

Saving the Mask

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Abstract: The Article defends the actor's mask training from the reformist trends that consider the mask study to be no longer necessary or topical. The author identifies one of the causes of this attitude in the purpose of higher education in Europe that has changed in the recent years. Students are unfortunately encouraged to have employment-focused *consumer* behaviours, therefore are more concerned with the *results* than with the *process of* learning and personal development. Specifically, the question arises whether academic studies, theatre, in this case, are intended only for the training of future employees or, without excluding, of course, this goal, they are rather ways to model behaviours, to (in)-form the spirit, to educate critical thinking and, last but not least, to endow students with an ethos that will allow them to be, as future theatre artists, spokesmen of free expression, the "mirror of the times"? The study continues with a brief exposition of the principles, themes and benefits of mask training. In the final part, the author presents the results of a mini-survey among graduates of the Cluj theatre school, questioned about the role of mask studies in their professional careers.

Keywords: reforms, theatrical studies, mask, actor, commedia dell'arte, Cluj

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Fig. 1. Neutral mask, clay model, by Filip Odangiu

I.

Radical reforms can lead to the disappearance of practices and values that are valid regardless of time or context. This article is a position statement, a call to reason and an argument for maintaining mask courses in the curriculum of theatre faculties. I discuss this particular case because it could illustrate the risks of changes that might undermine basic principles of arts education.

The coronavirus pandemic is generating unrest and serious questions in many areas, and has also been a catalyst for new trends in recent years. Not only the means of communication, but also the mission of art and education are questioned once again. The arts, the cultural and education institutions face unprecedented economic, social and even political pressures.

One can notice a similarity between the way in which the cultural act begins to be re-thought and the act of education. The criterion of efficiency, insistence on measurable results, quantification, statistics become more important than research, personal development, awareness building. Time is getting busier, standardized by “procedures,” there are even authorities

who determine exactly how long it *should take* to build an article, a theatre show, an artist. The study cycles are getting shorter, it seems that the training time of a mathematician or lawyer is equal to the training of a teacher, an athlete or an actor. The courses in classic format are seriously competed by workshops, seminars, webinars, tutorials that condense the information, provide the *result* directly without considering the *process*.

Or, at least in arts education, the order of priorities should be different, as the famous acting trainer, Clive Barker, states: “The keynote to all the work is that it is a process of exploration and discovery, not the direct acquisition of practical skills which the actor does not possess. The acquisition of skills is the by-product of the work. By starting with this premise we concentrate on the processes of action and not on the results we want to achieve.”²

Training, in the artistic field, as in sports, involves an underlying natural process of growth and development, which takes place in a certain time, determined by many objectives and subjective factors. In the face of the current of opinion that proclaims the need to accelerate and maximize learning, the question naturally arises: has the human body-mind evolved in sync with these imperatives? Has the pattern of growth changed? And towards what are we hurrying?

“A school should devote time and attention to a rigorous process of experimentation, to waste time in order to gain time,” warns the character Rosa Sensat, in the play *Amor mundi* by Victoria Szpunberg. Not only time must follow regulatory controls, but also the contents are targeted by radical reformulations. Education and culture must, apparently, sell well. The principles of marketing invade territories until recently protected. Attractive projects invite teachers to become “educational entrepreneurs” the innovative nature of courses depends on “maximizing the learning” of students, which is reminiscent of the questionable practice of forced growth in agriculture. The integration of entrepreneurship in teaching is justified by the need to approach the concrete, everyday life.

² Clive Barker, *Theatre Games. A New Approach to drama training*. (London: Methuen drama, 2019), 5.



