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A critical reflection on the use of masks in our production of Dylan Thomas' *Under Milk Wood.*

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> [The Mask] 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 to be looked upon merely as a curiosity, for its existence is vital to the art of the theatre. [1]

The theatre has long entertained a remarkable relationship with the mask. Throughout the ages, the medium has endured periods of immense popularity and prestige but also times where it has significantly fallen out of favour. However, the mask's enduring longevity as a theatrical tool is partially due to the malleability of both its purpose and status. The mask is essentially transformational both of its own function and of the actors who use it .The effects it creates can be manipulated depending on the different ideological, political and effectual concerns of the user, playwright or practitioner. The medium's pliable versatility means it can be transcendental, tragic, mimetic or simply comedic like the buffoonery of the sixteenth century Italian Pierrot[2].

In our production of *Under Milk Wood* we created the "Playground" masked scene through a series of improvisational workshops. Our work in its conception initially bore a tenuous connection to the trope of the Commedia dell' arte, a theatre popular in the Italian Renaissance that incorporated the use of masks and "fixed" characters whose performance typically centered around a scenario rather than a script.[3] Through experimentation we moved away from improvisation and devised a scene that evolved as we were awoken to the power of the mask and its effect on the performing body.

The use of the mask in theatrical performance has at times been considered primitive in comparison to the so called beauty of verisimilitude and realism. For example, this was seen particularly in the negative attitudes of Diderot and French neo-classical theatre towards the mask[4] However, the mask, although unrealistic in its appearance is not necessarily inferior in its ability to communicate realistic emotion. The mask arguably does not prove a barrier to the artistic 'truth'[5] in performance that Stanislavski delineates as key to successful communication of emotion:

> Everything which happens on stage must be convincing to the actor himself, to his associates and to the spectators. It must inspire belief in the possibility, in real life, of emotions analogous to those being experienced on stage by the actor. Each and every

[1] Gordon Craig, 'A Note on Masks', *Craig on Theatre,* ed. by J.Michael Walton (London: Methuen, 1999), p.20.
[2] Robert F. Storey, *Pierrot*: *A Critical History of a Mask*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978), p.3.
[3] Storey, *Pierrot: A Critical History of a Mask,* p.4.
[4] David Wiles, *Mask and Performance in Greek Tragedy: From Ancient Festival to Modern Experimentation*, (Cambridge University Press, 2007), p.73.
[5] Konstantin Stanislavsky, *An Actor's Handbook: An Alphabetical Arrangement of Concise Statements on Aspects of Acting*, ed. by Elizabeth Reynolds Hapgood, (New York: Taylor & Francis, 2004), p.23.

> moment must be saturated with a belief in the truthfulness of the emotion felt, and in the action carried out by the actor.[6]

In this sense the use of the mask, contrary to diminishing verisimilitude, can be described as eliciting an even greater level of believability of feelings and, therefore, 'truth'. Roger Caillois extols the importance of the mask as an 'instrument…for metamorphosis' in other societies whereby the mask holds significant cultural and religious importance. [7]

> For man, the basic aim of masking and mimicry is not deception but freedom, the liberation of the true personality. The mask confers the freedom of anonymity and of transformation on the masker.[8]

Therefore, if the mask is taken as a transformative tool, this process can be described as the ultimate level of saturation of belief; the emotions portrayed belong to the mask. The reminder of the actor's true self lost in the utter concealment of his face. [9] The mask provides a strange combination of liberation and confinement as on the one hand the wearer is confined to the character and the 'truth' of that character demonstrated on the mask, but at the same time taken out of their sense of self. This is extended in the argument of Gordon Craig who suggests,

> Drama which is not trivial, takes us *beyond reality*, and yet asks a human face, the realest of things, to express all that. It is unfair. It is this sense of being beyond reality that permeates all great art.'[10]

In our initial workshop with Kevin Tomlinson the power we found inherent in the mask came as a shock to the group. Taking it in turns we were told a little about the character of our masks without getting to see them. We were then directed with a series of prompts from Tomlinson. This provided quite extreme characterisations that were very effective in the sense that strong emotions were evoked in those watching the masked figure. This was achieved to the extent that I found it difficult to look at Luke Ashwell after his performance; his character really had repulsed me. This ability to evoke response from the audience was ultimately to do with the increased physicality that the masks encouraged. The actors felt they were "being" a character with the whole of their bodies rather than relying on the face[11] Therefore, a level of freedom came from the slight anonymity the mask provided. It was widely agreed that we felt like we "became" a vehicle for the character and, therefore, could behave less self- consciously "as" the mask.

