in effect as a total body mask.
Lecoq’s belief in the importance of masks to actor training is conveyed in the following statement: “Whatever its dramatic style, all theatre profits from the experience an actor gains through masked performance”. His approach to masks was pragmatic, and unlike Keith Johnstone, Lecoq did not promote the notion of masks having powers of possession or entrancement over the actor. When discussing his approach to working with expressive masks he said:

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.

Although Lecoq was regarded for many years as a teacher of mime, he was not a mime himself and the syllabus at his school was much broader than silent play without words. His school has produced many performers who have moved into that area of performance which is broadly termed ‘physical theatre’ and Lecoq’s teaching was always focussed upon developing, through improvisation, physical and imaginative technique in actors which could subsequently be brought to bear upon a broad range of performance work.
Working with masks beyond the training environment

Outside of the training environment, creators of theatre shows over the past thirty years or so have developed the mask object and drawn it into their creative vision in a multitude of ways. A cursory search on any of the major internet search engines will reveal many theatre groups in Europe, Britain and the USA who work with masks or mask-like objects regularly, both in performance and as teaching tools. While the ephemera of their endeavours, such as posters, programs and photos posted on websites, capture and maintain the visual images of masks at work, it is difficult to uncover discussion devoted to the process of mask performance within this professional arena, or to uncover discussion by the actor of its modus operandi with the emotional and physical registers of the actor.

The Trestle Theatre Company is one example of a professional company who have developed twenty years of theatre work around masks. The company are based in Hertfordshire and established themselves in 1981. Since then they have performed numerous shows in thirty five countries and the scope of their work now encompasses business training and an education program which offers masks for purchase, notes for teachers, and workshops in mask and physical theatre. The primary element of their style is full face masks with simple, cartoonish features, and choreography, mime and music are the major components of their scenic creations. Surprisingly, there is not a single journal article or section of a monograph which documents their unique style.

The Swiss company Mummenschanz took the mask object and developed it into a creation which inhabits the porous borders between performing objects, masks and
puppets. The company was formed by three ex-students of Lecoq, who, after leaving the school, set up a base in Switzerland and conducted their first European tour in 1973. In 2002 their theatre creations were part of Expo 02 in Switzerland, and in the years between they have made many tours of North America and Europe. Their style is to create large abstract shapes with dynamic qualities which somehow contain a generic humanity and a capacity for interaction which is infused with essentially human qualities. There is a great deal of humour in the interaction between the abstract structures they fill the stage with, however it is a style where the human performer occupies a primary role as manipulator of the constructions and the various elements of scenic imagery. “The Mummenschanz synthesis, which has much in common with object animation, puppetry and black light theatre as well as mime and mask work, owes as much to Jacques Lecoq as to Craig’s essay on the super-marionette.” 45

The position of the actor as an über-marionette is similarly applicable to some of the productions of American director and designer Julie Taymor. After studying acting with Lecoq, and mask and puppet construction with Peter Schumann of The Bread and Puppet Theatre, she spent four years in Indonesia where she investigated and absorbed much about the traditional manufacture, use and cultural significance of masks and puppets from the indigenous theatre traditions. Taymor also spent time in Japan studying various traditional forms of puppetry. Her eclectic and virtuosic use of puppets and masks exhibits an intellectual and inter-cultural understanding of performance traditions from Europe, Japan and Indonesia.
The objects of Taymor’s theatre expression include shadow puppets, rod puppets, dummies and large bas-relief puppets, alongside actors who may at various times be wearing face masks (half masks, full face masks or piece masks), body masks or puppet bodies. There is an overall impression from much of her stage work that the actors are contributing themselves as manipulators of her images rather than as conduits of character and there is a blurring of the traditional boundaries of scenic set, performing object and actor.\textsuperscript{46} The iconic imagery of her creations suggest that she uses masks and puppets as devices for essentializing the qualities of a character in order that information about that character may be delivered to an audience visually with broad and definite strokes. Taymor’s symbiosis of actor, mask and puppet seems at times to echo Artaud’s vision for a theatre where “puppets, huge masks, objects of strange proportions appear by the same right as verbal imagery, stressing the physical aspects of all imagery and expression.”\textsuperscript{47}

While Julie Taymor’s involvement with masks, puppets and performing objects is primarily as a designer and director, her understanding of how actors work with masks is grounded in her own experience as a performer with these objects. Her opinion of how a simple face mask works upon the actor reiterates the two most common reflections regarding the action of the mask upon the wearer, firstly, that the wearer is granted freedom from themselves, and secondly, the seeming paradox of concealing oneself in order to allow those parts of one’s persona which usually remain hidden to be revealed.

Forcing a person to get into a concrete exterior form helps them to get out of themselves. That’s one of the things about masks\textsuperscript{48} …If you can put on another
face, you can hide your own persona, and other parts that are locked away will be able to gain expression – which is why masks are liberating for the actor.  

Half masks which allow speech have been an essential feature of the text-based performances of the Footsbarn Travelling Theatre for over thirty years. They are another example of a company with a long history of working with masks who have largely escaped academic attention or documentation of any kind. The company now has a home base in France, but from their beginnings in Cornwall they adopted an itinerant way of life and have produced nearly sixty plays during their travels through six continents.  

They are expert storytellers with finely honed comedic skills and a common touch suggestive of the sideshow or the circus tent where they usually perform, and it is this combination of skills which has enabled the company to traverse language barriers and successfully perform their shows in many countries where English is not the primary language.  

When the Footsbarn actors are asked why they have continued to use masks, their reply is straightforward and the answer has remained the same over many years: because they don’t have enough people to play all the parts.  

Footsbarn has always used masks and continues to do so, the founder members of the group studied at either L’École Jacques Lecoq in Paris or with Peter Schumann of Bread and Puppet and the use of masks become a second nature. Partly for the very practical reason of there never being enough actors on stage, and the mask is the obvious way to change and add to the characters in a play. The influences for
the masks used by Footsbarn come from the many voyages made by the company, from Greece, Italy, Indonesia, India etc.\textsuperscript{52}

Other long standing members of the Footsbarn company have commented on the mask’s ability to give an actor size and authority in outdoor performance situations and their comments also emphasise the mask’s usefulness in allowing an actor to disappear completely and so facilitate a complete transformation of the performer:

A mask takes away from the naturalistic way of performing. It allows the actor to travel far [...] for us, the mask is the basic form. The essential part of theatre for us is the actor, and the mask is fundamental, the starting point [...] if you watch Noh theatre, you can’t think about the actor who is wearing the mask at all. He disappears completely. Then you watch something on television where you see the actor—who is so busy being wonderful, being a marvellous actor, that you can’t see the person he’s trying to play. All you can see is the actor [...] the mask was developed for out of doors. Its size, its features, its presence: all function out of doors better than our own little faces. You need size out of doors and the mask gives you that.\textsuperscript{53}

One of the most lucid discussions about why theatre practitioners might chose to use masks appears in an essay by Peter Brook from \textit{The Shifting Point} titled “The Mask—Coming Out Of Our Shell”, where he discusses masks with specific reference to his production of \textit{The Conference of the Birds}\textsuperscript{54} The production was based on an ancient Sufi poem and Brook turned to masks because he felt that the expressive range of his actors
was insufficient to meet the needs of the narrative, where many of the characters were archetypal and in some cases allegorical representations. In the course of the show the actors were storytellers with shifting identities, and Brook felt that masks and delicately made puppets could facilitate the many transformations of role and playing intensity which the actors were required to make. The masks were used in three different ways: 1) as puppets whose dynamism involved the full focus of the performer manipulating them, 2) to convey a fully blown character role, in which instance they were worn on the face, and 3) to express self-concealment behind a false image and so comment upon the duplicity of the character, in which case the masks were held in front of the face by the actor. In the course of the development of the show Brook and his actors had contact with traditional Balinese masks and performers and the production eventually made use of a combination of Balinese masks and others made specially for the show by a Western mask maker. Brook was particularly impressed with the traditional Balinese masks which he felt captured an esssentialized range of human experience and in the essay mentioned above he discusses these masks in terms which also reiterate the notion that masks perform the dual function of concealing and revealing:

The traditional mask in essence isn’t a “mask” at all, because it is an image of the essential nature. In other words, a traditional mask is a portrait of a man without a mask […] The traditional mask is an actual portrait, a soul-portrait, a photograph of what you rarely see, only in truly evolved human beings: an outer casing that is a complete and sensitive reflection of the inner life […] A mask of this order has this extraordinary characteristic that the moment it is on a human head, if the human being inside is sensitive to its meaning, it has an absolutely inexhaustible quantity
of expressions […] It is endlessly, endlessly shifting—but within the purity and intensity of the unmasked man, whose deepest inner nature is constantly revealing itself, while the masked man’s inner nature is continuously concealed. So in that way, I think the first basic paradox is that the true mask is the expression of somebody unmasked.56

Yet another slant on the reason why performers may chose to work with masks is offered by Etienne Decroux. In 1974 when Decroux was in his seventies, he was interviewed for an article in *Mime Journal* and the topic of the interview was masks. In the course of the interview Decroux made the statement that “The mask is a socialist invention.” Within the context of the interview the comment seems at once suggestive and yet perplexing, until Decroux explains himself. The point he was making was that the mask has the ability to make people, or actors, equal; which is to say that the mask can allow all performers to begin the process of creating a character from an equal starting point. He went on to explain that if he wanted to play a young lover, why shouldn’t he be able to if his body, personality and experience were capable of bringing expressive truth to the role? Why should he be denied the chance because he has the face of an old man? “From a socialist point of view, that’s not fair. But with a mask it’s possible. I could wear the mask of a young man in all his glory.”57 Perhaps in this wry comment can be found the germ of why people in the theatre choose to work with masks: because masks allow actors to transform themselves and so escape commodification based on the way that they appear in everyday life.
The “rediscovery and rehabilitation” of the mask over the past century is undoubtedly weighted in favour of the object as a tool for the pedagogy of the actor and while this chapter has briefly discussed those teachers whose work is seminal to the development of mask pedagogy over that period of time, new practitioners continue to develop their own particular approach to teaching with masks. Expressive masks, whose features range from embryonic suggestion to clearly defined characters are used in actor training for a number of different purposes: they are used to shield the actor from self consciousness and fear, those personal states which create barriers to expressive freedom and creativity; they are used as tools for the actor to explore their imaginative range, in effect concealing the actor so that they can reveal those elements of their person which are usually hidden; and they are employed as agents of character investigation, an agency which encompasses the use of a wide range of masks which may be silent or speaking, full face or half masks. All three instances of use have the corollary of throwing focus onto the actor’s body as a means of gestural and expressive communication and it is for this reason that masks are frequently used as an adjunct to classes which are devoted to improvisation, movement or mime.

Inexpressive or neutral masks occupy a less clearly defined area of the pedagogical arena and while commentaries on the history of mask use over the past century refer to this style of mask obliquely, detailed discussion of the significance of the neutral mask for actors in training is rare. They are training tools whose first instance of use can be traced back to the improvisation classes at the École du Vieux Colombier, while it is the teaching of Jacques Lecoq which has been most significantly associated with the neutral mask. 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.

NOTES

2 *Dido and Aeneas*, 1900; *The Masque of Love*, 1901.

“Craig’s chief influence on the Vieux-Colombier school would be to stimulate Copeau to incorporate theatre crafts and a study of Asian and Italian theatre as fundamental to a well-rounded theatre education […] Historian and theatre director Leon Chancerel has remarked that it was Craig who sparked in Copeau the idea of commedia dell’arte as the basis for a new dramatic form to work toward […] Copeau’s letters to Jouvet and Dullin after his visit with Craig in 1915/16 are full of references to this improvisational form as vital to actor training. He visualised such study as leading to the creation of a modern comedy form capable of bringing people together in a communion of laughter and recognition.”

9 *ibid.*

“Dalcroze based the study of music on direct experience with musical concepts. This involved basic work in physical expression and gymnastics, to develop rhythm, tempo, and dynamics, building on a child’s natural instincts for movement and play. In addition to this unique perspective on the teaching of music, Copeau was intrigued by Dalcroze’s attitude toward his students. “It is the student who must teach the master, not the master the student,” wrote Dalcroze. “The role of the master will be rather to reveal to the student what the latter has taught him.”


“The recollections of the Théâtre du Vieux Colombier that comes first to my mind is of the stage itself: it was both wide and high and every part of it was open to the auditorium. A forestage—on the same level as the main stage—projected into the auditorium to form another acting area, easily recognizable as such. It was designed for physical acting; its form, its many levels, its steps and aprons, allowed for a great variety of staging. The whole stage was an acting area, in contrast to that “box of illusions”—the proscenium stage. It gave an equal authenticity to classical farce, poetic drama and realistic “anti-theatrical” plays. It rejected any kind of painted or visual illusion, any kind of naturalistic décor created by sets and complicated lighting. Stage screws could get no footing on its cement floor.
The tyranny of stage hands and electricians, with their complex techniques of set changing, had been eliminated, to the great advantage of the plays and the actors. We were able to put on seven different plays each week as it was easy to change the décor between matinee and evening performances. And as the technicians no longer had the upper hand, the stage was often free for rehearsals. In a repertory theatre, as the Vieux Colombier was, it is of great importance that directing and acting be developed in the very space where the plays will “live” for the audience, that is, on the stage rather than in the rehearsal room.”


13 *ibid.*, p. 25.


15 *ibid.* p. 30.

16 Decroux, E., “Etienne Decroux on Masks”, *Mime Journal*, (1974), p. 55. Interview with Thomas Leabhart. “When I was at the Drama School of the Vieux-Colombier, under the direction of Jacques Copeau, almost all the improvisations were done with masks. The masks were inexpressive masks, made by the students themselves […] I said to myself, “If the face is covered, how can they express anything at all?” […] Then I saw the carefully done improvisations and exercises with inexpressive masks. We saw the body moving quite well and were not distracted by facial expression. That’s how I saw the importance of mime that I call corporeal.”


19 *ibid.* pp. 26, 27.

20 St Denis, M., *op.cit.* pp. 26, 27.


26 Various practitioners were also creating theatre shows using *commedia* techniques as a base, for example: Vakhtangov’s *Princess Turandot* (1922) and Meyerhold’s *Harlequin, The Marriage Broker* (1922).

27 Anderson, M., *ibid.*

28 Fo, D. *op.cit.* p. 5.


30 *ibid.* p. 43.

“He [Moretti] experimented with a series of masks representing animal types, preferring at first the cat mask but moving through one resembling a wolf’ to one (which became definitive) characteristic of the zanni. Strehler points out that Moretti was the first to discover the endless mobility of the mask: he realised the full expressive force of its mouth and gradually discovered how to externalise a whole range of emotions when he let himself be ‘conquered’ by the mask; he found liberty in the restriction, and the most rigid of conventions released his imaginative capacity, allowing him to realise the most vital part of himself. Strehler comments: ‘behind the mask, Marcello, who was shy (like all actors and he more than most), was able to release a new life, an imaginative power which was in no way “realistic” but securely anchored in his own down-to-earth inner self, and carry through that process of rediscovery and enrichment which I myself was undertaking from my own point of view into the problem of commedia dell’arte, which seemed to have been miraculously reborn before our very eyes’ ”. (From Strehler, *Per un teatro umano*, p. 172.)

31 Lecoq was initiated into the use of masks by Jean Dasté, the son-in-law of Copeau who married Copeau’s daughter Marie-Hélène. Jean Dasté and Marie-Hélène had both been members of the full-time apprentice group which trained at the L’École du Vieux-Colombier from 1921 to 1924.


33 Fo, D., *op.cit.* p. 66.

“The leather is fashioned by beating it out on a wooden outline. First of all the prototype is modelled in terracotta, then a gypsum mould is created, with the face form reproduced by chiselling on a block of hard, resistant wood. A thin sheet of leather, softened by soaking in water, is stretched over the form and is
made to stick to it by being beaten with briarwood clubs. The modelling process is continued by the use of special tools – some sharp pointed, others with a grained surface. Once the mask is formed, it is left to dry before special waxes are spread over it to make it at the same time hard and elastic, and most especially, able to ‘breathe’.

34 I suggest that the rediscovery of the ancient manufacturing technique for leather masks, and the subsequent sharing of this knowledge, has contributed in a number of ways to mask companies over the past thirty years, allowing resident mask makers to learn the skills whereby they can construct comfortable and durable masks for their performers.

35 Donato Sartori’s research into the mask continues. In 1979 he founded the Centro Maschere E Strutture Gestuali with the scenographer Paolo Trombetta and the architect Paola Pizzi. “It is a multi-disciplinary research group which studies the various ethnological, anthropological and spectacular aspects which involve the reality of masks as a whole and, in a progressive evolution, it stretches beyond the creation of body masks and gestural structures and brings us right up to the environmental masking or urban masking.” (From the group’s flyer for their summer school workshop, 2003)


37 St Denis, M., *op. cit.* p. 170.

38 *ibid.*

39 *ibid.*, p. 171.


41 *ibid.*, p. 27.

42 Lecoq, J., *op. cit.* p. 53.

43 *ibid.* p. 55.

44 *L’Amfiparnaso* was performed in Melbourne in 1990 at the Melbourne International Festival. *State of Bewilderment* was produced in Sydney as a joint production with the Sydney Theatre Company in 1995. It was based on the cartoon world and characters of Michael Leunig.


46 For an exposé of Taymor’s productions see Blumenthal, Eileen & Julie Taymor. *Julie Taymor; playing*
with fire: theatre opera film (Harry N. Abrams, New York, 1999)

47 Artaud, A., ibid.


51 Footsbarn Travelling Theatre performed four shows in Sydney in 1986: Circus Tosov, King Lear, Chinese Puzzle, and the world premier of their version of Macbeth. The latter show had been developed during their four months in Australia, when the company spent some time living in an Aboriginal community. The masks developed for their version of Macbeth had an eclectic influence of indigenous body art and culture from the Pacific basin.

52 From a personal e-mail from Footsbarn’s company administrator, John Kirby, May 2002. These comments are echoed in the interviews conducted with the company by Geraldine Cousins of Warwick University and published in NTQ, vol. 1 (1985) and NTQ, vol. 33 (1993).

53 From an interview between Geraldine Cousins and the actors David Johnston and Margarete Biereye, long standing members of Footsbarn who, in 1993, set up their own company, Ton und Kirschen, in a small town outside Potsdam, Germany. “From Travelling with Footsbarn to ‘Wandertheater’ with Ton und Kirschen” NTQ, vol. 14, no. 56, (1998), p. 305


56 Brook, P., op.cit. p. 218.

Chapter Two

The neutral mask, performative liminality, and the ‘pre-expressive’ state

When the neutral mask is spoken of today, the term generally refers to the male and female leather masks which were developed in the nineteen fifties by the Italian maskmaker Amleto Sartori. As discussed in Chapter One, Sartori was developing masks in the nexus of creative activity surrounding the early years of The Piccolo Teatro in Milan during the postwar reconstruction of Italy. It was an environment nourished with the creative input of director Giorgio Strehler, the actors and students of the newly formed Piccolo Teatro and its school,¹ and theatre teacher Jacques Lecoq. Many years later, Giorgio Strehler reflected on the long period of experimentation Sartori undertook in the invention and refinement of the neutral masks and wrote:

I consider it his masterpiece, a neutral mask, an expressionless mask. Gesture, the body, the situation, and the relationships with other bodies and movements, these factors alone were to give a sense and feeling to the completely absorbed and limpidly empty mask that Sartori invented. This was a difficult task; it was formal research that was almost impossible to realise. As soon as the theme was given we did realise how difficult it would be to develop. A mask that would represent nullity. Sartori made innumerable attempts at it […] He told me that “perhaps it is the most difficult project I’ve ever undertaken.”²

The masks are seamlessly crafted from a single piece of leather and are light and comfortable to wear. The eye sockets are large, allowing the eyes of the wearer to be
clearly visible and the masks are silent, but with the lips parted as if they might be about to speak. The masks are intended to be a face in a state of calm, a face captured at the mid-point between expressions, a face that is without attitude, a face which has no defining adjectival characteristics inscribed into its features. The *ko-omote* or *young girl* mask of the Noh theatre is said to have been an influence in the development of the mask and the calmness of the face and the parted lips are two features which the neutral mask shares with that particular Noh mask.

