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# Actor Training

in the Neutral Mask

by Sears A. Eldredge and

Hollis W. Huston

During the first World War, in Paris  
Jacques Copeau developed the idea of a

severe and simple form of theatre, neither classical nor topical, but versatile through the economy of its means. In 1919 he remodelled the stage of the Vieux-Columbier in accordance with his new ideas, and over the next two years he founded a school for the training of actors, the Ecole du Vieux Columbier. Both in design and in acting, Copeau wanted to make large statements with simple gestures. The pursuit of simplicity made him eliminate distractions, to create the still ground against which a movement or a form could be seen. His bare architectural stage was meant to magnify the evanescent statements of the drama. "I want the stage to be naked and neutral," he wrote, "in order that every delicacy may appear there, in order that every fault may stand out; in order that the dramatic work may have a chance in this neutral atmosphere to fashion that individual garment which it knows how to put on." (In Sergeant, "A New French Theatre," *The New Republic*, 1917.) The simplicity that Copeau sought required a neutral atmosphere.

Copeau built that atmosphere into the theatrical space of the Vieux-Columbier, but to realize it in the spaces and rhythms of the actor's body was another, less tangible problem. The actor would have to be stripped as bare as the stage; only then could he express himself clearly and simply. Otherwise, the movement would be lost against a ground of temperament or convention. To find the neutral atmosphere within himself, therefore, the actor would first have to give up deeply ingrained but superficial habits. "The actor always starts from an artificial *attitude*, a bodily, mental, or vocal *grimace*. His attack is both too deliberated and insufficiently premeditated." ("Notes on the Actor," trans. Harold J. Salemson, *Actors on Acting*, eds. Toby Cole and Helen Krich Chinoy, 1970.) The starting point was to be not an attitude but a silence serving as a resting state, a condition without motion but filled with energy, like the condition of a runner in the moment before his race. All impulses were to arise from that state and return to it. "To start from silence and calm. That is the very first point. An actor must know how to be silent, to listen, to answer, to remain motionless, to start a gesture, follow through with it, come back to motionlessness and silence, with all the shadings and half-tones that these actions imply."

To lead actors into familiarity with a neutral atmosphere in their own bodies, Copeau assigned his students to work with masks. In Copeau's use of the mask to rid the actor of temperamental habits, Etienne Decroux found the germ of his severe and abstractive corporeal mime. Decroux noticed that the mask reveals the personality of the wearer. In commonplace actions as well as dramatic ones, the actor's idiosyncratic way of moving tended to drown the movement itself; under the mask *how* becomes more important than *what*. "So we're relying on masks to fix things up, are we? But it's just the contrary! Masks make things worse. . . . It's like lightning. We see everything you do clearly. And the moment you wear a mask, especially [a neutral] mask, we see the quality of what you're doing." (In Leabhart, "Etienne Decroux on Masks," *Mime Journal*, 1975.) If the mask could reveal the "attitude" or "grimace" that controlled the untrained actor, then it could also amplify and objectify the "neutral atmosphere" when the actor found it. Therefore, the neutral mask became an important tool for Copeau and for a later generation of teachers.

Copeau's school did not survive, but the influence of his mask training has been carried on in two main channels. One of those channels was defined by Michael Saint-Denis, Copeau's nephew; the other, by Jacques Lecoq, who trained under Jean Dasté, Copeau's son-in-law, from 1945 to 1947. Teachers from both traditions have worked in or founded actor training programs in the United States. The Saint-Denis teaching stresses the actor's service to text, and uses only character masks, though some of those are closer to neutrality than others. Lecoq's teaching, on the other hand, is concerned in its initial phase with matters that precede speech and character. Before

wearing character masks, Lecoq's students are made familiar with the *masque neutre*, which is designed to rid them of conditioned attitudes in favor of an economical use of the body. More than any other person, Lecoq has defined the neutral state for the performer, as it is realized in masks.

