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THEATRE FOR GROWING - GROWING THEATRE

Masks and the art of being nobody



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¹ "Enso", Japanese symbol for enlightenment, strength, elegance, the universe and emptiness. New World Encyclopedia, 10 may 2018, <<http://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Sunyata>>

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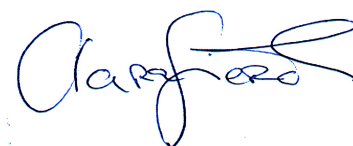
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Masks and the art of being nobody

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Abstract

Theatre for growing - growing theatre

Masks and the art of being nobody

I reflect on the significance of neutrality by examining the work with the neutral mask as a tool to silence facial expression and thus stimulate the physical awareness of an inner neutral center. Awareness of the body and physical receptivity both develop basic benefits for the creative development in the actor's training and also in Gestalt therapeutic practice. The focus on an assumed neutrality, which stands for a central point of reference, allows the exploration of unknown parts of personality and character, which can be used in the development of new acting roles as well as in methods of resolution of personal conflicts.

Own experiences with mask performances and masks in therapeutic use get juxtaposed with some theoretic background of mask work and philosophic ideas about neutrality. Assuming that in the no-thingness everything is included.

Abstrakt

Divadlo pro růst - divadlo růstu.

Masky a umění nebýt nikým.

Reflektujeme význam neutrality zkoumáním práce s neutrální maskou jakožto nástroje k docílení utišení výrazu obličeje, čímž se stimuluje fyzické povědomí vnitřního neutrálního centra. Povědomí o těle a fyzická vnímavost vyvíjí základní výhody a vlastnosti pro kreativní vývoj a ve výcviku herce, a také v Gestalt terapii. Soustředění se na předpokládanou neutralitu, kterou se myslí centrální referenční bod, umožňuje explorační neznámých oblastí osobnosti a charakteru, což se může využít při vývoji nových hereckých rolí a také v řešení osobních konfliktů. Vlastní zkušenosti s představeními s maskami, a s maskami používanými v terapii se porovnávají s teoretickým pozadím práce s maskou a filozofickými nápady o neutralitě. Předpoklad je ten, že v nicotě je pojmuto všechno. Žádný stres.

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The neutral mask is a strange thing. A so to say neutral, well-balanced face that offers a bodily sense of calm. This object, which is held in front of one's face, serves to sense the neutral state preceding an action, a state of receptivity to what surrounds us, free from inner conflict. The mask is reference point, base mask, origin mask for all other masks. In all other masks, expressive masks or those of the Commedia del'arte, hides the neutral mask as the bearer of the whole. Once the student has found this neutral initial state, his body is available like a blank slate for the drama's handwriting.

(Jaques Leqoc)²

1. Introduction

In my high school years I participated in the school theatre group, which excited and inspired me very much. But even though my fascination for acting started already as an adolescent, it took me quite a long time to make the decision to study acting and to view theatre as more than a hobby. After high school, I didn't dare audition for a real acting school for several reasons: Actors seemed to be persons with excessive self- confidence and my wish to become an actress felt similar to childish dreams like becoming a princess. The desire to act was for me connected to a wish to be great, to be somebody, being everybody at the same time. Thus, only the idea to study acting seemed to me arrogant and somehow superficial.

Twenty years later my perception of actors has changed to almost the opposite. The real art seems to be not about being somebody (famous and glorious), but about being nobody specifically- in order to lend your body and voice to different characters, inhabit them and make them real for the audience. Instead of expressing yourself and your personality on stage, to study acting means to profoundly explore yourself and to be able to step into other people's shoes. Studying acting finally reminded me of meditation exercises- by emptying oneself you become aware of your own habits and ideas which limit you as a person to certain patterns of being and as an actor to the interpretation of certain kinds of characters. Being a (good) actor or actress is like being an empty pot that can be filled with different ingredients, tastes and spices. The pot is an important instrument, a certain kind of structure with specific qualities and capacities, always ready to cook something new. I would like to

² Jacques Lecoq, *Der poetische Körper: Eine Lehre vom Theaterschaffen* (Berlin: Alexander Verlag, 2012) 55.

take this thesis as a chance to reflect on what was useful for me to become aware of my 'instrument' - my own physical qualities, voice, expression, capacities etc. and how 'to sense the neutral state', as Jaques Lecoq (with whom I will deal later on) describes the use of the neutral mask, can be helpful in this endeavour as a method of self-awareness - even outside of theatre work.

After two years of theatre studies I actually now believe that acting is one of the humblest professions, where you attempt to let your accustomed identity go, in order to become open to be somebody else. To do so, first of all it's necessary to know the present qualities of your instrument and to give up or reduce personal peculiarities in order to widen possibilities for different kinds of characters. For example, if somebody walks and moves in a very slack way, this might be perfect for certain roles, like a cool young guy, but it doesn't work for the character of a very accurate lawyer or a graceful king. That's why the (often unconscious) slack walk has to be first discovered and neutralized. When you know how to walk in a neutral way, then you can consciously choose the slack move again, provided it fits the role, or you develop a different kind of walk. It is this freedom of choice that I want to evaluate in this thesis, that opens up possibilities and options. This freedom, which allows me as a person as well as a professional actress to choose in every situation: to react in this way or that, as this or that kind of character.

When I talk about emptiness, nothingness or neutrality it is never meant in an absolute way, but only the approximation and intention. I'm also aware that these are big words, which are worth complex consideration and enter fields of several disciplines, such as philosophy, psychology or spirituality. In this limited work I will use them as a picture of a free and open state, where not the individual peculiarity is emphasized, but a universal human base, as a starting point for theatric and personal exploration and the development of character. As well as when I use the term 'therapeutic' it doesn't mean that the person would have to be ill or that a specific cure of a certain problem is intended. I will use the expression in my work more generally, as a positive process for bodily and mental experiences and curative development, as it is the idea in Gestalt Therapy.

As most of the literature I used is in German or Spanish, I translated the applied citations myself and ask for your consideration when I didn't use the official translations (if existing). Also I want to state here that I always took both sexes into

consideration, even if for reasons of text fluency I didn't specify both in every case (like 'actor' and 'actress').

I chose the Japanese symbol Ensō as a guidance for this work - the circle shall illustrate the emptiness, but totality at the same time. The circle is round like a hole, but also whole like the universe, where everything is included and completed. The circle is an ongoing and entangled structure, symbolizing that all the experiences are connected and positioned around the fascinating idea of 'neutrality'. The Ensō is not just any kind of painted circle, but an expression of dedication in Japanese art, a spiritual and philosophic exercise, for which the artists often practice many years to master it. The Eastern culture and philosophy, which also influenced the neutral mask, is strongly connected to the idea of neutrality and emptiness, as I will explore later on. So connecting with the underlying emptiness of every characteristic expression, you connect with the ongoing totality, as it is the same.

1.1. From personal experiences to the universe of masks

My own interest in the utility of working with masks in personal processes arose several years ago, along some artistic formations and different personal situations and I would like to take this research as an opportunity to shape my observations and hopefully find some conclusions about this for me very interesting topic. My decision to complete the Master in 'Authorial Acting' at DAMU was linked with an interest in nonverbal communication and truthful, authentic expression. Also I felt a certain need to examine what I really want, what I have to say and where this need is coming from. From an early age I had the feeling of being divided between different roles and that I had to change my faces and also my self-perception according to my surroundings and peers. Even though I enjoyed this diversity of my inner 'me', feeling quite like a different person at home or in other countries, with my family, with friends or colleagues, I also got curious, who actually is behind all these facets and what would remain, if I would take all these character- masks off. If you don't execute the different possibilities of yourself, does the potential still exist? Is it actually possible in daily life to act and relate without any masks, any character role and how can this happen? What does this void, the 'zero point', the centre between the distant poles,

the source of all creation - according to the German philosopher Salomo Friedländer, really have to say?³

After my university studies of communications in Vienna, and after many, sometimes painful, experiences of interpersonal misunderstandings and wrong interpretation of verbal exchange, I noticed that the so called 'communication' I had studied within the framework of the philosophical academy rather teaches to influence, manipulate, simulate and pretend than really 'to share' meaning and to profoundly understand each other. During a two year therapeutic art formation in 'Creativity training' in Vienna, I got a first taste of the possibilities of artistic expression and personal reflection, especially through the fine arts.

This experience brought me to the school of Gestalt Therapy by Dr. Claudio Naranjo in Mexico, where I visited several workshops and trainings for some months. In this specific orientation, methodic elements by Fritz Perls, one of the founders of Gestalt Therapy, are combined with Eastern meditation and therapeutic art techniques, such as movement, dance and body work, clownery, theatre and masks. I got very interested in this approach of theatric work and hoped to find more knowledge and facilities to continue this journey in the 'Authorial Acting' Master program.

In these two years of mostly practical and physical classes in DAMU I gained a lot of insight and ideas for psychosomatic work in theatre that I want to include in a further part of my thesis. The best known and obvious methods to combine theatre work and therapeutic benefits are, among others, the so-called Drama Therapy and Psychodrama. Globally a lot of schools, research and literature about this broad field of therapy through theatre exist, but here I want to focus on a tiny aspect of this big topic: the work with masks and its potential to look behind the mask.

My primary interest in masks might be a product of my delight in portraying and sculpturing myself from youth on, and in creating puppets, figures or masks out of clay and paper. I started this many years ago first in a simple manner, then experimented and improved through learning several techniques along the way. I believe that already in the construction of a face or a body, even in an abstract or fantastic style, some empathy and capacity to feel into the shape and anatomy of a

3 Salomo Friedländer, *Das magische Ich: Elemente des kritischen Polarismus* (Bielefeld: Aisthesis Verlag, 2001)

(distant) being is required and developed. The choice of the material itself is part of the expression of the figure or mask and could be compared to embodiment in theatre work. The process of construction holds something very calming and introspective for me and awoke my interest in the use of masks itself.

Thanks to the close contact of my movement teacher Petra Oswaldowa to the Czech mime, actor, clown and mask performer Ctibor Turba, me and my classmates attended two intense workshops with masks in the first and second year of my Master studies at DAMU. Here I could experience the neutral mask through several techniques and methods developed by the famous French theatre pedagogue and mime Jaques Lecoq as well as some expressive masks from the work of Mr. Turba. Additionally I visited workshops with masks of 'Commedia dell'arte', but I won't include this particular style into my research.

In my final Authorial presentation at the end of the second year, I took the opportunity to combine all the elements I was interested in: masks, fairy tales, movement, music, a certain amount of personal memories and reflections and created my own performance. For this project I had the chance to construct four full head animal masks out of clay and newspaper in the luxury sculpture studio of DAMU.

Because of this privileged opportunity to get closely in touch with mask work in DAMU, I noticed some interesting correlations with the Gestalt therapeutic techniques of personal growing which I had experienced in Mexico. Based on my experiences during the Master program of 'Authorial Acting', as well as in Gestalt Therapy formations, I want to reflect on the benefits of mask work for both actor's training and personal development.

I will especially concentrate on the base of all masks, or maybe a kind of 'non mask': the not very spectacular looking white 'neutral mask' by Jaques Lecoq and its idea to dissolve any kind of facial expression. The underlying search for this so called 'neutrality' leads me to the huge philosophic universe with certain partly Buddhist roots of 'nothingness' or 'emptiness'.

In my research I confront two intertwined disciplines with proper theoretic frames and vocabularies: The world of theatre, with real face-masks, but also masks in the

sense of roles and characters and the psychological and therapeutic frame with its inner roles and different, often unconscious aspects of character and personality.

In talking about masks I am referring mostly to real, material face- masks, like the neutral white masks or the expressive masks, but also to psychological, invisible masks, as an image of different aspects of personalities or roles.

1.2. Inspirations by masks in Mexico

*"The Mexican, whether old or young, criollo or mestizo, general or laborer or graduate, seems to me a person who shuts himself away to protect himself: his face is a mask and so is his smile."*⁴

In Mexico masks have a long tradition and nowadays still play an important role in folk rites and feasts or shamanic rituals by indigenous peoples. The popular 'lucha libre', a typical wrestling show with a comedic aspect, is based on the use of full body masks by the two opponents. You never see the fighters without their masks and you can buy the mask of your hero in every street market. Another popular event is the famous 'Día de muertos', the Day of Dead on the 2nd of November, where people dress up as death- figures and skeletons or in a colourful dress as so-called (dead) 'Catrina'. The face is painted or masked like a skull.

