

Otaru University of Commerce  
MASKS, A THEATRICAL TRADITION  
IN THE COMMEDIA DELL'ARTE

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The use of the mask establishes that this is authentic theatre and no pedestrian reproduction of true life. The mask helps to create a surrealistic style, to facilitate the journey into fantasy, canceling the reality of the present for the benefit of a more vast reality.

Nonus de Panopolis  
fifth century BC

It is the purpose of this paper to examine briefly the essence of the fanciful masks of the commedia dell'arte of Renaissance Italy, and their importance to dramatic literature.<sup>1</sup> Masks in modern theatre have long carried the stigma of a curious avant' garde trip to a fantasy world. While performing across Europe and other parts of the world from 1550 to 1750, frequently on improvised stages and with no dramatic texts as such, masked commedia troupes attracted vast audiences composed of all social classes. Centuries passed. Suddenly, in the 1910's, avant' garde directors like Vsevolod Meyerhold, Nikolai Evreinov, Max Reinhardt, Jacques Copeau and Gorgon Craig, discovered anew the comic whimsy of the commedia dell'arte. However, its primary appeal to the avant' garde directors was the attraction of the commedia to all social classes.

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<sup>1</sup> My appreciation is extended to Michael Carr for advice and criticism in developing this paper.

Eventually this appeal spread to other art forms in the twentieth century where it became a studied basis for works by Stravinsky, Cocteau, Picasso and other artists outside the world of theatre.

The actual origins of the commedia are obscure. Like the Noh theatre of Japan, performance techniques developed by the commedia actors were passed down through generations of troupes, many of these familial, and retained as professional secrets. Unlike the Noh, treatises on the commedia, such as those recorded by the great Zeami, do not exist. Much original commedia scholarship is not historically accurate; its basis is literary, documentary and iconographic records. Currently, doubts have been raised in academic circles by Laura Richards and Kenneth Richards who have translated most of the extant key source documents, even to the “popular” nature accorded the commedia. The difficulty in studying this art form arises from the fact that it is primarily an oral tradition, certainly not the creation of writers nor one that was accurately recorded by historians or scholars. Studies that appeared in later decades felt the impress of their authors.

In the 1960s, when the commedia was once again revived by the “new theatre,” most of the knowledge about this tradition came from books written by practitioners and scholars of the 1900’s, the avant’ garde corps. These studies are some of the most detailed works created on any one school of acting.<sup>2</sup>

The literal notion of mask offers a challenge to language. It

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<sup>2</sup> See Winifred Smith, *The Commedia dell’Arte* (New York, 1912), Constant Mic, *The Commedia dell’Arte* (Petrograd, 1914), Pierre L.Duchartre, *The Italian Comedy* (New York, 1966), Allardyce Nicoll, *Masks, Mimes, and Miracles* (London, 1931).

radically alters the face, that part of the body which the audience relies upon most for understanding. Because of the fixed nature of commedia masks, players were also governed by certain conventions, like gestures and stances, which were associated specifically with each role. Since the individuality and expressive emotions of the actors' faces were concealed by exaggerated disguise, emotion was not shown in the face but in gestures which were over-emphasized to ensure lucid communication. The very stylized nature of the commedia is supported by the fact that all of the major characters, with the exception of the Lovers, wore identifying face masks which look, to the modern eye, rather grotesque. These masks survive today in the Venice Carnevale and other celebrations.

The stock characters of the commedia, the Masks of the miserly father, the put-upon servant, the pedantic scholar, thrive in popular comedy. Moliere relied on them. Later, modern playwrights like George Bernard Shaw and Sean O'Casey also engaged these characters. One of the greatest sources of comedy's energy rests in the delight stock characters have always held for audiences. Television situation comedies are created around them. The codified blend of formalism and spontaneity in the Italian theatre lives on, so long as popular comedians continue to ply the old commedic formula to create laughter.