Copies and subtle variations of the Sartori masks have cropped up from various maskmakers, while teachers such as Carlo Mazzone-Clementi, founder of the Dell’Arte International School of Physical Theatre, and Jacques Lecoq, worked with neutral masks which the Sartori workshop created for them, but which bore the differing shades of neutrality which each teacher found to be most appropriate to their taste. Lecoq said that his neutral mask was based on a mask of Dasté’s called the noble mask (“The noble mask had something Japanese about it, but the quality it shared with the neutral mask was its calm, lack of particular expression and state of equilibrium”4) while Mazzone-Clementi named the mask he worked with the ‘metaphysical mask’.5

Actor training towards the neutral state is rare in Western theatre, perhaps because the focus in our theatre has traditionally been the presentation of narrative texts. It is the job of the actors and director to provide characters who are created, during rehearsal, to meet the conditions of time and place indicated by the script. Acting in the British and American tradition is most often understood to involve the creation of a role, a psychophysical character who is other than the self but who the actor presents in performance. Sometimes the actor achieves a total transformation, seeming to disappear completely
and be replaced by the character who has been patiently constructed during rehearsal, while at other times the actor allows some of their own personal traits to intersect with and form part of the new role being created. However total or partial the transformation to the new character is, most often in training and in rehearsal, the actor works to embody ‘someone other’ for the purpose of presentation.

In contrast to the traditional requirements of Western narrative theatre, the neutral—or performatively liminal—state is exploited as a performance convention in the traditional Japanese theatre forms of Noh and Kabuki where there are various roles which require the actors to perform neutrality. In these instances the actors are dynamically present and visible upon the stage, but they do not represent anything, neither are they acknowledged by the audience as characters because they are not a part of the play’s narrative. The kokken of the Noh and Kabuki theatre are the stage attendants who assist the main actors and in performance they are “representing their own absence”⁶, while the secondary actor of the Noh, the waki, is sometimes required to “express his own non-being”.⁷ The shite is the main actor of Noh theatre who is required to exit very slowly at the end of his performance, however, he does not perform the exit in character because within the narrative, the action of his character is finished. Instead, he is performing an absence of expression.⁸ In each instance, the performers are not being themselves as they are in their everyday idiom, but neither are they expressing anything, and nor are they embodying a character with a social, psychological or historical context. In the essay “Between Orient and Occident,” Moriake Watanabe refers to this performance state as “performing one’s own absence”⁹ while Phillip Zarrilli refers to this mode of presentation as performing ‘invisibility’¹⁰ but it could also be termed ‘neutrality’ because it is a performative
state at the mid-point between the two extremes which are a part of every performer’s working life: at one end of the scale is the performer as he/she is in his/her everyday idiom and at the other end of the scale is the performer embodying a fully developed character. Through training the performer has learned how to discard his personal gestural habits and to replace the everyday idiom of his physical being, for the duration of the performance, with a constructed performing self which is, nevertheless, not expressive of anything or anyone else. It is a performant state which Barba and Savarese, in A Dictionary of Theatre Anthropology, refer to as ‘pure presence’, and it is a state which is characterised by focus, physical control, balance, a dynamic energy and a ‘stillness at the centre.’

Some of the most significant acting theorists and teachers in Western theatre over the past century have articulated the need for actors to get rid of themselves, that is, to learn to leave out their own gestures and patterned behaviour when creating a role. When this ability has been learned through training, and a physical range has been explored which is greater than the actor’s habitual range, the actor is then able to disappear. The actor who learns these skills is then able to make him/herself thoroughly ‘available’ to transform into another character with a gestural and expressive range not limited by their everyday selves.

In his book Building A Character, Stanislavski made the following comment about actors and their need to get away from themselves:

In order to get away from oneself and not repeat the same externals in every part, it is imperative to achieve an elimination of gestures. Every external
movement which may be natural to an actor off stage separates him from the character he is playing and keeps reminding him of himself.¹³

Jacques Copeau made the following similar complaint about the actors he was working with at the Théâtre de Vieux-Colombier:

I always know in advance what they are going to do. They cannot get out of themselves; they love only themselves. They reduce everything to the level of their habits, their clichés, their affectations. They do not invent anything.¹⁴

As suggested in Chapter one, training the actor towards a neutral state can be identified as originating in the experimental work for actors which Jacques Copeau (1878-1949) developed at his school L’École du Vieux-Colombier in the years 1921-1924. In the Manifesto of the Vieux Colombier published in 1913 to accompany the establishment of the new theatre, Copeau said “we pledge ourselves to react against all the worst features of the contemporary theatre.”¹⁵ One of Copeau’s major dissatisfactions was with the way actors presented themselves in performance and in the manifesto he sets out his aim

to put an end to “ham-acting,” to create for the actor a better atmosphere for his development as man and artist, to educate him, to inspire him with a sense of conscience, and to initiate him into the morality of his art—to that end our efforts will be stubbornly bent.¹⁶
In his notebooks of 1919, Copeau defined more precisely what he was dissatisfied with in the actor’s rendering of his craft:

In reading aloud as well as in his spoken interpretation and in his physical playing or action or business, the actor always starts from an artificial attitude, a bodily, mental, or vocal grimace. His attack is both too deliberate and insufficiently premeditated, or, what is even simpler and more serious, insufficiently felt. He is not doing what he is doing with simplicity and good faith.  

Copeau wanted actors to deliver speech and gesture as if it was created anew in every moment of a dramatic portrayal, and he believed that such freshness of gesture in performance would result if the actor was attuned to the inner state of the character and simultaneously able to allow all corporeal expression to flow naturally from that inner state. In order for this to occur, he believed the actor needed first to prepare within himself a starting point from which all gesture could begin and return to:

To start from silence and calm. That is the very first point. An actor must know how to be silent, to listen, to answer, to remain motionless, to start a gesture, follow through with it, come back to motionless and silence, with all the shadings and half-tones that these actions imply.

The term Copeau used for this fulcrum point was ‘motionlessness’, however, it could also be termed neutrality, and he further explained the qualities and meaning of ‘motionlessness’ within the dramatic event:
Motionlessness, if it is made up of a correct attitude and a proper meaning, is expressive to the extent that it paves the way for the gesture that will follow. In point of fact, except in certain deliberate cases, there is no true motionlessness of the actor on stage. Because that would be the same as not being there. Expressive motionlessness, meaning that which already contains the seed of the action that is to follow, gets across to the audience, without requiring any external manifestation or half-manifestation.  

By qualifying that “there is no true motionlessness of the actor on stage” because this would mean that the actor was not there, Copeau is in fact describing a state which the actor must consciously construct for himself, psycho-physiologically, within the dramatic order. It is a dynamic state, filled with “the seed of the action that is to follow”, and by defining that this is a state which “gets across to the audience” Copeau is describing a condition which is full of dramatic presence since even in stillness the actor in this state is able to arrest the gaze of an audience before making any “external manifestation or half-manifestation” gesturally.

Whereas neutrality in traditional Japanese theatre is a level of performance which exists of itself, meaning that there are specific roles which require its qualities and nothing else, the neutrality Copeau defined is one level of the actor’s craft amongst a number of levels. It is a state which supports and integrates the actor’s psycho-physical realisation of a role, but is not ultimately an end to be achieved for its own sake.
Copeau sought, above all else, to discover the means for training actors to be aware of their capacity to work from this state but when he wrote these notes in 1919 he had not yet discovered a suitable method for achieving this. When the ‘inexpressive’ masks were introduced to the improvisation classes of the student apprentices in 1921, Copeau and his collaborators found that “exercises previously explored only in silence were given a new dimension with the neutral mask. Indeed, the mask itself seemed to dictate the style Copeau had visualized.”

The feelings of the student actors were recorded in the notebooks of Suzanne Bing (Copeau’s chief collaborator) and Copeau’s daughter, Marie-Hélène, and they reflected that the masks brought “a power and unknown security—a sort of balance and consciousness of each gesture and of oneself.” Work with these masks became a focus of the student apprentices’ experimental training and the teachers found that the neutral masks allowed the students a freedom from self while not burdening the young actor with expressive elements of character. Copeau now had a tool, in the form of the inexpressive mask, to implement a method of moving towards that state of dynamic motionlessness which he had identified several years earlier as being the ‘starting point’ for all movement and expression within the dramatic event. It was these investigations with the inexpressive masks, now usually referred to as neutral masks, which were the antecedent of much subsequent actor training which involves “neutral as a primary metaphor”.

Etienne Decroux (1898-1991) was the creator of a strictly codified and abstract form of mime which he called Corporeal Mime and his work is relevant to this discussion because the notions of ‘neutrality’ and ‘presence through absence’ were central to his teaching. Decroux was a part time student studying diction at L’École du Vieux-Colombier when he first encountered the inexpressive mask work of the full-time...
apprentices. He maintained that the inspiration for his life’s work of developing Corporeal Mime stemmed from his observations of the apprentices’ class.

When I was at the Drama School of the Vieux-Colombier, under the direction of Jacques Copeau, almost all the improvisations were done with masks. The masks were inexpressive masks, made by the students themselves […] I said to myself, “If the face is covered, how can they express anything at all?” […] Then I saw the carefully done improvisations and exercises with inexpressive masks. We saw the body moving quite well and were not distracted by facial expression. That’s how I saw the importance of mime that I call corporeal. 24

Unlike earlier forms of mime such as the representational and more familiar mime style of Marcel Marceau, Corporeal Mime is not illusionary, which means that it does not require the actor to represent character or to demonstrate the existence of and interaction with objects in an imagined environment. It is, instead, a physical vocabulary which places focus on the articulation of the trunk rather than expression conveyed in the face or the hands. 25 Its techniques are learned through strict training and passed on in much the same way as those of classical ballet.

The outcomes of Decroux’s lifelong refinement of his art were always pedagogical rather than performative. It is estimated that no more than one thousand people ever saw Etienne Decroux perform live on stage, and his intake of students was erratic and limited to the size of the basement in his home in Paris where he taught until he was well into his eighties. The full understanding of his work is limited to an initiated few. Thomas Leabhart, the founder and editor of Mime Journal, trained with Decroux for
four years and was also his personal assistant. In an essay published in 1995, he reflected on the enigmatic goals sought by his teacher:

What Decroux wanted […] was a state of being in which the student actor was relaxed yet alert, very much in-the-moment, and poised on the razor’s edge that separates movement from immobility. Until we were successful, neither our movements nor our immobilities were charged enough with their opposite qualities […] What he seemed to mean was that one had to get rid of the voices that habitually fill thought, the self-consciousness, the concerns; when this process of emptying out was accomplished, it allowed the moment of being “struck with the thought”—an important moment in Decroux’s teaching. This moment of being taken over by a force exterior to one’s self, yet still remaining lucidly aware and alert, was often one of complete, vibrant, immobility, and was usually followed by a movement imbued with qualities of that immobility.\textsuperscript{26}

Leabhart’s use of the word ‘immobility’ appears to contain a similar meaning in the frame of Decroux’s work as ‘motionlessness’ contained in that of Copeau. The qualities of relaxed yet alert, poised for mental and physical action, and in-the-moment are echoes of Copeau’s search for dynamic motionlessness. Just as the state of motionlessness described by Copeau “paves the way for the gesture that will follow” and contains “the seed of the action that is to follow,” so Decroux’s state of “complete and vibrant immobility,” led to movement which was “imbued with qualities of that immobility.” For both teachers, the condition of neutrality, however it was named, could only be reached by the actor who was able to let go of his habitual way of being.
which included personal gestures, self-consciousness, hopes, plans and fears. The actor had to learn how to ‘empty out’ himself to make way for what was to follow.  

In the same essay, Leabhart also describes the frustration experienced and the patience required to achieve the desired state of being present-yet-absent, then concludes:

More than twenty years after my work with Decroux, and studying the writings of Copeau and certain of his chief associates and disciples […] I realized that Decroux was teaching us what Copeau taught him: a method for achieving presence through absence, an optimum performance state that must be experienced to be understood. The exercises were not really mysterious; it only seemed that way, as words are so inadequate to describe this fundamentally non-verbal process […] I discovered that Decroux’s project […] was to build idealised bodies which were themselves neutral masks.

A quote from Mira Felner further clarifies Decroux’s training towards the neutral state as a means for the actor to learn to work with absolute economy of movement and emotion, and she places the actor’s development towards this state in the early stages of training:

Decroux believes that mime is first of all a series of actions in the present tense. These actions must be executed with complete economy of movement, expending no more physical or emotional energy than absolutely necessary. If done correctly, the mime should be in a state of neutrality, imputing no meaning
to his actions, for “the economical is without mannerism.” The performer at this early stage of training, learns to escape his own idiosyncratic gesture, as well as the tendency to artificially assume those of other characters.\textsuperscript{30}

Just as Copeau wanted his actors to “get out of themselves” and to discover the state of “motionlessness” from which all gesture would flow without artifice and affectation, so Decroux trained his actors to achieve a state where they were free of their own idiosyncratic gestures, and were not yet assuming the qualities of anyone else. For both teachers, the achievement of the neutral state was not an end in itself, but it was a crucial stage of the training process each of them developed in order to establish a starting point for the performer. The work which Copeau developed with the inexpensive masks was driven by the aim of training an actor who would ultimately interpret characters and serve the needs of a classical text. In Copeau’s analytical writings, neutrality is a level which allows the actor to \textit{not be himself} yet still be dynamically present in the dramatic sense, so that he can then be filled by the character he is portraying in a play, without his own social and gestural habits intersecting with the creation of the role. Decroux, however, sought to create a silent and impressionistic form of performance whose focus was a supremely articulate body which in performance was able to draw the audience’s gaze to it, a performing body which needed no words, since it was to be capable of communicating on a spiritual and aesthetic level, capable of embodying thought.

Jacques Lecoq is recognised as having done more than any other teacher to investigate the neutral state as an element of actor training and he did that by means of the neutral mask which Amleto Sartori created for him. Lecoq taught in Paris from 1956
until his death in 1999, and while the syllabus at his school evolved and grew over that time, the work with the neutral mask was seminal to his overall teaching philosophy. Of his work with the mask he said “experience has shown that such fundamental things occur with this mask that it has become the central point of my teaching method.”

Concurrent with much of this period Etienne Decroux was also teaching mime in Paris, but the pedagogical aims of the two teachers were fundamentally different, notwithstanding the concept of the neutral state was central to both teaching systems. Lecoq worked from an intuitive base which rejected the severe and strict codification of style inherent in Decroux’s Corporeal Mime, seeking instead to train performers who were capable of developing and shaping their own forms of theatre. His teaching was primarily based in improvisation and he was “concerned to reinstate the body as the basic means of communication.” In an interview published in *The Observer* in 1988, Lecoq said: “I remind the actors that they are ‘auteurs.’ The task is not to interpret. You must re-live each phase physically.” Simon Murray, in an essay published in 2002, offered his own gloss on Lecoq’s teaching:

from his opposition to the ‘performer as interpreter’ model of acting, and the codification of mime, it would seem that Lecoq is at odds with both the ‘psycho-techniques’ which have dominated professional theatre training in the West for much of this century, and with the *grammaire* of Decroux.

Lecoq placed his teaching with the neutral mask in the early stages of the first year syllabus, introducing it a few weeks into the first term and proceeding with it for approximately six weeks. Within the Lecoq training system, the mask is valuable at
this early stage for three primary reasons: it is silent; it throws focus onto the whole body of the actor and emphasises the actor’s physical habits; and it is devoid of character, so it frees the actor from interpretive demands.

The silent play of the neutral figure takes the actor to a space which is free of the constructs of language, and on the topic of silence and why it is necessary at this point in the actor’s journey, Lecoq said:

We begin with silence, for the spoken word often forgets the roots from which it grew, and it is a good thing for students to begin by placing themselves in the position of primal naïveté, a state of innocent curiosity. In any human relationship two major zones of silence emerge: before and after speech. Before, when no words have been spoken, one is in a state of modesty which allows words to be born out of silence; in this state strength comes from avoiding explanatory discourse. By taking these silent situations, and working on human nature, we can rediscover those moments when the words do not yet exist.37

Commentary by others is able to shed light on the mask’s ability to draw focus onto the body of the actor and, furthermore, why this is a valuable element in actor training. In an essay from 1978 titled ‘Actor Training in the Neutral Mask’, Eldredge and Huston make the point that

the mask is a tool for analysing the quality of the body’s action. The mask hides the face, but reveals the attitudes and intentions, the nuances, the feeling tones, that are otherwise only dimly sensed in a person’s motion or stillness38
and an ex-student of the Lecoq school, Bim Mason, commented:

I have found that the use of the neutral mask and the study of movement qualities has been indispensable in helping all kinds of students become aware of their characteristic physical habits and limitations.\(^{39}\)

Each of these comments emphasises the neutral mask as a tool for highlighting the personal physical habits of the actor, with the adjunct that once actors have been made aware of their personal idiosyncrasies, they can then set about the process of eliminating these from their subsequent performance work.

The third quality of the neutral mask which makes it valuable in the early stages of actor training is its lack of defining character. Lecoq described the mask as a “neutral generic being”, and he said that “you take on the neutral mask as you might take on a character, with the difference that here there is no character, only a neutral generic being,”\(^{40}\) further explaining that the mask puts the actor in a state of perfect balance and economy of movement. Its moves have a truthfulness, its gestures and actions are economical. Movement work based on neutrality provides a series of fulcrum points that will be essential for acting, which comes later. Having experienced perfect balance, the actor is better equipped to express a character’s imbalance or conflictual states […] for everyone, the neutral mask becomes a point of reference.\(^{41}\)
Perhaps the key idea in this explanation, and the one which has the most significance to the preceding discussion in this chapter, is the suggestion that neutral mask work is a type of ‘pre-acting’ since it is devoid of the expressive qualities associated with a character; qualities which develop as a result of conflict and imbalance in a personality, and the driving forces of personal wants or fears. The suggestion that it provides a ‘point of reference’ to the actor is an echo of Copeau’s stated need for his actors to establish a ‘starting point’, while the observation that the mask promotes an economy and truthfulness of gesture are recurrent echoes of the qualities sought by Copeau and Decroux in their training systems.

Lecoq described the neutral state as “a state combining calm and curiosity”, and further described it as “a state of receptiveness to everything around us, with no inner conflict”. In these comments can be heard further echoes of Copeau who, in 1919, wrote that he wanted his actors to learn how to “start from silence and calm. That is the very first point. An actor must know how to be silent, to listen, to answer, to remain motionless, to start a gesture, …etc.” Both practitioners also made corresponding comments about the state of neutrality being an ideal which is worked towards but which cannot actually be achieved. Lecoq said “of course there is no such thing as absolute and universal neutrality, it is merely a temptation,” echoing Copeau’s comment that “there is no true motionlessness of the actor on stage”.