Masked performance often depends on Stanislavskian concepts of relaxation, concentration and observation and importance of specifics.[12] However, the absence of the subtle emotions that the face can display is something that is at odds with naturalistic methods. John Styan argues that the masking of the face 'basically…dispenses with the need to 'act', for antithetic masks juxtaposed upon one stage provide the substance of a situation

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[6] Konstantin Stanislavsky, *An Actor Prepares,*(New York: Rotledge, 1989; repr 2003) p.142,
[7] Roger Caillois, ,*Man, Play, and Games,* trans. by Meyer Barash (Chicago, University of Illinois Press, 2001), p.87.
[8] Roger Caillois, *Man, Play, and Games* ,in, *Masks in Modern Drama,* Susan Valeria Harris Smith, (California:University of California Press, 1984), p.2.
[9] Susan Valeria Harris Smith, *Masks in Modern Drama*, (California: Univeristy of California Press, 1984), p.2.
[10] Craig, 'A Note on Masks',), p.21.
[11] Sorcha Maria Kiernan, *Logbook*, (2010), pp.26 – 27.
[12] Drake Hugo, *The Stanislavskian Technique of Acting,* <www.associatedcontent.com/article/1355891/the_stanislavskian_technique_of acting.> [accessed 26 January 2010]

and the plan for a play.'[13] The face, after all, is one of the most important tools in the naturalistic school of acting. There is much emphasis on the eyes as crucial to physical expression of a role, Stanislavski stating that it is only after 'you have made as much use as you can of the subtle means of expression of your eyes and face'[14] that you can go on to introduce gesture and voice.

Nevertheless, for a character or emotion to be construed as realistic, it is not solely achieved by articulations of facial gesture. Styan's comment oversimplifies the complex nature of the mask in performance and the effort needed to bring a piece of art to life. The innate, aesthetic quality of the mask does not make the actor redundant; in fact it positively draws attention to the actor's ability to communicate emotion, character and story to the audience. This is supported by Meyerhold's argument that 'The mask heightens the audience awareness of any awkward or unnatural gestures.'[15] The mask involves a two fold process in terms of its life as a piece of art and its presentation by the actor. W.B. Yeats on his work on Japanese plays supports this idea,

> A mask never seems but a dirty face, and no matter how close you get it is yet a work of art; nor shall we lose by staying the movement of the features, for deep feeling is expressed by the whole body. In poetical painting and in sculpture the face seems nobler for lacking curiosity, alert attention, all that we sum up under the famous word of the realists 'vitality'.[16]

The body is therefore esteemed as at least equally important as the face in the performance conversation between actor and audience. We discovered this for ourselves in our workshop with Tomlinson. Covering the face encouraged us to act more fully. This process of using a mask to fully utilise the body as an acting tool was capitalized on by Jacques Lecoq in his use of the 'neutral mask' as a training method. This method ensures 'attention [is] directed to the whole body of the wearer, now that the overly expressive qualities of the face are erased and rendered 'neutral''[17] . The mask offering an awareness of the body that Styan overlooks in its theatrical importance.

Leading on from our workshop we developed the "Playground" scene in *Under Milk Wood* achieving expression of feeling through physicality. We attended to the concept that the mask demands 'a physical approach to building character'[18] and therefore, used the theories of Meyerhold to achieve a stylized and exaggerated depiction of reality and power relations within our scene. The principles of 'otkaz', 'posil' and 'tochka'[19] were particularly adhered to. For example, in my role as the 'lead bully', my attack on Laura is incredibly structured. I recoil in preparatory action, keeping my head forward, before I push my head in a relatively small movement of the 'posil' into 'the victim's' personal space, then complete with a retracting 'tochka' movement. A similar pattern was adhered to for the lifting of the hand up high,[20] before I used it to mime pushing Laura's head down.[21] The lack of touch in the scene actually proved to stir more emotion in rehearsal than actual contact achieved.

