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Debra Bruch, Ph.D.
General Editor, *The Journal of Religion and Theatre*
Department of Fine Arts
Michigan Technological University
1400 Townsend Drive
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Ritual and Inhabiting the Mask: An Actor's Search for the Transcendent Creative State

By
Ken D. Elston

Making art exemplifies an "act of faith". At once necessary to the human animal as a way of satisfying the visceral need to feel essential in the world, daring to create assumes that there is completion in being observed. The same leap necessary to believe that "if you build it he will come", a line from the film *Field of Dreams* that captured the *zeitgeist* of the nation, acknowledges the audience as integral to the creation. Wholeness does not characterize the work of art, as it has not reached totality, until it is seen. Artists often fear that it might even hinge on acceptance, but we will consider that possibility later.

First allow me to relate a story that Julie Taymor shared at the opening of the exhibit *Playing With Fire* at the Wexner Center in Columbus, Ohio in 1999. She said she had gone with a group to see a "performance" in a village during her study in Bali. She separated herself from the group and sought solitude amid the shadows of some trees near a vacant spot. Men of the village, masked and costumed, came into that spot, and they began to dance. Mesmerized, she watched them pour themselves into their creative work. When they were done, when the piece was finished, they prayed and then called the village to watch them do it again.

This was no rehearsal; this was a communion. The sacred nature of the dance meant that it could not find wholeness until it was offered to a higher power, the intended audience to an act of human creation, only then could it be celebrated with the social community. As a privileged witness to this sacred ritual, Julie Taymor was later able to share the power of that experience.

The rituals surrounding performance in mask are ancient, ubiquitous in the world, and uniform in certain attributes. The intended audience of each masked performance can be particular, as the two performances of the same dance in Taymor's story illustrate, but that intent, itself, is the difference between them. The rituals surrounding them remain the same.

The intent that the performance be seen remains the same. Reasonably the connection between performer and *inspiration in the art* remains the same as well. Division between the secular and the religious is a construct of intention; in fact these worlds are joined in the continuity of ritual and spontaneity, and the profound nature of that continuity makes mask work a powerful catalyst for introduction to and embodiment of the creative state. This *creative state* is one of the uniform attributes of mask ritual.

Since hearing Julie Taymor speak, I tell her story to every mask class I teach. It is a reminder to them of the transcendent nature, the power, of art. More importantly it is testimony to the personal investment that ritual evokes. These students inevitably learn, through ritual with the mask, that the creative state is a vital principal, an animating force in which one can discover, surprise, and relate. More importantly to the student is the possibility of reliability in a path to reach the creative state, to coaxing artistic spontaneity, and to trusting intuition.

That Balinese Dance should provide a clear model is hardly surprising, as the sacred ritual remains bonded with the aesthetic ritual of performance. John Emigh, in *Masked Performance*, uses this to illustrate the potential for creative ascendance in the mask.

When a Balinese actor holds a new mask in his right hand, gazing upon it, turning it this way and that, making it move to a silent music, he is assessing the potential life of the mask and searching for the meeting place between himself and the life inherent in its otherness. If he is successful, then a bonding takes place that will allow him to let the potential life flow through his own body. If he finds that place of congruence between his physical and spiritual resources and the potential life of the mask, then a living amalgam is created: a character, a persona. This amalgam is at best unstable- based as it must be upon paradox, ambiguity, and illusion- but "it" moves, "it" speaks, "it" breaths, "it" is perceived- by the performer and by the audience- as having an organic integrity. If the performer fails to find this field of paradox, ambiguity, and illusion, then the mask will retain its

separateness: whatever its worth as an object, a "work" of art, it will at best function as a decoration, a costume element.¹

The search for connection to the mask is the artist's journey toward what Emigh calls "organic integrity". Ritual manifests the creative state. Of course mask has long been a conduit in performance and that communion between the individual and the larger body- be that the village or the gods.