Fig. 2. Masked students playing Pulcinella and Theresine, 2021;
photo credit Ioana Albu

Simultaneously with the decrease of subsidies in education, as well as in culture, the emphasis seems to be placed more and more on profitability, on an *input-output* system.³

The study “Students’ views on the purpose of higher education: a comparative analysis of six European countries” refers to the creation of the European Higher Education Area (2010) – as the moment when the European universities were ‘reverse-engineered’ around an Anglo-American model.⁴ According to it, students have employment-focused *consumer* behaviours, therefore are more concerned with the *results* than with the *process* of learning

³ Rachel Brooks et al., “Students’ views on the purpose of higher education: a comparative analysis of six European countries,” *Higher Education Research & Development*, 40:7 (2021), 1375-1388. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2020.1830039>

⁴ Rachel Brooks et al., “Students’ views...”, <https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2020.1830039>

and personal development. Some researchers, cited in the aforementioned study, link the Bologna reform to the same trend that reduces higher education to an economic production function. The study “Students’ views on the purpose of higher education...” shows that the tendency of decision makers to instil a *consumer* mentality/identity in students, has led to a more passive attitude towards learning, to the fact that students place much more emphasis on their rights than on their responsibilities and on getting a diploma, rather than knowledge. The findings of surveys by Rachel Brooks, Achala Gupta, Sazana Jayadeva, and Jessie Abrahams certify that politicians and decision-makers continue to introduce policies to measure the “quality” of higher education according to employment outcomes. However, as the cited article shows, many students have a different perspective. A considerable number of participants in the study argued that universities offer society the chance of a protected environment in which thoughts and ideas can be pursued at the highest level; intellectual research is a value in itself, and higher education institutions should play an important role in promoting the public good by facilitating reasoning, debate, the promotion of democracy and critical thinking.⁵

II.

Recently, the decision-making forums in theatre education put forward the idea of eliminating mask studies from the curriculum of the theatre faculty in Cluj. The rationale for this measure is in line with the general trend invoked above, whereby “the value of higher education has come to be associated with economic reward and labour market participation and measured by a relatively narrow range of indicators.”⁶ In the present case, the reasons presented refer to the limited number of theatre productions using mask in repertoires and the imperative to adapt art education to the expectations of the labour market. This kind of approach forces us to reaffirm the importance of mask studies in actor training, making it inevitable to refer

⁵ Rachel Brooks et al., “Students’ views...”, <https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2020.1830039>

⁶ Rachel Brooks et al., “Students’ views...” <https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2020.1830039>

to the role and purpose of arts education at the academic level. Specifically, the question arises whether academic studies, theatre, in this case, are intended only for the training of future employees or, without excluding, of course, this goal, they are rather ways to model behaviours, to (in)-form the spirit, to educate critical thinking and, last but not least, to endow students with an ethos that will allow them to be, as future theatre artists, spokesmen of free expression, the “mirror of the times”?



Fig. 3. Scene from commedia dell'arte performance, 2015; Filip Odangiu archive

I have been teaching acting at the theatre faculty in Cluj for almost 20 years. The discipline "Mask and character studies" has been in the academic program for 30 years, since the establishment of the faculty. The tradition of mask studies was created and cultivated by a whole gallery of exceptional artists and pedagogues who recognized the formative potential of the mask: Miriam Cuibus, Mona Chirilă, Bács Miklós, Diana Cozma, Ionuț Caras, Anca Măniuțiu, Ștefana Pop Curșeu and many others. The theatre faculty in Cluj is one of the few faculties in Romania where this discipline is taught on a regular basis, so the mentioned tradition means, at the same time, an accumulation of knowledge. Over 20 generations of student actors, directors, theatre critics and playwrights, trained in Cluj, were, directly or indirectly, influenced by mask studies.

Today, this tradition is questioned and this requires reaffirmation of the fundamental motivations of mask and the Commedia dell'Arte in the academic curriculum.

III.