It is convenient to identify the connections between the work of Lecoq and the work of Copeau and to assume that Lecoq’s work with the neutral mask was an extension of that of Copeau. It is beyond dispute that many of Lecoq’s teaching methods, based as they were in improvisation, and in a fundamentalist appreciation of the movement in
nature, owe a great debt to the intuitive and improvisational nature of the research conducted by Suzanne Bing and Jacques Copeau. However, a closer observation reveals not just the obvious difference of *zeitgeist* for each practitioner, but an essential difference in their goals. John Wright, one of the founders of The Trestle Theatre Company in Britain, made this point in an essay published in 2002.\(^{46}\) He highlights that Copeau sought to ‘renovate’ the theatre of his day and to investigate the essence of acting. Copeau was working, ultimately, for a speaking theatre and for the accommodation of classic texts,\(^ {47}\) while Lecoq was committed to the exploration of movement as the creative root of theatre making. He was working towards devised theatre and towards new theatre forms. Bim Mason made the following comment about the type of theatre Lecoq was training performers for:

> He does not exclude the spoken word or deny its importance but […] his is a theatre of action and physical image rather than an interplay of ideas and concepts […] he takes a tough line on ‘psychological’ acting. He promotes a human drama where the protagonists are pushed and pulled by passions so strong that they take extra-ordinary action; the source of human drama is therefore visceral rather than cerebral.\(^ {48}\)

Whether the benefits of working with the neutral mask are to be found in the achievement of the neutral state, or whether they are to be found in the various lessons of the journey towards the ideal, cannot be answered in an essay, only in practice, and even then, the self knowledge attained and the lessons learned will depend upon the aims and methods of the teacher. As this discussion has highlighted, the neutral or
inexpressive mask has been used over the past eighty years in similar ways to serve different creative ideologies.

The neutral state and performative liminality

The understanding that the expressive range of a performer can be analysed broadly as three phases, and that this analysis is meaningful theoretically and in practice to actors as they develop their creative processes, was fundamental to the pedagogical aims of Copeau and Decroux and can also be observed in Lecoq’s teaching. I propose that the term ‘performative liminality’ is an appropriate term to adopt for this performant state, and I suggest this term with reference to the theories of the anthropologists Victor Turner (1920-83) and Arnold van Gennep (1873-1957).

The word **liminal** comes from the latin word **limen**, meaning **threshold**, and it was adopted by van Gennep, a Belgian ethnolinguist and folklorist, who introduced the term in his book from 1908 titled *Rites Of Passage*. He used the term to denote the central of three phases in what he called “rites of passage” […] he looked at a wide variety of ritual forms, taken from most regions and many periods of history, and found in them a tripartite processual form. Rituals separated specified members of a group from everyday life, placed them in a limbo that was not any place they were in before and not yet any place they would be in, then returned them, changed in some way, to mundane life.49
Van Gennep pointed out that the purpose and effect of the rites was transformational with regard to the individual’s place in the society. The British anthropologist Victor Turner built upon van Gennep’s use of the term *limen* in his own work which explored the “relationships between ritual and theatre” and then in the theories he subsequently developed concerning the performative nature of social drama.

Turner sought to integrate the notion of liminality – the threshold, the betwixt and between – so decisive to his grasp and experience of ritual as anti-structural, creative, often carnivalesque and playful – with his emerging understanding of the relationship between social drama and aesthetic drama. Performance is central to Turner’s thinking because the performative genres are living examples of ritual in/as action.

I propose that the term *performative liminality* is an appropriate designation for the performant state elsewhere referred to as *neutral* because it can be understood metaphorically as a *limen* or threshold between the borders of the actor in his/her daily idiom and the actor expressively transformed into another character. Turner designated the liminal state as an “interfacial region”, a “betwixt and between” place, where “the past is momentarily negated, suspended or abrogated, and the future has not yet begun, an instant of pure potentiality when everything […] trembles in the balance”. It is a state characterised by the potential for transformation and change. “Liminality can perhaps be described as a fructile chaos, a fertile nothingness, a storehouse of possibilities, not by any means a random assemblage but a striving after new forms and structure.” For actors, the state of performative liminality is a state where they are free from the expectation of others and themselves to be a certain way, and they are not yet under any
expectation or demand to create an ‘other’ who will also be influenced by conflicts, needs, experiences past and wants for the future. It can be thought of as a space between who I am and who I am becoming, where the threads of potentialities converge with the actor’s ‘availability’.

There is yet one more metaphor I will suggest to assist in the conceptualising of this performant state and that is of a no-man’s land, and I make this suggestion with direct reference to van Gennep’s discussion of the neutral zones which used to surround states and principalities:

Today, in our part of the world, one country touches another; but the situation was quite different in the times when Christian lands comprised only a part of Europe. Each country was surrounded by a strip of neutral ground which in practice was divided into sections or marches […] the same system of zones is to be found among the semicivilized […] the neutral zones are ordinarily deserts, marshes, and most frequently virgin forests where everyone has full rights to travel and hunt […] whoever passes from one to the other finds himself physically and magico-religiously in a special situation for a certain length of time: he wavers between two worlds. It is this situation which I have designated a transition…

It is the concept of transition which is fundamental to the neutral or performatively liminal state, because passage through this phase facilitates transformation, and without the middle of the tripartite series of phases, the performer cannot move from their everyday self to a totally transformed and expressive other.
The neutral mask and the ‘pre-expressive’ state

A discussion about the neutral state is a discussion concerned with a specific ‘zone’ in the expressive range of the actor. The suggestion of a performatively liminal state within the scale of the actor’s range of expression led me to a consideration of the parallels which might exist between the use of the neutral mask, and the performant state of ‘pre-expressivity’ which has been the focus of much research and analysis over the past thirty years by the performance theorist Eugenio Barba.

Barba is the director of the Danish theatre company Odin Teatret which formed in Norway in 1964 then moved to the town of Holstebro in Denmark in 1966. In the early ‘sixties Barba was assistant to Jerzy Grotowski at his Theatre of the Thirteen Rows in Poland and was instrumental in making the work of Grotowski known to the broader international theatre community. Aside from his work with Odin Teatret he has done extensive research into Asian theatre and these personal investigations are the basis of much of his writing and analysis. In 1979 he founded ISTA, the International School of Theatre Anthropology, an international group of theatre practitioners from a broad performance base whose concerns are with investigating the connections between performance techniques in the East and the West. Through comparative analysis of codified dance/drama forms from Bali, Japan, China and India, Barba identified common physical principles which he claims make up a ‘transcultural physiology’ and form the sub stratum of the stage presence and energy exemplified by performers from
all genres. Barba names his research Theatre Anthropology and he defines the research as

the study of the behaviour of the human being when it uses its physical and mental-presence in an organised performance situation and according to the principles which are different from those used in daily life. This extra-daily use of the body is what is called technique.54

Barba is unequivocal in clarifying that Theatre Anthropology has nothing to do with cultural anthropology or the application of paradigms from cultural anthropology to the study of performance. Nor should it be “confused with the anthropology of performance”55 or the study of performance in various cultures which is carried out by cultural anthropologists.

Barba’s concerns are largely to do with the performer’s achievement of scenic presence at a physiological level, and he designates this organisational level of the performer’s craft as the ‘pre-expressive’ state. Just as the neutral state can be thought of as the central of a tripartite series of phases in the actor’s expressive range, the ‘pre-expressive’ state is the condition where performers are no longer behaving or holding themselves as they do in their everyday life, but are not yet involved in any form of expression, which is to say that they are not expressing themselves, nor are they representing anyone or anything else. An important element of the theory is the understanding that the ‘pre-expressive’ state is nevertheless a performant state, or perhaps it is useful to designate it as a fictive state, because it is a state which the performer works towards and constructs for him/herself through technical process work.
Barba claims that it is an operative level which, by abstraction, the performer can separate from the various levels of his/her craft and work on “in a situation of analytical research and during the technical work of composition” and he uses the terms daily and extra-daily to identify the difference in the actor’s use of the body. In the extra-daily use of the body, learned techniques create dynamic tensions in the body which attract the spectator’s attention to the performer before any expression is undertaken:

These new tensions generate a different energy quality, render the body theatrically ‘decided’, ‘alive’, and manifest the performer’s ‘presence’ or scenic bios, attracting the spectator’s attention before any form of personal expression takes place.

Barba postulates that an analysis of performance in all cultures reveals that the work of the performer “results from the fusion of three aspects which reflect three different levels of organisation.” The first is the individual’s personality, sensibilities and artistic intelligence. The second level refers to the traditions and the socio-historical context of the performers who belong to the same performance genre. The third level is the one which Theatre Anthropology is concerned with, the ‘pre-expressive’ level. He names the physiological factors of balance, placement of weight, heightened energy, opposition within the body, the position of the spinal column, the direction of the eyes, as being factors which produce extra-daily tensions in the body of the performer, and he claims that the tensions recur through all styles of performance, irrespective of the culture which has generated them. He claims that this is the level where a performer’s presence exists and is constructed and he proposes a complex analysis of the constituent
physiological elements of the performer’s scenic presence, designating them as ‘recurring principles’.

The recurring principles include the distinction between daily and extra-daily body techniques as mentioned above, and the remaining principles are termed balance, opposition, omission, equivalence and dilation. Barba and the academics associated with Theatre Anthropology have presented detailed definitions of each of these terms in *A Dictionary of Theatre Anthropology* (1991), and much of the information from the dictionary was reiterated in *The Paper Canoe: a guide to Theatre Anthropology* (1995). What follows here is a concise rendering of the meaning of each of the terms.

The physiological principle of balance is variously referred to as extra-daily balance, luxury balance, altered balance, precarious balance and balance in action. Each one of the linguistic variants suggests the situation where the normal, economical balance of an individual is threatened and altered in favour of a muscular arrangement of the body which requires much greater effort and energy to sustain. The new muscular arrangement of the body creates new tensions and re-routes the flow of energy through the body and Barba claims that these factors make the body appear more dynamic and alive, and he also applies the term dilated to describe the body in this state, with the sense of ‘dilated’ being that the body appears bigger, fuller, energised and radiant.

**Opposition** refers to the naturally occurring oppositional forces which are always at work in the body’s muscular operations. For example, when a leg or arm is extended, muscular forces push energy through the limb but at the same time other muscles work to limit the movement and anchor the limb within the natural range of movement.
particular to the body which is doing the action. Barba, however, makes the observation that a performer can make the muscular forces of opposition visible to a spectator. Some examples of opposition might be that in moving to the right, the body first moves to the left so that the movement to the right is accentuated; in bobbing down, the body first rises slightly before moving downwards; and when extending an arm, the oppositional forces which limit and anchor the movement are accentuated within the muscles of the performer, thereby giving greater weight and tension to the movement. Again, the extra tensions and extra energy expended serve to dilate the body of the performer and render it more dynamic and alive.

The term omission is applied to movement where everything that is not essential to a particular physical action has been removed and the action is thereby reduced to its simplest form. In one sense the term is describing actions which are economical, because all extraneous movement has been eliminated, but Barba insists that the term has a more complex meaning. He explains that the term omission entails “the compression, into restricted movements, of the same physical energies necessary to accomplish a much larger and heavier action.”

The principle of equivalence is most easily understood if it is approached through observation of mimes. The term refers to the body’s ability to represent a specific action by using the body in a different way to which it would normally work to execute that action. For example, in daily life when a person pushes something very heavy, the chest projects forward, the spine straightens as it extends forwards from the hips, and a great deal of downwards pressure is exerted through the back foot. When a mime represents pushing something heavy, the actions of the body are reversed, the spine arches
concavely, the arms are drawn up and into the chest, and downwards pressure is exerted on the front foot. The illusion is of something very heavy being pushed, but the action is not one which imitates real life; instead, the effort and action required to push the very heavy object has been moved to an *equivalent* position in the body.

Theatre Anthropology insists that the pre-expressive principles are not a catalogue of how to make a body appear more aesthetic, but theorises that the principles offer an analysis of the physical techniques performers use when they are in a performant state which attracts and holds the gaze of a spectator. It is a state where the performer is holding him/herself differently to the way they are in their daily life, but they are not yet expressing anyone or anything else. They are dynamically present.

As suggested in the introduction to this dissertation, my consideration of the possible relationship between neutral mask and Barba’s analysis of theatrical presence led me to pose the second question of the research project:

— 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?

If the neutral mask is a tool to teach actors to gain a level of performance where they are no longer themselves, and they are not yet someone else, yet they are performatively alive and present, what is the nature of that presence, how can it be described and how can it be achieved? In seeking to investigate the potential parallels between the effect of the neutral mask on the actor, and the physiological analysis of the performer’s scenic
presence made by Barba, my strategy was to first undertake investigations into the neutral mask, and when the analysis of this work was made, to then extend a comparison of these findings to the specific analysis of scenic presence made by Barba and Theatre Anthropology, and designated as ‘recurring principles’.

Chapter three presents the account of the practice component of the research project and details the processes used to investigate the neutral mask and its potential applications to the creative processes of the actor, while Chapter four is devoted to an analysis of the investigations and addresses the questions upon which the research project was predicated.
NOTES

1 Amongst whom were Carlo Mazzone-Clementi who later founded the Dell’Arte Company in the United States, Dario Fo and Franca Rame.

2 Strehler, G., from the introduction to Marcia, A., *The Commedia dell’Arte and the masks of Amleto and Donato Sartori*, (La Casa Usher, Florence, 1980), no page numbers are given in the publication.

3 A practical feature of the parted lips is that they allow the person wearing the mask to breathe comfortably.


7 *ibid.*

8 It is likely that this performant state developed of necessity from the physical conditions of traditional performance. The performances of Noh, Kabuki and Kyogen were originally staged outdoors where there were neither wings nor backstage to exit to, neither was there a place which could provide a hidden spot for costume changes. So the attendants, the *kokken*, took care of the props and assisted the *shite* with his cumbersome and elaborate costumes, and the long exit of the *shite* developed into a performance element with its own defining characteristics.


16 *ibid.*


18 These were the qualities which Stanislavski was also seeking. In *Apostles of Silence*. (Associated University Presses, London, 1985), p. 39, Mira Felner writes of the debt which Copeau owed to Stanislavski: ‘From Constantin Stanislavski, Copeau learned of the importance of sincerity and truth, that action must be linked to a psychological state, that movement should originate from need. Copeau called him “the master of us all”.’ (Copeau, J., *Souvenirs du Vieux Colombier*. (Paris:Nouvelles Editions Latines, 1931), p. 51.)


20 *ibid.*


22 *ibid.*, p. 30.

23 For a discussion of ‘neutral as a primary metaphor’ in actor training schemes see Zarilli, P., *op.cit.* pp. 81-83.


26 *ibid.*, p. 85.

27 There were significant differences between the methods used by these two teachers to guide their students towards the neutral state, but the obvious difference of relevance to this discussion is the position which masks occupied in each system. Within the form of Corporeal Mime, the face was superfluous as it represented the identity, character, and personal history of the actor and these were attributes Decroux wanted his students to abandon in performance. Decroux considered that the face was not malleable enough, its parts were not able to be isolated and articulated to the extent that the other parts of the body could be, and in this regard his attitudes echo those of Edward Gordon Craig. Decroux worked intermittently with masks and with a veil in order to abolish the face and throw all
possible emphasis onto the body and its movements, but the mask was not a paradigm of his teaching method.

28 Leabhart, T., *op.cit.* p. 86.

29 *ibid.*, p. 111.


31 Lecoq, J., *ibid.*


34 Murray, S., *ibid.*

35 The term *grammaire* refers to the strictly codified physical language which Decroux developed.

36 Neutral mask is currently taught in two professional actor training institutions in Australia, the Victorian College of the Arts (VCA) and at the West Australian Academy of the Performing Arts (WAAPA). At both schools it is taught intensively for approximately six weeks early in the first year of the acting curriculum.


40 Lecoq, J., *op.cit.* p. 38

41 *ibid.*


43 *ibid.*, p. 36.


47 *ibid.*


51 *ibid.*


55 *ibid.*

56 *ibid.*

57 *ibid.*

58 *ibid.*

Chapter Three

Neutral mask workshop report

As discussed in the introduction to this dissertation, 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 acknowledgment 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, a methodology suited to collaborative research where the conditions of the project suggest that new questions may emerge and require attention in the course of the project.

My strategy in planning the activities of the workshops was to preference practical involvement in movement and mask exercises over discussion, and throughout the early sessions I revealed little to the participants about the specific questions guiding the project. Initially I divulged to the participants only a limited amount of the findings of my own research regarding commentary about the neutral mask. My reason for proceeding in this manner was that I wanted to create a supportive environment wherein the actors were free to explore, question and discover the nature and effect of the masks, unencumbered by preconceived notions of how they were meant to feel when encountering the masks, and what effect the masks were meant to have on them and upon those watching. I did not want to supply the actors with ideas about what might be regarded as right or wrong. I was aware
throughout the project that the actors sometimes felt frustrated and that at times they wanted to be told if their work was correct or otherwise: these are the customary markers of acceptance which actors frequently seek as they traverse and expose their personal landscapes. Once again I would like to express my gratitude to the participants for their patience and belief in the project and to reiterate that throughout the workshops it was the questions, comments and application of the participants which continually opened new territory for me in the experiential and intellectual journey. I am gratefully indebted to each one of them for the gift they gave week after week to me, each other, and the project, of their trust, sensitivity, bravery, openness, creativity and reflection.

**Physical preparation for mask work**

My performance history with masks has brought me to the understanding that all masks effect a transformation in the body of the actor and that all mask work should be fed with a tributary of physically involving and challenging work. The more flexible, available, and articulate the body of an actor, the greater the physical transformation that will eventually be possible, in time. Accordingly, each workshop session was planned in two segments of eighty minutes each, the first part devoted to physically focussed work and the second part given over to mask work. This schedule allowed us time for a short period of discussion and review at the end where questions could be raised and observations made.

Every session started with a couple of high energy games which were used to raise the energy levels of the actors and I emphasised to the actors that games can be useful if we
play them mindful of the benefits they can offer: they immediately transport actors into the play realm, which, like all improvisation, is bounded with the subjunctive ‘as if’ and governed by simple rules which require respect; they establish focus within the group and within the workroom; and they can facilitate a sense of complicité from the very early stages of formation of a group of actors. After the games we moved immediately into movement work which was not strenuous but required a consistent focus from the actors that was both mental and physical. Exercises were chosen to heighten awareness of such things as:

- body alignment
- identification of the body’s movement centres and the focussing of energy in these centres
- the shifting interplay of movement, posture and emotion
- balance and counterbalance
- the creation and use of dynamic tensions in the body
- sensory awareness and the effect sensations create through our body when we yield to them

Through structuring exercises which enhanced the actors’ awareness of these things I was selecting activities which I believed would facilitate the preparation for the neutral mask work which was to follow later.

The movement exercises undertaken were loosely defined by the three spatial orientations of lying, standing and walking (see Appendix 2). My reason for grouping our exercises into these three positions was so the actors would be able to separate out and
analyse the ways that humans can use and organise their bodies in reference to their surroundings. Exercises in the lying position were appropriate in the early stages of each session because they encouraged a quiet focus to settle in the room and enabled each individual to bring their mental and physical focus into themselves. As the actors collapsed to the floor panting and sweaty after the energetic games, they could not help but listen to the changing rhythms of their bodies as they sank slowly through the layers of their unravelling tensions. The exercises which followed involved working towards minute physical control at a deep muscular level (see Appendix 2a).