Prehistoric evidence suggests that the roots of mask work lie in sacred ritual. Modern examples abound as well. Those Asian Ritual masks that represent gods and spirits are "housed" and "fed" as part of their sacred nature. Of course there is distinction between Ritual masks and theatre masks, but anthropologists worldwide detail commonalities in mask ritual. The direct correlation to intent is assumed in such investigation, and, as a result, the commonalities become more vivid. Samuel Glotz, writing for *Les Masques et leurs Fonctions* (*Masks and their Functions*) about European traditions, suggests,

...a certain unity in the European world of the mask. In spite of ethnic and political differences, there are parallel currents which intercross and influence our countries. The same custom is practiced in the same way from north to south, from Tagas (Portugal) to the Ural [USSR (sic.)]. The same characters or identical accessories are seen everywhere.²

This pan-cultural phenomenon, stemming from sacro-religious traditions, bridges the gap, cross-culturally, between the aesthetic world of myth and human drama and the sacred or religious ritual. This commonality assumes the distinction between ritualistic approach to mask and the parody of ritual apparent in dime-store mask, Halloween play. The mechanical presence of ritual does not have direct correlation to either meaning or discovery. But, like the sacro-religious traditions of mask ritual, the aesthetic mask ritual is charged with meaning. The

¹ John Emigh, *Masked Performance: the Play of Self and Other in Ritual and Theatre*, p. 275.

² Samuel Glotz. The excerpt is taken from an article originally edited by Cherif Khaznadar and published by Maison de la Culture de Rennes, France. It was reprinted in "The Drama Review" (Winter 1982), p. 18.

bridge between the two manifests in the way ritual connection to the mask exposes us to our humanity and something larger than ourselves, in this case the audience. But it is possible that communion, in so far as it defines the creative state, suggests a fusing that makes the *creative state-self* bigger than the *pre-creative state-self*.

Jean Paul Sartre in defining the essential nature of art in society mused:

Human action, in the real world, is dominated by needs and urged on by the useful. In this sense it is means. It passes unnoticed, and it is the result which counts. When I reach out my hand in order to pick up my pen, I have a fleeting [glissante] consciousness of my gesture; it is the pen which I see. Thus man is alienated by his ends. Poetry reverses the relationship: the world and things become inessential become a pretext for the act which becomes its own end.³

And as we, in our quest to be meaningful, seek to be worth more than those petty ends that surround us, we create. We seek connection to something larger than ourselves through our making art, our acts of faith. The nobility of art in Sartre's view begins with the pretext, the intent. The seeking, the ritual search for the creative state, an attainable end, is, in itself, an artistic endeavor.

Sartre's distinction between action as a pursuit of need and action as a pursuit of art defines the power of ritual. Ritual, conscious pursuit of art, seeks to harness the raw, ambiguous nature of the sacred and links the individual experience to that of the community. Grotowsky's attempts to create what he dubbed a "secular *sacrum* in the theatre" through surrender to discipline and strenuous ritual acknowledge that link and the transcendence of creativity.⁴

³Jean-Paul Sartre, *The Philosophy of Jean-Paul Sartre*, p. 369.

⁴Jerzy Grotowsky *Towards a Poor Theatre*. New York: Simon and Shuster, 1968. p. 49.

Historically the mask is a catalyst for transportation out of the self and into something transformative. The depth of that transformation, as stated, hinges on ritual and, as evidenced in the common experiences of those who address this transformation; specific elements of that journey- through ritual to spontaneity- have been identified.

Practical transformation, the essence of any mask performance ritual, enjoys universal, observable attributes. Because those physical attributes do not vary, except in intensity, it is reasonable to assume that the whole Bodymind experience is similar. [*Bodymind* refers to the transcendent integration of the whole being, what the Hebrews called *nephesh*, "or 'the integrated totality of the incarnate self'."⁵ Bodymind is the whole: the head and the body, spirituality and sexuality, the brain with ideas and the breath carrying emotion.] As Bodymind defines an integrated whole, the common, observable "externals" indicate common "internals" of experience. For example, part of the ritual of working with mask is ascribing space for exploration. In defining a physical sphere, a specific near space world, the performer defines a here and now, or a current existence free of the past and antecedent of the next here and now, the next moment. Donning a mask is a visible state of potential. It is a starting point. Alone this ritual has value in education, but the transcendence of mask ritual reveals far more than potential.