For the training of the actor, the knowledge and practice of masked acting are indispensable.⁷ Jacques Copeau has been the first to acknowledge this when he first covered the students' faces, at the Theatre du Vieux-Colombier, in 1913. Depriving the actor-apprentice of the possibility to use his/her facial expression on stage determines him/her to discover other instruments of bodily expression; the mask helps the actors gain a deep, physical and psychological understanding of the expressive value of their body position/ posture, gesture, gait, etc. At the same time, the mask develops the actor's dramatic instinct: he gets to "feel", to intuit the plot development, the character, the dramatic situation. His condition changes: from the photographic reproduction of reality to the level of a sculpture, that is, from the copying of nature to its understanding, states Leon Chancerel in "Notes personelles," as quoted by Sears A. Eldredge.⁸

⁷ The mask training must be understood, of course, as a complement, not a contradiction of other methods of acting training.

⁸ Eldredge, A. Sears, *Mask Improvisation for Actor, Training & Performance. The compelling Imag* (Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1996), 17.



Fig. 4. Shadow exercises, 2017; photo credit Filip Odangiu

Freshly admitted students to acting school seem, more and more often, strangers to their own body and mind. First year subjects bring them closer to themselves, teach them to breathe again, to walk, to talk and to undertake actions driven by intention and emotion. Mask studies, introduced in the second year, help beginners discover and practice concepts and techniques like the opposing vectors, status, mask-countermask, to practically understand the idea of mind-body unity, to integrate the environment in their performance, but something essential takes place: their “artistic morphology” develops, through the appearance and manifestation of the “third eye”, a metacognitive ability through which the future actor acquires a new, integrative perception of his Presence and actions in space and time.

The cost of these transformations is not to be neglected, because it concerns the very identity of the mask wearer. The newly admitted to acting are, on average, 19 years old and are in the effervescent phase of self-search. When they don the masks for the first time, they are shocked, because they encounter their unknown part, a part only foreboding, but not manifested until then. As all masters of the mask point out, its action is always twofold: it simultaneously hides and reveals the wearer's personality.

Mask acting involves such a radical paradigm shift in thinking that beginners are unsettled, at first. When I started studying the mask, as a student, the shock was just as great. The attitude of the students towards the lessons of the mask, in general, and the *Commedia dell'Arte*, in particular, moves from enthusiasm to confusion, recoil and, finally, revelation and freedom of expression. Beyond the deprivation of facial expression or the limitations imposed on the voice, a much more disconcerting requirement for the students is to put intentions, emotions and thoughts into the body, to amplify gestures, to discover that "total osmosis between outside and inside", described by inspired actress and mask teacher, Ana Vasquez Castro.⁹ The gestural behaviour of the masked character might seem illustrative and superficial, as the opponents of the mask theatre say, but this opinion betrays the limitation to a first level of understanding. We understand that the work happens at a higher level of creativity where each gesture has a significant role, being part of an elaborate system, called "mask code". Problems occur only when mask studies are taught inadequately, justifying the criticism of the mask.

Some of the preconceived ideas about *commedia dell'arte*, which I, as a teacher and spectator have met, are: *Commedia dell'Arte* is nothing but a cheerful, superficial comedy, uncoordinated, random improvisation, the opposite of realism; the characters are mere simplistic, even monomaniacal creatures, expressing themselves through chaotic agitation.

⁹ Ana Vasquez Castro, "The Clown, that unique being," *Revista do Lume*, 4/2012, 10.



Fig. 5. Masked students, scene from rehearsals, 2021; photo credit Ioana Albu

Connoisseurs have a different view, they see in this theatrical genre – called “codified theatre”, “fixed form theatre”, “theatre of declared convention” etc. – the essence of theatre. Pure improvisation does not exist in Commedia dell’Arte, maintain initiates, such as Ferruccio Soleri, with whom I had the privilege of working.¹⁰ Anyone who approaches the Commedia dell’Arte carefully can see the deep realism that underlies both the codes and the relationships between the characters. It is not simply a merry agitation. The codes, the “fixed” grammar elements of the mask acting allow the novice actor to understand and respect the craft part of the chosen profession. According to Eric Morris, technique and confidence are interdependent. Confidence in your own tool comes from the certainty that you master concrete techniques, says Morris.¹¹

¹⁰ “The masks of Commedia dell’Arte” workshop by Ferruccio Soleri, “Ion Sava” Centre, The National Theater, Bucharest, 2006.

