

BABEŞ-BOLYAI UNIVERSITY OF CLUJ-NAPOCA

FACULTY OF THEATRE AND FILM

DOCTORAL SCHOOL OF THEATRE AND FILM

Domain Theatre and Performing Arts / Cinematography and Media

DOCTORAL THESIS

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**MASKS AND CORPORALITY IN THE ART OF
THE ACTOR. THE BODY-CHARACTER**

-summary of the doctoral thesis -

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Argument

The thesis aimed to create a training system specific to physical theater that is based on bodily expressiveness, the ability to convey states, emotions, gestures or thoughts with the help of the body and the development of actors' skills to create characters starting from an external form. The 21st century, due to television, computers, smart phones, various games played on various gadgets, has led to a serious alteration of the human body, attributable, first of all, to physical inactivity, so that our spine has lost its elasticity and flexibility, the muscles became less strong, dexterity less developed, the legs and implicitly the gait deformed. In no case will these "qualities" help the young actor to walk the path between himself and the character.

We have concluded since the beginning of the scientific approach that this desideratum can only be achieved if the actor separates from his civilian body and moves, with the help of different training techniques, to a strong, expressive, energetic and available body. Only in this way can we move away from the personal self, which is never enough to create a living character on stage, and approach a new kind of energy, a way of using our body, a way out of our own repetitive mechanisms, so that later we may discover the movement of the body emptied of all the clichés and preconceptions stored over time.

Throughout the six chapters of the thesis, we emphasized the idea that the actor's body must be taught to function and express itself according to laws other than those of everyday life, laws that are specific to the stage, and this involves physical training and a series of exercises that have as an aim primarily a reorganization of the actor's body, in the second stage an initiation into "form", then the construction of a character, and in the last stage the construction of a "fixed character" specific to the Commedia dell'Arte. Consequently, the thesis proposed and carried out a double approach, both theoretical and practical, scientific and at the same time pedagogical, focused on the definition, conceptual delimitation and theorization of the concept of character body, and on a series of exercises that we advance in order to create a complex and compelling character body-character.

As scientific research method we chose the mask, more precisely: the neutral mask, the larval mask, the demi-mask of character and the specific mask of the Commedia dell'Arte. Before designing this thesis, we asked ourselves a series of questions regarding the mask and its usefulness in theater pedagogy, which we will try to answer: How useful can the theater mask be in theater pedagogy? When should this study start and how long should it last? How

attracted will the actors be to this approach? What does the mask and working with it trigger in the actor? Here are some questions that we sought and answered in this scientific endeavor.

The novelty and originality, as well as the scientific relevance of the paper, reside in the approach to the two independent and by no means synonymous concepts, that of the civilian body of the actor, and that of the body-character. In order to create a body-character, the civilian body must be abandoned. Actors often have considerable difficulty in making this much-needed separation between the two concepts. Consequently, the present thesis has achieved a theoretical, but above all practical, approach, intended to provide a conceptual and practical framework that will facilitate the actor's complex mission of separating the civilian body from the character one. Beyond the theoretical apparatus used in the research, the work can therefore also be understood as a manual, as a practical guide to approach this artistic goal. Additionally, we researched the chosen topic from both the perspective of the actor and the pedagogue, thus trying to look at the issue from two distinct, but still complementary, angles.

The neutral mask, the larval mask, the character mask, and the Commedia dell'Arte mask, represent the path taken in the present study. If we look carefully at the four types of masks, we will notice great differences in expression or even the lack of it (neutral mask), differences in color, size, texture, or use. It is a route that we have called the road of accumulations, setting the neutral mask as the starting point and the Commedia dell'Arte mask as the end point.

The first stage, that of the neutral mask, was dedicated to the process of eliminating everything that is unnecessary in a movement or a body expression. The actor, with the help of the neutral mask, will discover all that ballast that weighs down his body and corporeality, which he will then eliminate with the final goal of creating the neutral body. It should not be confused with a soft, inexpressive or absent body, on the contrary it is characterized by concentration, balance and above all availability and presence.

In the second stage, we focused on the larval mask which, through its architectural construction, proposes an approach to an expression that is missing in the case of the neutral mask. The expression of the larval mask is diffuse, it does not contain clear information so that we can define a character, it seems a thing started but not finished. These will be the coordinates according to which the specific corporeality of the larval mask will be built by the actors. The fixed point from which we started defining the larval body was the neutral body. Just as under the larval mask is the neutral mask from which different growths begin to emerge, timidly, that annihilate its neutrality, under the larval body is the neutral body that also begins to take on different nuances, qualities or at least undefined bodily expressions. The process takes place

by addition, as on a white sheet of paper (neutral mask) the draftsman adds vague lines on, that could convey the feeling of the beginning of a portrait. We don't know who it is, but we can say that it is there.

The outgrowths of the larval mask become, in the case of the character mask, clear, well-defined, recognizable. The character is contained in the mask, it provides all the information the actor needs to physically complete the expression of the mask. A new layer is added over the actor's body, only this time everything becomes clear, and the character can be described in detail like a realistic picture. The character mask contains details such as: size, color or colors, straight or rounded lines, and all its constituent elements must be encountered in the body composition proposed by the actor. With the character mask, the actor steps into the territory of the total assumption of a character completely foreign to him, with specific and clear characteristics that distance him from his own person and personality. In order for this to be accomplished, we felt that we needed to define a number of terms so that the actor could make a clear distinction between the character he is playing and his personality.