Other obvious commonalities of rituals found in mask performance can be marked including transformative moments for the performer, the Bodymind. An obvious start to such a catalog of attributes is the silence for the artist as the mask touches the skin, catches the breath, and replaces the visage. Next might be a consideration of the intimacies of dance: the twists, stretches, turns, gatherings, and, ultimately, the projection into space. The ritual of donning the character gives way to the ritual of direct contact with the performance character. In the studio students frequently use the mirror to make this contact. The actor's eyes find a foreign character in reflection, and the artist is drawn to explore perceived sovereignty over the physical life of this character. At this point the paradox of life in the mask materializes to the observer: the mask begins to inform the artist's movement simultaneously with taking on life.

⁵ Walter Wink from an essay entitled, *Bible Study and Movement for Human Transformation* published in *Body Bible: Interpreting and Experiencing Biblical Narratives*, Krondorfer, ed, and p.121.

Less obvious, but nonetheless observable, are what I refer to as the *stopping points* that occur for actors playing in the mask. The flow of energy, the exchange between the performer and the mask, the intuitive response, interrupts. These are moments of culmination in performance, and are often points at which the artist unmask in practice. At this point they can be identified as *natural endings*. While these moments seem natural progression from the viewer's standpoint in the audience, students invariably express both surprise and sudden awareness of those moments in early mask work. "Those moments sneak up on you". With more experience in the mask students note that these moments frequently give way to new impulses, but the nature of impulses is another concept that begs exploration.

Impulses, as I use the term with students, are the possibilities suggested by the flow of energy within the physical sphere. Impulses are potential reactions to the observed or the "sensed". The mask is a performance "tool" consistent in its power to evoke new sensitivity to impulses and connections to creativity. So an ability to access the creative state becomes attuned through ritual, as well. While the steps in the ritualistic path remain the same, the connection invariably comes more quickly with practice. Experiencing ritualized transformation codes the Bodymind to effect such transformation. Ritual becomes the transformative "door" to the creative state.

Impulse and *energy* as performance terms might seem muddy in their lack of specificity, but it is precisely that open-ended quality that defines a kind of higher awareness compatible with a general experience of transformation. Transformation takes place through ritual inhabitation of the mask as the performer is literally on the threshold of something new. This transformation resembles what Victor Turner dubbed "Liminal Phases".

Liminal entities are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed bylaw, custom, convention, and ceremonial. As such, their ambiguous and indeterminate attributes are expressed by a rich variety of symbols in the many societies that ritualize social and cultural transitions. Thus, liminality is frequently likened to death, to being in the womb, to

invisibility, to darkness, to bisexuality, to the wilderness, and to an eclipse of the sun or moon.⁶

Is transformation toward the creative state is a liminal phase? Undeniably transformation contains explosive fuel for creativity, and identifying the potential sparks to that fuel means identifying impulse in the creative state. It is fair to conclude that impulses are made available to the performer through ritualized communication with the self, a calling forth responsiveness in the Bodymind. This transformation meets the initial requirements of Turner's definition. Here is Richard Schechner's suggested definition of the experience of the action of the liminal phase:

The work of the liminal phase is two-fold: first, to reduce those undergoing the ritual to a state of vulnerability so that they are open to change. Persons are stripped of their former identities and assigned places in the social world; they enter a time-place where they are not-this-not-that, neither here nor there, in the midst of a journey from one social self to another. For the time being, they are literally powerless and often identityless. Second, during the liminal phase, persons are inscribed with their new identities and initiated into their new powers. There are many ways to accomplish the transformation...The possibilities are countless, varying from culture to culture, group to group, ceremony to ceremony. As I will explain later in this chapter, the workshop-rehearsal phase of performance composition is analogous to the liminal phase of the ritual process.⁷

Ritualized mask work meets the criteria. As a training tool, such work develops the artist's capacity for universal application of the creative state. Where the "workshop-rehearsal phase of performance composition" is analogous as the theatre piece itself undergoes a liminal phase, the ritual of mask work is analogous as it deals with a transformation within the artist.

⁶ Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*, p. 95.

⁷ Richard Schechner, *Performance Studies: an Introduction*, p. 57-58.

