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**Hellenic Theatre/Drama
& Education Network**

member of International Drama/Theatre & Education Association (IDEA)



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ISBN: 978-960-98466-4-6

Devil Masks between the Sacred and the Secular: From the Mime to the Clown to the Commedia dell'Arte



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I believe that the experimentation of the different languages in art, in theatrical art in particular, is an “innovative” way to work (on stage and in the school) that helps us to understand the extent to which each technique contains the others (the Mime contains the Clown, the Clown contains the Commedia dell'Arte, the Commedia dell'Arte contains dance and music), and to what degree, for this reason alone, the different art languages can interact.

Through the experimentation of the languages on the stage, we have the possibility to tell a story from our tradition in an innovative way, creating, on our course of study, a suited methodology so that the different techniques can find the right balance; that is, a fair synthesis of the different artistic expressions in the staging of a tale.

In our case, the story is inspired by the tradition of rites that the majority of ethnic groups, not only in Europe, practise throughout seasonal and yearly recurrences, with the aim of wishing the whole community prosperity and luck for the future.

The stories to be told can aspire to the tradition, but can develop in a contemporary key, changing the contents. As an instance, the characters of the masks in the Commedia dell'Arte represent a few fixed types that are social stereotypes, who, in the tradition of the XVIth century, identified **Harlequin** as the artful and silly servant, **Pantalone** as the Pater familias or the rich miser, **Balanzone** as the fake learned doctor, **Brighella** as the intriguing servant. The *canovacci* (the plots) pertain to simple stories, largely love intrigues, and often wink at the period of that particular society.



Nowadays, we can take up the tradition of the masks of the XVIth Century Commedia dell'Arte (study and keep the characters and the performing technique), but we can change the drama and contents (the ancient *canovaccio* can be transformed into a drama in which the contemporary society is revealed). This process of “transformation” develops through the interaction of theatre art languages (an innovative way of artistic creation) and a new criterion (a suitable methodology) to reach the synthesis of an ensemble of languages used for performance.

This is the same creative course that we have applied to the performance "**Hellequin et Dame Luque**", seen after the workshop "**Devil masks between the sacred and the secular – From the Mime to the Clown to the Commedia dell'Arte**".

The performance was inspired by a tale from the French literature of the XIIIth Century, in which two devil masks, king Harlequin and fairy Morgana, meet.

Through the improvisation of the actors, the sequences of the *canovaccio* attempt to recreate the tradition, the poetry and the magic of a play entitled, "*Jeu de la feuillée*", written by Adam de le Hale (poet, jester, musician) in 1276. The latter would have been written on the occasion of the *Calendimaggio* (Festival of Spring or May Day) or any other festival celebrating the beginning of a cycle, of an equally propitiatory character.

The play is concerned with a banquet of fairies held under a green gazebo, typical of the Breton tradition. Suddenly, the sound of bells is heard, announcing the approach of Harlequin's band, upon which all the characters on stage feel the urge to flee in terror. Croquesot arrives, the courier-jester (first servant of king Harlequin), and then fairy Morgana appears followed by the other two fairies: Arsilla, good and benevolent; and Malgoria, bad and mischievous. Croquesot brings the Queen of the fairies a love message from King Harlequin, and the fairy instructs the servant to greet his master. During this prophetic night the rendez-vous of the two characters takes place in the underworld, and from this union, abundant crops and luck for the community will be assured.



The development of the theme of this story departs from the tradition as a pretext to re-compose an ironic 'study' of love relationships that allude to not only a two-player game between demoniac masks, but also an internal conflict in the game of the man-woman combination. These games of opposites, attractions, amusement, malice and dirt generate the atavistic quarrel, inevitable for the survival of one's own individuality.



The "transformation" or "innovation" that makes the performance contemporary is the tale about the meeting-clash between a man and a woman, in a society where relationships between the two sexes are becoming more and more complex and further apart from each other. We maintain the tradition of the artistic techniques, and change the content (the meaning of the story) in the meeting-clash between the opposite sexes, nowadays.



Within this innovative, historical/traditional context, the work done by the actor (the participants in the workshop) becomes global: the actor is mime, clown, dancer... The same course of study and practical work on the stage as that of the actor of the Commedia dell'Arte is applied in the development of a daily training session in scenic art and in one's ancient and modern culture – training that bears in mind the continuous

movement of life, the mysterious relationship between body and mind, between the person and the character of the mask, between the man-actor and the character. In this case, space becomes a fundamental element: It moves and changes if the same actor is able to modify it at every moment with variances on the theme; that is, the guided (controlled) improvisation on a certain theme, for instance, inside which the group works on a dramaturgy that becomes, at first, writing on the stage, then plot. It is at this point that the mask assumes its primitive meaning (the animal nature, the fiendishly good/ironic hoaxter, the speed, the expressive intensity) with its communicative, pedagogical energy, made by the shape and content of each part of body and mind: the mask isn't just an "object" on the face of the actor; in fact, it is the cultural, technical, formal and artistic awareness gained by those who use it on the stage; that is, the actor and his/her artistic and personal experience.

The training is also the process by which the harmony among the group of actor-students in an empty space is built up. A construction of the space is made by the sounds, more or less intense or frail forces, misunderstandings, geometrical drawings of bodies, and play on words, all of which collate in meanings that give meaning to the character of everybody's mask, made by different individualities that need to interact through the experimentation of the global mask on the stage. This is the hard but charming route by which to rediscover the fundamental principles of the tradition (history, culture, formal expression) and call it into question again, rewrite it, covering an itinerary that is not tied up to any general traditional stereotype, but rather travels in our contemporary time (history, culture, and social problems: communication, relationships, cooperation...).



The Athens2008 workshop

The general aim of this workshop is to transmit the knowledge of the tradition of propitiatory rites (the Calendimaggio, the Carnival, the Lent ...) in European culture.

The theoretical and practical course (literary, poetic and theatrical) will be developed through a theatre activity in which the psychophysical action of the participants will be the main part.

The participants will work simultaneously on the technique of the Mime, the Clown and the Commedia dell'Arte, using music and dance too, in order to acquire a knowledge and consciousness of the tradition element, and afterwards, to turn the contents into an innovative scenic action.

The main purpose of this workshop will be to present the participants with a possible methodology for the creation of a performance in which the different languages talk among themselves, trying to find the right expressive balance between the style (the different techniques: Mime, Clown, Commedia dell'Arte) and the content (the Calendimaggio, the Carnival, the Lent... the tradition).