Exercises in the standing position were used to analyse the body’s ability to move with absolute economy into the six cardinal directions of right, left, forwards, backwards, up and down. In the standing position the actors were encouraged to discover the ideal ‘neutral’ arrangement of their body from which they might launch themselves into any direction immediately with a minimum of muscular disruption (see Appendix 2b).

Walking exercises were used to encourage the actors to become analytically aware of the unique method his/her body had developed to manage the constant shifts of balance required to keep the skeleton upright as it moves from point A to point B. In order to approach a physicalisation of ‘neutral’, the actors needed first to explore and understand their own particular way of moving (see Appendix 2c).

In the first session I introduced sticks into our movement exercises and we continued working with sticks throughout the length of the project. A catalogue of the various ways in which we used the sticks appears in Appendix 2d, but here I will briefly
discuss two of the exercises which the actors identified as nourishing the mask investigations which followed in the second half of each session. The first we referred to as “stick dancing” and it was done in pairs with an accompanying music tape consisting of five or six tracks (Fig 2). The exercise began with the longest sticks laid out on the floor between each pair of partners who positioned themselves facing one another one metre away from each end of their stick. The partners then established eye contact and in silence an agreement was made to move to the stick and pick it up together. The stick was picked up with the tip of the index finger and held suspended between the partners with a minimum of pressure as they moved around the studio, using the music to explore various physical tempi according to the ebb and flow of their energy levels. The idea was to keep the stick suspended at all costs but if it did fall, eye contact and the starting position needed to be re-established before picking up the stick to move around the studio again. One of the
actors (P2) asked the question “What should we do in the spaces? I don’t know what to do when the music stops.” My reply was that the spaces between the tracks of music were the most important part of the exercise because it was in the spaces that the actors needed to keep their energy and focus at its highest level. I urged them to never allow their energy and focus to drop, but rather to make it stronger when the music did not drive them. Another of the actors (P3) explained the usefulness of this exercise to the mask work in the following way:

…focus is not just on the other individual but also the dynamic connection between the two which is given life and vitality by the participants. In regard to the mask, this activity exercises focus in preparation for the organic experiences behind and within the mask.

“Stick structures” was an exercise which applied the concept of shared impulses and shared focus to a large group. We used the shortest sticks and built a structure wherein every member of the group was connected to two others by a stick suspended between the tips of each index finger. It was a closed structure which had both a cumbersome quality—since it included every member of the group—and a delicate quality—as the group’s organic interaction depended on the fine sticks and the delicate pressure which held them in place. When the structure had been built and closed, it started to move, twisting across the room, moving through varying levels of height, tangling and then untangling itself as it took on a pulse and life. At first I insisted that the group should establish a shared breathing pattern which was audible, but this became an imposition which impeded the flow of the structure. Instead I introduced a soundtrack which was comprised of several
sustained Mozart arias and this influenced the exercise towards a more continuous flow (Fig 3).

The shared focus required to control the sticks and the exchange of impulses, whether in pairs or as part of the whole group working together, encouraged the actors to explore their capacity for movement with increasing dynamic and daring effort. It also developed reciprocal relationships of trust and encouraged the elements of play and complicité in our sessions. If I had asked the actors to learn choreography much simpler than that which they created afresh for themselves each session, it is unlikely they would have mastered the choreography, but the moment-to-moment creativity of body-describing-space which the stick work engendered had the effect of encouraging the actors to push their physical creativity well beyond their accepted boundaries.
Early encounters with the neutral masks

The actors’ initial encounter with the masks took place during the first workshop session – they held the two Sartori neutral masks, (Fig 4) turned them over in their hands, passed them around, noted which was the male (Fig 5) and which the female (Fig 6) and observed the obvious differences between the two. The actors also smelt them and I am certain that the particular smell of these masks has become an olfactory sense memory for each of them. It is a smell which is warm and rich, a combination of leather and waxes. It is not possible to hold these masks without realising that they are the product of a very high level of artisanry and craftsmanship. While the skill of the mask maker should, I think, always be noted and respected, I nevertheless stressed to the actors that the masks were not to be regarded as precious artefacts but rather as tools to be used.
Fig 5 Male neutral mask

Fig 6 Female neutral mask
We talked about handling protocols which spring, I think, from a sense of respect due all tools which are required to last a long time. The masks should not be set to rest face downwards since the leather could, over time, take on marks which would threaten the neutrality of the mask. They should instead be set down face upwards so they are resting on the outer edges of the leather which are reinforced. In the early sessions I asked the actors to breathe out before putting on the mask and to breathe in as they swept the mask on. This is a method I have often used when working with masks but I found during the workshops that for some of the actors it was an imposition which at times added to their tension rather than being assimilated into a natural flow of movement. Some of them took so much breath in as they put the mask on that they became tense and forgot to breathe out, so in time they each found their own method for getting the mask on as naturally and economically as possible.

The first exercise which I asked the actors to do with the masks was simple in its structure. One at a time, with their backs to the group, the actors put on a mask, turned around through 180° and stood facing the group with their eyes focussed on a distant horizon. I then invited those watching to comment in detail upon what they could observe about the figure from this action. When each of the actors did the exercise they became acutely aware - somewhere in the execution of it and the discussion it aroused - that every movement they made was under intense scrutiny and that they were delivering discernible ‘meaning’ to those who were watching. Whether the actor manifested physical traits such as shoulders that were uneven or slightly collapsed forward, tension in the arms or hands, tightness or looseness in the neck, shoulders or chest, a personal tick here or there, a foot turned slightly inward or the head slightly off its central axis, these physical characteristics,
in small amounts, gave off information which those watching interpreted as having ‘meaning’, sometimes to the chagrin of the actor in the mask who insisted that they were not expressing anything at all. After an early experience of the standing exercise, one of the actors (P3) made the comment that it was a difficult task, because it was “hard to do nothing”. A discussion ensued amongst those watching to the effect that he had not been “doing nothing” since there had been so much readable information coming from him as he stood in front of the group. In this particular instance, his masked figure seemed to radiate a palpable presence which had qualities of menace and power in it.

The reason for the particularly heightened awareness of the actors’ bodies came of course from the masks. The Sartori masks possess a quality that could be termed ‘presence’ which at first arresting one’s gaze, but when one adjusts to the look of the masks they have the effect of focussing attention onto the whole body of the wearer.

Through observation of others doing the exercise, the actors decided that an ideal conjunction between the mask and the wearer could be attained where the actor in the mask was not delivering any discernible information through his/her body. In this state the body appeared aligned, and the whole image had a quality of balance where the mask neither swamped the actor nor did the actor appear too big for the mask.

During this initial exercise it was essential to give immediate feedback to the actor who was wearing the mask since they were for the most part unaware of the particular attitudes in their body which were causing those watching to discern meaning from their actions. As they stood, I adjusted them through minor postural shifts to help them achieve an
arrangement of the body which appeared to those observing to be balanced with the mask. For most of the actors this adjustment felt awkward and unnatural and one of the actors (P5) commented in her logbook that it felt as though the body had been dissected and rearranged. My next step was to introduce a full length mirror so the actors could note the physiological shift they were making from their everyday stance, to the arrangement which made them appear balanced and integrated with the mask. Actor P10 referred to this in the first questionnaire when he wrote “(the mask) drew greater focus onto the body and individual characteristics seemed wrong…I didn’t feel right acting the way I do in everyday life”. When they saw themselves in the mirror they were able to note the shift visually while experiencing it in sensation and they acknowledged that while their new postural arrangement felt uncomfortable and not like themselves, their body did in fact appear aligned, balanced and neutral. Most of them were surprised to see themselves without their face and felt that they were looking at a character who was other than themselves.

To ask an actor to accept this new physiological arrangement for any length of time would be an unreasonable request, since it would be a sudden imposition rather than a gradual reshaping of the use of the body over time. However, from this first exercise each of the actors learned that an ideal arrangement of their body was possible where their everyday postural habits were no longer obvious but they appeared alert and available, ready for anything but not anticipating anything in particular. It was the sensation of the individual’s neutral—or balanced—body which they were aware of working towards in their subsequent movement and mask exercises.
As I reviewed the territory we had traversed in our first two sessions I was aware that the early impressions, sensations and responses of the actors to the masks may soon disappear as we developed attitudes and constructed more information about them. I issued the first questionnaire at the start of session three and it consisted of three questions:

- What are your early impressions of the neutral mask?
- What are your early impressions of seeing the neutral mask worn by others?
- What are your early impressions of wearing the neutral mask and seeing yourself in the neutral mask?

Here are some of the actors’ comments from the first questionnaire:

P6: Fascinating to watch, as the person wearing the mask immediately has this presence. Initially I kept looking at just the mask, but once I got used to looking at it I started to take in the details of the body. People’s postural habits are magnified in the mask. It seems to demand honesty. It’s as if suddenly you have to watch much more carefully, the slightest movements have nuances. Simplicity seems to work well.

P6: I knew straight away that you can’t hide in those masks. You immediately become more aware of your body and what it is revealing, even when you don’t want it to. I found it confronting that people could pick physical characteristics which told of the internal, for example, if I was not taking up space, if I had low energy. Yet, in retrospect that is an amazing thing for both actor and audience.
P9: When the masks were on it was amazing how such small movements of the body made such a huge difference in the message that was portrayed.

P5: I was amazed that focus was not on the mask but drawn to the wearer’s body…The mask was very revealing of any “indicating” by the actor…I was interested how the mask looked different on everyone.

Short movement phrases

The standing exercise had established for the actors three basic lessons about the neutral mask: the masks attracted the gaze of those watching and turned that gaze onto the wearer’s body; when wearing the mask, the qualities of their physicality and all of their actions were magnified; an ideal arrangement of their body was possible which made them appear performatively alive without actually presenting any expressive information. The next step in our investigations was to push the masks and the actors into movement so we could learn more about the masks and the effect of the masks on the actors when they were engaged in physical activity. Our second mask exercise involved a shift to short movement phrases where the actors were required to translate their neutral body—shaped and acknowledged through the standing exercise—into a figure who moved through an imagined environment.

I asked the actors to begin the exercise from an assumed position of sleeping so that they could take time to establish a settled breathing pattern and become attuned to their pulse. From there, the figure was to awake and find themselves on a beach. They were to take in
their surroundings, find a reason for standing and taking a few steps towards the water, and
at some point they were to notice a stone, and to bend down, pick it up and throw it out into
the water. I suggested several other choices for this exercise such as: the figure was to
awake and find themselves in a forest; after taking in their surroundings they were to find a
reason for standing and then they were to notice a tree with a bird in it, whereupon the bird
flew away, disturbing the surrounding forest; or alternatively they could be annoyed by an
insect after waking and taking in their surroundings.¹

From their experience of the mask to this point the actors were aware that absolute
economy of gesture and movement would be required in the execution of these movement
chains. However, these exercises also introduced other technical hurdles for the actors to
acknowledge and solve. Each exercise could be regarded as a short story or a little ‘play’
with a beginning, a middle and an end, and the actors were required to play these, without
the customary acting tools of face and voice through which to register their involvement
with each passing moment. For most of the actors this was the first time they had been
presented with this type of acting task. For some of the actors the playing of these short
stories highlighted individual tendencies towards telegraphed or indicated expression, while
for others the playing through of the stories revealed embodied performance habits, that is,
keyed behaviour which the actor had developed in their performance history and which had
become for them a behavioural crutch which made them feel secure about being in
performance mode.

I explained that although the tools of voice and face through which they customarily
communicated were denied them, they were not to replace these tools with descriptive
mime nor were they to feel the need to explain anything to those watching. My research had taught me that the ideal way to approach this exercise was to allow their engagement with each unfolding moment of the activity chains to be experienced through their body. I further explained that in order for this to happen they needed to place themselves imaginatively in each moment as it evolved and that there was no room for them to be concerned about whether they were communicating with an audience effectively or whether those watching were ‘getting it’. Several actors achieved what appeared to be a seamless integration of activity coupled with a discernible reason for their movements, all of which was revealed through the body of the actor as they passed from moment to moment, and it was through the playing of these few that the group started to realise that a subtle form of embodied playing was possible where the actor’s whole body was the conduit of information rather than the actor’s dialogue or facial expressions.

During the short movement exercises the actors’ growing awareness of movement analysis—explored and developed through physical work during the first part of each session—started to be integrated as they assumed their dual positions as players and observers in the project.
**The journey**

In sessions five and six our neutral mask work focussed on an exercise called “the journey” which built upon the short movement phrases by extending the exercise temporally and spatially (Fig 7-10). “The journey” exercise lasted fifteen to twenty minutes and presented several new challenges to the actors, some of which were directly related to spending a much longer period in the mask. Whereas the previous exercises had been short and focussed on only a few directed activities, the new exercise presented hurdles of sustained energy and focus to the actors.

The exercise required the masked figure to make a journey through a changing natural landscape devoid of other people or any elements of the built environment. In order to maximise our workshop time and the fact that we had two masks to work with, I set the exercise up so that two actors were working at one time, a male and a female (although in the course of “the journey” the masked figure does not acknowledge the presence of
others.) I asked the actors to begin from an assumed position of sleeping, then they were to awake at daybreak, and from there the day unfolded as they moved through a changing landscape, travelling across beaches, through forest, up cliffs, down unstable shale slopes, into a river valley, through mulga scrub, swamps, and so on until sunset. They were required to negotiate the environment physically by walking, crawling, falling, slipping, climbing, or tumbling, doing whatever it would take to negotiate the evolving terrain. My role was as narrator of the changing landscape which the figure moved through, naming where they were going, offering suggestions for the landfall and its qualities, the changing incidence of the sun, or the sounds and smells they might encounter. I asked the actors to play as if it was their first experience ever, thereby adhering to the primitive and curious naïveté which Lecoq associated with the neutral mask. I explained that they were to create their environment moment to moment and to allow their bodies to be affected by the changing qualities of the natural landscape. While the exercise was induced by the voice of the narrator, their environment was created by their visualisations and their imagined stimuli, and I suggested to them that they were held in this environment by ‘the strings of their imagination’ which they needed to keep taut with their imagery.

I was concerned that the actors should not slip into performance habits of playing to an ‘audience’, or give in to the temptation to indicate in order to make sure that those watching would ‘understand’ exactly what they were seeing in their imagination. My strategy for taking away the obvious gaze of others was to re-position the rest of the group as soundtrackers so that they became co-creators of the experience. I provided them with a small amount of junk instruments such as sticks, shakers, small drums, recorders and a xylophone and asked them to explore the potential sounds of the instruments in non-
conventional ways—for example, the drumskins could be scratched and stroked, but not hit as drums, while the bundles of sticks from our movement work could be used in a variety of ways to create sounds. As they heard the unfolding story, they were to sensitively create sounds which evoked the changing natural landscape and modulated with the movement of “the journey”, the emphasis being on sound rather than music. The three-way collaboration between narrator, soundtrackers and masked figures meant that those working in the masks were supported by the whole group and were under no pressure to please or impress. I used the “stick structures” as one of our exercises prior to the playing of “the journey” exercise, since the reciprocal trust and support engendered by the stick structure seemed an ideal and appropriate image of the supportive relationship into which we entered with “the journey” exercise.

Many of the actors commented that one of the more difficult aspects of this exercise was meshing the vast expanse of “the journey” with the spatial limitations of the studio. In a situation of collaborative improvisation, each actor had to keep their visualisations strong while maintaining their movement through the landscape and simultaneously ‘blocking’ their journey within the studio as it was narrated to them. I pointed out to them that these sorts of spatial negotiation problems were some of the technical challenges embedded in the clunky apparatus of the theatre and that the skills required to negotiate and solve the technical problems of “the journey” exercise were part of the foundations of the actor’s craft.

Throughout these sessions I was aware that the actors seemed more relaxed and were placing greater trust in their impulses, with the result that they started to find a creative in-
the-moment quality in their improvisations. The actors noted that longer periods spent
improvising in the mask contributed to their developing self-trust and it was as a result of
this exercise that most of the actors noted a growth in their corporeal and creative
certainty. Some of them tied their growing confidence to their increasing ability to not
worry about being watched. Others attributed their heightened confidence to the knowledge
that they were learning to convey information about their moment to moment experiences
through their body, rather than the face and voice. These reflections were evinced in the
responses to the second questionnaire which I issued after our sessions spent on “the
journey”. Here are some of their comments from that questionnaire:

*P9:* At first I felt myself making facial expressions under the mask (in order to portray
emotions etc), perhaps I did it the whole time, but soon I very easily began to concentrate
more on how to use my body instead. I became very aware of every slight movement of
fingers, toes and head, usually these things wouldn’t be noticed, and the viewer would
instead be swamped with only facial expressions.

*P5:* I think that I have become less reliant on my face as my mode of
communication...Initially I felt very limited and inadequate in the articulation of meaning
through my body. I think I was too focussed on what it would look like to the observer and
giving a sense of ‘reality’ which of course is impossible. Then there was a shift with greater
use of my body in such a way that I did what I felt. I tried to express my experience more
kinaesthetically rather than literally.
P6: I guess it was like enacting or experiencing your imagination physically. It’s hard to say...because it has become so much a feeling. Me doing something, rather than trying to have a studied effect on an audience. Sometimes I think it was hard to express the different textures but it felt very clear to me (visually) in my mind.

P4: It has been a great experience to be pushed into using the body more, and has taken a while for me to stop using so many facial expressions to convey my journeys...I think performers can get so used to facial expressions being a huge part of their acting/performing, that their body movement is neglected in a way.

P2: I think we wear the mask. We hide behind it, almost to the fact that it is an excuse to do the things we do. I think it remains definitely as its purpose states. It is just a tool, without the mask we can still act this way. The mask without us is just a mask. However there are times when I feel I would not have the confidence and trust in myself to imagine without the mask.

P6: When this ideal state of retaining your identity as well as surrendering to the mask is achieved there is a great sense of honesty as well as clarity and “imagination realised.” Initially the mask was taking me, it was a place to hide but last week I was doing, I was wearing as well as just letting it happen. The mask allows extended movement and imagination. The ordinary becomes extraordinary when this balance is achieved.
White masks

After our work with “the journey” we left the neutral masks temporarily and I introduced a second set of masks which the actors explored over a number of sessions (Fig 10-13). The white masks were introduced as a context for our neutral mask explorations and I had several reasons for introducing them into the project at this point. I had noted that some of the observations and responses made by the actors in the early questionnaires could in fact be applied to any type of mask, since all masks do some of the same things: all masks take our faces away, allow us to hide, and can engender a kind of performative ‘safety’ and absolution from our everyday selves. However, the aim of the project was to test out the neutral mask and to discover its particular applications to the creative processes of the actor. Through introducing a different type of mask I hoped that the actors might experience a different range of mask playing which would in turn allow us to reflexively be more specific in our analysis of the neutral mask. My second reason for introducing the white masks was based on the acknowledgment that neutral mask work offers up a range of processes to the actor. I was keen to open an opportunity for the actors to integrate the
lessons of the neutral mask and I was also curious to gather their reflections about assimilating those processes.

The white masks were constructed by the actors from simple materials based on a brief I gave them to create full face masks which had only *embryonic* suggestions of feature. Through improvisation and free play the actors explored the range of eleven white masks over sessions eight, nine and ten (see Appendix 3).