In the initial approach to the mask actors address their masks with the eyes, with their hands, and, ultimately, their faces. Schechner's initial consideration in describing liminal phases, vulnerability, is present in the studio. Students express that in connection to mask work. Both their feedback and my observations of their journeys through the ritual stages support this. Students feel vulnerable in the mask. Change is difficult. Transformation to a true creative state does not allow for the pre-planned or the known and honed. Of course there is irony in this feeling of vulnerability when the actor is actually the Bodymind behind the explorations and performance, but such is the paradox of the mask to concentrate on the self even when "inhabiting" a character. This too is part of the ritual and a quality inherent in liminality according to Schechner. We have discussed the actor working in mask as "neither here nor there" but rather in a place of impulse awareness, a muddy place.

In donning the mask the actor is stripped of identity. The anonymity of the mask is legendary: in theater, comic books, and on Halloween, the mask becomes a license for variant behavior, the behavior of characters. Anonymity of the self continues while a partnership with the mask and the filling of the physical sphere yields something new. The same analogy holds true for the actor's awareness of change. Ritual becomes an active search to uncover a new identity, the masked identity. The freedom from psychology and strict structural form often makes the identities discovered surprising and theatrically exiting. This fuels the actor's exploration toward the liminal.

The creative state is a wellspring of impulse and energy, an energy I frequently refer to as improvisational energy, but it may as well be called post-liminal energy. It is that with which we try to be in-tune: we know it when we see it and know when we feel it. We have a myriad of terms with which we refer to this state- intuition, "the zone", in the moment, engaged, unconscious, to name just a few. It is what Nike wants us to associate with its swoosh: "just do it" achieved as a state, through ritualized and concentrated effort. Attempts to address the cultural *zeitgeist* seem appropriate as metaphor. Though popular in nature, the common links they reveal are useful. "Just doing it" assumes a starting place. It just that starting place that the mask reveals as it supports accessibility to an intuitive place: the creative state.

Tapping the creative state through the mask is immediate and jarring to the complacent eye. This ancient approach to communion of the self with the "something larger" is primal. Having considered the search for totality inherent in the creative act, the relationship between the need and the act has been defined. Ritualized entry to this communion echoes the outer/inner dialectic inherent in both the leap of faith of creativity and the entrance into the mask. This dialectic suggests the primal nature of this artistic quest and further supports the analogy with liminal phases. To clarify the transformative nature of liminality Turner, as an anthropologist, reserved the term for agrarian cultures and anti-structural models. Once realized, the aesthetic transformation to the creative state can be channeled into structured application.

Stanislavski, as a spiritual man, assumed the necessity of such a transformation. In describing the creative state in which the actor must begin work he used a term that Elizabeth Hapgood translates as *communion*. He intends the same alive and immediate transformation; a keen awareness of the shared energies surrounding the actor in highly codified application, as the ritual of mask work provokes. The actor's ability to become absorbed *in character* retains the core of ritualized approach and demands the entrance into the creative state. Speaking as the Director in *An Actor Prepares*, Stanislavski maintains:

The eye is the mirror of the soul. It is important that the actor's eyes, his look, reflect the deep inner content of his soul...All the time he is on the stage he should be sharing these spiritual resources with other actors in the play...He will not give himself up wholly to his part unless it carries him away. When it does so, he becomes completely identified with it and is transformed.⁸

The basis for this modern leap of faith, holding a new ideal chief in consideration- that Realism is the something larger than ourselves, that we determine our sole audience- can only be identified in terms of the outer/inner dialectic that is the connection of self to the creative state and, thus, to the audience. There is nothing mystical about the efficacy of the ritualized state. Ritual and mask tap into the creative because of the anti-structuralist nature, not as a

⁸ Constantin Stanislavski, *An Actor Prepares*, p.196.

reaction against, but as an alternative to the defined audience model. In this way the act of "tuning in" to impulse in the mask is training to listen and respond outside of the rituals of the work itself.

Audience as the integral aspect of performance, while true and inescapable, can also prove a tyranny. At the outset I suggested that, for the artist, wholeness or totality for the performance might hinge on acceptance. The modern desire to define the audience feeds such an expectation, but it also adds a component of fear to the mix that paralyzes potential.