The Commedia dell'Arte mask is essentially a character mask, but it proposes a fixed typology created by the tradition of this theatrical genre. The fixed type is characterized by mask, costume, corporeality and behavior. The actor's search space narrows, everything has been established by tradition and cannot be changed, because any change will break the relationship between mask, character and tradition, and the result will not be able to fit into the coordinates of the Commedia dell'Arte genre. The uniqueness of a creation in the Commedia dell'Arte will appear in every encounter between the fixed type and a new body that will actively participate in the creation of the character, as well as by establishing a combination of the characteristics of the *fixed type* and those of the body.

Each set of exercises specific to a mask was anticipated within the thesis by a set of preparatory exercises, which aimed to introduce the actor to an atmosphere specific to the mask he is going to work with. Each mask has its own requirements and forces the body into different ways of expression, different ways of relating to space and time. The preparatory exercises were intended to guide the actor in the direction of the requirements of his own mask to work with.

The exercises specific to each mask were divided within the thesis into three subcategories: static body construction, which starts from the information provided by the mask, body construction in motion and improvisation exercises. The static body construction constituted the first stage, in which the actor must discover those body elements that complement the architectural elements of the mask. It is very important that this construction

is based on asymmetries and the acquisition of a new kind of balance, different from the natural one, which is obtained by working with two or more opposite vectors. Thus, the body will create the feeling of a living body, ready to act, because only from the collision of two energies with different directions can movement be born. When the body is ready, it can act, at first the actions will be composed of simple movements: a walk through the playing space, sitting or rising from a chair, working with different objects. Afterwards, the actions can become more complex, forcing the actor to find the most natural way of the built body to act. Through movement and action, the built body adjusts its bodily coordinates almost naturally.

The order of the exercises presented in this thesis or their content may bear some adaptations, depending on the immediate needs of the group of actors or an actor. Working with the mask must have a personal character, therefore an adaptation of some exercises according to the character of an actor, or to his needs, is welcome. Our goal was not to make the actors performers of forms devoid of content and originality, but to find that path on which the actor's personality and the mask can work together. The exercises were created following both theoretical and practical research with four generations of actors, drawing on our experience as an actor who has worked on performances with comedy or character masks, or performances based on bodily expressiveness.

The stated purpose of this work was therefore a combination of theoretical and practical, artistic and pedagogical, intended to facilitate the actor's journey towards the creation of a complex, convincing and harmoniously realized body-character.

Chapter 1. The mask and corporeality

Man has always used masks. The mask helped him defend himself, hide, worship higher entities, lie or on the contrary, tell the truth, move up the social ladder, etc. Looking at people we ask ourselves: what is hidden behind the mask, what is beyond the appearances that allow us to observe? In different circumstances, usually events that we perceive as uncomfortable or that scare us, our face makes up different expressions under which we hide our true feelings, because we are ashamed of our cowardice and the dark thoughts that we sometimes harbor. Through mental control, we build a mobile mask, unstable and sometimes difficult to keep or to recompose to order, but which often helps us avoid conflicts and function in society. We can observe how, with the help of the mask, the human psyche managed to multiply into real or fantastic personalities, comic, tragic, heroes or deities. Where did this idea or need to put on a mask come from in order to get closer to another personality that can come into contact with realities otherwise hidden to man? How and when did man discover the power of the mask and

how it can be used? Is creativity the source of playfulness or vice versa, because it seems that both, closely united, guided primitive man towards fabulous manifestations.

Is it possible to live without masks? In our opinion, the only people who do not wear masks are newborns. In the freedom of lack of knowledge, without fears and desires other than the primary ones, man is in his purest and most sincere state. At first, the child behaves naturally and discovers the joy of being himself, but later, probably because of the frustration and distress caused by not having the right to act according to what he wants, the child shapes his personality to become what others want him to be.

Since prehistory, the mask occupies a special and well-defined place in people's lives. It was used in apotropaic, funeral or religious rituals of shamans or healers and is part of most cultures. The masks were extremely diverse in terms of material forms or production techniques. Modern Stone Age societies did not have a complicated belief system, believing that there were evil and good spirits who were cared for through food offerings and sacrifices. The elements of nature such as stone, water, fire, rain or thunder occupied a very important place in the spiritual life of the people of this era and acquired a special meaning. In rituals in which the spirits were invoked, people wore masks. Their belief was that the spirits would be more lenient with them due to the masks they wore, which attempted to mimic the form of the spirit invoked. The elders of the tribes also wore eagle masks signifying wisdom, understanding, or acumen, and the young men wore bull masks, signifying strength, resolve, determination.

In Antiquity, the most common belief was that a mask had the power to protect man from evil forces. But the mask was also a sign of happiness, purity and fertility. These meanings can be found in the old tradition, which is still preserved today among some peoples, of covering the bride's face with a veil. This ritual represents the culminating moment of the marriage, in which the bride and groom swear their faith and eternal love. In Antiquity, the veil was also used to cover the face of the dead or to ward off evil spirits. In some regions, a death mask of the deceased was created from wax, used by the young descendants to prove their belonging to a certain lineage. These demonstrations took place in front of the altar, and actors who wore these death masks, which they used to represent different moments in the life of the deceased, participated in them. It is among the first documentary attestations in which the sacred, the ritual, merges with the theater.