While living for two years in Mexico, I found out about and got fascinated by these different uses of masks in popular and folk culture. Also in Mexico, I got in touch with the use of masks in therapeutic work the first time, as I started to learn about theatre work in Gestalt Therapy. I don't know if this is pure coincidence, but to me Mexico seems to be a country where the importance and significance of masks is still experienced. Even though the use of the white neutral mask by Jaques Lecoq seems very different from the funny 'lucha libre' masks or the shamanic masks by indigenous peoples, the deeper meaning of them is still related and they always express more than mere entertainment. One famous Mexican writer, critic and diplomat, Octavio Paz and his description of Mexican society, character and the human soul motivated me to regard masks less as an object and more as an

⁴ Octavio Paz, *The Labyrinth of Solitude: And the Other Mexico, Return to the Labyrinth of Solitude, Mexico and the United States, The Philanthropic Ogre* (New York: Grove Press, 1985) 29.

attitude. It can be chosen by a whole nation or an individual person and always brings some more or less conscious benefit to the carrier. Due to the strong and lively tradition of masks in Mexican culture, it doesn't surprise me that Octavio Paz dedicated part of his work to the fascinating ability of masks to hide and protect, even though he concerned himself more with 'invisible' social masks than the colourful art pieces of his country. Paz outlines the dialectical connection between individual and collective, the personal and national cultural character sketch, but still I believe that what he says about Mexicans is more or less universally true for all people and also one of the cornerstones of Gestalt therapeutic work with masks.

In his chapter 'Mexican Masks' he describes the construction of psychological and social 'invisible' masks and argues that Mexicans of all classes and ages present a mask to the world in self-defense, building a wall of indifference between reality and themselves, a wall no less impenetrable for being invisible.⁵

Masks exist in the most different implementations and utilities and are difficult to define or put in categories. This invisible social or 'everyday' mask, as Paz is referencing here, is not the kind of mask I want to further accredit with a positive impact on self-reflection and individual development, but actually the opposite - a limiting wall of given expressions that inhibit the perception of the true person. This unconscious social mask might bring the person certain benefits and protection, but still has a censoring function, as it can not be freely chosen or changed.

The kind of masks used for the purpose of the actor's training or personal growing, shall rather make the authenticity hidden behind the social wall, as described and criticized by the Mexican writer, visible and recognizable.

My time in Mexico was not only an extraordinary period for me because of my attraction to the colourful culture and the people with many different faces, but also a time when I discovered a lot about myself and my own invisible "everyday mask"⁶, as the Gestalt therapists and masks workers Harald Klemm and Reinhard Winkler call the human face in context of social behaviour. I think this is a very pointed definition; it reminds us how habits and repetitions let phenomena appear simply 'normal'. If I had learned from childhood onwards to always be friendly and that it is necessary to

5 Paz 29-46.

6 Harald Klemm, Reinhard Winkler, *Masken. Gesichter hinter dem Gesicht* (Bern: Zytglogge Verlag, 1995) 12.

smile at everybody, I might identify completely with a smiling face and maintain this created character - even though in reality I maybe felt lonesome and depressed many times. Although it might be nice to have a smiling face/ mask, it would limit my experience and expression of other feelings that are equally part of me and of the human life journey. Just as our body can somehow be considered to be the shroud of our soul, our face as well can hide our bodily expression and real emotions.

Fixed habits and forms, in a social but also a physical sense, are the enemy of free creation and expression. And so I would like to take Octavio Paz' words to lead my research into the deconstruction, neutralisation and emptying of forms, in order to experience the whole creative potential as an actor and as person.

*"Form has rarely been an original creation, an equilibrium arrived at through our instincts and desires rather than at their expense. On the contrary, our moral and juridical forms often conflict with our nature, preventing us from expressing ourselves and frustrating our true wishes."*⁷

1.3. Experiences with Gestalt Therapy

During one year, in 2014, I took several workshops and modules in the formation program for Gestalt Therapy 'Escuela Gestalt Viva' in Mexico. This school was founded by the Chilean doctor, psychiatrist and therapist Dr.Claudio Naranjo, who is a follower of Fritz Perls, 'the godfather' of Gestalt Therapy.

He was influenced by several artists, theatre pedagogues, spiritual ideas and philosophers, like the German philosopher Salomo Friedländer. In this school of Gestalt Therapy, international therapists and artists lead workshops on different therapeutic techniques and topics. The most significant methods for me were about theatric work with masks and especially the neutral mask.

Fritz Perls learned and practised theatre acting as young man (also with Max Reinhardt) and always connected his approaches with artistic expression, what led him to the foundation of Gestalt Therapy. One of the objectives of Gestalt Therapy is to make the 'daily life drama' visible and conscious. Our common habits and

7 Paz 33.

behaviour and everything we are too familiar with, we are not able to recognise any more. Theatre offers the possibility to take distance on stage, being actor and observer at the same time and helps to see the overseen spectacle again. While in the environment of the artistic work in avant- garde theatre the correlation with therapy is not always well seen and a clear separation is pointed out to not be mixed with psychological issues, some well known personalities like Jerzy Grotowsky, Peter Brook, Jacob Levy Moreno or Augusto Boal recognize and underline the influence between theatric work and therapy. The stage brings us closer to the actual moment of the action, where past and future become present. The time of the scene corresponds to the moment of 'experience' in Gestalt Therapy, a time and space where we can become aware of our emotions, body and thoughts and can act in a congruent way with ourselves. This approach I recovered later in the 'Authorial Acting' program and especially in the practice of '(Inter)acting with the Inner Partner', where you have nothing else to do than experiencing yourself in a determined time in front of the audience. Theatre work and Gestalt Therapy have a lot in common,- both deal with the persons and their relations, intern and vital conflicts, the person's way of experiencing. They deal with a profound exploration of oneself, with attention on emotional, mental and corporal processes.

In the Gestalt therapeutic technique of work with dreams I also recognized parallels with the 'Authorial Acting' approach. Instead of analysing a dream intellectually, you intend to relive and embody every aspect of it from an 'I' perspective and in present time, recalling the pictures in a very attentive and detailed way. As I experienced in simple exercises in the 'Authorial Acting' class, replaying sequences of our lives, also in the Gestalt therapeutic dream work you try to slow down in your actions, sensing every moment. In both disciplines you open up your senses to what you hear, see, feel, smell, taste in each precise moment. According to the Gestalt therapeutic approach everything in your dream is a part of you and you should integrate all the unconscious attitudes which are projected on the appearing persons or objects.

I noticed several further shared aspects between the principles of Gestalt Therapy and the 'Authorial Acting' program.

The importance of:

- presence / attention / the here and now
- respiration and breath
- body awareness and sensibility
- embodiment and integration
- stillness, emptiness and silence / orientation towards neutrality
- the own biography, history and memory / authenticity
- contact and dialog / expression, etc.

What leads me to compare the neutral mask as an artistic tool to a therapeutic technique is Friedländer's claim that you can only perceive what is different. The distinction and withdrawal from the background is one of the corner stones of Fritz Perls' Gestalt Therapy and also a base of theatric expression. What we perceive becomes an opposite to what it contrasts through its difference. The opposites are related to each other, they form two poles.⁸ The expressions you see in an actor are different poles, opposites around a middle point, which Friedländer called 'indifference'. In the 'Authorial Acting' program I got to know some methods to appreciate and become aware of the different opposites and how to put them into a dialog. The most dedicated class to this attempt is '(Inter)acting with the Inner Partner', where my inner poles get their own voice, physical expression and can listen and react to each other. While Gestalt therapists and artists are generally concerned with the process of perception and distinction, the contrastive figure or 'Gestalt', Friedländer was more interested in the space between the poles, the apparently boring -'background'. According to him, only the middle between the poles could face the totality beyond the differences. So the indifference is not boring but creative, a 'Schöpferische Indifferenz'⁹.

Gestalt Therapy describes the theatre as an opportunity to know and discover yourself, to get closer to your multilayered personality and true expression. To get to know yourself profoundly might not always be delightful and sometimes even frustrating, but it leads you closer to reality. It is an invitation to be real, to be what

8 Stefan Blankertz and Erhard Doubrawa, "Stichwort: Friedlaender Salomo", Lexikon der Gestalttherapie, Encyclopedia, 26 March 2018, <http://www.gestalttherapie-lexikon.de/friedlaender_salomo.htm>

9 English translation 'Creative indifference', a term introduced by Friedländer.

we are, to get out of our tight limits and extend our being. To be 'nothing' or to have a certain inner nudity is necessary to be able to represent all the roles in the libretto of the theatre play as well as in life.

Being 'me', this unity of beliefs, emotions, thoughts and identifications with concepts about what we are and what we are not, helps us to define and orient ourselves, but also limits and separates us from everything that is outside of this concept. If this 'me' can dissolve a bit, becoming 'nothing', being inexistent, as proposed by Fritz Perls, we can be everything. But you should not simulate or be fake as if you would be or do something - but really to be and do it.

The theatre is an opportunity to do things differently, to act as we want to, but often are afraid to. It is the opportunity to take off the everyday mask of our common 'me' and allows us to be free, somebody completely different, becoming more than just 'me'. In that sense Gestalt Therapy doesn't pretend to 'change' the person, but much more to reconnect with what he or she always has been and already is. At the end of the long search the wish persists to come back 'home', to a kind of strong, untouchable inner source.

1.4. Working questions

1 What does the mask hide and what does it reveal?

- How can the use of masks help to experience what is covered and what expressed?
- How can masks influence physical awareness and embodiment?
- How can the identification and dissociation with masks clarify different aspects of the personality?

2 What are the benefits of the neutral mask for the development as an actor/actress and as a person?

- How can neutrality provoke a state of creativity?
- How does the neutral mask facilitate self-perception and awareness of inner emptiness?

The research in this thesis shall now weigh the possibilities of mutual inspiration: What are the benefits of using neutral masks in therapy working on personal growth and what insights can theatre training adapt to improve an actor's qualities.

2. Our daily mask - facing theatre and Gestalt Therapy

*"As a result, most adults live behind a mask. This mask is the face that one wants to have in front of others, as well as in front of oneself."*¹⁰

(Moshé Feldenkrais)

*"(...)a kind of mask, designed on the one hand to make a definite impression upon others, and on the other to conceal the true nature of the individual"*¹¹

(Carl Gustav Jung)

Generally we understand the mask to be something material which partly or completely covers a person's natural face. But masks exist in various forms, styles and uses, cultures and in all time periods, so that the topic of masks opens sprawling possibilities of subjects and disciplines to consider and reflect. There is extensive literature about masks and their use in fine arts and sculpting, anthropology, ethnology and archaeology, technology, medicine, cultural studies, pedagogy, philosophy and psychology, manual books on their manufacture and so on. Their size can be anything from a full body mask to consisting only of a red ball covering the nose. One can even speak of non-material 'invisible masks' in a psychological frame, comparing the human face or even a person's character to a mask. They find use in medicine as surgical masks, in research and construction work as protection from different substances, in spiritual, religious and traditional rites of different cultures, in clowning and entertainment or, with much variety, in theatre. The purposes of masks are different and span a large spectrum from pure decoration or representation on to protection, defence, deformation, transformation or bluff. Some masks intend to change a person's appearance, making them seem to be someone different. However, in the same way as they can hide a part of reality, masks can also uncover and reveal, showing a deeper reality of the person wearing it. In every case a mask always has two sides,- one facing out and one in,- it is this duality that makes a mask so intangible and interesting.

It is precisely because of this inside- outside duality that masks have a long tradition

¹⁰ Moshé Feldenkrais, *Bewußtheit durch Bewegung* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1996) 23.

¹¹ Carl Gustav Jung, *Two Essays on Analytical Psychology* (London: Routledge, 1992) 92.

in shamanic, folkloric, healing and religious rituals, but continually lost their importance in modern times. One of the most famous traditions of mask theatre, the Italian Commedia dell'arte, disappeared almost entirely in the 18th century, only being rediscovered in some areas of Europe during the 20th century.

Due to the development of a variation of therapeutic approaches, masks also made a comeback as a method for personal development and inner growth since the 1960's.