The difference between the two styles of masks is that they are opposite, and it is the opposition of expressive to non-expressive. The designation of a mask as expressive is not based upon *how much* expressive feature is inscribed in the face but the fact that there are some expressive qualities recognisable in the face. The nascent expressive features in the white masks, with their hints of personality, offered a wealth of suggestion as to the where, what, and how of character, providing an ‘other’ for the actors to discover and inhabit. It was a major transition from the neutral mask—which provided no such ‘other’ but which
instead focussed the actor’s corporeal awareness—to these essentially performant masks with emergent identities and an inclination to play up and to play out.

The white masks were also silent so the actors’ communicative facilities of face and voice were denied and the expression of character and the character’s communication with its environment had to reside in the articulation of the actor’s body. Shortly before we left the white masks to return to the neutral masks, I observed an increasing level of sophistication in the improvisation amongst the mask characters. After approximately fifteen minutes of improvised play, the actors began to share not only the same physical playing space but also the same imaginative space. There were storylines developing out of transactions and subtly shifting relationships and alliances. A meshing was occurring between the physical life of the characters and their expressions of personality. Their likes and dislikes, their attitudes to one another of jealousy, nurture, confusion, or self centredness were being expressed through the bodies of the actors and through the shifting spatial relationships of body to body. The moment to moment balance of the improvisation was made possible because the actors were peripherally aware of each other and were sharing the focus. They were balancing the character’s instincts and impulses with their awareness and understanding of each other character in the playing space at the time.

Elements

Our final exploration in the neutral mask was a physical study of the four elements of air, earth, fire and water. This is what Lecoq would have referred to as identifications,
however the pedagogical history of this physical study stretches back through the work of various French teachers of theatre including Michel St Denis and Jacques Copeau. My choice to explore elements was prompted by accounts of the early work with inexpressive masks at Copeau’s school and from accounts by Giorgio Strehler and Alberto Marcia concerning the very early uses of the Sartori neutral mask with the students at the school of the Piccolo Teatro di Milano. In these early accounts there is no reference to neutral characters or neutral bodies; the mask was introduced to the students for the purpose of removing their face so that they would “be able to establish an absolute expressive independence of the face from the rest of the body”, and so they might “learn to detach themselves from emotional habit and enter a different realm of emotional consciousness through a precious mastery of the body as a vehicle of expression.”

I initiated our work on elements by asking the actors to consider the various defining attributes of the four separate elements, suggesting that we understand them through the effect of the forces they exert on objects. In attempting to understand fire through the body, they needed to be specific about what sort of fire was being considered. Was it a single flame of phosphorous from a match which flares into life, consumes a little air, and then extinguishes due to lack of fuel? Was it a bushfire such as those that arise suddenly, consume five hundred houses and then go home again? Was it a bonfire, corrosive and hungry but ultimately contained, settling into a pile of glowing coals? Was it a candle flame, guttering in every shift or vent of air; or was it an upright blue gas flame on top of the kitchen stove? The same sorts of questions applied to a physical consideration of water. How big was the body of water they were embodying? Was it a puddle? A single drip from a tap which forms, falls and then reshapes itself or joins with a larger confluence of water?
Was it a torrent of water from a broken downpipe, or a river shrunken in drought, or swollen with flooding rains? Water can also be erosive, it can change the shape of the landscape, it can move rocks. Was it the ocean with its tidal shifts, deep churning currents and white caps on the surface? I suggested that they might approach an embodiment of air by thinking of its multi-directional draughts and currents, all of which have varying speeds and intensities, and through its capacity to move objects through three dimensional space. I urged them to be specific about the object which was being moved in the air and the force and direction of the vents. Work with elements offers a multitude of imaginative choices to the actor and within the short period of time in which we explored these exercises, the embodied interpretations of the elements varied greatly. The element which the actors found most difficult was earth, primarily because earth is very still and heavy, and rocks do not change very much. I suggested that perhaps earth could be thought of as clay, which is dense yet malleable.

After these considerations and suggestions I asked the actors to attach themselves to a strong image of the first element which they were to explore through the movements of their body. After a few minutes I called out the name of the next element, and so on through all four elements, with each complete exercise lasting approximately ten minutes.

The physical exploration of the abstract forces of the elements took the actors on a trajectory away from any concept of playing a person or creating a character. However, the curious aspect of these exercises was that through the various embodiments of elements, the essence of character types and emotional states emerged, conveyed through the whole body of the actor. Actor P5 noted the following in her logbook:
It was obvious to me how the use of an element can be used to create a character. The performance of an element expresses emotions. P2’s “fire” could have been a character that stammered and was very nervous.

Some of the actors regarded the elements work as the most enjoyable and fulfilling that they had done with the neutral mask (see Appendix 1c). The work of these particular actors seemed to be immune to the fracturing effect on creativity which awareness of others’ gaze can have. I noted that the obligation to show or explain the details of what they were physicalising—which had coloured some of their earlier work—had disappeared. Through their playing it was evident to those watching that the actors were integrated corporeally with the images proposed by their imagination. These moments were engrossing to watch and some of them were particularly moving. One such instance occurred in the playing out of fire when one of the actresses produced an embodiment of a candle flame which seemed to be layered with a deep sadness and longing. I was curious to discover if the playing of this element had been an emotional or cathartic experience for her, or whether it had been generated by a particularly private or personal experience. The following week I asked her if this was the case and she replied “not at all”. When I accessed this period of work in her logbook she had recorded the following comments:

...if I reacted from my mind and not a felt sense it seemed contrived...As long as I stayed with the image in my mind and didn’t worry about what an audience (might have) thought, I felt well connected between mind and body. The mask provided the safety to immerse oneself in imagination...
Through an integration of visualisation and physicalisation she had managed to affect her audience deeply but had not disrupted herself emotionally to achieve this.

All of the actors felt more attuned to some elements rather than others, but for several actors the elements work was extremely confronting, and the mask offered little aid in shielding them from the gaze of others which for them, in this instance, was inhibiting and ultimately destructive to their creativity. Actor P8 explained in her logbook that “the elements were my boundary”, while P9 made the following response in the third questionnaire:

*I found it much harder than say, the journey. The Element work saw the Mask act as barrier between you and your watchers, but for me that wasn’t enough and I found myself subconsciously completing most of the exercises with my eyes closed also.

During other Neutral work the mask, instead of acting as a barrier, in fact created you a character to start from. Therefore I felt safer—it wasn’t me—it was the Neutral person who knew no better.*

The prominent lesson of our work with the elements was that they allowed the actors to discover sensory embodiments which could then be applied to developing a character or identifying a character’s inner essence.
The workshop series came to an end after our work on elements, and in Chapter four I discuss my analysis of our investigations with the neutral mask and address the primary questions which were foundational to the project.

2 The exercise comes from the work of Jacques Lecoq. In The Moving Body, he explains that the exercise introduces students to a subsequent body of work which he calls ‘identifications’. Identification work entails the actor corporeally playing at identifying with a host of naturally occurring phenomena such as air, fire, earth, water, animals, colours, solids, liquids. Lecoq explains his purpose for teaching the work on ‘identifications’:

“The main results of this identification work are the traces that remain inscribed in each actor, circuits laid down in the body, through which dramatic emotions also circulate, finding their pathway to expression. These experiences, ranging from silence and immobility to maximum movement, taking in innumerable intermediate dynamic stages, remain forever engraved in the body of the actor. They are reactivated in him at the moment of interpretation. It may be many years later, when an actor finds himself with a text to interpret. The text will set up resonances in his body, meeting rich deposits awaiting expressive formulation. The actor can then speak from full physical awareness. For in truth nature is our first language. Our bodies remember!” p. 45.

3 Marcia, A., The Commedia dell’Arte and the masks of Amleto and Donato Sartori, (La Casa Usher, Florence, 1980), no page numbers are given in the publication, see third page of Marcia’s text.

4 ibid.
Chapter Four

Analysis and Conclusion

The analysis which follows teases out the lessons which the various neutral mask exercises offered. I will embark on this analysis by first referring to a comment made by one of the actors mid way through the project, which brought into focus the two primary nodes of experience addressed by our investigations with the neutral masks. After our work on “the journey”, actor P1 made the following reflection “I had problems between what was neutral and what felt neutral.” The comment encapsulates the primary conflict experienced by the members of the research group: that of being able to define and assimilate the difference between what looked neutral and what felt neutral. The comment is also valuable for delineating our work with the mask into two zones of application, a distinction which is not clarified in the available literature about the neutral mask. This delineation is crucial to the following analysis. The first zone, that of what looked neutral, adopted a structural approach to the body of the actor, using the mask to shape the body as a result of analysis from the outside. The second zone, that of what felt neutral, was concerned with allowing the actors to enter a state where they were imaginatively open and available, free of preconceived beliefs about the world and themselves.

The standing exercise and the short movement phrases were concerned with what looked neutral, and through these exercises our attention was directed to an analysis of the body, its capacity for signifying meaning, and its capacity for looking performatively alive.
without actually expressing anything. Here then is one of the paradoxes of the neutral mask: it is a non-performant mask because it is non-expressive, but it is assessed within the performative context of those who are doing something and those who are watching them do it. The knowledge gained from the standing exercise was of an analytical nature and it grew out of the discussion between those who were behind the mask and those who were in front. The exercise revealed to the actors that they could corporeally deliver clearly discernible information without using the expression of face, voice or language. For those behind the mask the experience was at first one of dislocation as they were analysed solely on the look of their physicality and the information it imparted rather than on their expressive abilities. (As explained earlier, the standing exercise entailed each actor being re-aligned slightly so that they looked in balance with the mask. Many of the actors said that they felt unnatural and uncomfortable with this new arrangement, but conceded, when they saw themselves in the mirror, that they did in fact look balanced, or neutral.) A corollary of this early lesson was the realisation that they all had the potential to learn to control exactly what they might communicate corporeally in a given performance situation.

The first exercise also underpinned a growing realisation amongst the actors that all bodies are enculturated; that is, all bodies at work in their everyday idiom carry not only personal habits but traces of the societal influences surrounding that individual. These early observations led to discussion that in order for an actor to be thoroughly ‘available’ to enter into a role or to create an ‘other’, the actor’s habitual physicality needed to be acknowledged and understood in order for it to be re-written. Our first two exercises with the neutral mask helped the actors begin to navigate their particular embodied habits and to
become aware that in their everyday idiom they were distanced from the ideal of the
‘neutral body’.

But why should an actor seek to establish a neutral body? The answer to this question is
that the establishment of a neutral body enables the actor to take the first step towards
making him/herself disappear so that a transformation can occur. The actor’s neutral body
becomes a referent which he/she knows in sensation and can re-create at will as part of their
technique, a starting point from which they can begin to build a character’s physical life
without necessarily drawing on the characteristics and habits which define them in their
daily life. In the closing entry of his logbook actor P10 wrote “the ability to develop new
characters from a new base is very helpful. It (the neutral mask) has also made me aware of
my own characteristics that I can keep or should abandon for a role.” The insights offered
by the standing exercise made sense of a term which crops up in commentary about
Lecoq’s teaching - the notion of ‘returning the body to zero’ —and also clarified another
of Lecoq’s comments: “when a student has experienced this neutral starting point his body
will be freed, like a blank page on which drama can be inscribed.”

“The journey” exercise added to the knowledge of what looked neutral the experience of
how it felt to be in an emotionally and therefore expressively neutral state. In their
responses to the questionnaire a number of the actors mentioned that in order for them to do
“the journey”, they had to stop worrying about whether their bodies were arranged correctly
or not. Instead, they needed to allow their imagination and sensory awareness to take over.
In another statement about the neutral mask Lecoq says that it “puts the actor in a state of
discovery, of openness, of freedom to receive. It allows him to watch, to hear, to feel, to
touch elementary things with the freshness of beginnings.” While this comment could not
be applied to the early exercises which directed our attention to an analysis of the body, it
summarises the emotionally neutral state the actors entered when they travelled through
their journeys. In Simon Murray’s commentary on Lecoq’s teaching he states that

> [h]e is thus inviting his students to explore a ‘primitive form of symbolizing’ which
is untainted both by language and a motivation born out of either intellectual
reasoning or emotional need. It is this pattern of non socialised movement and gesture
which Lecoq calls the ‘mime de fond.’

Neither Lecoq’s bald statements about the neutral mask nor the available commentary
expose the personal technique which the actor needs to access in order to traverse the
processes of “the journey”. My analysis is that “the journey” built upon the previous two
exercises and opened the opportunity for the actor to explore a synthesis of two types of
body knowledge, the somatic and the analytical. The ‘neutrality’ which the actors achieved
in “the journey” came in part from a somatic knowledge gained through the various
exercises which were done during the first half of each session—I refer here to the
exercises which were specifically chosen to clear the mind, free unwanted tensions and
blockages in the body and to re-align the musculo-skeletal system. These exercises and the
somatic knowledge they left in the body combined with the understanding gained from the
early standing exercise to create a new understanding which was both somatic and
analytical.
In the brief discussion about the neutral mask by Jacques Lecoq in *The Moving Body* he said that the neutral mask is adopted as if it is a ‘neutral generic being’. It was during our work on “the journey” that I began to understand the meaning of this comment, and moreso as a result of responses to the second questionnaire, where the actors variously mentioned the ‘neutral character’ or the ‘neutral person.’ I found this curious since it was not terminology I had introduced into the sessions and I had assiduously avoided the linguistic constructions which are frequently applied to masks. Such constructions usually assume a mask is a person with sensibilities, wants, likes and dislikes which the actor must discover and assimilate into their playing. Sentences such as “the mask wanted to…” or “the mask felt …” frequently crop up in discussion surrounding mask work, but unlike other masks, the neutral mask does not provide an ‘other’ to move into and it was with this singular quality of the neutral mask that the actors at times experienced frustration. They wanted to find the person in the mask, the ‘other’ who would define what they should do and how they should do it. However, if the neutral mask is thought of as a ‘neutral being’, the actor needs to ask and find an embodied answer to the following questions: How does one inhabit a mask created to represent ‘nullity’.\(^6\) How does one inhabit a mask with no discernible adjectival qualities? How does one assume a being which has no past and therefore no problems, no future and therefore no plans or agenda, no fantasies or daydreams or hopes? The answer to these questions is that the neutral figure exists in the only place left for the self to occupy which is the present moment, and perhaps the single adjective appropriate to the masked figure in this instance is curiosity, or as Lecoq phrased it, ‘innocent curiosity’.\(^7\)
In the latter stages of the project actor P10 told me that the face of the mask was everyone and no-one. I would add that it becomes the individual who wears it, essentialised, at the mid-point between all of their possible expressions. When the actors wear the mask well, they can explore a performative state in which they are present and available, uncluttered with anything they have been in the past or will be in the future. It is to this state, explored in our workshops through the exercise of “the journey”, that application of the term *performative liminality* is appropriate, bringing as it does, resonances of *transition*, and the potential for *transformation* and *change*. As Turner described and applied the term *liminal* within his own work, it also carried overtones of anti-structure, and in our work on “the journey”, one of the perplexing aspects initially for the actors was the lack of customary structural markers such as a textual base or character-driven motivation.

There are several observations I would like to make about the neutral masks which do not result from any particular exercise but rather from an overview of our investigations. Firstly, that the term ‘neutral’ is linguistically problematic unless a careful definition is made when working with the masks. The term is inadequate and inappropriate if conflated with any suggestion of the actor being unenergised. On the contrary, the qualities possessed of the body which is balanced with the neutral mask are alertness and aliveness; there is energy at the centre but it is a still energy, the body looks ‘ready’ but it is open and not anticipating any specific action.

My second point concerns the female mask. In my experience, it is the female mask which most often elicits a negative response from people when they first view the masks.
Perhaps it has something to do with the two lines which arch above each eye; these lines and a certain sharp or pointed quality in the face seem to threaten the neutrality of the mask. However, a mask comes to life when it is adopted and worn by the actor, and after watching the actresses in the research group work this mask over a term of thirteen weeks, I came to the conclusion that from a purely technical aspect, the mask is more precise than the male mask, and requires greater physical precision from the person wearing it. The mask achieves optimum neutrality when it is seen as if on a central vertical axis. This means that when it is worn the actress needs to maintain an elongation through the upper vertebrae which extends up in an imaginary line out of the crown of the head. The imagined sensation is of a string pulling the spine gently upwards through the crown. A corollary of this is that the chin remains centred, not lifted, the shoulders achieve a natural and slightly open fall to the sides and there may be a slight lift in the sternum. What I have just described are very basic conditions of body alignment which should also be applied when wearing the male mask. My point is that the female mask requires this physical precision in slightly more measure and the room for leniency is less than with the male mask. The precision of the female mask became most evident to me when I was photographing it, and when I discussed my observations with the women in the research group they agreed that it seemed less ‘stable’ and more easily diverted from neutral than the male mask.

My next point concerns gender and the neutral masks and my observation is that the masks have the effect on the actor of de-emphasising gender-specific physicality. Here then is another paradox of these masks: they are gender specific, acknowledging that as a genus we fall into two main categories, but rather than heightening the qualities by which we differentiate male from female, when the actors wear the masks well there is a relinquishing
of the coded embodiments of sexuality. In the introduction to her book *Presence and Desire*, Jill Dolan advances the opinion that sexuality is essentially performative. This comment has an interesting resonance for the neutral mask as we have explored it through this research project. The mask does not develop overtly performative instincts in the actor, instead, its lessons are positioned at the foundations of the actor’s craft. When the actor learns to acknowledge and slowly undo embodied habits which have developed from social conditioning, coded sexual physicality is a part of the behaviour which is let go. This is not to say that there is an erasure of gender, rather a softening of the edges of gendered behaviour, and I would add that specifically gendered physicality appears at odds with the masks.

Now I need to return to the two primary questions upon which the research project was predicated, firstly:

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

There is no doubt that the neutral masks are constructions which attract our gaze initially because they are exotic and fascinating, but after a short time, when we adjust to the look of the masks, our attention becomes drawn to the whole body of the actor. From the earliest standing exercise through to “elements”, the actors created many chains of moments that attracted our gaze and held it compellingly. These were times when, in the studio, sitting quietly, we watched the silent figure in the neutral mask make the ordinary seem extraordinary, and for a few moments, time seemed to stand still. If we refer to these as instances when the actor has a strengthened scenic presence, how do we describe it?
What is the actor doing at these times which attracts and holds our attention? I will begin to answer these questions by stating what was not exhibited: it was not charisma or a sexualised magnetism, nor were there qualities of power or authority inherent in the actors’ persona - these are the qualities which are frequently associated with the quality of a performer which is termed ‘presence’. Instead, the actors possessed an economy of movement in their unfolding actions, and even in movement there was an underlying stillness at the centre supported by a focused energy. The actors had a flow and we noted that every unfolding moment seemed of itself, that is, without held memory of the moment preceding and without anxiety or concern for the moment to follow. The actors also possessed a corporeal confidence which was not the result of being buoyed by the gaze of others, but rather seemed apparently unaffected by the gaze of an onlooker. When those observing were asked to analyse the particular qualities of these chains of moments, words such as ‘purity’, ‘honesty’, ‘simplicity’ and ‘unison’ were used. All of these words could be applied to the psycho-physical unity which seemed to be the primary quality of the actors’ work at these times and “the journey” and “elements” exercises were particularly good at developing this unity. The reason for this was probably because the customary markers which define and frame the actor’s reason for being there, such as language-based text and character development, were no longer constituent elements of play, while the customary means of communication—the face and voice—were also removed. The actors were left with their bodies and imagination in the empty space of the studio.