In common with the tradition itself, it is problematic to ascertain the source and purpose for the creation of masks in the Italian genre. Some anthropologists and scholars offer the theory that masks, used as a covering to disguise or ornament the face, return to ancient classical origins<sup>3</sup> when actors wore masks that not only covered the face, but

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<sup>3</sup> John Rudlin, in *Commedia dell'Arte, An Actor's Handbook*, makes a case for the primordial use of masks by referring to paintings on the walls of caves

completely engulfed the head and rested on the shoulders. Such massive creations met the requirements of huge Greek and Roman theatres where the actors' faces were otherwise indistinct to an audience. Modern actors discovered disadvantages to using full headmasks outside the ancient amphitheaters. These either muffle the voices or act as echo chambers, both of which affect the audience unpleasantly. Further, covering the entire head in this fashion gives the semblance of an inanimate object atop a moving body. Like modern theorists, maskmaker Donato Sartori and architect Paola Piizzi see the mask as a complex element belonging to the historical world of social communications.

Rudlin and other scholars indicate that the impulse to play with masks in order to change a person's aspect, is not simply child's play. Drawings on the walls of ancient caves depict hunters in various forms of facial disguise. Beyond this playing are various aspects which reflect the social force of the mask advancing past an historical and cultural reflection toward new notions of aesthetics, psychology and sociology. Because the mask functions on two different levels, both as a textual metaphor and as a stage device, it is essential to dramatic literature and to theatrical practise alike.

In the theaters of Renaissance Italy, the masks offered escapist fantasy to the diverse populace in attendance. The country had been politically divided for a long time. Some Italian states had endured

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in the Pyrenees. One of these depicts a man in the disguise of a goat. He wears a mask with horns and beard, and wears a goat's skin over his back. Rudlin says that: "The rite of dressing up in animal skins is linked to the culture of almost every race on earth." This statement becomes more meaningful when it is understood that the original commedia masks, as well as later reproductions, were molded of leather.

invasions from other countries. Each state spoke in varying dialects. Poverty was rampant. Life was depressing. Consequently it was reassuring to know that, on stage at least, servants in fifteenth century Italy would not revolt against the tyranny of masters.

It was to please their audiences that Italian performers revived the ancient use of facemasks to heighten dramatic effects, and developed the half masks so long associated with the *commedia dell'arte*. There were different masks for comic and serio-comic actors, but both kinds were grotesque. They emphasized an ugly wart, an outsized nose, bulging eyes, a fantastic skin color, and an open mouth. Generally, the more comic the role, the greater extent of the face was covered. The masks left the mouth free concealing only the nose or part of the cheeks, or both. Masks of this nature give freedom to the voice, a necessity in the Italian theatre where dialogue, because it was rarely textualized, was of prime importance.

Traditionally the masks were fashioned of leather by artisans, and pocked like the surface of a basketball or the surrealistic dots of a Cezanne painting. Unlike the masks of the Chinese and Japanese theatres, they expressed no emotion, creating instead the illusion of a character type, a *persona*. The etymology of the word persona derives, appropriately, from the Latin:

Persona, I A mask: hence II, The person, part or character played by an actor. III The part or character sustained by anyone in the world: also a person who sustains a character.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> *The Young Scholar's Latin-English Dictionary*, London, 1863.

Historically the mask referred to a union of character role and face covering. In fact, in medieval Italy a man in face mask lost certain rights (like the right to bear arms) during the carnival season because he was thought to have lost his own identity by assuming another persona, for whose actions he could not be held responsible.<sup>5</sup> In other words the individual's personality vanished with the replacement of a type, the persona of the Mask assumed. Later in the 1700s, playwrights like Carlo Goldoni found the use of masks on stage limiting because the mask erases individuality and shows only a presence as a mask.<sup>6</sup> Goldoni alone, because of his immense popularity as a playwright, did much to bring on the demise of masking in the 17th century.

In the *commedia dell'arte* masked figures<sup>7</sup> mingled on stage with actors whose faces were open to view, setting up a contradictory tension between illusion and reality that was the focus of *commedia* performance. The unmasked faces in performance established the reality of Italian life, or what was supposed to be reality, a world in which masters possessed the right to tyrannize their servants. The masks, in opposition and despite their appearance of fantasy, set up an illusion of reality. In this

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5 Women in this era did not wear masks because it was generally assumed they had no identity beyond a bonding with a patriarchal figure.