Anathema to creativity, fear predicates an awareness of self and a possibility of failure that blocks the transcendent state. Indeed, fear, as the opposite of faith, is anti-art. Its anti-ritualistic nature [because structure cannot include play when fear predominates] squelches spontaneity and invention just as it restricts freedom. The kind of play, childlike freedom to be and do, necessary for creative transcendence requires permissiveness. Ritual, and ritual play, infuses performance with vitality. While many scholars have defined play, the common elements are exploration, learning and risk and yield flow or total involvement.⁹ Another element present is spontaneity.

Spontaneity within the mask results from the inner/outer dialectic: communication between object and artist, between artists, and between the art and the audience exist in the nexus of ritual and spontaneity.

Rituals are more than structures and functions; they can also be among the most powerful experiences life has to offer. While in a liminal state, people are freed from the demands of daily life. They feel at one with their comrades, all personal and social differences erased. People are uplifted, swept away, taken over. Turner called the liberation from the constraints of ordinary life "anti-structure" and the experience of ritual camaraderie "communitas".¹⁰

⁹ Schechner, p. 82.

¹⁰ Schechner, p.62.

The rituals of mask, in dealing with the whole gamut of experience [personal, contemporary, and cultural] are no exception. Students are consistently moved by what they discover in the mask, because ritual is powerful and the creative state so rewarding. Though discoveries may be as fleeting as the camaraderie most often observed in the course of exploration, the artist in post-liminal phase cannot dismiss the experiences of the mask. Jacques Brunet, in writing about the "Masks of Southeast Asia", made this observation about the partnership of performer and mask:

The mask is made not to hide or to conceal, but to expose. As an instrument of metamorphoses, the mask permits man to lose his identity, and allows the gods to manifest themselves with an uncovered face. To mask oneself is to give life to a superior being.¹¹

The aesthetic exploration is little different in nature, though miles apart in intent. Regardless of intent, the ritual engenders social recoding. So, instead of lessons concerning good and evil and the mythic history of a culture, inhabiting the mask leads to an artistic recoding, an aesthetic transformation, away from the fear based, memorize-those-lines world of modern educational theatre.

Of course embracing structural approaches is natural. Bjørn Krondorfer, in his introduction to *Body Bible*, asserts that in the new century "we experience life as *bricolage* [and] coherent meaning systems are replaced by a coincidental accumulation of *objets trouvés*."¹² Meaning systems are transient in the modern age. They are both necessary and fleeting. So as we desire worth, meaning and definition in this world, we tend to cling more doggedly, more fiercely to those found objects that reify us in consistent, predictable ways. Mask work can

¹¹ Jacques Brunet. The excerpt is taken from an article originally edited by Cherif Khaznadar and published by Maison de la Culture de Rennes, France. It was reprinted in "The Drama Review" (Winter 1982), p.68.

¹² Krondorfer, *Body Bible*, p.2.

never fit that model, but then art cannot either. Hence, mask is an effective alternative to the doggedly predictable outcome in absence of the creative state.

Hans-Georg Gadamer did not believe that reality could be transformed, and so was out of reach to the human artist. In this modern ideal truth is actually unattainable, and transformed reality (i.e.: art) needs play to have any meaning at all. This makes sense: the play needs playing, the character needs breath, and the mask needs to be inhabited before it can have transcendent value. He went further to say that there is no value in art past its essential quality, its search for truth. Surely aesthetic ritual has relevancy, as the religious does. There is value in the creative state. Perhaps Gadamer would replace the "something larger than us" with this idea of essential quality.

The players are not the subjects of the play; instead play merely reaches presentation through the players...[Neither] the separate life of the performer, who acts the work, nor that of the spectator who is watching the play, has any separate legitimacy in the face of the being of the work of art.¹³

Gadamer defines artist and audience as the communal body, united in the act of artistic expression. Perhaps the legitimacy exists both in the quest for and the fleeting ascension to the creative state itself.

Tapping into the intuition, gathering the clues to this assumed truth might just be the closest we can get to a definition of something beyond the observable. But as artists might that not be enough?

We have license and necessity to create. The personal freedom to create is all that is left to require. Achievement, as I relate it to my students working within the mask, is transformation. It is not the transformation to character, but the liminal change that we are after, that transformation toward the creative state. The unconscious tapped through conscious

¹³ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, p.113.

attention to ritual reassures the artist of the dialectic of exchange and emboldens the leap of faith that is the creative act.

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