The actors said that they experienced an unselfconscious spontaneity and a receptivity to their visualisations during these times and they said that these qualities were strongest when they managed to be unaffected by the presence of an audience. The split between
mind and body which so often occurs when a young actor goes ‘on stage’—a fracturing which is not there in the actor’s everyday idiom—often comes from the awareness of the gaze of others. The corporeal confidence and openness which neutral mask work encourages, together with a development of trust in one’s creativity, engenders the state wherein the actor can dispel the fear of the gaze.

The second of the primary questions which the project sought to answer was:

— 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?

As suggested in the Introduction to this dissertation, I was uncertain as to whether this question could be adequately addressed within the structure and scope of the research project which was a one-off series of thirteen workshops with a group of undergraduate students in a non-vocational institution. The question emerged as a result of my early research into the use and application of the neutral mask which suggested that it might be a tool which could be applied to developing the scenic presence of the actor. If that was found to be the case within the work of the project, then what parallels might be drawn between the nature of that scenic presence and the manner in which it was constructed within the body of the actor, and the analysis of scenic presence made by Eugenio Barba and the theories of Theatre Anthropology?
The research method of Participatory Action Research allows for evolution within a research project; it allows for research questions to be considered through practice from various angles, thus enabling emergent understanding of the question at hand. In this instance, the research method enabled me to move away from an assumption that there would be strong parallels which could be drawn between our neutral mask work and Barba’s theories about the ‘pre-expressive’ state, to a deeper understanding of the two approaches to performance which underscore both systems. A few sessions into the workshop series, I became aware of the potential dissonance in attempting to draw strong parallels between the effect of the neutral mask on the actor and Barba’s analysis of the constituent elements of the performer’s scenic presence. The potential dischord did not lie in intellectually assimilating the concept of pre-expressivity with the neutral state. As discussed in Chapter two, both the neutral state as it has been described and approached by Western theatre teachers, and the ‘pre-expressive’ state as it is described by Barba, occupy a specific area within the performer’s expressive range, a state which the performer works towards and constructs through personal process, a fictive and performant state where they are without the physical and gestural habits which define them in their daily idiom, but they are not yet expressing anyone or anything else—a performatively liminal state. However, when I shifted my consideration of the possible parallels between these two into the practice of the workshop environment, I became aware of the distance which exists between the two.

The distance lies in the fact that Barba’s physiological analysis of pre-expressivity is structural and has developed from studying highly codified Asian theatre forms where the performers study from childhood how to inhabit and maintain their performance traditions.
Even though Theatre Anthropology extended its scope to include Western ballet and the Corporeal Mime of Decroux, its focus has remained upon formally structured styles of performance where the performer, with patience, learns to embody the codes of their performance style which they can nourish but never alter. The ‘recurring principles’ offer a complex physiological analysis of the body techniques of performers who possess a highly evolved ability to control their energy and the arrangement of their bodies. I would suggest that the nature of the ‘recurring principles’ can only be fully understood by performers who have a great deal of performance technique behind them, or by theatre practitioners with a substantial history of working corporeally with performers.

The neutral mask, however, is a product of 20th century European theatre, imagined and then created for the pedagogical environment to help Western actors neutralise their daily selves and develop a corporeal independence from the expression of the face. Work with the mask can also encourage actors to enter an emotionally neutral state, thus allowing them to be in a zone where they are sensorially and imaginatively open and available. Neutral mask work belongs primarily in the exploratory environment of the early stages of training and its lessons are most valuable to actors in the nascent stages of body awareness.

Nevertheless, there were parallels which emerged, and they emerged from the early standing and short movement phrases exercises, which, as explained at the beginning of this chapter, were concerned with what looked neutral and adopted a structural approach to the body of the actor, using the mask to shape the body as a result of analysis from the outside. It was during this structural work with the body and the mask that some of the ‘recurring principles’ were observable as elements of the actors’ physiology, in particular
dilation, altered balance, and omission, while the distinction between daily and extra daily was one of the early lessons acknowledged during the standing exercise.

The foundational concept of Barba’s theory of ‘pre-expressivity’ is the distinction between daily and extra-daily uses of the body:

The first step in discovering what the principles governing a performer’s scenic bios, or life might be, lies in understanding that the body’s daily techniques can be replaced by extra-daily techniques which do not respect the habitual conditionings of the use of the body. ⁹

It was during our first exercise that the actors acknowledged that they could not use their daily body when they wore the mask. As P10 wrote in the first questionnaire, “I didn’t feel right acting the way I do in everyday life” and “(it) drew greater focus onto the body and individual characteristics seemed wrong.” The actors had to find a new way of arranging their bodies if they were to achieve a spatial balance with the mask and this did not feel comfortable to them, as the new physical arrangement created unfamiliar tensions through their bodies.

The principle of a body which appears dilated, with the sense of ‘dilated’ being that the body appears bigger, fuller, energised and radiant, was applicable to the actors when they achieved a synthesis of themselves and the mask in the early exercises. Some of the larger-framed actors said they thought they looked smaller but my observation was slightly different: these actors looked more flexible and less imposing. Some of the actors with a
smaller frame said that they felt they looked bigger, and they did indeed look fuller and
more energised. The physical transformation of the body-in-synthesis with the neutral mask
causes the whole body of the actor to appear alive and alert, ready, but not yet anticipating
anything, and this transformation is, as Barba explains it, a result of different tensions being
created within the body.

The third physiological principle which was applicable to our early exercises was that of
altered balance:

A change of balance results in a series of specific organised tensions which engage
and emphasise the performer’s material presence, but at a stage which precedes
intentional, individualised expression.\(^{10}\)

In acquiring the new physical organisation which the neutral mask required, each actor
had to accept a new way of balancing his/her body and accordingly, new tensions were
evident in their bodies. For all the actors the most fundamental change was the requirement
to stand with feet in parallel, a position which requires the hips to be held evenly on the
horizontal axis and the knees to also be held parallel and soft, that is, unlocked. Of all the
adjustments to the ‘daily’ use of the body which the mask requisitioned, this was one which
the actors regularly needed reminding of. The angle of feet—whether they turn inwards or
outwards off the parallel alignment with the hips—delivers information about
‘individualised expression’, as do hips which are skewed and off centre and knees which
are either too close together or which open on an outwards angle. Knees which are locked
off tend to plant a body stubbornly in one spot, thus rendering the body closed off and
unable to move freely and maintain an openness to external influences. The new and specific arrangement of the lower half of the body meant that the upper half—the upper vertebrae, shoulders, neck and head—also had to find a new relationship of balance with the lower half of the body.

The recurring physiological principle termed *omission* would seem to be applicable to all of the neutral mask work explored through the workshop series. As we observed early on, the neutral mask requires that action and gesture be economically reduced to its essential elements only, with all extraneous movement omitted. But the description of the term *omission* proposed by Theatre Anthropology has the corollary that the performer’s energy becomes compressed in the movement as a result of oppositional forces at work in the muscles; the extra energy required adds to the dynamic tensions observable through the body of the performer. This extra level of meaning appended to the term *omission* was not a quality of the essentialised movement which we observed as being in unison with the mask.

It was during the exercises of “the journey” and “elements” that we witnessed playing which was particularly engaging and arresting as described in answer to my first question above. Yet it was during these instances that I found very little resonance with Barba’s analysis of theatrical presence as explained through the ‘recurring principles’. These exercises were concerned with how it *felt* to be in an emotionally and therefore expressively neutral state. The playing of each exercise evolved within an improvisatory environment which was suggestive and open, and the idea of codification was antithetical to the necessarily intuitive and anti-structural nature of these explorations. In these instances the ‘presence’ of the actors appeared not to be constructed as a result of specific dynamic
tensions through their bodies, instead, their ‘presence’, the particular quality which
attracted and held our gaze, was the result of a corporeal openness which was self absorbed
and yet vulnerable at the same time, and unaffected by the gaze of an onlooker.

I found the ‘recurring principles’ a useful lens through which to view and analyse the
work of the early neutral mask exercises because they facilitated my ability to explain how
and why some bodies appear dynamic and therefore capable of arresting one’s gaze more
than other bodies, which lack the particular dynamic tensions. Work with “the journey” and
“elements” allowed me to observe the presence of a performer being constructed in a
different manner, and at this stage of my own journey into this research, the terms I can
find which best characterise the nature of this presence are corporeal and imaginative
openness, vulnerability, and a stillness at the core. A training scheme for actors which
found room to embrace, through practice, the performance analysis of Barba, as well as the
work of the neutral mask, would be a rich scheme indeed.

Conclusion

My personal conclusion to the neutral mask project is that I look forward to working in
future with other actors and the mask, utilising the knowledge I have gained from this
intense period of investigation and analysis and exploring out from the new intellectual and
experiential base which the project has established for me. My conclusions about working
with the mask have already been stated in this chapter, but I want to reiterate that work with
the mask provides the actor with a phase of transition for the purpose of transformation,
with multiple attendant lessons. In light of my earlier discussion, perhaps it is more precise to say that work with the neutral mask can provide a series of transitions. Certain exercises with the mask can be aimed at physical transition, where actors learn to acknowledge and neutralise the habituated and enculturated behaviour which defines them in their everyday idiom. Other exercises with the mask can open the opportunity for emotional transition to the neutral state, the performatively liminal state characterised by the potential for transformation and change, where they can be open and available to all playing possibilities. The two zones of application in the pedagogy of the actor are not discrete, and corporeal and experiential lessons within each zone necessarily overlap each other.

It is interesting to note that some aspects of neutral mask work intersect with theories of movement and posture rehabilitation such as Alexander Technique and Feldenkrais Awareness Through Movement. There may be other theories concerning the relationship of posture and emotion which also share some common territory with the neutral mask, and a comparative analysis of these theories, while beyond the scope of this project, is a potential area of further research with the neutral mask. It is possible also that neutral mask work may have application beyond the performative environment. The mask’s appearance of calm, and its ability to transform the wearer and the manner in which the wearer is perceived, my well have application within the field of therapy and rehabilitation in mental health. Such an investigation would necessarily require an inter-disciplinary approach with guidance from the areas of health and psychology, yet this may be another possible area of research with this intriguing and singular mask.
NOTES


3 _ibid_., p. 38.


5 Murray, S., _ibid_.

6 Strehler, G., from the introduction to Marcia, A., _The Commedia dell’Arte and the masks of Amleto and Donato Sartori_, (La Casa Usher, Florence, 1980), no page numbers are given in the publication.

7 Lecoq, _op.cit_. pp. 29-30.


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Appendix 1: 1A, first questionnaire issued to workshop participants

Neutral Mask Workshop, March 14, 2003

1. What are your early impressions of the Neutral Mask?

P1: They had more character than I thought. And the craftmanship (*sic*) which obviously went into them gave them a precious quality and instantly (*sic*) made me respect them. I was expecting a more white slate “tabla rasa” (*sic*) if you will. And they smelt nice.

P2: I liked the smell. I was very hesitant to put it on. Hard to actually put it up to my face.

P3: It was glossy and looked like it had been sweating. It looked puffed but it couldn’t open its mouth.

P4: Amazing artworks! Smooth. Female mask a lot sharper than male mask.

P5: Light, delicate, not necessarily “faceless”.

P6: I think they are exquisite (*sic*) to look at. Compelling, even when they are just being held. I liked the male face better, it’s more open, the female is very harsh. They are kind of scary, in an awesome kind of way. It didn’t bother me having my "face taken away", in fact I liked it. But I knew straight away that you can’t hide in those masks. You are immediately become more aware of your body and what it is revealing, even when you don’t want it to. I found it confronting that people could pick physical characteristics which told of the internal eg not taking up space, low energy. Yet, in retrospect that is an amazing thing for both actor and audience.

P7: I couldn’t stop looking at the male mask. I felt although the masks were neutral they still showed a great deal of character. They were beautiful to look at and beautiful to feel.

P8: Amazed yet dunting (*sic*) with trying it on. I wanted to put it on to see how it felt on but I was sort of put off because it was alien to me.

P9: Alien, almost scary. Surprise. They seemed to me to have a personality somewhat, although they looked different on each person. Unlike any “neutral” mask I’d ever worked with.

P10: Impressively sculptured yet seemed to reflect only slight emotion. Firm yet flexible. Earthy tones kind of suggested a natural state.
2. What are your early impressions of seeing the Neutral Masks worn by others?

**P1**: It was amazing to see the dichotomy of movement and attention draw directly to the mask. I was looking at the mask searching for a type of character and although my focus was on the mask a simple turn of the foot stood out as much as a kick of the leg without the mask.

**P2**: I liked how every mask looked different on each person. It looked the same yet it was completely different.

**P3**: Every little movement by a person could affect the meaning of the mask.

**P4**: Seeing someone you know fairly well (i.e. their walk, mannerisms etc) is extremely odd, however when it’s someone you don’t know it seems to fit in more naturally. Makes the person seem really intense. (is this the right word?)

**P5**: Amazed that focus was not on mask but drawn to the wearer’s body. It (the mask) was very revealing of any “indicating” by the actor when they were performing. Interested how mask looked different on everyone.

**P6**: Fascinating to watch, as the person wearing the mask immediately has this presence. Initially I kept looking at just the mask, but once I got used to looking at it I started to take in the details of the body. People's postural habits are magnified in the mask. It seems to demand honesty. It's as if suddenly you have to watch much more carefully, the slightest movements have nuances. Simplicity seems to work well.

**P7**: P3 was the first to wear the mask and the mask seemed to fit his face as though it was made for him. I was surprized (*sic*) at how ugly the female mask looked when it was put on.

**P8**: I found that the whole face, I mean personality changed. Their whole stance effected (*sic*) what I thought of them.

**P9**: Very strong. Amazing how such small movements of the body made such a huge difference in the message that was portrayed, when the masks were on.

**P10**: Drew greater focus onto the body and individual characteristics seemed wrong. Created an air of dominance.
3. What are your early impressions of wearing the Neutral Mask and seeing yourself in the Neutral Mask?

P1: After the earlier movement and calming exercises I found that as soon as I put the mask on I went a type of blankness and in a way I looked for neutrality as a mind state (as opposed to a body stance) and this let me move more freely.

P2: After a while I wanted to touch it. Then it began to scare me. Like it had taken me away. I began to like my new face more than mine.

P3: It’s tight and hurts. I feel really uncomfortable when I wear it. I stress out and breathing in when I put it on makes me stress out more. I like the colour of the boy mask, the girl mask is a yukky colour.

P4: Strange experience. Had worn other masks (made by school students) but each had a lot of character in them. Seeing myself without facial expressions, or without a face was odd. I was drawn straight to my eyes.

P5: Too big, which made me feel uncomfortable and nervous about using it. When I used it, one’s want to impress an audience was more palpable, I had to stay very focussed (difficult with it falling down).

P6: It can get hot in there!
I was so glad of the coverage the mask provided in the first class, (so nobody could see how worried I was). I think in time they could be really liberating devices, because your there but your not. Doing that waking up, throwing a rock sequence, I felt “wow” just light and amazing, I don’t know how it worked and it was like I was doing nothing at all. Maybe just letting the mask work its magic. They are exciting, because they have all this potential about them, like something really different might happen.

P7: I felt awkward doing it in front of the group and when I looked at myself in the mirror I was even a little frightened.

P8: “My eyes are wonky.” It felt strange because the person in the mirror wasn’t me but it was. I guess I felt like a different character.

P9: Shock – I looked scary and controlling. I felt that I looked bigger and stronger than usual.

P10: I seemed smaller. Without my face it seemed to alter every part of me. I didn’t feel right acting the way I do in everyday life.
Appendix 1 : 1B, second questionnaire issued to workshop participants

Neutral Mask Workshop, April 11, 2003

1. When undertaking the Journey, you were faced with the hurdle of meshing the imaginative landscapes of the vast journey with your kinaesthetic* movement in a confined space. Please comment on your experience with this.

P1: The space was not cluttered so there was no problem with distractions due to obstruction. The journey was one which moved through vast areas and also small confined spaces, my problem was trying to find an equilibrium between my conscious efforts to live within the space while journeying outside the area. Constantly changing the disappearing point for my vision. I found that if I encountered a hurdle so to speak like a tree or loose rock underfoot I would draw my vanishing point in and when I had experience with the larger environment I would push it out.

P2: Quite often I found I could not spend enough time in each environment. The different locations required me to be there longer so I could fully adapt my breathing, movement and general feeling to that place. I was (after reflection) quite frustrated at the limitations of my imagination e.g. I wanted to smell, hear and feel more. The limitations of the space have become less and less a problem (or hurdle). It was almost like I was in these environments but was imagining the real space (the studio).

P3: The difficult part of this was the limitation imposed by the space. The journey was supposed to be long and in the space you can only walk so far before you have to turn around. Therefore it is a constant exercise of focus: to be aware of the journey and the real space yet not let the real space destroy the illusion.

P4: The first journey I found more difficult than the second, I think it was due to being in the mask for longer than I had been previously. The space used in my second journey (Studio) for some reason seemed to give me more of a freedom to move. I did find myself getting extremely lost/into my journeys e.g. I hadn’t realised how close I’d gotten to the front of the stage in my first journey until Gillian mentioned it, due to the fact that I was so surrounded by my journey.

P5: On the stage with the focus continually out to the “audience” I felt limited by the use of space. Being ‘first up’ in the journey more advice came afterwards to not be concerned with mask to the front as on previous occasions in the mask. As the journey progressed I didn’t worry so much about my ‘mask’ to the front and got more involved in the journey.

P6: I guess it was like enacting or experiencing your imagination physically. It’s hard to say…because it has become so much a feeling. Me doing something, rather than trying to have a studied effect on an audience. Sometimes I think it was hard to express the different textures but it felt very clear to me (visually) in my mind.
P7: Having seen the journey made by others before me, I found I knew what to expect and was a little to (sic) eager. I didn’t completely let go and allow my imagination to go wild. I also felt as though I should have been experiencing the journey with my partner. Having to experience the same things in such a confined space meant running into each other. Sometimes I focused more on what he was doing than I.

P8: I felt not me. It was like a dream. I felt maybe I wasn’t doing it right or experiencing it but I relised (sic) that (afterwards) it was my journey. I felt I was going through the motions and not really thinking.

P9: I found it easy to restructure the landscape as I ran out of room, but felt I was betraying both myself, the watchers and everything I’ve ever learnt in drama regarding consistency of the imagination and the unseen. I was comfortable to re-create the landscapes each time I turned but uncomfortable about being watched doing so, as I wondered if they “understood” and felt the need to explain. This was an exercise for the individual though, and thus I tried to put this uncomfort (sic) aside.

Please comment on your observations as a watcher of others doing this exercise.

P1: I felt that most people did not have too much trouble with the obstacles that the journey presented. Watching the others I was unsure as to how conscious they were of their immediate surroundings and their efforts to live within the journey as opposed to living within the space.

P2: passed

P3: As the exercise progressed the descriptions of the landscape became more in depth. In this many people in later groups had more stimulus to work with. The actions of the pairs became increasingly interesting.

P4: At times there was a certain break of focus, as was there in my journeys, I think it was because it was the first time each of us had been in the mask for that length of time. It didn’t always happen, just sometimes at the start of a new area in the journey I could see people stop and think, and then get back into it.