6 Rudlin, *Commedia*, p.34

7 Originally there were only five masked character types (*personas*) in the *commedia dell'arte*. These included

1. The Zanni, two servants, one of whom was clever. The other was his stupid foil;
2. Two old men, one a father and one an academe. Both were pompous, miserly, amorous or avaricious, as the plot demanded
3. The military captain, a strutting braggart who was, in actuality, a coward;
4. On occasion, in the early *commedia*, minor masks were created, but only if the plot demanded.

case the servants were revealed to have intellects superior to those of the upper class. Carl Jung would have us ask which in truth was reality, the masks or the unmaskings (the uncovered face)? While the masks formed a unity of their own, they were not far removed from the others on stage who wore no masks. In other words, the effect of a commedia performance depended on the juxtaposition of the dual sets of dramatic figures.

Masks are used today in improvisation because they enlarge the character. Like commedia masks, they transform the actors, actually becoming the characters and doing the talking. It is plausible to don a mask and *pretend* to be someone else. In general terms, this is masking. But in the case of commedia actors, the technique has to do with *not* acting and letting the *mask* work.

Jacques Lecoq is a world master in the art of masking and improvisation. Lecoq, renowned mime and teacher, trains students according to the tenets of the commedia dell'arte. They learn to use five different kinds of masks in progressive stages. These are the neutral, the expressive, the larval, the commedia and the clown mask. His early mask experiments were with papier-mache'. While poetic in appearance, they were shortlived. Due to the perspiration of the actors, they almost dissolved by the end of a performance. Some actors refused to play with these masks preferring instead to make up their faces cosmetically. However such a mask lost the psychological power of a face-mask.<sup>8</sup>

In Lecoq's training the neutral mask is basic and enables the uninitiated to comprehend the behavior of other masks around him. (It is

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<sup>8</sup> Jacques Lecoq, "Acting the Mask," trans. Virginia Scott, from a monograph from the Classics in Context Festival, 1990, COMMEDIA DELL'ARTE & THE COMIC SPIRIT, Louisville, Kentucky pp.31-34.

important to understand that a mask is more than the covering placed over the face. It encompasses the actual being of the actor's creation.) The neutral mask is one without specific expression or characterization. The features are regular, simple, calm. The first time a neutral mask is donned, it feels stifling and constricting. Then, by degrees, the actor experiences taking risks never before dared. Under the mask, a new kind of freedom is born which is less confining than when the face remains uncovered. Deprived of facial movement and dialogue, the player begins to use his body, which is the best expression of silence. When the neutral mask is assumed it hides the individual, actually stripping that person naked. The real-life role vanishes, meaningless. The self is drained and a new essence takes over, so obviously body movement becomes more acute. Since the psychological play of eyes is impossible, it is replaced with head movements. Gestures are larger and slow. Though the initial reaction to the neutral mask is physically stifling, finally the actor figuratively breathes freer than ever on stage.

The neutral mask is a common leveler of men and women. While there are different masks for male and female, they become one being in the unity of playing, a being in which all recognize themselves. This mask goes nowhere, but it leads. It is the source of gravity and dynamics of all things on stage. The actor who plays a mask is commanded by the object until, not only the face, but the entire body becomes modified. The individual becomes like a blank page. Everything is erased so the player can begin at the source. Even the tone of voice is controlled by the mask. Wearing the neutral mask is an unlearning experience which reveals a depth of acting that plumbs the core of the actor rendering that person naked of set dispositions and attitudes, now ready to play any character role other than himself.



Larval and expressive masks are similar. Their difference lies in the extent to which they establish the characters' objectives. Larval masks are simple renditions of the human features. The nose has the greatest importance and its presence is commanding. The Swiss acting company called *Mummenschanz* and the cartoon character *Stew* wear larval masks. These are unfinished faces with prominent noses which permit large, elementary acting.