## Neutrality

Jacques Lecoq speaks of the neutral mask as tending toward a "fulcrum point which doesn't exist." As the actor approaches this fixed point, he becomes "a blank sheet of paper, a 'tabla rasa.'" (This and subsequent quotations of Lecoq are taken from notes of an interview by Sears Eldredge, trans. Fay Lecoq, in Eldredge, "Masks: Their Use and Effectiveness in Actor Training Programs," Diss. Michigan State University 1975.) For Bari Rolfe, "the two words, 'appropriate' and 'economical' together almost add up to the term 'neutral.' The student executes any action, like walking, with only the expenditure of energy and rhythm, in space and in time, that the action requires." [T53] Richard Hayes-Marshall speaks of neutrality as "a condition such that, if the actor finds himself there, he doesn't know what he will do next. . . . When you are there, you don't know what it is; if you did, it wouldn't be neutral." Andrew Hepburn writes that "Neutrality means responding to stimuli in a *purely sensory* way."

A neutral organism expends only the energy required by the task at hand. Personalities expend that amount of energy and something else besides; personalities are distinguished from each other by the nature of what they add. *Therefore, to be a personality, to be oneself even, is not to be neutral.* Yet one cannot avoid being oneself. An actor can hope to perform a neutral action, but he cannot be neutral—neutral is a "fulcrum point that doesn't exist." To approach neutral action, one must lose oneself, denying one's own attitudes or intentions. At the moment of neutral action, one does not know what one will do next, because anticipation is a mark of personality; one cannot describe how one feels because introspection intrudes on simplicity; one reacts in a sensory way, because when the mind stops defining experience, the senses still function. Economy demands that both motion and rest be unpremeditated. Neutral activity withholds nothing; it is an energized condition, like the moment of inspiration before speech. The neutrality that the mask seeks is *an economy of mind and body, evidenced at rest, in motion, and in the relationship between them.*

## Characteristics of the Masks

The personality of the maskmaker threatens the neutrality of the mask. One must devote many trials and experiments to the research of neutrality. Hayes-Marshall has redesigned his neutral masks seven times. "There is no such thing as a neutral mask," he says, "It has to be designed by somebody."

Neutral masks are at rest; they do not gesture, frown, smile, or grimace. The masks are symmetrical. Though the neutral mask is never used for speaking, the lips are lightly parted, as if the mask were about to speak. The masks are usually designed in pairs,

male and female. Since the male and female bodies have different centers of gravity, the masks that will be carried by them must also differ. The leather mask designed for Lecoq by Sartori is brown, but celastic or papier-maché masks used in other studios are often white. A white mask reflects light well, and therefore shows its expression clearly; brown masks, on the other hand, are closer in appearance to skin tones. Leather is the best material for simulating the textures of living skin, but there are few people capable of making leather masks. Amleto Sartori of Padua reconstructed the craft from Renaissance sources, and made neutral, expressive and *commedia* masks of leather for Lecoq and for Carlo Mazzone-Clementi. His son Donato carries on the work today, but the masks are expensive and slow to produce. Papier-maché or celastic masks are easier and cheaper.

Styles of sculpting vary according to the amount of personality considered proper in the mask. The Sartori mask used by Lecoq, which is dominated by a pair of sharp lines that define the nose and continue upward to form the brow line, seems to some observers rather abstract (Fig. 1). The Hepburn mask (Fig. 2) is softer in outline and more naturalistic: detailed contours in the nose, eyes, cheeks, and brows, give an impression of flesh and muscle. The tragic masks of the Saint-Denis tradition, which are used for some of the same purposes as the neutral mask, are simple and harmonious masks that represent the four ages of man. (Michel Saint-Denis, *Theatre: Rediscovery of Style*, 1969.) At the extreme of abstraction is the metaphysical mask of Mazzone-Clementi (Fig. 3). The metaphysical mask is defined only by a centerline, a browline, and one circular and one triangular eyehole. An abstract mask leads the actor beyond psychology to the intrinsic qualities of movements and body shapes. A personalized mask is less remote from dramatic characterization.