In Ancient Greece it is assumed that the first forms of theater appear, having their origin in the Dionysian celebrations, during which the participants wore masks representing the god Dionysos. Gradually, the performances became more complex: authors of texts appeared,

which were divided into two categories: tragic and comic. The performer character appeared, who broke away from the chorus and spoke lines along with it. The show sometimes even lasted a whole day. The actors wore large costumes, high wooden shoes, to appear imposing, but also in order to be seen from the last rows of the amphitheater. Of course, they wore big, enormous, heavy masks, the reason being the same as mentioned above: better visual acuity. At first, the mask represented only two characters: the happy and the sad, or the good and the bad. Slowly, with the appearance of more and more varied and complex texts, the masks became more and more expressive, trying to capture as much of the personality of the interpreted character as possible. The tragic poet Thespis was the first to give the mask a human appearance, and Choirilos and Phrynicos dealt with the evolution of the mask, the latter creating the female mask.

In Ancient Rome, one of the rituals in which masks were used was the funeral ritual. The funeral was directed by the funeral director as spectacularly as possible, especially if the deceased had a high rank. The roles were divided: the mourners who cried and publicly expressed the pain of the family, the mimes and the dancers, in front of the coffin walked a group of people who "interpreted" the ancestors of the deceased and who wore masks representing the ancestors of the person being buried. A wax mask was made for the deceased on the date of death, and after the funeral it was placed, together with the other masks representing the ancestors, in a special tent. As far as the theater is concerned, things happened differently than in Greece, the origins of the Roman theater not being of a religious nature, they rather came from the parodic area. We would mention here, as types of masks, the mask of Dossenus (personifying cunning), Maccus (typology of the fool), Pappus (the mellow old man in love).

The Middle Ages are probably the heyday of the mask. Its use in this era is multiple and complex. Carnival, the way to release people before or after a period of deprivation, was a good occasion to use masks. During Carnival, the slave could become king for a day, and the king could turn into a beggar. The power of the mask is amazing. It could change everything, equalize or reverse all the power relations in a society, unspoken truths could surface, which in the absence of this context would have remained buried, for, as we already stated, the mask hides and at the same time has the power to reveal the truth.

This object, the mask, with such a distant history, with such a fascination and power over people, with such a wide, practical, psychological, spiritual use could not but be part of the History of the Universal Theatre. Starting with the Dionysian celebrations, then the ancient theater, the medieval mysteries, the Commedia dell'Arte, the modern theater or the

contemporary theater, the mask has always been present. It fascinated, frightened, brought to the surface truths or mysteries, covered or enlightened, intrigued, provoked laughter, etc.

A transfer from the utility of the mask as a tool used in various daily activities or in spiritual activities to the mask as a representative object of theatrical performance was inevitable. This transfer is primarily due to the development of religious rituals, which at first had a less uniform form, based on momentary improvisation, but which over time managed to crystallize their form and content into a repetitive performance. The ritual is transformed so that it takes on the characteristics of what we can call a performance. These rituals, in which the mask is assigned an increasingly privileged role, can be associated with various manifestations in which dance was the main means of expression. As a dramatic function, in primitive rituals, the mask is an object that, through its presence, venerates different entities, some supernatural. It is invested by the wearer with magical powers capable of direct communication between the wearer and the deities, through a transformation of the former in relation to himself, but also a transformation of the surrounding world with which he is connected.

The theatrical mask holds a central place in the development of the theater in Greece, through its ability to synthesize the most diverse characters, as evidenced by the large number of types of masks. The evolution of ancient theater is similar to the evolution of the mask, the two being separated only when the mask was re-evaluated from the point of view of its dramatic function and an impediment represented by the mask in the evolution of dramaturgy and the performing arts was concluded. The importance that the mask had in ancient Greek theater is undeniable, leading to the emergence of new theatrical traditions. The Latin theater transfers almost entirely the characteristics of the Greek theater, including the tradition of using the mask.

The 19th century is marked by the aesthetics of realism. Everything that is represented on the stage must be as faithful a reproduction as possible, sometimes going as far as naturalism, of life. In this context the mask loses its value as a stage tool. Any artifice that could have distanced the stage discourse from reality is abandoned. The art of acting meets this desire, trying to build a character based only on the actor's personal skills, without him resorting to something artisanal such as a mask. The actor's face remains uncovered and the mask is replaced by the actor's facial expressions.

Masque and Commedia dell'Arte have always had a remarkable power of attraction on theater people, be they actors or directors, influencing their work or inspiring them to create new methodologies for teaching and learning the art of acting. The mask is seen as a theatrical

training tool capable of purifying an actor's stylistics and helping him to create a new reference system that will shed new light on the relationship between him and his own body, between the actor and the character, or between the actor and public. For many practitioners of the art of acting, the mask is central to their training as they aim to develop communication skills beyond vocal ones. Thus, the body acquires new dimensions and becomes able to transmit in a deeper and more expressive way states, emotions or thoughts. The actor is thus put in a position to move, to act, to involve his whole body in the stage performance. Nothing remains unused, everything participates in the creation of a character, and with the help of the mask the actor discovers the infinity of means of expression at his disposal. Beyond any aesthetic option of a performance or work system, the mask is the one that radically influences the artistic path of an actor, being able to open new perspectives on the actor's art and his creation. The mask challenges the actor to discover his limits, know them and overcome them or turn them into assets.

The mask covers the actor's face and reveals his body. When the actor's face is covered, all the viewer's attention and concentration will be focused on the performer's body, and the most important communication channels such as the face, eyes, or voice will no longer be able to be used, and the actor will be forced to communicate only with the body. He is put in a position to build a set of extremely precise and characteristic movements at the bodily and gestural level of the states, emotions, or thoughts he wants to express. Any construction of a character and in whatever theatrical style may be its stage approach, involves a conceptual unit composed of verbal communication, energetic communication and bodily communication. The body has an extraordinary capacity to transmit thoughts or emotions, but for this to be possible we must first discover its biological functionality, and then its readiness to react to various external stimuli.