Different disciplines use the theatre as a therapeutic media,- Gestalt Therapy, Psychodrama, Drama Therapy and Art Therapy among others. In the theatre we can take a step away from ourselves and our often closed and difficult world, see ourselves differently and discover the reality of other, maybe completely unknown personalities.¹²

Gestalt Therapy, which focuses on the individual's experience in the here and now, takes advantage of nonverbal expression and impulsive, non-rational, borderline unconscious communication through art and is therefore one of several approaches that utilizes the mask's potential and power. Here it is important so see that even when a mask covers only the face, or even only the nose, it influences and transforms the whole organism. So the aim is not to change the face, but to get the entire body 'into' the mask. In the case of an expressive mask, this can cause the whole body (and further, aspects of the person itself) to become this character in a stylized figure,- in the case of the neutral mask the whole body and self is supposed to approximate neutrality and emptiness.

Facial and a bodily expression,- being finally both we selves, shouldn't be treated as separate parts. However they depart from different sources and the body seems to be channeled less with the brain than with instincts, feelings and authentic motions. In our increasingly rational society we are less conscious of our bodies and physical expression than we are of verbal communication, intellect and controllable facial expression. That's why it might be more difficult to become aware of or even change the physical expression than the facial one. In that lies the hard work of an actor's training for physical theatre, or indeed any kind of acting that believes in the power of body language.

12 Fernández, Laura and Isabel Montero. *El teatro como oportunidad*. Barcelona: Rigden Institut Gestalt, 2012. 8-29.

*"The body exists, and gives weight and shape to our existence. It causes us pain and gives us pleasure; it is not a suit of clothes we are in the habit of wearing, not something apart from us: we are our bodies. But we are frightened by other people's glances, because the body reveals rather than hides our private selves."*¹³

2.1 'Personare' - sounding through the mask

The term 'person' corresponds to the Latin 'persona', which shows an awareness already in ancient times of the actor's and person's role in theatre and daily life, referring to a kind of mask or false face. It is related to the verb 'personare', which means 'to sound through', just as for example the actor's voice sounds through- and is amplified by the mask.¹⁴

Even if 'persona' indicates the wearing of a mask, it does not have a negative connotation implying beings that are false, hidden, and masquerading as someone else, but is actually a positive term. 'Persona' refers to the Greek Tragedy, where the actor put on a mask, completely entering the role he had to represent, becoming one with this role and casting off his own personality.¹⁵

The form and expression of the face, or 'facade' we show the outside world in our daily lives, is built from everyday experiences, becoming a kind of a mediator between our inner and outer world.

The Jungian psychology calls this kind of mask 'persona'¹⁶. This fixed personality makes interactions and social living together a little easier, providing clearly structured identities and ways of behaviour, but on the other hand it also confines us to our own concepts and perceptions, excluding all other possibilities and potential aspects that have not been included in that mask.

This social mask doesn't only prevent us from new experiences, but also demands a lot of effort and energy and let us stuck with a certain body posture and fixation.

¹³ Paz, 35.

¹⁴ "Person", Etymology Diccionary, 28 may 2018, <<https://www.etymonline.com/word/person>>

¹⁵ Anke und Erhard Doubrawa, "Schattenarbeit für Gestalttherapeutinnen und -therapeuten", Gestaltkritik 1/2012, magazine for Gestalt therapy, 10 may 2018, <http://www.gestalt.de/doubrawa_schattenarbeit.html>

¹⁶ "Persona", Etymology Diccionary, 28 may 2018, <<https://www.etymonline.com/word/persona>>

*"The hunger to be affirmed by one's fellow man is so great, that most spend a life-, but not their lives, to reinforce their mask."*¹⁷ In our private lives, definitions of ourselves and the way we are can simplify and facilitate interactions, as long as this doesn't limit us to only a small range of responses or reduces us to a rigid statue of our self-definitions. As actors we have the chance to completely immerse ourselves in a mask and change into or switch into a yet another one as a different character,- as long as the actor is flexible enough and is capable of playing more than one 'type'. This flexibility is what good acting training and also Lecoq's work with the neutral mask is trying to achieve,- and what I want to relate to with the orientation toward neutrality.

In a sense, our natural daily face is a kind of non-material mask already, which can be discovered and eventually deconstructed through the work with (material) masks. To use masks in the actor's training or a process for personal development is in this respect not a 'masquerade', but helps to unmask the 'everyday mask' and to raise self-awareness.

The Jungian psychology has developed a whole system of archetypes, in which working with masks,- relating them to the symbolic and mystic world-, is of great importance. Aspects of the human psyche that are not recognized or accepted and are often perceived to be the opposite of what one believes oneself to be are referred to as 'shadows'. Especially in the process of constructing one's own mask one can use it to represent the shadow and use it as a kind of mirror for its creator. I also experienced this connection during the mask construction process for my final performance. The four animal masks which I formed according to the fairy tale 'The Musicians of Bremen' were in that sense also depicting some of my shadows. For example, the stubbornness that I sometimes recognize in myself, got 'sounded through' the donkey mask with a much stronger voice and became for the audience,- and also for myself,- far more visible and palpable. I think this way of inhabiting different characters of a story is also comparable with the Gestalt therapeutic dream work, where you take responsibility for all the aspects which you projected in something or somebody else,- your own stubbornness to a donkey for example. An expressive mask can have different meanings and purposes,- it can hide and disguise aspects of a person just as well as it can clarify and point them out. Since it exists as an interpret or an interpretation of a world of symbols, mysteries and

¹⁷ Feldenkrais, 24.

archetypes, it only ever reveals the aspects of it that are currently relevant and the full meaning of a mask can never be discovered completely. Harald Klemm and Reinhard Winkler, who have been working with masks in an artistic and Gestalt therapeutic way since the 1970's, describe the mask as a guardian of borders in that it exaggerates and marks the personality to show said borders more clearly. By inhabiting and living completely through the mask's personality, we are offered the possibility of taking a big step and crossing that border in the sense that it can enable us to break the habits of self definition and achieving personal growth. I think that it is this that makes masks so mysterious and indescribable, - by covering one part of the picture, they actually help the whole silhouette to become sharper and it's meaning clearer.

We can explore the extremes the mask is offering us with a full embodiment. The advantage of bodily expression versus facial expression is that it is deeper, more sincere and connected with emotions, a pure and direct response. *"Since his face is hidden, he doesn't need the protection of his facial expressions, which disturb the coherent image of the character often enough. He can feel and fill the figure from inside, and is not in danger of controlling himself from the outside."*¹⁸

As the mask negates the ability to use facial expressions, the player is forced to increasingly use body language instead, shifting from drawing on intellect to a mostly impulsive and instinctive source. *"Since the facial expression is connected closer to the nerve sensory pole, it is also guided to a greater extent by the imagination. (...) The body language on the contrary feeds on unconscious forces of the will."*¹⁹ By delving into the essence of a certain reality, by 'becoming it' ourselves, we can learn to really understand it and thus widen our empathy for different characters, parts of other people or ourselves. To give an example, Klemm and Winkler suggest that one could only understand Napoleon if one becomes Napoleon, even though the figure of the personally constructed Napoleon would not be identical with the historical Napoleon. *"We can go through the masks into every phenomenon, we can become and grasp it. Slipping into a mask is something of a 'dive into' their cosmos, their laws, their order."*²⁰

18 Doris Müller-Weith, Lilli Neumann and Bettina Stoltenhoff-Erdmann, *Theater Therapie, Ein Handbuch*, (Paderborn: Junfermann Verlag, 2002) 155.

19 Müller-Weith, Neumann, Stoltenhoff-Erdmann, 155.

20 Klemm, Winkler, 65.

Basically, by embodying different roles the actor already uses certain kind of masks. But the material mask, in covering the face, helps the actor to be more physically expressive and aids them in feeling the character with the whole body. 'Becoming it' includes the player's movements, balance, sight, voice and, at the centre of all that, their breathing.

*"Sometimes it becomes faster and more agitated, and sometimes the respiratory organs become tighter, the breathing more compressed. Thus, the attitude under the mask causes increased feelings that are not so clearly perceptible in everyday life. Feelings like pain, fear, sadness, pitifulness, arrogance, lust, exuberance and joy."*²¹

The emergence of these feelings are the main focus of mask work. According to the approach of the analytic Jungian psychology, they are part of our unconscious or rejected attitude, our 'shadow',- and thus not integrated aspects. The work with masks allows us to explore the counterparts of our known personality, which in Gestalt Therapy are named 'polarities'. They describe situations in which, for example, a person is used to showing a smiling, friendly face, they should also become aware of it's hidden but existing opposite,- maybe distrust and sadness. Equally, if someone perceives himself as being a mostly cruel and aggressive person used to a 'tough guy' identity, he certainly also has sensibility and tenderness in his unconscious shadow side, longing to be integrated into the full personality. This is why the idea of polarities has nothing to do with a division between 'good' and 'bad' qualities or moralistic judgements, but operates with the belief that both extremes are just two sides of the same coin and should be considered equal important aspects. To me, this seems to be a very helpful thought when used in the actor's training and theatre work, encouraging the actor to always also discover and develop characters that are the own opposites and less comfortable.

*"Since ancient times while polarizing has been paid more attention to the poles than to their indifference. In the indifference lies the real secret, the creative will, the polariser himself,"*²²

²¹ Klemm, Winkler, 68.

²² Salomo Friedländer, *Schöpferische Indifferenz*, (München: G.Müller, 1918), 337.

2.2. Neutrality and nothingness

2.2.1. Influences from Eastern tradition

The 14th Dalai Lama describes the Buddhist theory of emptiness:

*"One of the most important philosophical insights in Buddhism comes from what is known as the theory of emptiness. At its heart is the deep recognition that there is a fundamental disparity between the way we perceive the world, including our own experience in it, and the way things actually are. In our day-to-day experience, we tend to relate to the world and to ourselves as if these entities possessed self-enclosed, definable, discrete and enduring reality. (...) The philosophy of emptiness reveals that this is not only a fundamental error but also the basis for attachment, clinging and the development of our numerous prejudices. According to the theory of emptiness, any belief in an objective reality grounded in the assumption of intrinsic, independent existence is simply untenable. All things and events, whether 'material', mental or even abstract concepts like time, are devoid of objective, independent existence. (...) Thus, things and events are 'empty' in that they can never possess any immutable essence, intrinsic reality or absolute 'being' that affords independence."*²³

The Buddhist central term 'Śūnyatā' is a Sanskrit noun that derives from the adjective sūnya, meaning void and emptiness, but also openness.²⁴ This Buddhist teaching claims that nothing possesses essential, enduring identity because everything is interconnected in a chain of co-becoming, in constant transformation. In various schools of Buddhism, 'Śūnyatā' is a key concept used to express that everything one encounters in life is empty of absolute identity, permanence, or an in-dwelling 'self' because all is interrelated, mutually dependent and never wholly self-sufficient or independent.

Originating from Eastern traditions and Buddhism, the idea of 'nothingness' as a relative point of a source is used in several artistic, philosophical or psychological disciplines and can be trained and applied, for example through practices of awareness or meditation,- without treating it as a religious practice.

The reference to 'nothingness' can be imagined as a 'no-thingness',- there are no existing things appearing, only presence. In this context, neutrality, nothingness, emptiness or the void doesn't indicate a place or fixed position, but a process, an approximation and openness to all possibilities.

23 Dalai Lama, *The Universe in a Single Atom: The Convergence of Science and Spirituality*, (New York: Broadway, 2005) 46.

24 "Sunnyata", New World Encyclopednia, 10 may 2018,
<<http://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Sunnyata>>

Even though feeling the void and the freedom from limiting definitions, experienced in meditation practice for example, can be pleasant and relieving, there is a human necessity and tendency to be defined, to identify with something and to be this or that kind of person. To not accept the emptiness and the potential to be everything is a little like escaping freedom itself,- a freedom that we might not be used to or able to live.

While one of the central Gestalt therapeutic approaches is working with the polarities and the integration of extreme opposites of one personality, Eastern traditions especially place their focus of attention onto the central and basic zero point of existence. Through practicing meditation,- but also martial arts or artistic disciplines like calligraphy, architecture or music, one intends to reach an equilibrium in a neutral middle zone, the source of all being and creation.

The Japanese symbol 'Ensō',- a painted circle which is not completely closed,- has its source in Zen Buddhism and refers to enlightenment, strength, elegance, the entire universe and the void. The circle is empty,- but still complete. The basic inner orientation of Zen meditation can be related to both fields I am covering here: the actor's training in the search for neutrality, authenticity and presence, as well as personal development and it's search for integrity, detachment and freedom from suffering.