## ***Exercises for the Actor Using the Neutral Mask***

Most teachers of the mask believe that training should be a *via negativa*: they will not tell the student what to do, but they will point out mistakes after they have been made. "By blocking the path taken by the actor," writes Rolfe, "you oblige him to look for another. . . . Each restriction placed on the actor forces his imagination to seek ways to get around it." The teacher cannot provide a model or a set of rules. The student must look for the condition of neutrality within himself. Since bodies are unique, each person's neutrality is his own: there is no single pattern. Hayes-Marshall says that "if a student's work creates fire, I'm not interested in saying it's not fire." Yet in the pursuit of neutrality, a lapse into psychology is perceived as an error. To see such lapses, and to train his students to see them, the teacher must have experienced them in himself.

A period of training, often as long as a year, is required before students attempt the mask. The training period is devoted to acrobatics and conditioning, to developing an awareness of the body's articulations and of the images that the body can project into space. The mask then becomes a way of learning the meaning of those articulations and images.

Most teachers introduce the mask with a talk on its design and significance. Then the actor studies the mask: at the École Lecoq, that study lasts for eight days. The moment of putting on the mask is crucial, since the body will immediately begin to accept or reject the mask. The actor may feel the urge to impose a movement or a body image, but he must inhibit that urge, allowing his own thoughts, his breathing, and his

stance, to be replaced by those of the mask. Lecoq does not allow his students to view themselves in a mirror at this point, but some teachers find that the mirror can help a student see the change in his condition. The mask is treated with the respect due to a human face. It is handled by the sides or by top and bottom; one never grabs it by the nose or places the hand over its eyes. There is no speaking in the neutral mask; if the student needs to say something, he must first raise the mask onto the forehead.



Figure 1. Male and female neutral masks designed by Richard Hayes-Marshall, strongly influenced by Sartori masks.

The first exercises begin from sleep, the most fundamental of resting states. The study of neutrality starts with simple activities such as standing, walking, sitting, or picking up an object, as performed in the mask. The first level of error is gratuitous movement. In walking, one student will bounce, another will sway, another will take extra steps after the forward movement has stopped; one will look at the ceiling, another will look at his feet. In standing, one will scratch his head, another will put his hands on hips. One student will take hold of an object several times before lifting it, another as he picks it up will make gestures to show how heavy it is. Such movements are imposed on the action; the student must find a way to do the action without them. By making mistakes, however, a student begins to learn how his habits lead him away from neutrality.

A second level of error has to do with the tempo of movement. The actor may seize an object abruptly, without preparation, or he may wait so long that when he picks up the object, the need to do so is gone. Either error will leave questions in an observer's mind. "Why so fast?" Or "why so slow?" If the question arises, the action is not neutral—an attitude has intruded on the movement. There is a moment when the body is ready to move, and if the movement happens at that moment, no question arises.