¹¹ Eric Morris and Joan Hotchkis, *No Acting Please*, (Los Angeles: Ermore Enterprises Publishing, 2002), 37.

The great acting teacher Michel Saint-Denis, quoted by Sears Eldredge, stated that working in a mask is essential in training the novice actor, because it allows him to arouse his emotions and cool his mind, understanding, through experimentation, the chemistry of acting. The need to control his physical actions, even in moments of great emotional tension, forces the actor to adopt a detached and lucid attitude.¹²



Fig. 6a, b, c. Mask creations and improvisations done by the students;
photo credit Filip Odangiu

¹² Sears A. Eldredge, *Mask Improvisation for Actor, Training & Performance. The compelling Image*, (Evanston, Ill: Northwestern University Press, 1996), 37.

If, from the orientation of my argument, it can be deduced, hastily, that I reduce mask studies to the Commedia dell'Arte style, I mention that, in working with students, the denotations of the mask are very diverse, from the object made of different materials applied on the face, or one part of the body or on the whole body of the actor, to the psychological concept of mask.



Fig. 7. Masks on body parts exercise; photo credit Filip Odangiu

During mask training, students acquire, through experimentation, notions like: *body mask*, *vocal mask*, *object-mask*, *incarnated mask*. As the study progresses, exercises with masks overlap with physical theatre themes and culminate in maskless exercises, in which the gains obtained in the masking stages are preserved. The well-known British director Declan Donnellan asserts in his book, *The Actor and Target*, that working with a mask can be revealing when actors establish the basis of a role, even in the case of the most realistic contemporary texts. Declan Donnellan also points out that „Working with a mask is great for the stuck actor because the mask can destroy the actor’s self-consciousness.”¹³ The use of the mask, as an antidote for creative blockage, is based on the following premises: the mask allows the wearer to find a second nature, the actor is not self-conscious anymore, free from the pressure; the „target” is somewhere outside the actor, not the actor himself. Declan Donnellan then states that the theatre costume, the makeup or any concrete object worn by the performer can serve as a mask as long as (or if) the actor uses it only when playing. In my opinion, the mask works similarly to the *psychological gesture* proposed by Michael Chekhov – whose working method we frequently use in conjunction with the mask – contributing to the laying of the invisible foundation of the role.

Mask studies often fulfil themselves in the actors’ consciousness when they play in the street, in front of an audience that does not necessarily attend theatre institutions. With each generation of students, we go through the mask exercises in the space of reality. There, they find out that ordinary people do not reject the interaction, nor treat the mask as a bizarreness, but generally accept the convention and gladly engage, in most cases, in the interaction.

From this perspective, challenging the mask studies, under the pretext that mask performances are rarely present, today, on the cultural market, is obviously an error, a misunderstanding of the role that the mask can play in building the identity of the future theatre artist.

¹³ Declan Donnellan, *The Actor and the Target. Rules and instruments for theatrical play*, trans. Saviana Stănescu and Ioana Ieronim (Bucharest: Unitext Publishing House, 2006), 92.



Fig. 8. Masked students during an action at the Turda Salt Mine, 2021;
photo credit Marius Romilă

IV.

In the summer of 2021, looking for the best way to support the idea of maintaining mask studies, I consulted several graduates of the Theatre Faculty in Cluj, based on the premise that the opinion of the graduates that already have a solid professional perspective can contribute to choosing the right direction to follow. Thus, I launched a mini questionnaire that included two questions:

1. *Do you think that studying mask theatre / Commedia dell'Arte helped you later in your profession as actor / director and in what way?*
2. *Do you think it is useful to maintain the mask study in the training of future actors?*

I received 29 responses from actors and directors, representative of the new generations of theatre professionals trained in Cluj. Their full answers will soon appear in a volume dedicated to Mask Training. However, I still choose to reproduce some of the opinions they expressed, in order to illustrate both the “polychromies” of the approaches and the points of convergence. All the views presented here are taken from the correspondence of the author of this article and are given on the basis of the agreement of those cited.