P5: Watching the journey in the theatre and then in the studio the studio seemed to allow greater continuity in the journeys. Having seen and done journeys the week before I think the wearers were more comfortable to use the space unprohibitively.

P6: It felt very peaceful watching. This exercise really encouraged people to explore space as well as lots of movement possibilities. It was like while the geographical boundaries were being crossed, so were the individuals physical boundaries. It was interesting, P10 was close to the front and I actually caught his eyes, could look into them. It was strange, like his eyes didn’t fit. It took me by surprise because I haven’t been looking at faces as such but the whole package.

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P7: I really enjoyed watching both those on the instruments and those experiencing the journey. However I found myself picturing myself on the journey rather than observing how the others were enjoying and experiencing it.

P8: It was interesting to see how other people interpreted their journey, some were hipnotic (sic). However, by the end of the 3 hr class it did get a bit boring to watch the same thing over.

P9: The “special moments” are truly that. When you see someone encounter something, more so the harder things than the breathtaking, on their journey and they seem so real – a neutral body struggling for the first time with something - it does strike a chord within and you empathise with them, not as the actor in the mask but as the neutral character.

2. The mask stays the same even though it looks different on each wearer. Only the body can change and articulate meaning. Please comment on your experience with this.

P1: That is a definite. I had problems between what was neutral and what felt neutral. I still find this interesting because so much is telegraphed by the face when reacting to something. Even if these things are still felt the mask can hide the personal reaction to the stimulus, be it a bird or a stone, therefore it seems that due to the nature of the mask every reaction is not judgemental but purely reactive. A positive reaction or negative is shown through the effort it takes to physically react to the stimulus i.e. throwing the stone after much deliberation, or simple (sic) seeing the stone and knowing that a person will throw it before they pick it up.

P2: Often I was convinced to a point that the mask was the actual face of the person. I expected the ‘skin’ of the mask to move. In some cases I think it did. The body in most cases articulates what the face says and because the face remains solemn I think as a viewer we imagine the face moving and appropriate the mask to the personality traits of the figure.

P3: I completely disagree with this statement. The mask changes shape with each wearer depending on the width of the wearer’s head. These minute changes affect ‘meaning’ in combination with the attitude and position of the wearer’s body.

P4: It has been a great experience to be pushed into using the body more, and has taken a while for me to stop using so many facial expressions to convey my journeys. I think performers can get so used to facial expressions being a huge part of their acting/performing, that their body movement is neglected in a way.

P5: Initially I felt very limited and inadequate in the articulation of meaning through my body. I think I was too focussed on what it would look like to the observer and giving a sense of ‘reality’ which of course is impossible. Then the week of the first journey there was a shift with greater use of my body in such a way that I did what I felt. I tried to express my experience more kinaesethically (sic) rather than literally.
P6: passed

P7: I think the earlier workshops really exposed how the Neutral Mask drags the focus to the body. Even slight movements or stances can create a character or situation.

P8: The mask seems to take on the different personalities of the wearer, adapting itself it seems. I can now see it more now than I did a few weeks ago that the mask does strip away the wearer to the bare bones.

P9: At first I felt myself making facial expressions under the mask (in order to portray emotions etc), perhaps I did it the whole time, but soon I very easily began to concentrate more on how to use my body instead. I became very aware of every slight movement of fingers, toes and head, usually these things wouldn’t be noticed, and the viewer would instead be swamped with only facial expressions.

Please comment on your observations of others.

P1: It seemed to me that some people reacted to the stone as they would to anything else which they had no previous experience with, and thus the throwing was more of an instinct, than a conscious decision. Others telegraphed there (sic) throw so that it almost became stylised, this was good I thought, because most people would not throw the stone that way so this meant that they were in some way experiencing a new type of reaction.

P2: It is possible to get a neutral standing body. I don’t think you can get a neutral face because everyone’s is different and says different things. The face of the mask enhances and invigorates the body.

P3: I like the way some people’s hair falls over the mask and changes its appearance. I almost wish I had hair so I could see how my hair would affect the mask.

P4: I’ve noticed the concentration within the group when it comes to the way we stand and move. People are more conscious of their own habits etc

P5: Definitely looks different on people and it seems to take on stronger qualities when the personal body articulation informs the mask.

P6: passed

P7: e.g. The inward turn of a foot created a nerdy character.

P8: As before

P9: When watching the others, the need for facial expressions, felt so strongly when in the mask myself, was completely unnecessary. Their slight movement told the story and
their feelings sufficiently. Interestingly, some people look extremely powerful, while others young and innocent.

3. **In your Journey, how did you sustain your focus/energy? Were you aware of sustaining your focus/energy? Did you feel your focus/energy ebbing and flowing? Please comment.**

**P1:** I felt that there was no lack of energy but personally my reactions did not seem as intense as others. My focus was for the most of the journey, split between many areas. I was both conscious of my reaction and living them at the same time. I was reflecting on my reactions as they happened. This is why I did not feel as if I fully gave the mask its proper attention. Or lack thereof.

**P2:** My focus and energy was completely there the whole time. I was not aware of sustaining them. The music dictated along with the voice of the person telling us where we were. This became interesting and curious. My want became my need to continue.

**P3:** I found that my energy was fairly low in the beginning of the exercise. It also tended to lessen when I was confronted by the limitations of the space. By the end of the activity I felt very focussed.

**P4:** I actually found myself, as I was lying down at the start of the journey, thinking “stop worrying about what your (sic) going to do, and if it’s right or wrong—JUST STOP THINKING AND DO IT!” I had been getting so worked up about whether I had been standing right, moving right etc, that I hadn’t been clearly focused. I found after just ‘doing it’ my focus increased, I was less worried about how it looked from the outside, and my energy also grew. I didn’t hold myself back as much in Journey II.

**P5:** Often I came back to my breathing and gave myself a moment of space and often this ‘space’ (momentary) as it was would allow a new impulse to arrive. Very aware of focus/energy ebbing and flowing and interested that if I mourned the loss of energy it would increase loss but if I accepted it and waited insight would come.

**P6:** I didn’t really need to try to maintain focus/energy as long as the journey kept going. If you’re in a forest that you have to get out of you can’t really afford to feel unenergised. I feel much more focused now, initially I felt a bit distracted when I saw the others but the more complicated the task the more I have to focus and the less I am aware of being watched.

**P7:** I wish I had of sustained more focus and energy. I felt as though I rushed through, expecting and preparing for each next adventure without staying in the moment.
P8: I felt like I was going through the motions of the journey – I didn’t feel anything, I just did what I was told. It made it harder for me to remember the journey because of this.

P9: I was quite lost in my own little world. While working with just the music I was unaware of sustaining focus however I did notice my focus was distracted each time I ran out of space and had to turn and each time the “story” was added to.

Please comment on your observations of others.

P1: It was obvious that people’s energy was diffusing towards the end of the journey, but I think this was because they were in the moment. Not that they had not energy left. Most people’s focus seemed to be complete. There were times when they became conscious of another person’s reaction to the same stimulus and altered their reaction accordingly. I think that this is an interesting phenomenon as initially this is what a human being does when first learning how to react to things, they imitate someone who has obviously been through this before and draw their own reactions to it from these.

P2: passed

P3: I can’t really comment on the internal energy/focus of other individuals but I think others may have been the same: most people tended to pause at the ends of the space and almost no one took their journey perpendicular to the long walls of the studio.

P4: passed

P5: Wearers would look lost or tired or fed up but this could fit into the journey too. I think that the barriers to focus/energy actually are often the most insightful moments.

P6: I think as a whole the change of geography as well as the music would re-energise people. But I felt that the energy was fairly intense from the constant pulse of the music, interested observers. The quality of the energy kept changing texture. I could see that the performers who did the more complicated journeys were getting physically exhausted.

P7: I felt that my fellow performers were far more focused and were listening to what was being said and actually experienced the journey as though they had never heard the journey before.

P8: At first it was very interesting to watch others go through their journey but after a while it got boring (mainly last week).

P9: As it was an exercise for the individual it was hard to fully comprehend everything I saw, however occasionally it was obvious when people broke focus, there would almost be a return to the actor’s natural state as their usual being.
4. We have adopted into our working language the consideration of whether ‘the mask is wearing me’ or ‘I am wearing the mask.’ Ideally each wearer needs to find the balance between both these situations. As watchers we have become more tuned to acknowledging when this ideal state is achieved by a ‘wearer’. Considering these comments, please discuss your experience to date in the mask.

P1: Personally I am still having trouble with the mask. I don’t fully understand it and am constantly finding contradictions between the method and the theory. This is entirely my problem as it is the way I am reacting because I am not happy with my progress so I am trying to find problems with the mask and not sort out my own (which takes more effort).

P2: I think we wear the mask. We hide behind it, almost to the fact that it is an excuse to do the things we do. I think it remains definitely as its purpose states. It is just a tool, without the mask we can still act this way. The mask without us is just a mask. However there are times when I feel I would not have the confidence and trust in myself to imagine without the mask.

P3: I feel like the mask is wearing me because I am still not completely comfortable in the mask. BUT I am becoming more at ease. I feel like it dominates me and won’t let me do what I want to do. I need to find a happy medium.

P4: passed

P5: With my greater body use in wearing the mask I have felt less disassociated from it. I think that I have become less reliant on my face as my mode of communication.

P6: When this ideal state of retaining your identity as well as surrendering to the mask is achieved there is a great sense of honesty as well as clarity and “imagination realised.” Initially the mask was taking me, it was a place to hide but last week I was doing, I was wearing as well as just letting it happen. Its like the mask allows extended movement and imagination. The ordinary becomes extraordinary when this balance is achieved.

P7: passed

P8: I think when we are focused we can reach the balance between the two. I think I have done this without my knowledge, because with the mask on conscious thought disperses.

P9: When I “wake up” I am wearing the mask, I am looking around, I am waiting for the landscape to appear. When I am lost in that world however I do suppose the mask is wearing me. I have not become completely conscious of it but in retrospect I suppose it must.
Considering these comments, please discuss your observation of others in the mask.

**P1:** It is wonderful to see the little moments when someone finds a oneness with the mask. In the way they react to a stimulus e.g. P9’s reaction to the bird flying away, or P10’s efforts in climbing the mountain. They ceased to be themselves for a moment and totally gave themselves up to the neutral mask.

**P2:** passed

**P3:** I like others in the mask. Some people seem confident and relaxed. I think, perhaps, that they are in a neutral relationship where they are not worn by the mask and neither are they wearing it, they are cohabitating (sic) the space with the mask.

**P4:** passed

**P5:** Everyone seems more comfortable in the mask and have a distinct look about them.

**P6:** Hmm, tricky. You just know when this “ideal” state is achieved. It just feels pure—the atmosphere, I don’t know and can’t say.

**P7:** passed

**P8:** Most seem to [have] adapted well and have a good balance between themselves and the mask; they work together to go through the journey.

**P9:** Most people are extremely clear in the mask, by that I mean they become a distinct character in the mask, usually the same each time, which implies consistency, whether or not the mask was wearing them, I think it is up to the individuals.

**5. Please describe your feelings and sensations when wearing the mask recently.**

**P1:** Confusion and self-consciousness, I try to find the equilibrium and it eludes me because it cannot come when I try to find it. What I feel when wearing the mask is the same thing you feel when you try to think of nothing. It takes practise and you are constantly criticising your efforts. Like dog chasing its own tail.

**P2:** The most obvious is that I wanted to experience more. Smell and hear and see. Imaginations are limited and I found it frustrating that I could only feel and experience sensations to a degree.

**P3:** I have certainly become more comfortable. But I still have a lot of ground to cover. When I stop thinking and start listening to my soul I will be able to have a productive relationship with the mask.
P4: I feel so much more comfortable in the mask than I did in the first few weeks, I guess that’s to be expected though. I think the longer journeys have made it more a part of me in the work, than the mask just being the work and me putting (it) on for a couple of minutes and wanting to take it off ASAP (don’t know if this makes sense?)

P5: I was more comfortable and less concerned about judgement which allowed me to explore the possibilities I have already discussed.

P6: I’m starting to forget it—having a mask on isn’t such an issue especially when you are focused on moving through the obstacles of the journey.

P7: My eyes have become accustomed to the mask been (sic) worn by others. Likewise I feel more comfortable and used to wearing the mask myself. I feel as though I have the potential to drop all my inhibitions and become a neutral character with more focus and control.

P8: Nothing, almost like I wasn’t there, maybe even lost within the journey.

P9: The last class when I took the journey was alright. Previous to that the idea of people watching and judging my movement was really scaring me. In retrospect I guess I haven’t done a lot of work in drama where I haven’t had facial expressions or dialogue to back me up. I hadn’t realised how heavily I relied on dialogue. It felt good to push the boundary.

6. Can you identify what exercises to date have been the most useful to you for ‘feeding’ the Neutral Mask work? Please comment and expand.

P1: The physical warm-ups. I find that unless I loosen up I cannot give in. The journey. Mainly because of the amount of time in the mask, although now that I think about it I am not sure that this was a good idea as it gave me more time to think about what I was doing.

P2: The Journey — Helped to create a sense of a need for discovery and curiosity and it really pushed me to explore my body and its environment. Farewell to a best friend — helped to identify the moments that you experience. The quite short lived moments, they became more evedent (sic).

P3: I like working with sticks. It complicates more regular focus exercises. I mean by this that focus is not just on the other individual but also the dynamic connection between the two which is given life and vitality by the participants. In regard to the mask, this activity exercises focus in preparation for the organic experiences behind and within the mask.

P4: Definitely the stick-movement work, it helps the body to get moving more expressively, especially for people that usually don’t feel free enough to move like that.
—The use of music during the journeys was extremely useful, there was no dead silence, it helped me get into the mask journey—get lost in the mask a little more. Silence felt too confronting at this stage.

P5: Funny walks—allowed me to re-connect with how much I can say through my body. Stick-Dancing—increased focus and made me less cerebral. If I was too cerebral in stick dancing it didn’t seem to flow as well as when I went with the feel.

P6: I loved the stick work with music—awesome—really opened me up physically. The mask work I did after it was the best I’d ever felt. The obstacles of the journey. Music—liked Not having dead silence. Created a supportive environment.

P7: One exercise that stands out in my mind was the dancing with sticks. Although the exercize (sic) was not directly related to Neutral Mask work. It allowed me to free up my body and gave me a great deal of focus for future mask work. The Journey was an exercize (sic) I thought could be very useful and I hope we continue working with it, so I can be more focused.

P8: The step forward (by our selfs (sic)), step back, side. I found this exercise really good, it focused me greatly. Preparing me to step into the mask, all my attention shut out everything apart from the task (journey) at hand.

P9: Definitely the relaxation involving the steel ball—finding my centre. The walking from different feet positions allowed for understanding on movement of different types of characters and therefore neutral characters. The stick dancing was extremely useful as it displayed how little energy from a small extremity could do so much—leading to small movements making a huge difference in Journeys. Also the partner pulling at the waist. Extremely important in understanding the inner energy and pull and drive.
Appendix 1: 1C, third questionnaire issued to workshop participants

Neutral Mask Workshop, April 11, 2003

1. What are your experiences / observations of the differences of the way you / we work in the White Masks and the Neutral Masks?

P1: I find the work we do with the white masks is more free than the Neutral work. This is due mainly to the idea of finding a character. It makes you search yourself physically and mentally so you can transmit to the rest of the class.

P2: I find with the white masks I am more curious and more pure and open to experience than in the Neutral Masks. As I grow more comfortable with the Neutral I want to branch out and explore other realms. I get increasingly more frustrated with my body. I want to dig deeper and do more ‘extreme’ things.

P5: The Neutral Mask brings me more into myself, hidden from the world whilst the white mask takes me out into the world while wanting to interact and watch. Of course the white mask brought my focus ‘in’ initially whilst getting in touch with the character, but after that was fairly well established I wanted to go out, look out and explore.

P7: The Neutral Masks takes us back to the basic elements, ridding us of all mannerisms and movements stemmed from childhood. The Neutral Mask is a basis for creating a pure character. The White Masks are already characterised. I felt that there was only so far you could go with the Neutral Mask whereas the White Mask opens us up to so many more options.

P8: The White Masks are freer than the Neutral. We are able to have many different movements. While in the Neutral our movements are restricted.

P9: I find the White Masks in a sense more ‘fun’ than the Neutral and therefore feel a greater sense of freedom while ‘inside’. The Neutral Mask fed into the White Masks but not vice versa. There is an overall sense of respect while in the Neutral Masks, the White are extremely cheeky and are not afraid to offend people or conventions.

P10: I think the main difference is the necessity for the White Masks to have an identity. The Neutral Mask is no one but also everyone and exists only in the present while the White Mask has a past and a future.
2. Please try and capture some of your images / impressions of your recent Elements work. If it is different to any of your previous work with the Neutral Mask please try and define how it is different for you (note: it may not be different)

P1: It is different in the way that it explores the physical aspects of the Neutral mask as opposed to the internal journeys. Personally I have trouble with fire, because I can’t find a physicality of fire inside myself and I would feel silly giving a ‘Dramatic Representation’ of fire.

P2: Watching others I feel embarrassed for them because they are being silly. But when I get into the mask I don’t feel inhibited. Again similar to other Neutral Mask work I feel so very restricted and there is only so far my body can go. Limitations of space and body are bloody frustrating. Hence, there are brief moments when I’m lucky enough to actually forget myself.

P5: I relied totally on the image I had in my head of the element I was interpreting. I really had to let go into the image, if my logical mind tried to say “do this!” it would feel fake and disconnected. Instead if I trusted the image, inhaled, imbibed it, it flowed through my body and I was there with the element. The strength of the image as the impetus for movement was one that I only minutely touched in previous Neutral Mask work. I trusted the image much more this time.

P7: I think out of all the work we’ve done with the Neutral Mask the Elements work we did was what I enjoyed most. I didn’t really get a chance to be in the moment with the ‘Journeys’. I felt as though I wasn’t really in a neutral frame of mind. I was in charge of the Journey rather than the mask. I took my time when I was doing the Elements. My mind was completely on the task at hand, a specific scenario involving the element at the time.

P8: The Element work has been really difficult for me to capture. I’m really reserved to do it.

P9: I found it much harder than say, the Journey. ‘Earth’ proved a real challenge, while Air and Water came naturally. The Element work saw the Mask act as barrier between you and your watchers, but for me that wasn’t enough an I found myself subconsciously completing most of the exercise with my eyes closed also. During other Neutral work the mask, instead of acting as a barrier, in fact created you a character to start from. Therefore I felt safer – it wasn’t me – it was the Neutral person who knew no better (??) During the Elements work I was quite conscious of being watched and I’d say for that reason only really enjoyed the Elements I was (felt I was) ‘good’ at.

P10: I found this quite a jump as it was originally quite subdued but ready for action. The Elements required the mask to come alive with vigorous or sustained action. Fire, Wind, Water were quite easy to find as they predominantly exist on their own while Earth is subject to the other 3 elements for identity.
3. Each person in our research group has at some stage commented on recognising when another actor in the Neutral Mask is ‘on’ – for want of a better term. You have variously used terms such as ‘purity’, ‘unison’, ‘balance’, ‘flow’. Could you please try to explain this with a more detailed analysis.

P1: I think that Barba’s ‘pre-expressivity’ is an excellent way of viewing the thing that is happening. When the Neutral Mask is ‘on’ it is when the person behind has found that point which exists when they are completely in the moment, both performing and existing simultaneously.