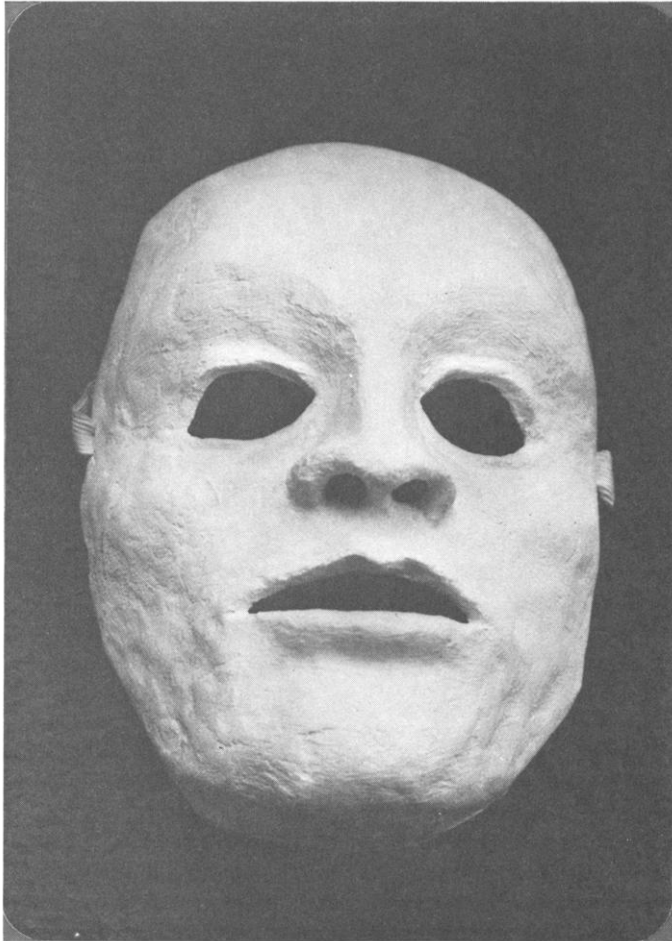


Figure 2. "Mask of Wonder" (male)  
designed by Andrew Hepburn.

A third level of error is marked by the imposed attitude. The student performs a single action, but in a manner that creates the image of a character with prior experience of the action. The hands may be so stiff that they seem fearful or hostile. The chest may be sunken, expressing fatigue or cunning, or expanded, showing curiosity. The student must examine his customary self-use, because neutral action is performed as if for the first time. No one part of the body, nor the mask itself, can draw attention; in

neutrality, the entire body and the surrounding space are perceived with equal weight. To focus on a part of the space—to expand the chest, for instance—is to be dramatic and not neutral.

The initial exercises introduce the student to a process of experiment, perception, and change. Each error brings discovery of a new approach to the task. The new approach is questioned, in its turn, bringing the student closer to a condition that he can



Figure 3. Carlo Mazzone-Clementi's metaphysical mask.

fully achieve only for brief moments. The research of neutrality never ends, for every level of knowledge, if accepted rather than questioned, becomes a technique imposed on the mask. The advantage for the performer is that each new technique is stronger than the old, because it is closer to the body's natural functioning.

After exploring simple actions in the mask, the teacher may assign extended scenarios, in which the person wearing the mask encounters elements or objects. Some



of the common exercises are: 1) The figure wakes and moves toward light. 2) The figure wakes in the desert and walks into a city. 3) The figure wakes in the desert; goes to a river and enters it, perceiving its flow and its source; finds a tree, from which a bird flies. 4) The figure encounters another figure, of the opposite sex (man meets woman). 5) The figure wakes and stands in a fog; explores the fog; finds himself at the edge of the sea, as the fog clears; throws a stone out to sea. 6) The figure walks along a beach; goes to the end of a pier; sees a boat moving across the water, and waves to a person in the boat. 7) The figure walks to the end of the pier and pulls in a sailboat; punts the boat away from the shore, raises sail, and rests at the tiller; lowers sail and throws out the anchor; casts a net and pulls it in full of fish; lifts the anchor, raises sail, and rests at the tiller.

The teacher looks for simplicity and clarity in the actor's imagery. Lecoq has said that "If the Neutral Mask looks at the sea, it becomes the sea." Does the actor accept the environment, or does he establish a dramatic conflict with it? Does he show us the sea, or his own impression of the sea? Are the imaginary objects established in their weight and texture as well as in their shape? Is each experience—touching the earth, entering the river, casting the net—finished before another is begun? Does the actor show awareness of another person, or is he only compelled in a social way to look at him? Does he show awareness of objects and elements, or is he only compelled in an intellectual way to touch them? Is his breathing quiet and regular, or jagged and dramatic? Does the stone continue its flight after it leaves the actor's hand? "How can I discover without curiosity?" protests the student, and in asking the question, he defines the assignment.