From the very beginning it can be seen that there are differences of approach between actors and directors: while the former passionately describe the lesson of the mask as having a fundamental contribution to their identity as artists, directors – seemingly untouched by the masks “virus” – although recognize the transformative power of the mask over the actor, are more reserved, adopting a rationalist perspective. Both perspectives may contribute to the reconsideration of mask studies, but neither justifies giving them up.



Fig. 9. Students playing Arlecchino and a Romanian Capitano, 2015;
photo credit Alin Barbir

The key words most often evoked by the respondents are: basic, rigor, mathematics, archetype, expressiveness, rhythm, energy, playful. Most of the actors whose formative background includes mask studies make categorical statements that, in essence, coincide. Thus, mask studies are seen as “a school in itself (...) one of the cornerstones of acting” (Diana Licu); “A formative base of complex artistic mechanisms that has served me in my practical approach.” (Ioana Cojocărescu); “This theatrical form that is ultimately the basis of the construction of any character, be it comic or dramatic” (Patricia Brad); “This form of theatre puts the actor in a continuous state of alert and because it pushes the actor to realize and explore his limits, both physical and mental” (Alex Condurat).

Gaspare Nasuto, Italian artist, who recommends himself as “Ambassador to the world, Museo di Pulcinella. Actor, traveller, puppeteer, sculptor,”¹⁴ one of the most well-known keepers of the tradition of the Pulcinella puppet, responded to my request in his characteristic temperamental manner, first taking the problem that I raised as a re-enactment of the endless negotiation with the Power, a struggle that comedians have always waged: “you are not alone in this battle. I will be by your side whenever you need my support. I am ready to come to Cluj. The future is now. We will win again. For 500 years and more, we’ve been under siege. The story repeats itself. Nobody remembers the names of the attackers; the world remembers all the *Commedia dell’Arte* artists.” The Italian actor then states that the techniques of *Commedia dell’Arte* and ancient theatrical codes are important in the formation of an actor. Mind and body control, discipline and exercise contribute to professional growth and enrich the cultural foundation of each student. Gaspare Nasuto believes that an actor capable of using ancient masks and puppets is an actor who has reached a higher level of mastery. His imaginative ability and mind/body connection are amplified. In conclusion, Nasuto states that it is essential to keep the course of study on masks, concluding that “an actor of *Commedia dell’Arte* represents the gate, the bridge of communication between our times and the past, a past built through technique, faith, practice, study, and discipline.”

¹⁴ “Gaspare Nasuto: Biography,”

<https://gasparenasuto.wixsite.com/ladomusdipulcinella/biografia>.

Ofelia Popii, the well-known actress of the National Theatre "Radu Stanca" Sibiu, theatre teacher at the Department of Theatre Arts at the University "Lucian Blaga" in Sibiu, says that the study of the mask is "extremely useful" and that she addresses this subject in the second year of study. Regarding the contribution of mask studies to her own professional success, Ofelia Popii states: "Studying Commedia dell'Arte and working with a mask is important for the development of body expression, it helps to explore voice and diction, develop imagination and creative ability. At the psychological level, it marks very well the awareness of what a character means, something you aim for and become, the understanding of the mask idea on a larger level. In my acting career, it helped me both in the composition roles and in those in the realist-psychological area; this study helped me to create all my characters."

Oana Mardare, actress, founder of a well-known independent theatre in Cluj (Reactor of creation and experiment), proposes new perspectives. Having a master's degree in acting at ESTUDIS at Teatro Berty Tovies, Barcelona, allows Oana Mardare to say that "the mask is a lifeline for the actor, it helps her to keep lucid." It is worth noting here the paradox typical of the mask, which is generally perceived as a gateway to the trance of otherness, not to a clearer perspective. Regarding the academic curriculum, Oana Mardare confesses that she does not see the usefulness of completing mask studies by producing shows, the reasons being "time, energy and resources lost by building things that have little to do with the actor's laboratory. "Oana Mardare suggests to continue with the mask studies, but to also have an approach to contemporary reality. The actress considers that, in a symbolic and essentialized way, each character is a form of mask. She thinks it's important to be aware of that, because the convention gives the actor a safe distance from the interpreted material.