It is very important for the actor to know his body as accurately as possible at the anatomical level. A thorough study of the human skeleton, of the muscles that cover the bones and set the body in motion, is necessary for the actor not only in this study of the mask and the corporeality obtained through the study of the mask, but in general. When the actor knows his body anatomically, he will know exactly how it works, what it allows him to do, the energy his body has, its flexibility and its ability to transform. In the same direction of knowing the limits and specifics of one's own body, we recommend that actors practice yoga, breathing exercises or martial arts before starting the study with the mask. In addition to the discipline that these activities impose, the actor has the opportunity to discover his body and its functionality.

In conclusion, in this section of the thesis we have drawn from a pedagogical and theoretical point of view the main landmarks of the construction of the body of character, thus arriving at a personal definition of the concept, based on an eclectic vision of the different valences given to the term by prestigious pedagogues of the dramatic arts. The definition we formulated is that a body-character can be seen as a body that has the power of self-expression, of thematizing human physicality and that increases its expressive power through the use of neutral, larval, character masks, and masks specific to Commedia dell'arte. The body-character thus differs radically from the civilian body through its artistic dimension, from the body created through the use of masks and specific acting techniques.

Chapter 2. The neutral mask

The neutral mask is a symmetrical mask. The two longitudinal halves are and must be perfectly equal and similar. It can never speak because its lips are glued together, but it gives the impression that it is about to say something. It seems to express the exact moment when the two lips are about to part and speak. It has no wrinkles, grimaces, rictus or smiles. The most common colors are white, which has the ability to capture light better and, therefore, be more visible, and brown, as were the masks used by J. Lecoq, which is more reminiscent of the natural color of the skin, thus creating a stronger illusion of a unitary whole between mask and body. The neutral mask worn on a civilian body can look strange because the symmetry, calmness, concentration specific to the mask is not found in the body. What the neutral mask does to the body is to draw it into taking on its characteristics. The shape of the mask must dictate the corporeality of the wearer, who is obliged to find correspondences between the body and the mask. Only in this way will the mask come to life.

Before starting work with the neutral mask, the concept of neutrality must be clarified very precisely. The state of neutrality in no way refers to an inactive, passive, disinterested, uninvolved state. The state of neutrality of the actor can be identified, rather, with the state of balance, of availability, of openness to the new or to a new beginning. It is a state of preparation, a zero point from which later the game begins. The neutral body is symmetrical. Each half of the body is in perfect balance with the other half and each appears to be the mirror image of the other. It is totally wrong to think of the neutral body as lacking energy, soft or unengaged. On the contrary, the neutral body is an energetic body, only that this energy is kept under control, waiting to be released at the right time. At the same time, it is relaxed. The muscles are relaxed, but not without tension, it is an active relaxation where the actor is ready to start work. The neutral body is focused on what is about to happen.

The modern actor involves his whole body in his acting creation, the character is incorporated. Whatever situation he finds himself in, whatever idea or concept he has to express, he engages his whole body. Only in this way will his character become strong, expressive and complex. But to succeed in this endeavor, the actor must be educated and trained. Unfortunately, today's society, bad habits, fashion, poor diet, stress, pollution, beauty or behavioral standards contribute to the existence of untrained and untrained stage bodies of young actors.

Some actors have soft bodies, others too rigid ones. We often see bodies with the center of gravity in the wrong position, which can lead to serious spine health problems over time, shy bodies that hide behind loose garments, that cannot withstand sustained physical effort, scattered, disordered bodies in gestures and movements, too energetic or too little energetic. Many of the young actors are unsure about their bodies, they do not have confidence, they do not know their potential and they try to hide it. Even beautifully structured bodies have characteristics that relate to the unique way in which their owners manifest themselves, which adapt to life conditions specific to their own biography. All these factors lead people to create a mask-body.

In order to become the best artist possible, the actor must give up his own bodily expression in order to be able to assume the corporeality of the character. This is why mask work is so important: to get to work with the neutral mask we have to let go of this mask of the body built up over years and which gives us this false sense of security. The situation must be looked at deeply and it must be understood that a civilian body, a body that corresponds to a certain life situation, limits creativity and will not be able to be sufficiently expressive on stage. For this reason, this "decontamination" or "detoxification" of bodily expressions must be resorted to, and the tool by which we propose to achieve this is the study of the neutral mask. To begin with, the actor must come to understand his body and how it works, accept it as it is, and love it. Then he must develop resistance, expressiveness, watching the performance. Only in this way will the body be a reliable instrument for the actor's creative work.

Chapter 3. The larval mask

In the second stage of mask work, we turned our attention to the larval mask. Jacques Lecoq was the first to introduce this type of mask into theatrical pedagogy. The larval masks were introduced to Lecoq by a group of actors in Basel Switzerland, and he found them extremely interesting, using them as a stepping stone from the neutral mask to the character mask. They originate in Switzerland and are fantastic appearances during the Spring Carnival

in Basel. They are white in color, simple and large, so they create a bizarre image when worn. Sculpturally, they are not well outlined and in no case can we speak of a definite character in their case.

Like the neutral mask, the larval mask has no mouth, therefore it is a mute mask. The corporeality of the larval masks is, like the structure of the mask, a simple one, composed only of beginnings of forms, of sketches, it is at the beginnings of form or expression. The neutral body studied in the first part of the semester begins to develop, to acquire new characteristics. The body is no longer neutral, but neither is it so well defined that it can represent a character. What is interesting about the larval mask is that it can work very well in both a realistic and a fantasy situation. It is an extremely versatile mask that can easily be dressed up in everyday clothes and used with different objects. Used effectively when placed in realistic situations, it can be just as expressive in a fantasy area, with characters wearing these masks appearing as beings from another world.

