

# The Compelling Play of the Mask

~ Shobi Dobi



Some of the Masks created by Shobi used in her classes

The human face communicates. Cover the face with a mask and it amplifies the human essence. It can become pathetic, horrifying or hilarious depending on its direction. As a clown, I paint my face (also a mask) which symbolizes the fool. Recently, I have developed workshops working with *character masks*. These are not the new age and age-old shamanistic masks or Mardi Gras masks, but a continuation of the Comedia masks of Italian Theater which I studied at Dell'Art in Blue Lake, California.

We have a natural instinct to play, to act, to become someone else. Halloween and Mardi Gras are good examples of adults at play in masks. Traditionally, the character mask has been used only by the actor. However, I have found that the non-actor/artist has an advantage over those trained. The non-actor doesn't have a gestural vocabulary to express the mind's interpretation of the mask, thus he often bypasses the mind's critical direction and responds with his own uncensored truth.

With side coaching and encouragement from a group, the mask wearer is given permission to exaggerate, to get absurd, to "let it all hang out." The stimulation of performance heightens the experience and draws out deep feelings, thus revealing many complex layers of a character. Because this is done in the spirit of play, the censoring of the mind loosens its grip often allowing hidden aspects, feelings and shadow characters to emerge. This expressiveness is liberating because the character develops and exists in an environment of play - the very base of humor. It is fun to do, and fascinating to watch. The power of the mask allows us to go into the imaginative world and to discover ourselves as part of the theater of life - it gives us permission to be another only to realize that "other" is part of ourselves. When we play with our shadow, it becomes our playmate and "friend."

"While we are alive, we cannot escape from masks or names. We are inseparable from our fictions - our features. We are condemned to invent a mask for ourselves and afterward to discover that the mask is our true face."  
- Octavio Paz, *Posdata*

"For the receptive and willing bodymind, the mask acts as a compelling image, stimulating the imagination, suggesting and even dictating psycho-physical changes in the behavior of the wearer. The external, physical object of the mask becomes a potent image that convinces the sensitized wearer to do it bidding."  
- Sears A. Eldredge, *Mask Improvisation*

"The actor who performs under a mask, receives from this papier-mache object the reality of his part. He is controlled by it and has to obey it unreservedly. Hardly has he put it on when he feels a new being flowing into himself, a being the existence of which he had before never suspected. IT is not only his face that has changed, it is all his personality, it is the very nature of his reactions, so that he experiences emotions he could never have felt or feigned without its aid. If he is a dancer, it is the whole style of his dance. If he is an actor - the very tones of his voice will be dictated by the mask. The Latin "persona" - a 'being' without life until he adopts it, which comes from without to seize upon him and proceeded to substitute itself for him."

- Jacques Coqueau quoted in *Mask Improvisation*

"It is a fact that all mankind wears or has worn a mask. This enigmatic accessory, with no obvious utility, is commoner than the lever, the bow, the harpoon or the plough. Whole peoples have been ignorant of the most ordinary tools. They knew the mask. Complete civilizations, some of them most remarkable, have prospered without having conceived the idea of the wheel . . . But they were familiar with the mask . . . there is no tool, no invention, no belief, custom or institution which unites mankind so much as does the habit of wearing a mask."

-- Roger Caillois, *The Mask of Medusa*

## Comedia Dell'Arte Lazzi

Lazzi refers generally to comic routines that could be performed in any one of dozens of plays. A lazzo would have masked actors interrupt a dry performance to invite the audience to laugh.

"It would be difficult to think of an historical style that has affected twentieth-century performance more than the Italian Commedia dell'Arte . . . with its reliance on stereotype characters, masks, broad physical gestures, improvised dialogue and clowning, represented the very theatricality of the Theatre. While performing across Europe and elsewhere from 1550 to 1750, often on informal stages and without dramatic tests as such, Commedia troupes developed large audiences composed of all social classes. It was this last feature that made Commedia so attractive to the avant-garde directors. The most popular entertainment of the first part of the twentieth century - motion picture comedy, both silent and sound, and radio comedy - seem closely related to the Commedia. Indeed, it is hard to conjure images of the Commedia without seeing Charlie Chaplin, W.C. Fields, Bert Lahr, the Marx Brothers, Jack Benny, or Laurel and Hardy."

Mel Gordon, *Lazzi*, *The Comic Routines of the Commedia dell'Arte*, p.3, *Performing Arts Journal Publications*, New York 1983 - a collection of lazzi from 1550 - 1750 in Europe