2.2.2. Ideas about nothing

"Das Nichts der Welt ist nichts als der Schöpfer der Welt." (Salomo Friedländer)²⁵

"The nothingness of the world is nothing but the creator of the world."

This idea of being 'nothing', of not identifying with fixed, stiff characteristics and qualities in order to be anything and everything at the same time, while originating in different spiritual practices, therapeutic and philosophic currents was eventually also adapted to European concepts and theatre work.

I was able to experience this search for the basic point of reference, one's own 'emptiness', in theatre work and Gestalt therapeutic workshops with masks. The Mexican Gestalt Therapy school 'Escuela Gestalt Viva' offers therapeutic formations with the artistic approach of using theatre and mask work, working with international teachers. Headmaster Claudio Naranjo leads the school's worldwide network and

²⁵ Friedländer, Schöpferische Indifferenz, 329.

focus heavily on the research of nothingness and void. Inspired by the founder of Gestalt Therapy, Fritz Perls, a devoted follower of the philosopher Salomo Friedländer, he describes emptiness as a starting point for personal and artistic growth and as the basis of all creation. Just as Friedländer opposed the polarizing either-or view that is commonly taken in Western culture, Perls and later on Naranjo focus on the 'middle mode', the balance, centre or 'fertile void'.

In our time of fast communication and information exchange, the 'empty spaces' in daily life are becoming increasingly rarer. For many people the normal state of being involves feeling occupied, busy and active, the absence of which becomes undesirable. The extremes, the polarities seem to be more attractive than the unknown void in between. *"So it is easier to come to know the apart than the one, the none",*²⁶ states Friedländer in his most popular book, "Creative Indifference". I can confirm from my own experience that after stressful periods full of action and movement, calm moments and breaks in which nothing seems to happen can be almost unbearable. To cover this discomfort we tend to fill the stillness and silence with random words, thoughts and actions, as we feel a vague fear of falling in a hole of emptiness. I think this is what Friedländer referred to as a 'common error' in reasoning that *"one confuses the nothing of plus and minus with the minus,"*²⁷ meaning that 'nothing' often has a negative note pointing to a lack of something,- not understanding the indistinguishability itself and that 'nothing' is neither much nor little. Instead of fearing the lack of something differentiable, one can experience oneself as the centre around which all alternatives rotate.

*"In the course of ordinary life the emptiness is very annoying and becomes very 'discredited'. You have to start to realize that not only does one grow by becoming friends with emptiness and by supporting it - by not fighting it or trying to fill it with something else - but it becomes the main fuel of search."*²⁸ These reflections on the importance of bearing the inner feeling of being empty or lost, written by Claudio Naranjo, are very useful and accurate. Obviously he is talking about an existential life experience of a 'walk in the desert' and being drawn to the illusions of a mirage, in order to avoid accept the emptiness of reality, which produces fear. I believe he

²⁶ Friedländer, 13.

²⁷ Friedländer, 329.

²⁸ Claudio Naranjo, "La teoria de Nasrudin de la neurosis", theory to Gestalt therapy, 25 feb.2018, 10 may 2018, <http://www.claudionaranjo.net/pdf_files/theory/teoria_de_nasrudin_spanish.pdf>

speaks of the same desert you walk in the class of '(Inter)acting with the Inner partner', and the same one experienced at the moment of coming on stage, invited to be authentic and yourself. It is always challenging to stay with what you have and what you are instead of distracting yourself and the audience with stories and illusions that might seem more interesting than reality.

Onstage as well as in their private life, actors tend to talk, gesticulate and show something distant from themselves (what is without doubt part of their job) to avoid feeling naked, silent and 'boring' on stage. But in fact it is the connection to an inner emptiness that can create an authentic contact with oneself, making the person more interesting and real than an intellectually controlled presentation of a constructed person.

As soon as one is able to stand this feeling of emptiness, the uncertainty about the self and can accept the reality of existence, one reaches what Friedländer calls the 'fertile void', an elevation to the 'moment of creation'. I believe it is this 'fertile void' that we endeavour to reach and explore in '(Inter)acting with the Inner Partner',- as well as through the training with the neutral mask.

2.2.3. From somebody to nobody

To be 'empty', 'nothing' or become 'nobody' is an obvious contradiction to the usual goal of the current times, where 'to be somebody' seems to be the top priority in all aspects of life. This is especially apparent in social media such as Facebook,- already a very promising name, as it helps every user to build up their perfect social mask and to create their chosen profile of being 'somebody'. The social media process can be regarded as a mask theatre of sorts: We select photos and information creating the character we want to show,- mostly beautiful, successful and positive ones. Under the mask we can still be somebody completely different.

Instead of being 'somebody', with a certain profile, fixed personality and qualities, the actor's training of physical theatre, through for example Jaques Lecoq's methods, tries to open possibilities of developing depth, becoming anybody and nobody.

Since we all develop our physical structure, personality patterns and posture during our lives, it is necessary to undergo a process of detachment and neutralisation to reach a base attitude upon which one can then further explore, develop and create.

This process of deconstructing already existing physical and mental concepts is a very important preparatory step.

In theatre work, to be neutral means to be ready, clean, open and sensitive to your surrounding, your body and impulses. Personal reflection and development of 'neutrality' refers in a similar way to being free of all kinds of patterns and ideas of who you are or should be, to then become aware of the real inner being and it's needs in any given moment behind all the facades/ masks.

Even the meaning of an inner emptiness in the way that Buddhist tradition, Friedländer's philosophy and Naranjo's therapeutic approach describe it might not be equal to the work with neutrality and the neutral mask in the actor's training, I believe that the fundamental sense of the search is comparable to the orientation towards the source and to look 'behind' the 'surface'. The underlying direction of growing/ improving, this need to go one step back in order to be able to go forward, is recognizable in different methods and traditions. It would also parallels to Christian teachings, which state that you need to take the way down to death if you want to go up to heaven and that out of the moment of non-existence new life begins to rise. The suffering of nothingness, of no- existence, of 'death' is also always an important part of the 'hero's journey', the basic conflict for many stories in literature, film and theatre.²⁹ And in all these references to a kind of development- circle, the key moment consists of bearing the lack of differentiability and being.

*"But if (...) we are able to remain where the absence of being is suffered, this allows a sort of existential 'fattening' to take place in us little by little. (...) What is nothing other than saying that to reach true life you have to dare to lose it."*³⁰

The French mime and theatre pedagogue Jaques Lecoq, who created methods for the actor's training based on the neutral mask,- which I will focus on with special attention later-, was much influenced by the Japanese Noh-theatre, specifically its background and masks.

Through the training with the neutral mask and referencing an assumed neutrality, the existing natural manifestations of one's peculiarities and character can be identified. This growing awareness of one's own personality traits enables a partial detachment, relaxation of the fixation and expansion of the scope of action.

²⁹ The American author and mythologist Joseph Campbell compares in his "The hero's journey" similar human patterns in religion, mythology and literature.

³⁰ Claudio Naranjo, "La teoria de Nasrudin de la neurosis", theory to Gestalt therapy, 25 feb.2018, 10 may 2018, <http://www.claudionaranjo.net/pdf_files/theory/teoria_de_nasrudin_spanish.pdf>

The purpose of being 'neutral' and being 'empty' moves on a comparable path,- searching for stillness, getting rid of unconscious roles and characters, becoming aware of the empty space as a neutral base for new creation. The physical work on neutrality, for example with the neutral mask, always made me quite curious and raised certain questions. How could a human person ever be 'neutral'? Is not already the body shape itself an expression? What would the field of reference be to decide if a movement is fast or slow, big or small? What is a 'normal' way to walk and would it be the same for Europeans, Asians and Africans, men and women, for young and old? Even the construction of the 'neutral mask' is based on general agreements of common features of a human face. I believe that more important than exercising and archiving some kind of agreed posture of a fictive zero point is the remaining big question: What is neutrality? What does neutrality feel like? Is there any point or state in me that I could call neutral or zero point?

Even it seems useless to expect satisfying answers, I think it's very valuable to fine-tune the perception and senses of your 'instrument'. The search for neutrality does not involve an intellectual or philosophical reflection,- it is a bodily exploration and inner attentiveness. I would rather compare it to physical meditation techniques in which you can become aware of the slightest meaningful movement in yourself.

*"And for those who disagree in their lives with themselves or their own bodies, the neutral mask is help and starting point for breathing more freely. For everybody, the neutral mask becomes the reference point."*³¹

2.3. Invisibility and visibility

One of the most relevant, but at the same time difficult to define qualities in an actor is their 'presence'. There are different methods to work on one's presence, but since there are also non-actors with a strong or good presence, it doesn't seem to be so much a question of technique but personal attitude, perception and receptivity.

"With the neutral mask develops primarily the presents of the actor in the room. It puts him in a state of discovery, readiness and receptive availability. It allows him to look at, hear, feel and touch elemental things with a freshness, as if it were the first

³¹ Jacques Lecoq, *Der poetische Körper: Eine Lehre vom Theaterschaffen* (Berlin: Alexander Verlag, 2012) 57.

time. One penetrates into the neutral mask as in a figure, with the difference that it is not a figure, but a being of neutral kind."³²

This quality of 'presence' might include several aspects; one of the ingredients being the stage visibility, which depends on certain principles. To raise your visibility, there has to be something distinguishable, different, noticeable, that catches the observer's attention. For example, an always steady movement without any extremes or interruptions will not catch anyone's eye in the audience for longer time. I present no judgement as to whether being visible on stage is good or bad, but it is important to the learning process to experience the opposite,- the lack of visibility. Exploring this makes it clearer to recognize the own present position on the scale of stage visibility. 'Polarities' is a term used frequently in Gestalt Therapy, referring to the opposite extreme of a characteristic or an emotion. Working with polarities helps to distinguish them clearly and to better recognize oneself. The famous 'presence' of an actor is something that is essential on stage and might become easier to recognize when contrasted with somebody possessing very little presence. As we, in theatre, work with our own bodies as our instruments,- which we are used to doing more or less unconsciously from everyday life-, we normally become quite insensitive to what they actually express. Going back to a zero point can help to be receptive to any expression and experimenting with invisibility sharpens your senses for visibility.

I remember well when, in one movement class in the first year, we did the exercise of 'visibility'. We had to be in front of the audience, our classmates, being as invisible as possible (without hiding). My colleagues told me that I can be splendidly invisible,- which I didn't take as a great compliment at that moment, seeing as how as an actress you aim to be the focus of attention. It is obvious that an actor should know how to be visible as well as present on stage, but it was quite surprising for me that the search would start counterintuitively, reaching backwards to the other extreme, the polarity of visibility. A good way to recognize how to be visible is experiencing the opposite, how being invisible feels like. After that you can explore the changes increasingly, and feel what makes you invisible for the audience. After the exercise, we convened and discussed the tricks and the techniques of invisibility: Not changing movements quickly either in tempo or direction, but moving steadily; not

³² Lecoq, 57.

looking directly at the audience; not making extra or unnecessary movements, but instead adopting quite closed, smooth postures, etc.

What personally helped me the most to seem invisible was really to feel unimportant, overseen, insignificant. During the exercise I enjoyed trying out for myself how am I when I feel invisible, insecure or sad in the company of other people,- and how am I when I feel beautiful, secure, proud and want to be seen. It's interesting to notice that it is not so much a certain movement, trying or begging to be seen,- but really the inner perception of oneself,- feeling interesting and great and worthy of being seen by everybody. I think you can observe that phenomenon in many everyday situations,- in every crowd of people there are some you will notice immediately and others who don't catch anybody's attention. And normally the same principles as in theatre are applicable: you will look at the one who is different from the rest.

3. Jaques Lecoq and the work with masks

*"Part of my interest complies with theatre, another with life. I've always tried to train people who are good at both. Maybe this is an utopia, but I wish that the student is lively in life and an artist on stage."*³³

Jaques Lecoq, 1921- 1999, was a French actor, mime and theatre pedagogue, creator of the 'neutral mask' and founder of his famous 'École Jaques Lecoq acting school' in Paris, emphasizing physical theatre and mask work. The main interest of Lecoq and what I would like to explore here is the expression of the human body and its ability to transform. The use of masks, such as the neutral and the expressive 'Commedia dell'arte' masks, are not considered to be solely an aesthetic or creative detail in a play, but are used to train and form the body in a more acute way. By covering the face and with it the rational and conscious expressions, the mask intensifies the receptiveness of the body and unconscious communication. With or without a mask, Lecoq guides physical movements into uncommon or even nonhuman paths, using the body as the instrument of this transformation. This practice also falls in line with Gestalt therapeutic intentions. Even though it may seem as if Lecoq was more interested in the inner world of an actor, he actually took

³³ Lecoq, 29.

distance from psychological methods to look for 'true memories' or to find intimate experiences which can arise in improvisations, but that, in his opinion, still *"belong to the player"*³⁴. He didn't advocate a so called 'psychological acting' the way the 'Stanislavsky method' does, in which the actor tries to recall and connect with past feelings and memories, but instead wanted his students to be in the present, free and ready to play with the real actual surrounding and demands. In the opinion of Lecoq it's not necessary to dig in the past to tell something about yourself because your inner self already becomes visible through your present behaviour and acting.