From a completely different position, the director Radu Nica states that the study of the mask did not help him in his career. However, the director acknowledges that his area of artistic interest is rather in the direction of a realistic aesthetic, which involves a style of play as natural as possible. Radu Nica appreciates that the study of the mask would lead the actors towards "a thicker/expressionist/exterior (...) acting style", in collision with what he

considers to be an adequate acting style for the 21st century: authentic, internalized, but not without stage expressiveness, a post-Brechtian acting, in which one can see the inner universe of the actor who plays a character, but also his personal attitude (be it sometimes critical) towards the role he plays. Radu Nica acknowledges, on the other hand, that the study of the mask is useful for future actors who, thanks to the aesthetics of *Commedia dell'Arte*, have the opportunity to unlock emotionally, to acquire the means of bodily expression, to learn the mechanisms of comedy, a body of knowledge from which the director can also fully benefit. Radu Nica concludes that, in an age where honesty, rather than virtuosity and artistic illusion, is at the forefront, the study of the mask is useful, provided that this study is strictly limited to only one semester.

The opinions given above resonate with those expressed by other representative directors. For example, Leta Popescu reproaches mask studies for taking too long and for the lack of grip on contemporaneity. Norbert Boda, actor and director, also believes that the study of *Commedia dell'Arte*, which spans more than a semester, may be to the detriment of the actor.

Director Leta Popescu also brings into question the fact that sometimes mask studies can distort the way actors play, and she finds that to be the reason why some directors, with an aesthetic close to that of the film, avoid working with actors with a mask background. However, Leta Popescu does not forget to mention a series of healthy, useful, indispensable principles, assimilated by herself, through the study of the mask. Thus, as for the directors, Leta Popescu evokes the precious lessons received from her teacher, Mona Chirilă, a well-known director, specialized in mask theatre: the opening to the poetic area – through the character Pierrot –, in her case, the principle of freedom, of serious play, understanding and applying the techniques of theatrical convention, rigorous pattern, training the muscle of seeking solutions. As for the actors, Leta Popescu adds the relationship with the audience to the previously mentioned lessons. In this regard, she recalls the procedure “*colpo di maschera al pubblico*” (or the “double take”), which means to give a fair expression to a reaction, a principle which very few actors with no previous mask experience can incorporate. Recognizing the value of the mask study, however, Leta Popescu recommends shortening the study duration and orienting the work topics towards more contemporary issues.

Andrei Măjeri, director, goes even further, proposing the reconsideration of the curriculum succession, respectively the placement of the mask studies earlier. In his opinion, a more appropriate order of acting lessons would be: nonverbal theatre, then mask studies, in the first year, Elizabethan theatre and then realistic theatre in the second year and, finally, contemporary drama and preparation of the graduation performance in the third year. Andrei Măjeri places mask studies in the area of typology and formalist theatre and considers it imperative to counterbalance this lesson with approaches that, while addressing major themes, show interest in students, are connected to their age and contemporary issues.



Fig. 10. Scene from commedia dell'arte performance, 2013; Filip Odangiu archive

Undoubtedly, it is encouraging and inspiring that directors express views contrary to the current of opinion manifested among the actors. But if we look closely, their criticisms do not address and do not raise the issue of eliminating mask studies, the usefulness of which they unanimously recognize,

but rather express the need to reconsider the approach. I do believe it is very useful to take into account the feedback of the directors who have a constant contact with the professional field. It is also to meditate on the evolution of acting, on the idea of topicality versus permanence.

My pedagogical approach, in mask improvisation, has multiple goals, the most practical one being to help the student incorporate a stage behaviour in the theatre *without* masks.