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[13] John Styan, *The Elements of Drama,* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1969), p.169
[14] Constantin Stanislavski, *Creating a Role*, ed. by Hermione I.Popper, (New York: Routledge, 1989), p.113.
[15] Jonathan Pitches, *Vsevolod Meyerhold*, (London: Routledge,2003), p.85.
[16] W.B. Yeats, 'Certain Noble Plays of Japan', in *Essays and Introductions,*(London:Macmillan,1961),p.226.
[17] Simon David Murray, *Jacques Lecoq*, (London: Routledge,2003), p.73.
[18] Pitches, *Vsevolod Meyerhold*, p.58.
[19] Pitches, *Vsevolod Meyerhold*, p.57.
[20] See Appendix 1 for images.
[21] Kiernan, *Logbook,* p.58.

The deconstruction of the action into sections in a stylized manner relates to Eugenio Barba's theory of daily and extra daily technique.[22] The actions we used when breaking them down into Meyerhold's three stages of realisation demonstrate Barba's point that extra daily techniques suggest the principle of 'maximum commitment of energy for minimal result'.[23] The movement of the 'otkaz' preparatory arm lift required more effort than the actual action. Exercises and actions are used in performances that 'do not respect the habitual conditionings of the use of the body'.[24] However, the use of extra – daily technique in performance does not necessarily mean it is rendered unbelievable. This echoes the point that using a mask can evoke real life emotions 'analogous to the actor'[25] despite its use being unnaturalistic. Barba reiterates this stating, 'Extra- daily techniques… lead to information. They literally *put* the body *into form,* rendering it artificial/ artistic but *believable*'.[26]

The performing body is at the centre of any theatrical experience. The many ways it can be used, as mentioned before, can be applied to creating an experience for the audience that either transcends reality or simply mimics it to create a naturalistic effect. 'Stanislavsky's ultimate objective was an attempt – within the proscenium - to frame the illusion of reality…Meyerhold strove – in sharp contrast - to make a three dimensional stylised view of an ever changing humanity spill into the lap of the auditorium 'with no effort'. [27] Nevertheless, whether the work produced is overtly theatrical or realistic, it is always a performance of some kind. This claim is supported by Schechner's theory that all performance is restoration of behaviour, 'Performance means: never for the first time. It means: for the second to the *n*th time. Performance is "twiced behaved behaviour"'.[28] All theatre is rehearsed to create an effect and therefore, even if the effect is designed to be naturalistic, it is still theatrical; it is still larger than life.

This leads us to query the boundaries of what we label as a mask in the performative context. Schechner indicates that,

> By using masks, costumes and physical actions arranged in a set way or improvised according to known rules; by performing or following a script, scenario, set of rules; by performing in special places or places made special by performing in them; …by all these means , and more, theatrecality is marked "non – ordinary" for special use only."[29]

Therefore, it must be questioned if all the aspects of theatre that make it "non-ordinary" are in fact forms of masks. In this way it can be said that even naturalistic theatre uses forms of mask in terms of scripts, costumes, make up, style[30], and even characterisation to present a theatrical reality. This concept is demonstrated in Stanislavski's *An Actor Prepares* , his character Kostya after smearing makeup on himself 'learns that only behind the mask can one actually reveal one's self, for 'characterisation is the mesh which hides the actor – individual. Protected by it he can lay bare his soul down to the last intimate detail'.[31] The masks in our

[22] Eugenio Barba, *The Paper Canoe: A Guide to Theatre Anthropology,*trans. by Richard Fowler, (Abingdon: Routledge, 1995), p.16.
[23] Barba, *The Paper Canoe,* p.16.
[24] Barba, *The Paper Canoe,*p.15.
[25] Stanislavski, in David Griffiths, *Acting Through Mask*, (Amsterdam: Routledge, 1988), p.7.
[26] Barba, *The Paper Canoe,* p.16.
[27] David Griffiths, *Acting Through Mask*, (Amsterdam: Routledge, 1988), p.9.
[28] Richard Schechner, *Between Theatre and Anthropology*, (University of Pennsylvania Press, 1985), p.36.
[29] Schechner, *Between Theatre and Anthropology,* p.117.
[30] Peter Hall, *Exposed by the Mask: Form and Language in Drama*, (London: Oberon books,2000), p.23. Hall presents Shakespeares's verse as a mask.
[31] Constantin Stanislavski, *An Actor Prepares*, in David Wiles*, Mask and Performance in Greek Tragedy: From Ancient Festival to Modern Experimentation*, (Cambridge University Press, 2007), p.80.

performance, therefore, are not only the conventional masks used for the playground scene but also the hair, makeup, costumes and external characterisations of the multiple roles.