Expressive masks are more elaborate representing fixed psychological types of one dimension rather like Pirandello's Six Characters. Wearing these masks forces the body to respond to its own stimulus by finding a counter-mask within. For example, an actor wears a mask which portrays a fool, like Arrlechino (Harlequin). All the body movements and gestures convey this mask. Yet at the same time the actor can also play the opposite and reveal an intelligent creature behind the fool's mask. Now the actor succeeds in creating another character richer than the first, who suffers inner conflict because of looking like a fool, but reveals a self that is other. In life one often searches a face (reads a face) for its other face in order to truly know that person and that person's role. All masks function in this manner with the exception of the neutral mask which has no counter-mask.

The half-masks are speaking masks which require the actor to discover the voice, the language and the acting style of the mask, in other words, the stereotype the mask represents. The essence of the commedia dell'arte lies in these masks. Pantalone, the old, wealthy and original Merchant of Venice, epitomizes the half-mask. He is the condensation of many characters. At the same time he is miser and lover, invalid and healthy, old and young. When a young girl gazes amorously at him through lowered lashes, he dances in response. When his daughter

wants his money, he lies on a deathbed. These masks manifest themselves in a kind of physicality that is an enlargement of life.

The smallest mask in the world is the clown nose. It expands and distorts the natural nose making the face appear open and round, the eyes alight with innocence. It is an obvious artifice. Although the nose looks stupid, the clown is delighted to wear it, therefore the audience deduces that the clown is delighted to appear stupid. The round red sham is symbolic by its association with the art of clowning, which evokes laughter. Because the red proboscis induces no fear, children naturally love it. There is something of the buffoon in everyone, although society discourages such exhibition although permits it on stage. Popular songs announce, "All the world loves a clown", and "Bring on the clowns"

Early twentieth century popular entertainment bears a striking similarity to commedia particularly in the images of great comedians like Charlie Chaplin, W.C. Fields, the Marx Brothers, Laurel and Hardy, Abbott and Costello, Bert Lahr and Jack Benny, who identify with particular Masks<sup>9</sup> (character types) of the commedia dell'arte. Charlie Chaplin *became* the comic character of the tramp only after he had assumed the Mask of the tramp persona. In his autobiography, Chaplin writes:

I had no idea of the character. But the moment I was dressed, the clothes and the make-up (Chaplin's Mask)<sup>10</sup> made me feel the

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9 When written with the capital letter, Mask refers to the persona or character type; when written with a small letter, as mask, the word refers to the physical face covering.

10 Parentheses, the author's.

person he was. I began to know him, and by the time I walked onto the stage he was fully born.

A Mask is like a leather glove or a pair of leather shoes. Only after being worn does it assume the configurations of the wearer and become a comfortable fit, like a second skin. In the same fashion a Mask assumes the identity of the wearer until the two become transformed into one.

Many decades after Goldoni's death knell of face-masks in the 1700s, a modern, established sculptor named Amleto Sartori, was searching for a new mode of expression, one free from the yoke of fascism. After a discussion with Lecoq about masks, he attempted to reconstruct a face-mask following techniques of the sculptor/artisan. The year was 1948. The studio was in Padua. The result was inadequate. Later Lecoq founded the School of the Piccolo Teatro in Milan with Giorgio Strehler, famed commedia director and teacher. Here it was that Strehler added his creative ideas about masks in the theatre to those of Lecoq. Sartori was excited by the challenge of fashioning a sculpture that was to be more than lifelike, rather part of an active, living performer instead of the non-lifelike statues he formerly created. His first attempts in papiermache' proved unstable and delicate, falling victim on stage to performers' perspiration (Acting is a test of physical endurance.), so he turned to wood.

Wood has always been used for the masks of Noh, the Japanese theatre form that predates the commedia dell'arte. But masks are not a vital part of the actor in Noh as they are in commedia. In Noh the masks simply suggest a character as a ritualistic object rather than become an organic part of the actor. While the Noh mask is the soul of

the performer in theatrical tradition, the mask barely touches the skin of the actor, nor does the actor imbue this mask with life.<sup>11</sup> Yet, without the mask, Noh actors believe a performance is not touched by the beneficence of the gods. The Noh artist studies his mask at length before each performance, first to recognize a divine presence, second to make himself one with the mask in order to bring it to life.