In the exercise called "Discovery," the actor carrying the mask assumes a position of sleep, while the teacher places around him objects of various shapes, weights, and textures. The assignment is to wake up, to explore several of the objects as if one had no experience of them, and to return to sleep. Familiar objects are treacherous; it is tempting to hold a knife by the handle, to pick up a book and read the print, to open an umbrella, to bounce a ball, but these familiar actions may assume a history of interaction with the object. The neutral mask might discover the working of the umbrella, but only as the result of an exploration; and that discovery, if it comes, has no psychological or intellectual purpose. The mask does not impose a concept on the environment, but accepts the experiences contained within the environment.

Not all neutrality exercises cast the actor as a human figure. Rolfe asks her students to identify with animals in the neutral mask; or to recreate the images of a *haiku*. Hayes-Marshall gives assignments in the elements: earth, air, fire, and water. By asking the student to carry the mask in a nonhuman image, the teacher extends the student's ability to enter a condition without imposing personal associations on it.

## ***Benefits of the Training for the Actor***

The neutral mask is a way of understanding performance, not a way of performing. The mask is a tool for analyzing the quality of the body's action. The mask hides the face, but reveals the attitudes and intentions, the nuances, the feeling tones, that are otherwise only dimly sensed in a person's motion or stillness. When he carries it, the actor must communicate through his whole person; and the spectator must perceive the

expression of the whole person. The experience can be frightening, because it is like being, or perceiving, a second person within the familiar body. Because the neutral mask is empty to begin with, it fills with whatever expression is perceived in the body. Hayes-Marshall says that "a good neutral mask looks like the person who puts it on." Trained observers know the expression of the face before the student takes off the mask. The mask draws attention to the body's points of resistance, and demands, as the price of comfort, that the body be integrated in a single image. Carrying the mask is internal and external, analytic and holistic. The dichotomies of physical and emotional



Figure 4. Clay mold by Huston for a male neutral mask.

technique are united in a single experience. The neutral mask allows the quality of a movement to be seen; it takes that quality on itself and magnifies it.

Because it requires participation in an image different from oneself, the mask attacks mumble-and-scratch naturalism. Peter Frisch has described the kind of actor who says, "Oh, I know that character, that character is just like me," when the truth is

that "the character is nothing like they are. They see it through their own neurotic self-image." The neutral mask can lead an actor to reject his habitual identifications in favor of a deeper, simpler understanding of his powers of expression.

The neutral mask teaches simplicity in stillness and in activity. When an actor throws a stone, each part of his body should throw the stone, and no part should do anything else. The action should be allowed to complete itself before it is terminated, and it should terminate either in stillness or in the incipience of the next action. Bad movement training confuses activity with commitment; in the hands of a good teacher, the mask shows us that many details of our movement are parasitic behaviors, caused by resistance to the task at hand. When the actor clears himself of habitual assumptions and attitudes, he becomes a finely tuned instrument, capable of recording the subtle phases of perception and intention. An actor who is comfortable in stillness and activity, who commits to both, and who moves easily from one state to the other, is an actor who commands the stage. The neutral mask provides a way for a teacher and student momentarily to grasp and hold on to the intangible quality called "presence."

The actor cannot be neutral; he can only hope to attain moments of neutral action. Yet the pursuit of neutrality purifies him, making his very errors more commanding. Shedding personal clichés and habitual responses, he looks deeper into himself for images that are truly his own. After experiencing the neutral mask, he moves on to expressive masks, to the speaking masks of *commedia*, and finally to the clown nose and the discovery of his personal clown. Beneath these masks, however, is the state of near-neutrality: in a sense, the actor wears the neutral mask beneath every other mask and every other character. Lecoq likens the neutral masks to "the bottom of the sea," whereas "the Expressive Mask is like waves."

The neutral mask is not a way of performing; there is no neutral "style" of acting. The mask helps to identify a resting state for the actor, a condition of presence from which all things are possible, and to which all actions return at completion.

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