P2: When a person is ‘doing it’ not being behind a mask. I more and more think that the mask is an excuse for the person behind them. Why does it need to be there? But then again maybe it helps you be another person by giving them a different face. So I guess it means when a person has tricked their body into thinking they are ‘in the moment’ yet they can still be present to enjoy their tricked body.

P5: It’s almost as if you can see when the movement/reaction is ‘contrived’ when the brain has said ‘do it’ rather than the ‘whole’ self-mind, emotion, body. When it’s the whole self the movement flows, seems in place and the mask and person are one.

P7: I think the best way to explain when a performer is on is P1 using the White Mask. One week P1 had created a character using a specific stance and mannerisms. It was obvious to me he was in the moment. The next week however, some of these movements had dropped. I think a performer is most switched on when he/she is focused, energetic etc.

P8: The person is ‘on’ when focus is at its max, we, the audience, see this through movement and reaction from the wearer. They, wearer, seem totally engulfed with what they are doing.

P9: Perhaps also the words ‘Aura’ and ‘Vibe’? You can sense the focus of people in their eyes but also in their bodies. When you watch people in the Elements exercise or the raising stick exercise you can just feel when they’ve finished or simply had enough, or aren’t focused.

P10: When a person is ‘on’ there is a noticeable merging between the mask and person. In this I mean they combine both elements of neutrality and their own persona. A kind of halfway point which allows the person to become lost in the moment and forget or ignore everything other than the actions they are involved in.
4. What is happening to you - the way you use your body, your sensations - when we work with sticks? We do stick dancing, moving stick structures, we walk with sticks on our heads and we command and ‘warm’ the space with sticks. Please describe how each experience is for you.

**P1:** - Stick dancing – As I have mainly been doing the dance with P2 we have really been pushing ourselves to the extremes. We have moved to the fast tempo mostly.
- Stick structures – The last stick structure moved fluently and everyone was pushing themselves – it was great.
- Balancing stuff – this is interesting because while you try to balance the stick you are forced into finding your own centre of balance.

**P2:** The stick can make me do extraordinary things. I like the sticks. I can feel incredibly focussed yet explore the possibilities of my body without feeling inhibited. I really want to fly sometimes and I wish I couldn’t hurt myself. When I think about it afterwards there are things I do that should have hurt me.

**P5:** Stick dancing has become a little stagnant over the last 2 weeks. My movement potential seems totally explored at this stage. The stick structures add more to my awareness (having to work with 2 people & whole group) than to my body/movement exploration. I was wanting to run with the music last week, up the tempo, respond to what I was getting from the music but it seemed out of ‘sync’ with the group. Walking with sticks on my head focuses me and gives me an opportunity to focus on my posture. ‘Warming’ the space seems more a response to the music with the sticks as a prop that create a certain image in my head.

**P7:** Stick dancing I found has a lot to do with the music, the pace. Stick structure has a lot to do with the trust you have toward your fellow stick holders.
Head sticks is to do with balance and focus.

**P8:** Working with sticks are the best focusing exercise for me. I think that through each exercise with sticks needs concentration…which for me is great for focus. It may too have something to do with them being straight, in the sense that it becomes a focal point?

**P9:** Dancing: wonderful, fun and exciting – if you and your partner are ‘on’. If you are both on the same wavelength and focused. If not, its hard and frustrating. Structures: much better with music. Without, I had trouble focusing as a group mind. Was interesting to become aware of all sides of your world – as you needed to ‘look after’ those either side of you.
Heads: this exercise takes me back to my dance years. 16 years of ‘heads up, shoulders down, bottoms in, hips under’. I don’t know what I look like but I feel extremely stylised, and those words are spinning through my head. Warming: empowering! Incredible. Today while lifting the sticks while walking I felt tiny. So small in a growing space around me. Love it.
**P10:** The action of balancing stick on head raised my eye level and helped develop Neutral walk. Extended with the raising of 2 sticks and a focused walking brought my body to a super energised neutrality. I felt I was ready for any kind of action also I could feel my energy, presence filling the entire room. (I really loved this exercise.) Stick Dancing – great warm up but also pushed my body to new limits. With certain people a good flow was hard to find due to different rhythms. Other people allowed me to find how far my body could be pushed and I think become visually interesting. It also loosens up the body.
Appendix 2: Exercises used in preparation for the neutral mask work

This appendix sets out some of the exercises which I used during the first part of each workshop session where our work was devoted to movement in preparation for the neutral mask. Few, if any, of the exercises are original but are part of the migration and mutation of exercises which constantly shift through performance circles as a result of the teaching and learning process.

Throughout the movement work there were a few questions which I regularly put to the actors for their consideration:

- When I move or alter the arrangement of my body, how does it affect me?
- Can I change the way I feel by changing the position of my body and its orientation to the immediate environment?
- Must the performer be affected in order to affect the spectator?

I continually urged the actors to broaden and enrich their awareness of space, telling them that for actors, space is not a vacuum or an absence, it is, rather, something we can shape and describe with our bodies and gestures. It is something we can give form to, a moveable thing which we can ‘warm’ and energise and which can, in turn, describe us.

Lying

In the lying position, spread out with the resistance of the floor underneath our body and the weight of gravity upon us, we are most able to bring all aspects of our psycho-physical self to neutral. The spine is able to relax gently into alignment as it rests against the hardness of the floor, free from the requirements of balancing and supporting the weight of the trunk and torso above the pelvis and legs. Our breath can slow and settle into a rhythm which assists the musculo-skeletal system to release gathered tensions. Our chest and shoulders open up as they are allowed to release towards the floor, and the pelvis, lying flat, encourages a natural outwards rotation through the hips, of the thighs, knees and feet. In this position we have the least impedance to locating in sensation and in our imagination, the various powerful movement centres in our body such as the pelvis, the central five lumbars, the solar plexus and its corresponding twelve upper vertebrae.

Four circles of concentration—this exercise is good for developing a dual focus where the actors maintain an underlying awareness of their body and its systems while shifting their awareness of the environment outwards in increasing circles. The exercise begins by asking the actors to listen only to the sounds and rhythms of their own body as they lie upon the floor, sinking down into its hardness. Then ask them to listen to every sound which can be heard within the room - the sounds of other bodies, of the lights humming, the roof creaking, or the windows rattling - while not losing the awareness of their own bodies which they established at the start of the exercise. Next, ask them to become aware of the third circle of concentration which is the environment immediately beyond the studio, and then ask them to imaginatively shift their awareness to the sounds and activity of the fourth
circle, that of the next suburb, while not losing the various levels of awareness they have
established to that point. Finally, talk them through a slow return to the rhythms and sounds
of their own body against the floor.

*Viscous liquid*—suggest to the actors that a drop of warm, viscous liquid has been poured
onto their big toe, or little finger, and that it is slowly moving through their whole body,
seeking out tensions and muscle gatherings, seeping into tight corners and loosening every
part of the musculo-skeletal system on its slow journey through. Talk them through the
journey of the liquid slowly, systematically naming the parts of the body where tightness
and tensions customarily gather.

*Isolations* —this exercise builds upon the previous exercise by asking the actors to isolate
small areas of their body initially with their imagination, and then to exert conscious
control over those areas by contracting and then relaxing the muscle groups which control
the particular areas. The exercise might start by naming the toes, moving to the front of the
foot, the ankle, the calves, and so on through the body, with the actors isolating each part of
the body first in their imagination, and then addressing that isolation with muscular control.

**Standing**

In the standing position we establish a specifically interactive relationship with our
environment because we are able to fully observe our surroundings and our body is most
open to receive and respond to external stimuli. When we shift the axis of our body
upwards and assume the standing position, our musculo-skeletal system is suddenly
subjected to the requirements of the constantly shifting and precarious balance which all bi-
pedal primates continually manage. In the standing position we can become acutely aware
of our impetus to the large movements which launch us across the surface of our planet,
and we can analyse the various qualities and tempi which our impetus to movement can
possess. If we pose a range of questions to ourselves such as: Are we moving away from
something? or towards something? and why? we can observe and analyse the changing
qualities of our impetus to movement which are a result of and reaction to specific stimuli.

*Six directions*—begin by asking the actors to find a standing position from which they are
able to move into any of the six directions of right, left, forwards, backwards, up and down
with the least muscular disruption possible; or to put it another way, with the greatest
economy of movement possible. When they have found their ‘ready’ stance, give them the
signal to move, using either the beat of a drum or the clap of two woodblocks. Each beat
signifies a movement in one direction, so *forwards* would be a single large step forward, at
which point they should maintain the position briefly, then return to neutral. The direction
of *up* is achieved with a spring in the air, straight up, returning to the neutral position, while
the direction of *down* is achieved by sinking as low as the body can manage while
maintaining the ability to arrest the movement and recover to neutral. The exercise can
evolve as a series of random calls of direction, or via a pre-arranged pattern, while the
speed and intensity of the exercise will depend upon the relative aptitude of the group. It
can further be developed by asking the actors to imaginatively create for themselves a
reason for moving, that is, an imagined external stimuli, which will in turn give texture to their movement.

Holding partners—this exercise builds upon the previous exercise and is done in pairs. One partner assumes their neutral, or ‘ready’ stance and their partner stands behind them, holding the front person firmly at the pelvic bones and bracing their own body strongly. The brace position of the rear partner will lend their body a strong forwards diagonal slant as there ought to be an amount of resistance set up between the two bodies. At the sound of the wood block, the front person is to spring forwards with a single step. Their aim is to take as big a step forwards as they can manage, to threaten their balance as much as possible, while still maintaining enough energy and control to arrest their movement, hold it for a moment, then return to neutral. All of this is done against the resistance of the rear partner who is holding them firmly at the pelvic bones, exerting a certain amount of resistance to any forwards movement. The front partner should be encouraged to initiate all impetus for movement from the area being held by their partner, that is, the pelvic area and lower spine, and one of the reasons for this exercise is to establish a strong imaginative and corporeal awareness that this area is the body’s most powerful centre of movement and energy. Again, the actors should be encouraged to give themselves an imaginative external stimulus for movement. During our movement sessions, I asked the actors to alternately create a stimulus that they were moving away from, then a stimulus that they were moving towards, and I asked them to become aware of the different qualities of each movement.

Strings—this exercise comes from the idea of a marionette held upright by strings. The actors should first assume their neutral stance, that is, the standing position most closely approximating the arrangement of their body when they are lying on the floor. Next, ask the actors to imagine that strings are holding them in place. Then suggest to the actors that the string which is attached to their left shoulder is slowly being drawn up by the puppeteer, but there should be no disruption of the body other than that part directly attached to the string. The rest of the body ought to appear relaxed and uninvolved. In turn, name different extremities to which the string is attached such as the wrist, the knee, the elbow or the ankle, and designate whether the string is being drawn up or is being allowed to release; the actors are asked to respond accordingly. The exercise develops the ability to isolate body movement, while developing an awareness in the actor of muscular resistances which are strongly exerted in the body during each isolation.

Walking

Our walking exercises developed from the single idea of choosing a particular part of the body which was to lead the walk. For example, the forehead, the chest, the stomach, knees or toes can variously be designated as parts of the body which can lead a person forwards through space. Alternatively, different parts of the foot can be specified as the part that is to maintain primary contact with the ground. Invariably, broad characters develop quickly from these improvisations. I asked the actors to take plenty of time to explore each particular walk, to allow a tempo and breathing pattern to develop, and then to play with the type of vocal sounds which might also develop from each walk. By threatening their balance and challenging their usual manner of moving, this exercise encourages actors to
become more aware of their own manner of moving, and it sharpens their awareness of a ‘neutral’ body which is devoid of the affectations and extremes explored through the various walks.

**Sticks**

Some of our exercises with sticks were done individually, some in pairs, and some involved the whole group, and the sticks we used were sized according to the appropriate needs of each exercise. The sticks were inexpensive bamboo garden stakes which I bought in bundles from my local garden shop in three differing lengths of 80cm, 120cm and 180 cm. Throughout the thirteen workshop sessions the actors did not tire of the stick exercises and we regularly discovered new and innovative ways of using them in our work.

*Stick structures* and *Stick dancing* have been described in Chapter three, but I want to add a few more comments about the *Stick dancing* exercise. The key to the success of this exercise is for the partners to push each other to greater extremes of balance through an increasing range of movements across as many height levels as possible. They also need to share the impulses to movement through the stick so that there appears to be no leader and no follower. Another key to the exercise lies in the fact that the part of the body which holds the stick in place is the tip of the index finger. If we stand or lie down and stretch ourselves out as far as possible, we note that the tip of the index finger is, in fact, the outer extreme of our body. From this outermost extreme, the actors should be encouraged to allow all of their movements to flow through the inner parts of their bodies, where the movement does not stop or stall, and so on out to the corresponding extremes of the feet. The exercise is done with music and another of the keys lies in the choice of music. Each session I prepared a music tape consisting of an eclectic range of music – West African drumming, the Belfast Harp Orchestra, Flamenco guitar, ABBA, Mozart arias, French gypsy ensembles – my primary concern was to choose music with a flow to it and I found my choices often included music where the breath of the musicians could be heard on the recording. It also seemed a good idea to steer away from contemporary music which might be close to the actors’ own daily choice of listening. Each tape lasted twenty or twenty five minutes with five or six different tracks and this meant that the actors had to push through a number of levels of fatigue. I encouraged them to use the music to explore various physical tempi according to the ebb and flow of their energy levels. The exercises became for them a synthesis of space, time, effort and rhythm.

*Balancing sticks*—this exercise is so simple but the immediate transformation which it effects through the body is remarkable. Ask the actors to take a stick – I found that the longest sticks were most suitable for this exercise – balance the stick on their head, and walk around the studio with it for a reasonable amount of time. Suggest that they adopt a visual vanishing point slightly beyond the tip of the stick, and ask them to explore a range of tempi in their walking. As they walk, suggest that they start analysing the various corporeal adjustments which they are making in order to keep the stick balanced. The effect is that the actors’ spines align and elongate, movement slows, and the whole body appears focussed.
Warming the space—this is an excellent exercise for enhancing actors’ sense of their ability to fill a space with their corporeal presence and it works best in a large space. Ask the actors to take one of the longest sticks in each hand and to walk as slowly as they can from one end of the room to the far end. They are to begin their walk with the sticks held out and down so that the tips of the sticks are just above the floor. As they walk, they are to slowly raise the sticks upwards and to raise themselves up on to the balls of their feet so that as they reach the far end of the room, the sticks are extended straight up and they are standing on the front of their feet. The raising of the sticks and the rising up on to the balls of the feet is something they must judge as they move down the room. From the fully extended position, they are to turn around as simply as possible through 180°, fixing their focus on a vanishing point well beyond the facing wall of the studio, and from this position, they are to control a very slow lowering of the sticks, together with a very slow lowering of themselves back to a flat-footed position. As they lower the sticks, they are to judge the point at which they still feel that they command the space, and the actors should be encouraged to hold on to this feeling for as long as they are comfortable.
Appendix 3—White Masks

The rules of engagement and play which I set up for the White Mask work was quite different to the manner in which we had approached the Neutral Masks, because the White Masks were expressive masks. As with all expressive masks, no matter how basic the suggestion of character in the face, these simple masks required the actors to first discover their nature and physicality then play through this with others and the audience. There was a strong sense of ‘the playroom’ in the studio during these sessions. On one large table we laid out the masks, while on another large table I set out lots of costumes and little props and various bits and pieces that I thought might be attractive to these masks. Things such as a clock, feathers, handbags, a suitcase, an umbrella, a walking stick, shopping bags, flowers, small toys, ribbons—the special pieces of paraphernalia that can come in handy in improvisation and play. I also set up a cheval mirror next to the tables. We split into two groups, with four or five actors up working at a time for twenty five to thirty minutes before swapping over. After the actors in the second group had made their first pick of the masks, I then opened the playing space to anyone from the first group who wanted to continue working.

Each actor chose a mask, then, in their own time, according to their own pace, creating their own imaginative working space around them, I suggested that they explore the physicality of the mask as it made an impression on them. How did the mask walk, how did it breathe, what was its tempo or range of tempos as it moved across the space, how did it view its environment and how did it respond to its surrounds? If they seemed to be losing impetus or the strength of their image was waning, I suggested to the actors that they return to the mirror. I urged them: ask yourself, what resonances does the image in the mirror set off in you, trust the impulses suggested by the mask, follow where they lead, and the life of the character will start to take shape. I was resolute that there was to be no interaction with others, and no costumes or props adopted until each actor had decided on or found the walk and the breathing pattern of their mask. When these characteristics had been decided on or
discovered—since often the mask seems to dictate its walk and other characteristics and the actor seems to “fall in” with the demands of the mask—then the actor could choose clothing and personal props, and only then were they permitted to start interacting with others in the playing space. Again I gave the directive that there should be no Marcel Marceau style descriptive mime. The characters could not communicate through speech but that did not mean speech was to be replaced with sign language, communication was to be evinced through the body. Interaction was tentative at first, but in time alliances formed and dissolved, antagonisms arose, relationships developed, and shreds of discernible storylines appeared. Some alliances were revisited and built upon in each session, with some characters assembling an abundance of personality traits and a number of relationships that each had their defining qualities. (Fig 15-20)

At the close of session nine, which was our second session with the White Masks, each of the actors had explored at least two of the masks and had discovered or developed some defining physical characteristics for at least one of those; so I set them a performance task. One by one, they were to make an entry through the black curtains and the reason for their entry was to be one of two possibilities: 1) they were entering in order to perform or show off something to the assembled audience, or 2) they had a specific reason for being there and entering the room at that time, but upon entering, discovered that they were in completely the wrong room, and needed to leave. All of the choices they made with regards to timing and physicality were to be dictated by their mask character as they had discovered it so far. It was immensely funny to see the crumpled faces of the masks, some of which looked like lumps of bread dough, transformed into characters with wonderfully human likes and dislikes, feelings, sensibilities, and many with definite comedic tendencies. After working with expressive masks for many years I never fail to be fascinated at the transformation which occurs when the mask meets the actor. There is something mysterious in this interface and the transformation of both is palpably exciting and immensely satisfying to experience.

We pressed deeper into the White Mask work in session ten, and I asked the actors, during their free exploration time with their mask, to exercise more self discipline in the physicalisation of their character. The use of the term discipline within the context of free play may seem like a contradiction, but I was asking them to make some decisions about the physical life of their character, these decisions were to be filtered out of the many possibilities they may have experimented with. I requested them to define the three physical gestures (shadow moves) which typified the physical life of their mask character. We talked about ‘keying’ a character’s physicality, that is, defining the particularly salient gestures of a character. The reason for identifying these is so that the actor can fall back on the gestures if they feel that the essential physicality and flow of the character is waning or evading them. The ‘keyed’ gestures become the actor’s ‘anchor’ so to speak which can lead him/her back to their character at such times. At the end of the session I issued another performance task where each actor was asked to show the assembled group their particular way of moving across the space, and their range of three or so gestures which provided them with the ‘keys’ into their particular mask character.

Some of the masks were always outgoing and interactive, some remained more or less isolated, while some seemed to function as hieroglyphs—by that I mean that an actor could find an appropriate walk for the mask, could find movements and a physical shape which
suited the mask, but this seemed to be all that the mask was open to. Rather than having the inherent capacity to develop into characters, these hieroglyphic masks seemed to operate more like puppets or objects—fascinating to look at as images moving through a space rather than characters capable of expressive interaction with others.