“Komote” is a unique Noh mask depicting a young woman whose features are placid. However, when the actor wearing the mask tilts his head, a smile can dissolve to tears. It is this wooden mask which is closest in spirit to the neutral masks of Lecoq.<sup>12</sup> Because of their careful handcrafting by dwindling generations of master artisans, old Noh masks are valued today over modern ones.

Modern stage lighting allowed Sartori to utilize current technology for his artistically sculptured masks. He learned to use light effectively. His specialty was to pound leather onto a wooden form with a horn hammer. The effect is the creation of a pointilism that diffuses the surrounding light as it deflects light from above. Other masks of smooth leather lose their effectiveness on stage because the harsh lights reflect a glare off them. The pounded leather surface of Sartori’s masks are too subtle to be seen by the audience as tiny pounded dots, but the overall

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11 See Donald Keene, *No: The Classical Theatre of Japan* (Tokyo, Kodansha International, 1966) pp.70-71; Ernest Fenollosa and Ezra Pound, “Noh” or *Accomplishment* (New York, Knopf, 1917) p.53; “Actors and acting,” *The Muses at Work*, ed. Carl Roebuck (Cambridge, Massachusetts, MIT Press, 1969) p.260; and Susan Harris Smith, *Masks at Work* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, California, University of California Press, Ltd., 1984) p.142. There are other sources as well as these.

12 W. Tom Wheatley, “Mask Magic at the Centro Maschere,” monograph from *COMMEDIA DELL’ARTE & THE COMIC SPIRIT*, 1990 Classics in Context Festival, Louisville, Kentucky, p.37.

effect under stage lights is stunning. Sartori's mask evolved through many changes as the creation of his masks developed over the years.<sup>13</sup>

Masks exist in every culture which are very decorative hung on a wall, but they do not act. Theatre masks find their meaning in movement. It is the task of the actor to bring the mask to life and to reveal to the audience the mystic bond between masks and life. The mask is extraordinary because it provides the actor an aesthetic and intellectual scope other stage devices cannot provide. Because it simultaneously hides and reveals the face, the most vulnerable part of the human body, the mask has existed for centuries as the prime means of expressing social, moral and aesthetic values. The purpose of the mask, as conceived by artists of the *commedia dell'arte*, is to free the creative spirit, revealing an infinite diversity of character development.

On the nonverbal stage, the meaning of performance is totally dependent upon the face covering and its movement. Because it is supportive in nature, the mask immediately informs a character or an idea. The success of a guise rests in its simplicity, that is, its absolute

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13 Sartori's mask-making process is involved and time consuming. First a plaster mold of a mask is formed. The inside must fit the face of the actor for whom it is fashioned. Then an exact wooden replica of the mask is created so the artist can fashion the leather mask on it. The use of leather, which was used to fashion the original masks of the *commedia*, is the secret of Sartori's success. The actual process involves endless pounding with special hammers until the leather fits the wooden mold snugly. It is impossible to pound directly on the plaster, hence the wooden form. The finished creation is a sharply delineated, finely sculpted mask.

Years have passed since Sartori created his first successful, working mask. Later he created masks for other theatrical genres as his mask-making reputation spread. Some of his regular clientele included traditional theatres in Japan and Chinese opera companies. He became a modern legend. When Sartori died in 1962 his son, Donato, expanded on the family vocation with the same commitment, dedication, craftsmanship and talent.

rigidity. Although the use of masking as a popular stage technique has diminished, the contemporary audience, fortified with historical and cultural knowledge, has an understanding of the tradition. The Japanese Noh and ancient Greek theatre coverings are somewhat familiar to moderns. Disguises donned for Halloween, Mardi Gras, Carnivale, even social masks like those of Richard Nixon and O J Simpson, assume a naturalistic dramatic form. While its use on stage no longer excites audiences, the mode of masks and masking is undeniably fixed in dramatic literary presentation.

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