*"Reacting means shaping the offer of the outside world. The inner world reveals itself in response to the challenges of the outer world. For playing it is no use, to call your own emotional world, memories and childhood in yourself."*³⁵

3.1. The neutral mask

In his training with students Lecoq worked with different kinds of masks, always using the 'neutral mask' as starting point. This mask usually is white or brown and absolutely plain, mostly made of gesso, papier mâché or, the most elaborate one, of leather. The mask is slightly bigger than the player's face and shouldn't stick to the skin, yet not look huge. In order to encompass different proportions there is a male and a female version, but still without expression of any gender particularities, age, culture or specific features. The mouth is closed but forms a small gap between the lips, as if about to speak, and the eyes are ample, round holes. The facial structure is neither too skinny nor too angular or chubby and the nose is middle sized and straight. Every aspect of the neutral mask should be 'average',- even it might be difficult to decide what that means. The aim of a neutral mask is to express nothing, no emotion, no background and no particular information about the person. Although the mask ends up looking very 'simple', it is extremely difficult to make a good neutral mask with its absence of expression.

As previously mentioned, one of the influences for the invention of the neutral mask was the Japanese Noh-theatre, which Jaques Lecoq appreciated very much.

³⁴ Lecoq, 47.

³⁵ Lecoq, 46.

Although the masks in Noh-theatre have their own complex functions and symbolisms, there is a certain familiarity recognizable when looking at the Western neutral mask. A famous Italian sculptor and poet, Amleto Sartori of Padua, was asked by Lecoq to construct a completely neutral mask. He made the first version of this from brown leather, which was later transformed into white papier mâché and gesso versions.

In the mask- workshop in DAMU class with Mr. Ctibor Turba, we had to choose which of five different white neutral masks was 'perfectly neutral'. It turned out that actually none was one hundred percent neutral, as there was always some detail that didn't entirely fit complete neutrality. This is not mentioned as a criticism of the sculptors capabilities, but to show that neutrality is kind of unreachable,- both in a material shape as well as in an inner state. Primarily this is because there is no such thing as an objective and measurable neutrality, but always subjective point of views. Secondly, in the light of relative neutrality, the slightest 'imperfection' instantly becomes visible. Still, observing and recognizing deviations from a hypothetical norm can reveal much about what neutrality could actually mean. Indeed I believe that in the end these 'imperfections' and 'deviations' from neutrality are the best teachers for subtle expression.

I would like to refer to the neutral mask as a kind of 'no mask', more the opposite of a mask than a mask in an of itself. We could say that the common expressive mask wants to add and emphasise things in certain character, whereas the neutral mask takes any kind of character away. Actually I think its purpose is to remove any kind of mask, be it of role or of trained or developed habits and characteristics. It is not just one more style of mask, it is the mask that goes beyond what all the others convey. Material theatre masks and invisible everyday masks, connecting us with this neutral centre, the 'creative indifference'.

"Through a recognized reference that seeks neutrality, students find their own position. Of course, this absolute and universal neutrality does not exist, it is merely an incentive. In this way the error becomes interesting. The absolute can not be without the error." ³⁶

³⁶ Lecoq, 35.

3.2. Embodiment and identification

Especially in Lecoq's work with the neutral mask,- but also with the expressive masks or exercises of embodiment without masks, of animals, colours, music, matters or objects,- I found this profound research of 'being', the essence, of the 'what is behind' or the 'inner source' of the creature or object. I think the aim of Lecoq's method is not to represent something, for example a cat, but really 'to be' it and express it from within. He doesn't specify this act of imitation to the physical embodiment of actors, but references the mimicry children will do in play and all kinds of artistic expressions. *"Every real artist is a mime. If Picasso could paint a bull in his specific way, it was because he had previously seen so many that he initially internalized the bull inwardly, whereupon his gesture could arise. He mimed!"*³⁷

Obviously you can never become a real cat, but you can try to feel the same energy and connect with the origin of the cat. For me, the Lecoq's methods have a very interesting self reflective aspect, far off from aesthetic superficiality. Even though the audience will in the end judge for themselves whether they really could see a cat or not, the process for the actor is not studying the outcome and merely imitating certain cat-like movements, but finding the form from inside. If the audience can then really 'see' this creature or not depends on if they can connect to the transmitted feelings. While a person is obviously physically incapable of moving just like a real cat, just as they would be incapable of depicting an object or something as abstract as a colour, they can indeed express the feeling we normally associate with cats,- such as pride, arrogance, tenderness etc. by making completely different movements than the original while still presenting the same effect. We cannot see the shape or the movement of a colour, but the emotion it evokes in us can move us and make us move. The word 'emotion' was adapted from the French word '*émouvoir*', which means '*to stir up*', coming from the Latin '*emovere*'.³⁸ So emotions are not a stiff state in a person, but constantly in movement and a being moved.

The teachings of Lecoq enhance and fine-tune all the senses of the students. Similarly to colours or feelings, music and sounds are also act as a partners for the actor. Music has to be embodied, to be recognized, says Lecoq. It should not be

³⁷ Lecoq, 37.

³⁸ "Emotion", Etymology Diccionary, 28 may 2018, <<https://www.etymonline.com/word/emotion>>

confused with a physical 'interpretation' of music. A personal interpretation of music can depend on an individual époque, culture, opinion and point of view,- but the identification lies beyond individual affectations.

Lecoq describes this process as 'touching' the passing notes and observing if we are pulling and pushing them or if they are pulling and pushing us. "*Only parting from this touch the election of a point of view is possible: for it, against it or in it.*"³⁹

The work with music very clearly exemplifies the idea of really become the sound for me, to identify and act 'out' of the sounds instead of illustrating or doubling them or even using music as a decoration for movements. Lecoq talks about 'traces' as a main result of the identifications, marking the body. These experiences are stored in the body of the actor and can resonate through a text many years later and enrich the expression,- "*Because the body remembers!*"⁴⁰

I think it is also important here that one first becomes conscious of silence and stillness, how it feels to be nothing, no sound. Out of the silence, an approached neutrality, the person can then begin to embody and inhabit a rising sound, putting all expressiveness to the body while keeping a relaxed face. The neutral mask can help to find this neutrality in the face, but is not useful for further work, because of its limitation of movement and specific rules. Lecoq describes the importance to approximate and penetrate the element, to embody the music, colour, emotion or as well the expressive mask. "*To penetrate a mask means to feel how it emerged, to discover its base and inner vibrations. Through all that it becomes possible to play it from inside.*"⁴¹

When playing with an expressive mask it is possible to empathise with the character and detect the psychology of the role, or you can let yourself be guided by the form and the structure of the mask itself. The form can evoke movements which in turn lead to the feelings and emotions, so the whole character develops from form of the mask.⁴² Even though this sounds like a process that is oriented primarily on material

39 Lecoq, 77.

40 Lecoq, 68.

41 Lecoq, 83.

form and outer structure, I would still identify the impulses as emanating from inside, since by wearing a mask, the whole body becomes this mask.

I remember well one of Lecoq's exercises with the neutral mask in my movement class at DAMU. The task was to lie on the floor and then, waking up from sleep, discovering some object. You look at it and treat it as if it were the first time in your life that you see something like this, extinguishing all previous experiences and concepts and keeping a neutral position. I found it quite challenging not to fall into acting out a fitting reactions of surprise or fear, playing like a child or clown, as I am used to from similar tasks. It is so easy to immediately create a story about the situation and to imagine what this strange object could be, but the aim of the exercise is just to stay in what you really sense and experience in that current moment,- without interpretations or connections to your real life full of classifications and know-how. While the resulting behaviour might be similar to that of a child or a clown, especially matching the traits of innocence and curiosity, it is important to not try to be a child, which would be to accepting a role and with it a fully formed mask. Rather you try embody a being without age or biography, but with an innocent, curious spirit which is directly connected with its sensations and impulses instead of its rational thinking.

Masks stimulate the physical expression, the identification and the embodiment of unconscious parts and roles. While covering the face, masks intensify the body sensitivity and connected the person underneath with their intuition and subconsciousness.

3.3. Alienation

Masks always reveal a double message, mark two sides, two opposites; the inside and the outside, proximity and distance, identification and alienation,- polarities that might appear within the work and they provide interesting opportunities to reflect on inner self awareness and external perception. On one hand, the embodiment of sounds, colours, animals, feelings, objects, etc. allows one to not only become very close to the element in question, even to identify with it. On the other hand, masking and unmasking also enables one to take a step back and regard the object from outside, recognising that this is not (completely) you. Seen from outside the mask

42 Lecoq, 84.

has an elevated, curved and arched profile, from inside it is hollow and sunken in,- an empty cave to slide into. Both sides appeal to you, as player and observer. While the own face - the facade, the 'everyday mask' - is not easy to see on yourself and even more difficult to take off or change, the tangible theatre mask allows to step in and out smoothly,- to try it out, to identify with it and then to separate from it and distance yourself again. This switch from embodiment and identification to alienation is very important for the awareness process and thus to core of the Gestalt therapeutic approach: After experiencing the identification and completely 'being' the element, for example anger, you take distance and consider that anger might be a part of you, but you are not the anger itself; it is only one aspect among many others, one variety among many other phases and faces. Alienation is an essential method in Gestalt therapeutic work and even if it doesn't require the use of masks, they can be a good supporting mechanism. Basically our problem usually isn't feeling angry, sad or depressed,- negative feelings are part of human life,- but lacking the capacity to step back from these emotions, not giving them more than their adequate importance and weight. I think alienation is not only the opposite of identification, but its natural continuation and in the end, part of the whole. The idea is to identify with many different feelings and characters, as Lecoq proposes in his work, which makes alienation equally important to acting. An actor who masters all his registers also includes and needs the opposite poles, stepping out and perceiving the mask from an external neutral point.

Alienation is also part of the 'Verfremdungseffekt'⁴³ and Bertolt Brecht's 'Epic theatre', in which the actors continuously destroy the audience's identification with the characters in order to archive a critical reflection and distanced perspective from the themes the play brings up.

In his Epic or 'Didactic' theatre Brecht works with the idea of alienation and dissociation, taken from oriental influences. With this quite unfamiliar way of acting and the distance between actor and his character, Brecht pretends to detain the audience from identifying with the emotions expressed by the characters, they then can be able to more clearly reflect and judge the presented incidents and social conflicts. His technique of distance requires the actor to show a double appearance on stage,- Firstly as the role within the play and secondly as themselves. The actor

⁴³ German term for "alienation effect", based on Bertolt Brecht.

should not let his own personality disappear, on the contrary, they should stay as a real and normal person as anybody else in the audience.⁴⁴

Aware of both sides of the mask, the audience should understand the point of view of the characters but not stick with it, in order to criticize and change the system. But the pedagogic- reflective part can not happen without a primal identification with the perspective, as *"one has to have entered into an issue, before you can be against it"*.⁴⁵ Brecht implements this break of identification very radically via this

'Verfremdungseffekt'- but there exist several further possibilities to let the audience know about the actor/ person behind the mask, which is also used in contemporary films or theatre plays. This happens not only for educational or political intentions like those of Brecht, but also to more intimately include the audience, or sketch the character in a more complete way, also including the person without the 'everyday mask'.

Other styles of theatre and film, and definitely most mainstream productions, try to keep up the illusion without disappointing the audience with another kind of reality. Our 'everyday masks', the role of 'the funny guy' or 'the helpful mother' which we play in our families, with friends and in society are normally part of mainstream technique and should not be revealed. And yet it could be very healthy to involve a bit of 'Verfremdungseffekt' in our daily life's masquerade. The Gestalt Therapy actually doesn't worry about a sad face in a difficult phase, as the problems arise not with sadness itself but from when the person cannot pass out of the state of depression anymore and doesn't see the potential of another reality. If the person could take distance and consider the depression (or any kind of feeling) as a temporary, transitory state, desperation and despair would not get out of control. So it could be curative to feel happiness without getting stuck in it, to feel sad without getting drowned by sadness.