Mask work is important work for the development of the actor and must take into account the personality of the mask wearer. We are not against the idea of form imposed from outside, but the actor must learn to search and discover for himself, in order to acquire a working method that he will be able to apply later in the study of other characters, especially in the study of characters of composition (but not only). In addition, a personal search and a journey of self-discovery breed enthusiasm, the actor will gain confidence in his own artistic forces, his self-esteem will be strengthened. A form imposed from the outside will not be able to quickly acquire the organicity, energy and fluidity that a form born from a personal search has, so that the mask and the body become a unitary whole. The role that a coordinator must have in working with the mask, we think, must be that of a guide who intervenes extremely little in the path chosen by the actor, and when he does his intervention must be subtle and not speak of the actor's personality. What we are most interested in regarding mask features is for the actor to be able to identify the main vector of the mask, that is, the strongest feature in the architecture of a mask. This is the starting point in embodying the concept of the mask.

The larval mask urges the wearer to play. It does not know anything, everything it discovers is new to it and is happening here and now. It is a joy for it to look, to discover, to play. Its condition is that of a child who can build a world with only a simple object. The naivety with which it acts makes it special and full of life. The larval mask is a large white mask and is used during the carnival that celebrates the coming of spring. It is originally from Basel, Switzerland and was introduced to theater pedagogy by Jacques Lecoq. Larval masks are exaggerated in size, much larger than the normal size of the head. It takes us to the area of

the imaginary, the fantastic, of unearthly beings who have fallen to earth and are extremely curious about everything that happens around them.

Unlike the neutral mask, which has no memory, the larval mask has memory, but the ecstasy of an encounter or discovery causes it to immediately forget any memory it had. For it, everything happens for the first time, here and now, and this characteristic makes it very present. With the larval mask we enter the territory of joy, discoveries and play. It is always amazed and always attracted to someone or something. For this mask, time stops, nothing has a beginning and an end, it can be drawn to a piece of paper endlessly, play with it endlessly, enjoy a small discovery as if it were something exceptional, for to then return to the beginning and travel with the same joy the path already taken.

The corporeality resulting from the larval mask is built on the basis of the same coordinates of ambiguity, vagueness and indefinability. It is an unfinished body between a neutral corporeality and a well-defined *body-character* of corporeality and movement. The larval body has many of the characteristics of the character body. Due to the fact that it is built in a certain direction, that it moves in a certain way, has a rhythm determined by the larval mask, the larval body can be considered a *body-character*.

In conclusion, in this section of the thesis we presented a pedagogical approach to the concepts of neutral and larval mask, offering a complex selection of exercises and didactic activities aimed at illuminating and strengthening the two types of masks. The purpose of these activities is to facilitate the actor's path towards abandoning the civilian body and creating a body-character, towards deep identification with the mask worn.

Chapter 4. Character masks in theatrical pedagogy

The next stage of our scientific endeavor was the study of the character mask and the corporeality derived from it. The character mask also involves a voice study. A trained voice, capable of as many inflections as possible, with a wide range of tonalities is also a goal of any creative actor. A sharp mind, alive, present, able to improvise at any moment helps the actor to seek and discover new forms of expression, so as to build complex and profound characters. The tradition of using the character mask is a rich and diverse one, as it can be found in many theatrical genres from radically different cultures.

During the Renaissance, the actors of the Commedia dell'Arte used masks to play different characters. These had distinctive and thickened features sometimes going as far as the grotesque, caricaturing the physical and moral features of the respective society and thus

aiming for comic effect. The Commedia dell'Arte mask was also used for quick and easy audience identification of the character being performed.

Traditional Noh theater in Japan uses masks that represent a wide variety of realistic characters, but also gods, spirits or mythical beings. Noh theater actors use these masks to add a spiritual dimension to the characters they perform, but also for the ability and power of the mask, due to its architecture, to convey emotions. In Indonesia, in Balinese theater, there is a tradition called Topeng, which uses masks representing mythical or divine characters. These masks appear especially in performances or ritual ceremonies. The opera in Beijing, China uses various character masks, which are painstakingly crafted with extremely deep attention to detail. They usually represent specific mythological or divine characters. Mime and European religious theater of the Middle Ages used masks to represent allegorical or fantastical characters, but also to emphasize the features of the characters and to create a certain atmosphere of the performance. In African theater the mask has deep meanings, being associated most of the time with sacred rituals. Theatrical performances in this culture use masks to represent mythological characters, spirits or strange apparitions of ancestors.

Here are just a few examples from which we were able to deduce how seductive and important the character mask is to theatrical performances in such different cultures and geographies. Obviously, this theatrical tool evokes emotion and power through its presence on stage, while also being an extraordinary, adaptable and versatile tool that helps the viewer quickly recognize the character or characters on stage.

In theatrical pedagogy, the mask is often used as a means of developing corporeality, non-verbal communication, or the ability to improvise. Educators or theater people like Gordon Craig, Meyerhold, Duchartre, Constantin Mic, Louis Jouvet, Charles Dullin, Jean-Louis Barrault, Jacques Copeau, Michel Saint-Denis, Giorgio Strehler, Jackie Snow, Carlo Mazzone-Clementi, Jacques Lecoq, Giovanni Poli, Dario Fo, Carlo Boso, Antonio Fava, Keith Johnstone, Sears A. Eldredge, John Wright, John Rudlin, Olly Crick, Barry Grantham or John Rudlin placed the mask in a basic position of their pedagogical or theatrical systems. The fact that this theatrical tool is still present in so many different theatrical genres, even today, demonstrates its adaptability, but also its capacity for expression and the powerful impact it has on the actor's art.