In this sense the use of the mask is just an extension of the non- realistic nature of the theatre in itself. It just more openly acknowledges the artifice and this way can be said in Brecht's term to create an "alienation effect"[32]. This forces distance between the audience and the character encouraging them to use their imagination rather than demonstrating every aspect as detested by Meyerhold.[33] This in turn can produce a different kind of pleasure in the spectator, as argued by Peter Hall, 'True theatre only deceives to a point: like children we want to see and acknowledge how it is done, while agreeing to ignore this knowledge. It is part of the great game of make believe'.[34]

This ascertains that the worth of the mask must also be questioned in terms of criteria; it is not necessarily a bad thing for the performance to be considered unnaturalistic. The transformative nature of the mask and the exaggerated gestures that this elicits significantly making up for emotion lost as an expense of covering the face Schlegel describes how for the Ancient Greeks,

> Fidelity of representation was less their object than beauty; with us it is exactly the reverse. On this principle, the use of masks, which appears astonishing to us, was not only justifiable but absolutely essential; far from considering them as a makeshift, the Greeks would certainly, and with justice too, have looked upon it as a makeshift to be obliged to allow a player with vulgar, ignoble, or strongly marked features, to represent an Apollo or a Hercules; nay rather they would have deemed it downright profanation. How little is it in the power of the most finished actor to change the character of his features![35]

The enjoyment of our playground piece in performance suggested that the pleasure of watching the masked scene was two fold; the enjoyment came from the mimesis of a situation and the emotions evoked but also from the visible craft of the actor. As Anne Ubersfeld states,

> in the best of cases, the staging of the play reveals that this mimetic reproduction is not the result of magic, that it is pleasing in two ways, since it is the result of a human practice which can be and is reproduced.[36]

The mask when characterized through bodily gestures, like other predominantly gestural performance, goes beyond reality and creates a gap between normal gesture and performance gesture, that is 'read' by the audience'.[37] Anne Ubersfeld signifies the importance of this in audience satisfaction stating, 'the act of filling the gap is the very source of theatrical pleasure'.[38] The notion that our audience filled in the "gaps" was distinctly obvious in the fact that friends who came to see the production referred to the masked section

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[32] Bertolt Brecht, 'A Short Orangum for the theatre', in, *Modern Theories of Drama,* ed. by George Brandt, (Oxford:Clarendon Press, p.240.
[33]Pitches, *Vsevolod Meyerhold*,p.58.
[34] Hall, *Exposed by the Mask: Form and Language in Drama*, p 18.
[35] Augustus Wilhelm Schelegel, *Lecture On Dramatic Art and Literature,* trans. John Black, (Kessinger Press, 2004), p.52.
[36] Anne Ubersfeld, 'The Pleasure of the Spectator', in *Performance: Critical Concepts in Literary and Cultural Studies,* ed. by Philip Anslancker (ed.),vol.2 (Routledge, 2003), p.239.
[37] Patrice Pavis, 'The Discourse of (the) Mime' in *Performance Analysis: An Introductory Coursebook,* ed. by Collin Counsell and Laurie Wolf, (Abingdon: Routledge, 2001), p.134.
[38] Ubersfeld, 'The Pleasure of the Spectator',p.238.

as the "Playground bit" even though there was no verbal indication to the concept of the scene.

In conclusion, the mask is a transformative tool that is commonly accepted for its role in stylized performance and its obvious exposure of the theatricality of the theatre. However, it is also present, albeit in discrete or invisible forms, in the many elements involved in the presentation of any style of theatre, including naturalism. Whether these forms of masking are overt or disguised the audience gains pleasure in the concept that the performance, although potentially believable, is always a performance. After all, 'the pleasure of believing is part of playing, especially when you know how it is done.'[39]

[39] Hall, *Exposed by the Mask: Form and Language in Drama*,p.19.

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