Similarly, it is important not to make the mask exactly the same size as one's face when one constructs a mask. According to Lecoq, acting with masks needs a certain

44 Fernández and Montero. 82-110.

45 Lecoq, 77.

distance between face and mask. If the masks sticks to the face, it becomes "*a dead mask*",⁴⁶ - a certain distance is required to enable the connection.

Lecoq emphasizes the necessity of actor and character having to be different. Actors should never end up playing themselves on stage. His demand evokes an interesting question mark for me in regard to the 'Authorial Acting' approach: is it still possible to not play your own personality while I remain the author of my own performance, when I create the script and all theatrical elements? Lecoq requires you to play somebody who is different than you but still to involve yourself. Not to play 'oneself' but 'with oneself',⁴⁷ -this is the double-edged sword an actor always has to work with.

I find it interesting to reflect on where the 'real' person ends and where the character begins. It might be easier to play a distant role and interpret someone else's text, but I think it's also an useful challenge to be the creator and author of your play and still keep a distance and certain alienation to the developed character. I think playing 'yourself' on stage also requires the its own correct technique and training and can be more challenging for an actor than just turning into a complete new character and personality. Lecoq insists in the creation of a 'real theatre character' and not a 'life character', making his students play characters that are as distant from their own personality as possible.⁴⁸

As it happens in the training exercise of '(Inter)acting with the Inner Partner', you stay yourself, private, but in front of an audience. In my opinion the main issue is not to play a 'theatre character' or a 'life character', but the actor's ability to distinguish both and to know where the elements of the character originate from.

Lecoq's physical approach stands in stark contrast to the psychological methods like for example Stanislavsky's. Still, this doesn't mean that approaching a figure through physical exploration would result in a psychologically less deep or unemotional character. Perhaps the opposite is true,- becoming a sound, an animal, a colour, an element of nature or a matter like oil, metal or any kind of object requires a lot of empathy and the capacity to feel the process from inside. To really identify with a

46 Lecoq, 80.

47 Lecoq, 89.

48 Lecoq, 92.

dissolving piece of sugar, losing your life and body, can be at least as dramatic and intense as remembering your first heartbreak in high school.

"Crumpled paper, a piece of sugar that dissolves in liquid, are movements of extreme tragic density. The tragedy of matter springs from its passive character. It suffers!"⁴⁹

4. Authorial Acting

I have to admit that when I decided to study acting, I somehow expected there would be certain movements or tricks to learn, a technique that I could learn off by heart or a method of how to represent a specific character. After finishing two years of practical classes I realized that actually nobody had taught me what or how to play, instead I was encouraged to recognize which tools already exist within myself and then to finding out what I can express with what I have. It therefore did not come as a surprise to me that according to Professor Ivan Vyskočil, founder of the Authorial Acting program, this specific acting training is more about cultivating individual creativity and 'being' in a state of creative responsiveness than acquiring techniques.⁵⁰ In this way it is obviously different from disciplines like for example classical ballet, where you study and practice specific movements, positions and techniques you haven't been able to do before. Acting is more subtle,- even if you might not improve significantly while exercising your voice and body and maybe never become a good singer, you still open up the existing potential and become aware of the present material and possibilities. The first step is to become aware of what you are expressing all the time already. Sometimes it can even come as a surprise that you are! To recognize and distinguish your personal style exactly is important for the creation of a character,- if you want to avoid unconsciously reproducing more or less the same clichéd character in every play.

During my two years of classes in the Authorial Acting International Master program in DAMU Prague, I was able to gain an overview of what my themes and abilities are, what I express without doing anything specific and what people see and expect

49 Lecoq, 125.

50 Ivan Vyskočil, "A Discussion with Ivan Vyskočil about (Inter)acting with the Inner Partner", translated by Alexander Komlosi, Downloads, 25.4.2018, <<http://www.interactingwiththeinnerpartner.org>>

from me. Furthermore I could go through a process of searching for the authentic source, the personal voice, creative topics and ideas, the natural body posture and way of moving. I didn't see a connecting thread between the different disciplines in the beginning, until I finally recognized the connection researching my own 'me', regarding one's physical, vocal and mental reality in a constant process of 'going out of yourself' and 'coming back to yourself'.⁵¹ So in every practical class I could identify as the first step to focus on the present situation, allowing a time of insight and stillness, like a personal inventory before stepping out. I now see that some classes of the Master program are especially connected to and relevant for the research of the 'person behind the mask' which I want to examine and include in my reflections:

(Inter)acting with the Inner Partner, Training for Movement and mask workshop, Voice, Authorial Acting and the creation of an own Authorial Project.

4.1. (Inter)acting with the Inner Partner

One of the core disciplines of the Master program '(Inter)acting with the Inner Partner' deals with the multiplicity of different inner personalities and assumes that there are several 'partners' or different aspects of one's own personality which can interact with each other. (Inter)acting is an physical, mental and integrative discipline that should be combined with other psychosomatic classes such as Voice, Speech, Movement and others. According to its founder, Professor Ivan Vyskočil, the goal of this practice is 'nothing',- meaning that it is not the result or product but the process of exploration itself that counts. Just being in emptiness, without any intentions, topics or keys, is the basis for original creation.

What really happens in (Inter)acting classes is not easy to explain and I myself missed an honest exchange and discussion with my classmates about the benefits of this work, but without a doubt it is motivated by a kind of self-exploration. "*For most it can be, and often is, a path of self-discovery, self-understanding and self-acceptance; for many a path of self-realization as well.*"⁵² This experimental class, created by the czech actor, writer, psychologist and teacher Ivan Vyskočil in Prague

⁵¹ Ivan Vyskočil, "(Inter)acting with the Inner Partner. Authorization Code", translated by Alexander Komlosi, Downloads, 25.4.2018, <<http://www.interactingwiththeinnerpartner.org>>

⁵² Ivan Vyskočil, "(Inter)acting with the Inner Partner. Authorization Code", translated by Alexander Komlosi, Downloads, 25.4.2018, <<http://www.interactingwiththeinnerpartner.org>>

during the 1960's, in which during group sessions each participant is invited to improvise, to play, speak and interact with themselves alone in front of the audience, *"is for nothing, until you discover that it's for something and realize what that something is."*⁵³

According to Vyskočil it is neither a technique nor a method, but an open space for experimentation and searching, a path to deeper understanding.

I think the purpose of this contemporary, improvisational practice of acting out several aspects of one's own personality is quite similar to the more traditional work with (expressive) masks, as well as to the concept of inner 'everyday' masks which I mentioned earlier - always assuming that within a person several 'me's' coexist. During the interaction between two internal partners, the body, face, voice and expression can completely change, as if you were switching from one mask to another, playing two characters at (almost) the same time. But when I tried to step out of one character, 'taking the mask off' if for example I was getting annoyed by this personality and just wanted to be 'myself' or neutral, I experienced that this is not easy either and I just fell into another character, another part of me, another mask. The question of 'who truly is the one behind all these masks' can be considered during these sessions, but will likely stay a vague approximation in a search without a clear answer. This is similar to trying to approach neutrality, which we know can never be reached completely. We also can never play the true 'self' character in (Inter)acting with the Inner Partner, even if we try to be truthful. Yet the act of stepping back from one character, taking off the mask, using the 'Verfremdungseffekt' can be considered an interesting exploration in and of itself, especially as one gains insight into the complex layers between the inner partners and neutrality. The precise moment of taking distance, the few seconds of de-masking, seems to be the most interesting part for me. It is an impulsive reaction to what you have said or done, being aware that this is not (only) you. I suppose that if we get to know all our own facets and learn how to switch from one to another without sticking to any single aspect, we can recognize that we are neither this nor that one,- in reality we are actually nobody and everybody at the same time, putting on different masks continually.

⁵³Ivan Vyskočil, "The Discipline. (Inter)acting with the Inner Partner", translated by Alexander Komlosi, 25.4.2018, <<http://www.interactingwiththeinnerpartner.org>>

4.2. Voice and breath

*"Observing the breath not only allows us to attend to it, but also we can perceive the internal states which, unconsciously, are reflected in it. Breathing is a basic function of the body that facilitates all others, but it is also an element of non-verbal communication. As receivers, we capture the subtleties about the state of the other in the way he breathes, in his agitation or his calm ..."*⁵⁴

Breathing is the fundamental basis for all physical actions and for life itself. In the Voice and Speech class in DAMU I could experience the importance of breath and its connection with the body and emotions, the psychosomatic connotation. In our voice,- the singing voice in particular-, all emotions and tensions become audible. It is a very precise instrument that can be fine-tuned with the right body posture but also inner readiness, presence and emotions. You aim to release tensions and open up a bigger resonance in the body through physical exercises, but also imagination and visualisations, in order to achieve a free, full voice. This can be done by the right stance,- relaxing legs, pelvis, shoulders, arms, neck, face etc., but at the same time grounding yourself over the feet to activating the body support,- and always, smiling! I was frequently surprised at how much a smile and the resulting 'positive' muscle tension influences the voice. Mechanic adaptations aside, a positive imagination, creating emotions of joy and contentment, and a clear inner picture of communication can shape and improve the voice radically.

In this class I also discovered that the first step to improvement is not longing for a 'better' voice, but to discover 'your' voice and somehow yourself through the sound. A tone may sound beautiful, but you can learn to recognize if it is authentically yours or not. I suppose it is important to first know and develop your voice before you can form and modify it. With body posture and breath you try not to pretend and to not make anything up, but to be nothing apart from the true voice.

Gestalt Therapy is also very familiar with the idea that body, breath and movement are vehicles for the work with emotions and that the body experiences everything we live in a more genuine and authentic way.

The Russian director Vsévolod Meyerhold, who developed a system of actor training based on physical etudes, took distance from the psychological approaches of his

⁵⁴ El teatro como oportunidad, "Respirar el escenario", translated by author, 21.8.2017, 25.4.2018, <<https://www.elteatrocomooportunidad.com/2017/08/21/respirar-el-escenario>>

time and required his actors and students principally to know their physical capacities, voice and respiration. This attention on breath and its relation to the lived feelings and awareness is not only close to the Gestalt Therapy approach, but has common origins in Asian philosophy and theatre practice.

In Gestalt Therapy the psychosomatic influence of breath, sound and voice is used to discover and experience what the inner situation or conflict is communicating. Therapeutic work with voice doesn't try to change something at first sight, to stop a scream or improve a sound during a session, but to go deeper into and through the experience, like a going down to the bottom of the conflict in order to then raise it. The Spanish Gestalt therapists and theatre workers Laura Fernández and Isabel Montero describe different methods and Gestalt therapeutic techniques in relation to theatre in their book "*Theatre as opportunity*", which I also could experience in some workshops in Barcelona and Mexico. They approve of the advantages from theatre for raising consciousness, as it offers you a well defined and limited playground, where the process is easier to follow than in normal life. The scenario limits what happens in a scene, for which it is easier for us to take a tour of what has happened, than for the flow of our life. This way we can see when the breathing block appears, when we use only the upper part of the lungs or when we take advantage of all our capacity, breathing deep and complete using the diaphragm breathing.

4.3. Movement and embodiment

In the two years of movement classes in DAMU I could experience how the body becomes an other receptive organ, sensitive to inner and outer space, impulses, qualities and the group through exercises of stillness, introspection and attention to breath and emotions. I could begin to comprehend what 'body attention' implies and classes sometimes seemed almost like awareness practise, very soft and attentive. When in the first year I was told that we primarily had to get rid of pre-existing behaviours and patterns, 'deconstructing' our knowledge and start from zero, I first thought that it was a special measure for our group only, for not having studied the right acting techniques before or for having visited the wrong schools. It took me a while to understand that everybody gets into 'bad habits' automatically and that life itself teaches you a way of thinking, moving and expressing, whether you want it to

or not. Our bodies are programmed and trained depending on physical structure and heritage, practice of sports and movement from childhood on, illnesses and obstacles, but also emotional and mental influences. So it is not so much about 'good' or 'bad' habits, but more about every kind of unconscious positions, customs and expressions we all have. As we are,- luckily-, still not robots, we cannot just press the 'erase all' button and go back to the neutral, clean, free position of newborns.