The character mask is a versatile theatrical tool, which has the ability to transform its architectural characteristics according to various elements. The way it is used can change or even transform the expression of the mask. A well-constructed character mask architecturally, coloristically or from the point of view of texture, will never contain a single expression, it has

the ability to reveal to us the various facets of the character. Some elements that can influence the expression of the character mask would be: the design and shape of the mask - these two elements deeply influence the expressiveness of the mask in discovering elements of subtlety, in the case of realistic character masks, or an exaggeration of features, in the case of stylized character masks, emphasizing the actor's ability to search for a bodily expression capable of conveying the identity of his character.

Another important aspect is represented by the actor's movements and expressiveness. Working with the mask is done in two directions. The actor works with the mask, but the mask also works with the actor. The ability of the actor to build a character starting from the mask can influence its expressiveness. The actor's personality, the way he perceives the character expressed by the mask, the corporeality built following the study of that mask, can change the expression of the character mask and the way it is perceived from the outside. From our experience, we could say that if two actors work with the same character mask, on the same theme, the result will be totally different, and the mask will change its expressiveness. We must be aware of our ability to "interpret" a character mask and our power to influence its expressiveness. A simple exercise that the actor can do in the mirror with the character mask demonstrates its ability to change its expression just by a different positioning of the head.

When working with an already elaborate mask, which is not constructed by him, the actor must learn to decipher all the features from which a mask is constructed, and any small detail can have a major influence in the construction of the character. His image must be an overall one, but at the same time, the actor must be focused even on the tiniest detail of the mask. The mask sums up a multitude of information that we must read, understand, deepen, so that we can then embody and vocalize it. As pedagogues, we are most interested in the actor having a particular and personal way of deciphering the mask they are studying and working with. We intervene very little in this process and only when the actor is obviously on the wrong track. The dialogue between the coordinator and the actor seems essential in the process of deciphering the character mask.

In order for bodily expressiveness to reflect in the most correct and unified way the architectural characteristics of the character mask, the study of body positions and the study of gestures must be as thorough as possible. They are essential elements in the communication between the characters on stage and between the characters and the audience. The smallest gesture is a sign that must convey something and must be constructed in such a way that that gesture is recognizable to everyone. Thus, the actor working with the character mask is put in a position to study his body, movements and gestures. Each gesture specific to the character

must have the appropriate expressiveness, rhythm, intensity and energy specific to the built character and the stage situation in which he is. Any deviation from this goal will produce a breakdown in communication between the actors and the audience. Nothing should be left to chance. Everything depends on a mathematics of construction, of gesture, of movement.

From a pedagogical point of view, we felt that the actor required a series of preparatory exercises before starting the actual work with the character mask. The purpose of these exercises is to make the actor perfectly aware of his body and its capabilities to move in a certain space or rhythm. The development of movement skills will result in absolute control over one's own body, a goal of primary importance in mask work. Working with the character mask requires absolute concentration during the exercises.

As for the warm-up, the theater employing character masks being a physical theater, it requires as correct and complete a warm-up as possible to avoid injuries. At the same time, the warm-up must also aim at developing elasticity, expressiveness and availability of the actor's body to move as freely and easily as possible. At the same time, the body warm-up must be for the actor an awakening of the senses, an exploration and a knowledge of the body. To begin with, we recommended that the warm-up should be done in a group and led by the coordinator. Afterwards, the body warm-up can be done individually, from the moment each actor knows his body, his needs and the way they react to certain movements. Bodies are different, they react differently, so every actor should end up with a set of warm-up exercises specific to their body and its functionality. It is also useful to try several types of body warm-ups, thus giving the actor the chance to discover in as many ways as possible the ability of his body to adapt to certain movements. We also recommended the collaboration with the coordinators of stage speech, acrobatics, dance, ballet, singing, instrument during the entire semester of study with the mask. A theoretical training from the coordinators of Theater History and Directorial Doctrines would also be welcome.

A good technical training will attract confidence, adaptability, ease in artistic work, the possibility of professional development. Accordingly, attention will be paid to the development of acting technique. This can be done daily, in the training at the beginning of the course, introducing towards the end of the body warm-up exercises that develop different vocal and physical techniques.

Finally, we discussed in this section of the thesis the concept of counter-mask. This is used to support character mask construction and completion. With it, the character acquires depth, nuances and complexity, and the image and behavior of a character move away from a simplistic characterization. The character mask must be looked at and discovered both from

the front and from behind, from its hidden side. We must discover not only the evidence that is contained in the image and its architectural construction, but also what lies behind it, what it hides and does not want to reveal itself. No human being can be described as "good" or "bad", such a characterization would be poor, unrealistic and superficial. The principle of the appearance of the scenic vital energy that is born from two opposite vectors is based on reality, what life offers us: opposite tendencies in the same being, so inner conflicts.

Chapter 5. Commedia dell'Arte. History and schools. Short definitions of Commedia dell'Arte

We began our scientific journey in this section by stating that it is important to establish clear boundaries in defining this theatrical genre, because the different names give us information on the characteristics of what will later be called Commedia dell'Arte. On the other hand, these numerous denominations of the Commedia dell'Arte can also reveal an evolution of the genre, the first terms being quite restrictive and specific, then becoming much more comprehensive and attractive to the public. Only if we analyze the name Commedia degli zanni do we notice a framing of the show in which the action unfolds around the Zanni character, while Italian Commedia is a broader name that is composed of several spectacular elements and represents ideas that are closely related to the specifics of the Italian people.