I am perfectly aware that we rarely meet the physical mask on stage. I am not aiming for students to acquire a mannerist style of playing, not even a certain style. The ultimate pedagogical purpose is to help the students gain something that is pre-style, pre-expressive, in Eugenio Barba's terms, a transformation, it is laying a foundation of thinking in act. This final purpose can only be achieved in time. It is true, in the early phase, after the mask studies, the students' acting style may seem shrill and this can sometimes contaminate the following roles, but gradually the interpretation is tempered and the right tone is reached. It's all about the way the mask is taught. I'm not a mask mystic, my landmarks are Jaques Lecoq, Dario Fo, Feruccio Soleri, Declan Donnellan, Sears Eldredge, Gaspare Nasuto and others. Well-done mask theatre is deeply realistic. The spectators are still very impressed when a masked character suddenly turns to them from the stage. Maintaining the mask during training can structure the actor's long-term stage ethos. Only if it is taught incorrectly, the masked acting remains shrill. Following my former students, I can say that the "work of the mask" is sometimes accomplished even some time after graduation, in roles in which they play without a mask.

Beyond the discussion about aesthetic choices and observations on the teaching process, a number of respondents to my questionnaire presented concrete examples of how the study of the principles of mask play supported them in the profession, helping them in various contexts. I have retained a few eloquent examples. One actor claims that the study of the Commedia dell'Arte brought him closer to social theatre (Alex Condurat). Director Delia Gavlițchi and actor David Constantinescu talk about the non-verbal theatre they practice, mentioning the clear difference between the actors who studied mask theatre and those who did not.

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Fig. 11. Masked and unmasked group of characters during an exercise from Sears
A. Eldredge; photo credit Filip Odangiu

Actress Fatma Mohamed, present in most of the feature films of the English director Peter Strickland, mentions the contribution of the Commedia dell'Arte archetype characters in shaping her film acting. Actor Cosmin Bighei refers to his career in stand-up and improv theatre.

Paul Sebastian Popa, along with many others, mentions the usefulness of mask studies in the activity of director/trainer of non-formal education workshops, but especially in puppet and animation theatre. Actor Cătălin Filip talks about the creation of the Commedia dell'Arte canvas as an exercise in structuring ideas, beneficial for the playwright's work. Actor Cătălin Florea highlights the development of scenography skills, comparing the construction of the costume and mask with building a house with his own hands. Most actors talk about the power of the mask to provide solutions to overcome creative blocks. Others confess the contribution of the mask to their identity as actors.



Fig. 12. Commedia dell'arte and Romanian traditional masks, performance by Filip Odangiu; photo credit Alin Barbir

Bogdan Bob Rădulescu – actor who works both in the state and in the private system, considers that the actor becomes a character only when he dons a mask, otherwise the mask is the face of the *actor's character* (real Self). Bob Rădulescu believes that each actor contains, in essence, a character from the gallery of those in the Commedia dell'Arte, and that the discovery of this virtual inner character is the effect of studying the mask. In conclusion, Bogdan Rădulescu states emphatically: "the mask can exist without theatre, but theatre without a mask, no!"

V.

The limited space of an article does not allow the development of an extensive argument in favour of maintaining mask studies in the academic curriculum. It is more than obvious that doing the exercises of Jaques Lecoq, Dario Fo, Eugenio Barba, Keith Johnstone, Sears Eldredge and others one can best understand the value of the mask in training a future theatre artist. I tried to briefly present the themes of working with a mask and their benefits. But the direct experience with the mask cannot be replaced by any theoretical presentation. The enthusiasm of those who have gone through this experience can be felt in the tone of their statements of support. The fact that almost 40% of the theatre students in Cluj choose, as topics of their bachelor's dissertation, subjects from the mask theatre is an obvious indicator of the importance they give to this stage of their training.

But beyond statistics, after all, an actor is just someone who wants to play someone else, or how can he pretend to do that if he doesn't firstly learn who he is? The mask on the face of the novice actor is the perfect alibi and tool that allows him to find his true nature and function at a higher level of creativity.

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