However, approximate to the so called 'neutrality' can be achieved within many varied exercises and special physical training, since it is a baseline from which developments in different directions can rise. As an actor or actress you should be able to create the character and body posture according to the required character and not as the result of coincidences, conditioning or habits.

Jaques Lecoq's approach and that of physical theatre is a gradual development leading towards a higher body awareness. The use of the neutral mask is only one of Lecoq's numerous methods; all designed to heighten the body's sensitivity and strengthen its expression. In movement class we explored several of his techniques and exercises. The aim in every case is to silence the face, to deconstruct used body habits and trained patterns and to explore movement in a new freedom, with or without the use of masks. Facial features are relaxed and the body takes over all the senses. Since eyes have a soft view,- perceiving without focusing, the whole body converts to an eye; the skin can feel who is around, perceives attraction and repulsion, impulses and their qualities. The movement class helped me to silence my brain and instead let the body talk.

I especially enjoyed the imaginary work, visualizing walking on sand, being wind or water or embodying different colours or emotions. The instructions and inputs we were given allowed us enough freedom to experience and explore whatever appeared in the moment. To be able to let yourself be driven by body sensations alone requires a certain peaceful atmosphere, so you can let yourself identify completely with the hot sand, the colours or emotions, without rationally judging or questioning yourself. This peaceful atmosphere helps the transition into a certain kind of ready, relaxed working mode. I think the approached neutrality can not only become present in the white mask, but also using the whole space or atmosphere, supported by music for example. It might not be easy to decide what sort of music

sounds 'neutral'; but as there is music that provokes joy, aggression and all kind of feelings, so I suppose there must also exist sounds that simply serve to make us aware and ready. These sounds could for example be the gong which is used in Eastern meditation practices: it should not compel you to choose any direction, but just make you awake and aware for whatever might come.

In the movement classes I felt the well selected music to be a big support for the development of intuition and sensibility in the body, on top of being a refined communication tool. A fact that became especially apparent as we were working with a multicultural language mix of Czech, English and German. The correct music choices can open up images of sand, storm, heat and all kind of elements and emotions, and painting imaginary colours with the whole body felt almost like moving in an impulsive, rationally difficult to define trance.

I also got to know the practise of Feldenkrais as helpful method for raising body awareness. These very cautious and subtle motions allow to distinguish and to refine the own senses, like tuning a music instrument.

4.4. Masks training with Ctibor Turba

When I first began to learn about the neutral mask several years ago, I didn't like it too much. To me, it was connected to a very old traditional style of pantomime or to strange white clowns which I didn't regard as very pleasant. Experiencing the work with the neutral mask by myself, from inside it, also changed my view on it from the outside and now I enjoy the subtlety and details of movement which this mask shapes so well, recognizing that there is no better method to wake up your body than silencing your face. My first contact with the neutral mask was during a workshop of the Gestalt Therapy training program in Mexico. The group was split up and every participant with a white mask had one personal observer in the audience, with whom he could reflect on the experience afterwards. Music and verbal instructions guided our inner journey and movements and I remember feeling extremely vulnerable, transparent and hypersensitive to all sounds and impressions while I had the mask on my face. The neutral mask somehow erased my convictions about who I am and made me extremely receptive to all sensations and feelings,- even to negative ones.

During the two workshops with Ctibor Turba, a Czech actor, pantomime, director and teacher at the department of mime in HAMU Prague, I learned a lot about neutral and expressive masks, the techniques from Jaques Lecoq and embodiment in general.

Under the neutral mask I can feel that my facial expressions cannot be seen and that I have to communicate differently. It is like when you want to tell somebody something but you speak different languages, so you have to discover a creative way to make yourself understood. With the face covered I can feel my body much more intensely and precisely. Working with the neutral mask had a positive influence over time on my physical expressiveness in general, so now I understand better how to put the attention on my body, even when my face is not covered.

Trying out five different 'neutral' masks from Mr. Turba was very interesting. The small differences between these white masks in shape, size of eyes, volume of the lips, angle of the nose etc. gave me a feeling of what 'neutrality' looks like and if absolute neutrality is even possible. You become aware of the tiny distractions and how easily (and unconsciously) a certain character and expression can shine through eyes that are too big or slanting, a high front, lips that are too fleshy or thin. So even though these masks were constructed by great sculptors, it seemed that there always was something not quite right that ruined neutrality. This gave me an idea of how difficult or even impossible it is for your whole body and movements to be completely neutral. In the end the final purpose of this work is not neutrality, but rather the opposite, to be more expressive. While it is important to be aware of all expressive details in your body, movement, voice and speech it is equally vital to learn to skip the ones you don't need and emphasize the ones you intend to prioritize. It is amazing how the neutral mask is like an amplification and makes all personal features and every peculiarity clearly visible, almost like a caricature.

In the work with the mask I can also feel a different connection with the audience. More than 'hiding' behind the mask, you are revealing something different that only the audience can see. As you have limited vision under the mask and cannot see yourself, you need the observers to give you precise feedback on if and how the mask 'works'. You can only learn about masks via the reactions of the audience. This dependence and interaction with my colleagues, supportive and guiding observers, creates an intense atmosphere of collaboration and mutual confidence.

One exercise with the neutral mask, in which we have to establish a specific space for the audience and then cross it without expressing any character, is a big challenge for me. On one side you should show the space well, (mine first one was a closed, dark hallway, which then opened up to light) and at the same time there should be no personal expression of fear, astonishment or any kind of visible emotions. There is a thin line between what is a neutral and necessary description of the space and what is too much interpretation and characterisation,- this is the central point and moment of learning.

In another exercise with the neutral mask we changed from neutral walking to the expression of a certain feeling. You change slowly from neutrality into the emotion, for example 'hysteria', starting from one light impulse in the arm, becoming bigger and bigger until the whole body is in this hysteric movement. It was impressive for me to really become the fear and excitement myself, to feel the hysterical breath not only in my lungs, but in my whole body. As I don't have a face, my whole body becomes a frightened eye, becomes a foot that wants to run and hide, a mouth that wants to scream, a heart that beats faster and faster.

Observing my colleague who was tasked with transforming into 'masculinity' I could see her interpreting the masculine energy. She was not trying to act and behave like a man, but to find the masculine qualities. She used a lot of straight, direct lines in her whole body, her movements were outgoing, very clear, powerful and sharp. She also had some protective, hiding, bowing movements which I couldn't read so well, I suppose because of our different views and experiences with masculinity.

In this exercise I could clearly experience the intensifying of a small impulse of 'hysteria' thanks to the neutral mask. I got the impression that through the physical neutrality in the body you are better able to identify the essence of an emotion, since it contrasts with empty background. The contrasting 'Gestalt' to its background is also the main point of interest in the therapeutic context, as you cannot work with something that you can't distinguish and recognize. The Gestalt therapeutic approach assumes that all different kinds of emotions are part of the human reality and that by recognizing and integrating the repressed aspects you can grow as a person and widen your possibilities and resources. Lecoq points to emotions that everybody can relate to somehow, more or less. Even if I wouldn't consider myself a hysterical person, nor my colleague a masculine woman, they are qualities which we

have in a small doses within ourselves and we can intensify and let grow through the catalyst of neutrality.

Besides the training with masks, we also worked with Mr. Turba on the embodiment of the four seasons, colours, the four temperaments of Hippocrates and other abstract exercises by Jaques Lecoq. Even without mask, these tasks still have the purpose to raise body awareness, to 'be' in the body, letting your body speak and to recognize the quality of a season, a colour or a temperament as part of your own repertoire.

It became apparent to me how easy and frequently we use clichéd expressions and indicate labels, which are boring and superficial on stage and limit our truthfulness in everyday life. In this exercise, as you can't use the hand gestures to give signs in a symbolic or common way, you have to go under the surface and to find the rhythm, the energy, the pattern, I almost want to say 'the soul' of a feeling. Everything that this emotion (hysteria) means to me and is normally expressed in my face, by mimics or by words has to develop concentrated in one arm. We also worked with colours in the same way. Instead of describing the colour, such as for example showing 'brown' with pantomimic language of the earth on the floor, you try to feel it inside, becoming a brown, falling autumn leaf yourself. It is not even necessary to really sink down, which might again already be a cliché, but to live this grounded state with a certain weight and slow rhythm, an energy that calls to the inside. A contrasting energy would be for example blue. Without pointing to water or the sky or flying like a bird you can expand the air in your lungs and feel the lightness and liberty this colour generates. Colours are only light in different frequencies and speed and it is well known that they have an effect on our state of mind and our emotions. Inhabiting colours offers us the possibility of going deeper into emotions, exploring 'expansion' and 'freedom' in a physical way, far away from easy descriptions like jumping around like a happy child. I think this is very interesting for the Gestalt therapeutic work, at least the experiences I made in Mexico had a similar quality. It is not enough to exclaim for example that maybe you feel weak, without energy. But you have to search for and discover this feeling in your body, recognize its small impulses and let it grow to its maximum expansion. You can become aware that this feeling is one of multiple colours within yourself and that the weakness is equally as true as its polarity, a shining red or blue.

In these exercises of body awareness I observed many parallels to the Gestalt therapeutic approach and its work of inhabitation of emotions and integration of polarities. In both fields you try to explore the underlying source, avoiding stereotypes and fixed ideas about how something feels or should feel. To take a step further as a person, to become deeper as an actor, you have to break through the first layer of settled clichés and experiment with what blue, fun, freedom or air really feels like and means to you personally. Gestalt Therapy tries to avoid analysing, explaining or diagnosing a problem, but lets the person experience what and how it is subjectively. The neutralisation of face, rational thinking and expression opens up the inner sensors, instincts and unconscious impulses for this exploration.

In the exercise of the four temperaments of Hippocrates (fun, melancholy, phlegmatic, choleric) you have to express the emotional state with only one arm and covered face, without using symbols, signs or conventional everyday use. I was asked to express 'fun' with one arm and 'melancholy' with the other. This exploration with covered face is very useful to explore the real essence of these emotions, without translating them to some agreed and settled movements.

I especially enjoyed the exercises with the elements water, air, earth and fire. The element 'water' has no form,- so you have to fight against every common, usual and predictable movement. You should erase the images of water we train since childhood, like making regular waves with the arms. Water has no regularity in form or rhythm and is an element of constant surprise. I found it really fascinating to not imitate a fountain, a river, a waterfall, the ocean, but to really feel and to be it. That means letting go all your preconceptions of how water should behave and letting yourself sink into it and surprise yourself with sudden changes in direction and rhythm, feeling a soft wave in the feet while the head gets turned by a heavy current. Every part of the body feels its own pushing and pulling, is divided in millions of drops, each one with its own playfulness and life, as water doesn't have any inner structure or logic, no borders or homogeneity. It can you let float through the room or crash on the floor, without any rational decision to do so. It is a very beautiful, almost meditative exercise, where every fibre of your body is concentrated and attentive on how the water will move it the next moment.

The following exercise with objects was completely unknown and surprising for me. Instead of manipulating or playing with an object, we tried to be the object in action,

doing its movements and development. So I was watching the movement of a dropping ping pong ball, and then repeating the same movements in me. I tried to embody the elastic quality of the ball, falling in slow motion on the floor, the clash and running on the ground till stillness.

In another exercise without a mask we had to choose some food and eat it on a table in a certain animalistic, exaggerated character and style. I decided to eat a banana in a very unusual, sensual and greedy way. I didn't think of a specific animal, but just felt a kind of animalistic instinct, like seeing this banana on the table the first time in my life and discovering it with all my senses. To see the colour, it's freckles and hooked shape, to touch the soft skin, feel and smell it, is an almost sensual adventure. I opened and peeled the banana from the side, in a way I never had done before. I enjoyed discovering the banana very innocently, like a child playing with dough, not pretending to do something creative or funny, or letting myself be led by some erotic connotation or sexual clichés. Even the creamy texture of the banana caused a very sensual reaction, which I regard as the result of an immediate physical contact and not as an idea.

One of the last exercises with Mr.Turba involved us trying to be animals, again with neutral masks. I find it to be a very interesting and almost scientifically investigational work to transform in different types of birds, like storks, owls, roosters etc. Once again it depended on very small and precise details, like rhythm and respiration which make a certain bird recognizable or not. To embody a rooster I first had to find a typical posture and then the right rhythm of movement. The short turns of the head and the lifting of one leg have to happen at a specific speed. I felt a character coming up in me,- male, proud, authoritarian, not very clever, but also alert and watchful. It is very refreshing to work with animalistic elements as a base to create your character in theatre work, such as I also tried to do in my final performance. You find yourself getting more connected to a certain physicality than only psychological patterns and the whole character becomes more lively and visual.