The professional status of the comedy actor is not based only on a self-title or commercialization of the show, but also on recognition and protection from the authorities. The troupes were in close contact with the authorities for obtaining playing spaces, for drawing up contracts or logistical help, and the actors had the duty to communicate the subject of the show they were going to present, which could be accepted or refused by the authorities of a city. In addition to his artistic qualities, the Commedia dell'Arte actor had to have the qualities of a negotiator or impresario, in order to be able to sell his artistic product as advantageously as possible for his troupe, but also to face the competition.

The possibility and ability to improvise has always belonged to the actor, but only with the Commedia dell'Arte did improvisation gain maximum importance and priority over other skills. The actor's desire to break the rules in an extremely inventive era and open to everything new, made him choose this path to express himself, or maybe it was just the result of an immense desire for freedom.

A strong source of inspiration for the birth of the Commedia dell'Arte show is also the market, an extremely lively and colorful entity in that era, where different mimes, jugglers, charlatans or vaulters were active who, although they lived on the outskirts of the cities and

they were regarded as pariahs of society, they will form the nucleus from which different amateur groups will be formed which, with the appearance of the Commedia dell'Arte, will turn into professionals. Many of their spectacular elements will later be found in the Comedy show.

Commedia dell'Arte, in order to succeed in creating such a special style, needed two extremely important characteristics: simultaneity and collectivity. Simultaneity consists in the ability of the actor in the Commedia performance to create the text and the performance at the same time. In that period there was no single artist responsible for creating the show, like the director is today. The comedy show was a collective creation. All the actors had to participate in the creation of the show to the same extent, they all had to work as hard. Commedia dell'Arte also relied on the cohesion and discipline of the troupe.

At certain moments of the performance, buffer scenes called lazzi were introduced. Over time these became independent moments, and their duration was at the discretion of the performing actor. They started from a minor action, turning into a conflict that could give rise to repetitive actions. But the lazzi also had a very pragmatic feature in the economy of a Commedia show. They were usually used when a set or costume change took longer, so that the audience would not get bored during such "dead" moments.

We concluded by saying that in a broader sense, theater has been social since its inception. It could never be removed from social, political or cultural realities. Theater is inspired by social issues that become personal and can be subject to community meditation and debate. It brings to the stage not what the artist thinks about what happens in a situation of marginalization, poverty and abuse that he has not experienced, but the cruelest reality, outside the artist's world. Social theater is a form of interactive theater, a method of intervention that encourages participants to take a stand, defend the values and moral principles they believe in, and find solutions to problems. In a social theater performance, one must always be ready to deal with twists and turns, unexpected changes, improvisations. Improvisation seems to be the arc of the circle over time, which connects the two theatrical genres - social theater and Commedia dell'Arte.

Chapter 6. Preparatory exercises for Commedia dell'arte and its fixed characters

Commedia dell'Arte, like any physical theater, involves a certain development and specific training with the ultimate goal of building an expressive body available to the demands that this form of theater implies. After the study of the neutral mask, the larval mask and the character mask, we entered the stage where the actor must render both bodily and mentally the

typologies of the Commedia dell'Arte. Unlike the character mask, the Commedia dell'Arte mask implies a stronger and fixed bodily, vocal and psychic construction, because it deals with the fixed type characterized extremely precisely by the bodily vocal and psychic qualities that derive from tradition and the type of Commedia dell'Arte mask with which the actor will work. The character mask also allows greater freedom of interpretation, a wider spectrum in which the actor can "move" and in which his personal imprint is stronger in the construction of the character.

The preparatory exercises for the Commedia dell'Arte mask aimed, in addition to the development of bodily expressiveness, to achieve a precise direction of it, valid in the case of each mask or the fixed type represented by the characters of the Commedia. Developing the actors' vocal skills was another goal of these exercises, starting from the idea that each character is characterized by a certain intensity of speech, a certain rhythm or a certain vocal characteristic. The voice, like corporeality, is closely related to the personality of the interpreted character, to his physical or mental data. The more developed the actor's vocal apparatus, the more complexly he will be able to build a character. In the Commedia dell'arte we are in the territory where "anything is possible", so that training in the development of the imagination is absolutely necessary for the actor. The rhythmicity in which a character walks or acts is another characteristic that the actor must train and develop. Acrobatics, jumps, fights or stunts are part of the world of comedy characters. Specific training for these forms of expression, of physical comedy, is also essential.

Chapter 7. The characters of the Commedia dell'Arte. Masks, costumes, physicality, exercises

The head of the masked actor is perceived as one large eye. The audience will always see what the mask sees. It sees only if and when the actor performs the act of looking. Otherwise, it becomes a blind mask, causing the visible and invisible to dissipate. The mask play is always looking for confirmation, always asking for an explanation. Whatever takes place or happens, is truly accomplished, but it is never enough. Everything has to be verified, explained, told based on what we know or what we have seen. This desideratum takes place by observing the facts and details one by one, which leads to a rhythmic construction of the Commedia dell'Arte performance. Thus, the mask becomes a magnet for the public. Spectators will look in the direction the mask is looking and see what the mask sees. Each mask, alone or together with others, is loaded with a cultural history. It carries forward the folk tradition contained in various layers that are sometimes unknown to us, but nevertheless recognizable

to the public. Spectators intuit beforehand what a mask will do. They will appreciate both confirmation and innovation, as long as the novelty does not contradict what we already know about the particular mask.

The masked actor is different from himself. He must not confuse the act of masking with his private and intimate life. But even when he uses themes from real and private life, the masking becomes spectacular, for the mask creates another dimension to the actor. The performance of the masked actor must be subject to dynamism: of voice, gesture, movement, speech, language, it is a spatial performance. The movement of the actor must be as free as possible, and then the space will change and be full of meanings born from his movements. The masked actor does not create something abstract, but rather exaggerates reality while still maintaining a boundary between the recognizable and the compressed.

Mask play involves a combination of the human and artistic particularities of the performer and the universal archetypes of the mask. Thus, the actor achieves a unique and personal creation, participating in a continuity of tradition. Anyone who wears a mask must take into account certain rules for its use. Only when these rules are strictly followed is the mask expressive, and only then does it help the actor to express himself.

To begin with, the Commedia mask had two functions: firstly, it had to make the character being played immediately recognizable. The second effect of the Commedia dell'Arte mask was that of surprise, of shock. The audience had to be immediately interested and drawn into the story. In the Middle Ages the mask was a common object in everyday life and on certain holidays. In order to distinguish themselves from the common form of the mask used until then, the actors of the Commedia dell'Arte had to innovate, to surprise, without canceling the feeling of familiarity. The shape or cut of the mask had to follow some strict rules. First, it had to preserve anatomical proportions: although the caricature of the mask was very strong, it strictly followed the anatomy of the human face.

With its expression always remaining unchanged, the face mask is one of the means by which the identity of the various types was ensured and made recognizable. In the Commedia dell'Arte, the mask arose not from a direct transfer from classical theater, but from Carnival customs. The mask sometimes served to hide the actor playing, but in the dell'Arte performances it completely changed its function, having the role of recognizing the character, as a fixed type, always equal to itself, with the same clothes, the same movements, the same fundamental psychology, whether it was played by the same actor or not.

The dell'Arte performance is the triumph of the mask that embodies a single character. The actor's name gets confused with the character's and vice versa. The name mask also extends

to the characters of the Amorites, who did not wear an actual mask, broadening its notion and thus entering a psychological area. The Masca dell'Arte, the fixed type, does not appear to be a troublesome pattern, but rather an ingenious technical device that allowed for freer play. The character being recognizable from the moment he appeared on stage, once the broad lines of the role were indicated, the actor had the freedom and opportunity to embroider at will, without compromising the clarity of the character or the performance. The masks of the characters were made of leather, with the features grotesquely thickened, so that the defects of each character represented were reflected in enormous deformities, fixed forever. The mask made facial expression impossible and thus the actor was forced to build his performance on body movements. Gestures, movements were amplified, the performance took on another dimension, a deeply physical one. The actor's whole being came to life.

Conclusions

In the context of the physical theater practiced in the performance with masks, we tried in this thesis to develop a new approach to the theatrical character through the perspective of the body-character. We found this perspective to give the actor a new foothold, precise and stable, in approaching a role, regardless of the aesthetics of the performance or performance. The body-character, as it was defined, theorized and exemplified throughout the thesis, represents a sum of characteristics that the actor must discover and assimilate on a physical level, so as to succeed in defining the character at the level of bodily expressiveness defined by gesture, movement and body construction.

We concluded from the theoretical and practical approach taken that any characteristic, no matter how minor, added to the neutral body, used as a zero point in the construction of a character, will provide uniqueness and direct the approach of creating a character in a precise and original direction. Most of the time, the path of development in the art of acting, during the study dedicated to mask play and the development of bodily expressiveness in a character body is amazing. The actor can use the character's body as a photograph or mental image with landmark image status, to which he will return whenever he needs to during rehearsals and later performances. The *body-character* is the fixed point. In conclusion, we stated that the actor is in a territory clearly defined by the characteristics of the character's body, and the margin of error is reduced when the benchmarks are well established and concrete. He will be able, thanks to the body of the character and its characteristics, to develop a whole mechanism by which his character moves, gestures or communicates.

As a basic tool in the construction of the body-character we used the neutral, larval, character and Commedia dell'Arte mask, each of them, due to its characteristics, defining the body-character. Their chaining was based on the idea of an accumulation of bodily expressions that have as their finality the character body. We affirmed during the course of the paper that the mask, first of all, helps to develop non-verbal communication ability, having the body as the main tool of expression. Thus, the actor finds himself in a position to redefine his entire relationship with his body and corporeality, and the definition of the character he is working on will go beyond the use of simplistic means of expression and will acquire an involvement of the whole body. In conclusion, the actor will have a much wider range of means of expression, and the character played will be fully capable.

Regarding the practical and pedagogical part of our scientific approach, the improvisation exercises specific to each mask and implicitly to each character body were aimed at discovering the ways in which the character body relates to different stage situations. We concluded here that during an improvisation the actor can discover different reports towards certain events, partners or towards his own character, because the mask creates that distance that the actor needs to form an overall image of the character. Through improvisation, the actor tests the character and character body, discovers its limits and needs and integrates into a wider context composed of actor-character-situation-partner.

The present thesis also had a self-declared didactic purpose, the search methods described and proposed being able to become a working system to help the actor to start neutrally, alive, always from scratch in each new project. The actor who is master of the method will be able to use the working principles of the discovery of the character body even if he removes from the work the use of the mask as an object, taking inspiration from a real model, from the typologies of the street, like the actors of the Commedia dell'Arte.

We tried to offer throughout the thesis not only a historical-theoretical look at the various masks and their importance, but also a pedagogical approach, deeply anchored in the practical dimension, intended to provide a guide, a set of guidelines, to young acting students. This practical dimension mostly represents the personal contribution of the thesis author.

Key words: mask, character, Commedia dell'Arte, corporeality, actor.