We finished the workshops with Mr.Turba with some of his expressive masks. To me they felt like the crowning glory of all the mask work we had done previously and they automatically brought up a reverent feeling, as if they were some kind of holy artefact.

I tried the 'White Birdman',- a white mask with a long, birdlike beak and small, round eyes. I thought that the mask fit my tall figure well and made me feel even taller. I felt like a kind of teacher, rational, clever and a little arrogant, high above the others. It made me straighten up my body and neck and just do head movements in a quick and sharp rhythm, as if I was observing and judging the others curiously. I really liked the mask, which made me feel like a strange, funny character without having to do much. I held my hands behind my back and was just watching and being watched, like a celebrity. I could recognize some of the characteristics in myself and without exaggerating too much, they became very visible and funny thanks to the mask.

"The actor is lost when he falls into the presentation of his own ridiculousness, one does not play the clown, one is one when the inner being, the primal fears of childhood come to light".⁵⁵

At this point I feel it is fitting to also mention our clownery work in movement class and finding our own 'inner clown'. I remember that the red clown nose is also called 'the smallest mask on earth', which I think is very true and beautiful. In this case it becomes obvious that the mask is not hiding something, but revealing something hidden. We all, down to the most grumpy old man, have some kind of innocent, curious and child-like being in us, which in daily life doesn't get many chances to appear. The clownish aspects of our personality are not necessarily what we consider worth to showing when we want to be taken seriously in our jobs and businesses. The clown in us has to do with an openness, good faith and giving mood, qualities which we often learned to not present in an unprotected way, in order to not get hurt. As the clownish qualities from our childhood don't fit the usual demands on a successful social life, they waste away more and more until we don't register or recognize them any more. The use of the red nose, which helps to rediscover the own curiosity, innocence and clownish simplicity, can be very surprising, especially if you were aware that you can be terribly funny.

⁵⁵Lecoq, 204.

4.5. Personal experiences with performances

My Authorial project - "Bremen Calling"

A one woman performance with violin and masks. June, 2017, DAMU, Prague.



In my final performance I was lucky enough to be able to include everything I enjoy working with: fairy tales, music, memories of personal experiences and masks. As it was an authorial piece, I had to be the author of all elements: The author of the story and script, the set and the music, direction and choreography of movements, construction of the masks, stage design and performance.

During the previous months I had constructed four full-head masks out of clay and covered them with newspaper. The main characters of my favourite childhood fairytale, 'The musicians of Bremen', are a donkey, a dog, a cat and a rooster.

The process of constructing their masks was very beautiful and relaxing for me and gave me time to identify and put myself into the characters of these four animals. I wanted to tell an own story with the traditional fairy tale, using the characters to create human animals, an artistic style I find very attractive.

My starting point was my connection to the fairy tale of 'The musicians of Bremen' and the idea that the elemental conflict and constellation of the figures is very adaptable to many contemporary and realistic situations. I like the high symbolism and the animals' will to survive in the story: A donkey, a dog, a cat and a rooster are living in their separate farm houses and homes. Even though all of them have worked and served a lot in their lives, now they're in danger of being killed by their owners for not being useful anymore. But instead of waiting passively for death, they decide to save their lives, to depart and start a new beginning in an unknown place. From the donkey to the rooster, one animal after the other animates the next one to escape and come along, passing on the dream of a better place to live. So these very different animals,- which normally don't fit together at all-, become a group of friends, a family, united through the same danger and the same wish: To survive.

For me it is a story of people who are not accepted and no longer are able to live where they are, but still don't resign or give up. And it is a story about the power of dreams, or even illusions,- of a better life, worth looking and fighting for. What inspires these four runaways to venture on this big journey is their love of music and their maybe quite naive dream to become famous musicians. To me it sounds like a poetic call of art that promises freedom and fulfilment. They leave to Bremen, maybe without even knowing where or what Bremen exactly is, but music somehow guides them, like a voice in their hearts.

However, instead of reaching Bremen, the place of their dreams, they stop at a forest hut from thieves on their way, where they find a comfortable accommodation, a save place with plenty of food. So they decide to scare the thieves away and to stay there forever. This interesting turn in the story can be seen as a happy end and lucky coincidence in their unpromising search for Bremen, or as a resigning compromise and a giving up of their original expectations. In either case the story invited me to wonder about the people who left the danger of their homes to follow a dream, an ideal in an unknown place, but then reaching a comfortable place instead. Would they really live there happily ever after, together as the friends they had

become or would the stolen thieves' house corrupt and transform them into thieves as well? How would the reality in an easy and materially comfortable surrounding change the spirit of the searchers, who followed an inner call of the heart?

I regard this house of thieves as the crux of the matter for me,- the intersection between dream and reality, vision and materialism, oppressed and oppressor, searching and resigning, longing and acceptance, lust for life and weariness. Even if this might be a very peculiar interpretation of the story, it inspired me to relate these questions to actual circumstances and personal experiences. First I felt very tempted to craft a storyline dealing with the topic of refugees and the political discussion around those people searching for a better life. But then I decided to focus more on a psychological and personal point of view, combining all characters,- the four animals-, into one person.

Here the play with masks brought in a new layer for me. It is not only the head of an animal, which the actor puts on to represent it, but it symbolizes the emphasis on one peculiar characteristic of the person, in between many others. During a life, but even during one day, we switch between different characteristics, moods and aspects of our personality. Sometimes we feel as sly as a fox and sometimes as silly as a goose. As we keep switching between the masks and sometimes even playing without any mask, a question pops up: So who is the one behind all these masks? Who are you when you don't act in any character,- who are you in reality?

During the weeks working on my performance, I was inspired by the idea of invisible, psychological masks and how they stood in relation to the animal's characters, Lecoq's exercises of embodying animals and humanizing animals in different grades and the always remaining question,- who am I with an unmasked face?

In my project I wear all four masks in different moments, depending on which animalistic aspect of the figure is the most relevant and dominant in every scene and situation. Associations with animals are a delightfully creative outlet to me, because the stereotypes are part of our everyday expressions. In languages of different cultures the characteristic attributions to animals are often similar, even though they can be expressed differently in sayings and proverbs, which I find very interesting to compare to each other. In every case they invite to relate and connect the animal's qualities with their alignments to human types and stereotypes.

For example: To be as stubborn as a mule or to be an obstinate donkey. The dog would be loyal, the cat proud, elegant and independent, but also playful, kittenish and sweet. The rooster would also be proud and arrogant, but he rules over the others with his voice, and is 'the only cock in the yard'. A pig/ sow would be dirty and lazy, but also a symbol of good luck and so on.

The story in my play, a combination of autobiographical elements and related observations, is placed in the rehearsal room of a successful musician,- representing the fairytale's hut of the thieves, in which the four animals decide to stay forever. I chose an ambitious violin player as the main character, who is the amalgam of all other roles, because at the first glance it looks like the fulfilment of the animals' dream: to become a musician. In the violinist is gathered the longing for art and music, but also for success and recognition. It is the character of the present, the actual facet of the complex figure, who is remembering past situations. Furthermore I can recognize myself in the violin player, as I also play this instrument. For this role I chose the rooster mask,- representing the attributes of self-confidence and pride, but also the jazzy way of moving. In the story's present, in the rehearsal room of the violinist, the aspects of the rooster character are the most dominant ones in the multilayered figure. But the whole person consists of many other facets, which were more dominant in the past. They become visible in the childhood memories and flashbacks during the play. In the first childhood memory, at the age of five years, the figure switches into the cat mask and character. It is the innocent playfulness of a small child, cute and a little clumsy, that is reminiscent of a kitten. In a later memory of the character, during schooldays, the aspects of softness and devotion to her classmates play a more primary role. This child, about twelve years of age, longs for friendships, playmates and being part of the peer group,- even if they bully or 'dog' her. It is the mask of the dog that characterizes this life period best, condemned to being an 'underdog'. The last aspect of the character is a memory as a young adult, falling in love. Here the obstinate and 'stupid donkey' (a German proverb) becomes visible, when one's love is not being reciprocated any more and the lover is abandoned. Instead of accepting the reality and letting the beloved go, the dominant characteristic of this character is her stubbornness and the unwillingness to give in. This character is represented by the donkey mask.

My project is a reflection on different layers of personality, memories and appearances, in which the experiences from the past mix with the present personality of the character. While the main character is waiting to give an important concert, she remembers different moments during her life, when she was not a successful violin player, but a completely different person: soft, shy and hurt in several occasions. In her flashbacks she reconnects with painful experiences of incomprehension, exclusion or rejection and realizes how those feelings transformed the cute kitten, the trustful dog and the confident donkey she had all once been into her actual personality: an arrogant, self protective and lonely cock.

In her rage about those soft and weak aspects of personality which she is remembering and the fear to reconnect with the denied feelings of sadness, hurt and abandon, the cock- character collapses as of inner fragmentation and disconnection. Taking off this last mask of the journey, she is able to look at them clearly, from a certain distance, without judgement or rejection.

Even there is no neutral mask in this performance, the moment when the main character finally sees her life in a sober and mature way could be regarded as a step towards neutrality and inner equilibration. She no longer recognizes herself in any of these masks, and yet though in all of them sees a depiction of herself, realizing that she is nobody and everybody at the same time.

5. Conclusion

*"To be oneself is, always, to become that other one that we are and that we have hidden inside us, more than anything as a promise or possibility of being."*⁵⁶

I want to close my research with these words of the Mexican writer Octavio Paz, whom I also opened it with. I think this possibility of being is what we are trying to reach through the approximation to a basic neutral state. In order to become authorial and original creators of our lives and theatre plays we are expected to be completely free and aware of ourselves in the middle of a plethora of options. Thanks to its founder Ivan Vyskočil, the Authorial Acting program places a lot of focus on the cultivation of awareness and body attention, which makes it comparable

⁵⁶ Paz, 320.

to the Gestalt therapeutic approach and method. In both cases the development has to begin with self-reflection and self-questioning:

*"When and how do we act based on stereotypical, clichéd and ingrained behaviour models or instinctual responses about which we are little or completely unaware? Cultivating freedom necessitates an ever-expanding awareness, a bringing into consciousness of the behaviours and potential(s) we are less familiar with. Freedom means the person experiencing herself fully in her given context and situation."*⁵⁷

Neither is there the purpose in theatre to perform with a white mask on the face all the time,- that would become quite boring, nor is there the intention in real life of becoming a person without character,- that would be quite impossible. In both fields covered here, the goal is not to stay in a state of indifference, but to use it as departure point for uncensored and original creation. In the moment of exploration, the work with the neutral mask produces a similar benefit for theatre and therapy: The prevention of fixation, the freedom of choice and a raising body awareness for meanings and feelings under the surface. Instead of always sticking to the same mask, the same characteristics and physicality, we should become able to select our role,- on stage as well as in real life. To take responsibility for the own life is a cornerstone in Gestalt Therapy and before all else requires awareness of your present state, the character you developed and the roles you got used to playing in life.

Being 'me', this unity of beliefs, emotions, thoughts and identifications with an idea about what we are and what we are not helps us to define and orientate ourselves, but also limits and separates us from everything that is outside of this 'me'. If this concept of 'me' can dissolve a little, to being 'nothing', being nonexistent, we can become everything.

To be 'nothing' or to have certain inner nudity creates the freedom to represent all the roles in the libretto of life and theatre. But not to play make-believe, to act simulating being or doing something, but to really be or do it. This is what I experienced in multiple exercises by Lecoq with the neutral mask,- not to indicate a colour, a material or an emotion, but to embody it.

The theatre is an opportunity to do things differently, to act the way we want to, but often are afraid of. It is the opportunity to take off the everyday mask of our common

⁵⁷ Ivan Vyskočil, "(Inter)acting with the Inner Partner. A Model First Lesson", translated by Alexander Komlosi, Downloads, 25.4.2018, <<http://www.interactingwiththeinnerpartner.org>>

'me' and allows us to be free, somebody completely different, becoming everybody and everything at the same time. The Japanese circle 'Ensō' symbolizes both void and universe. To be the authorial creators of the universe of our lives and plays, we should learn to trust that out of the nothing something new will always appear.

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