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What is Behind the Mask? An Exploration of The Human Experience Through Physical Theatre

What is it that makes a dance performance intriguing to an audience? Is it the elaborate costumes, brilliant lighting choices, or the astonishing soundtrack? Though they support the performance immensely, perhaps a work's triumph is not dependent upon these variables. One thing is for sure: audiences crave connection. Individuals long to feel the weight of the work in their velvet theatre seats. Without this, the work becomes estranged. Luckily, there is a genre of theatrical performance that emphasizes this exact concept. Within the realm of performance, a thin line exists that intersects the mediums of acting and dance. This line is known as "physical theatre" and is often used to describe how the physical body portrays a person's experience through dramaturgical and kinesthetic research (Kriegler-Wenk 397).

Evolving from Greek theatre, this art form utilizes the human body to convey expression and gesture effectively. The incorporation of the neutral mask, expressive masks, and "mime" all assist in the conveying of this art form. These concepts are quintessential in understanding the relationship between the expressive body and human emotion, neglecting the use of facial expressions. Physical theatre and dance intersected in the late twentieth century, with credit to the remarkable Pina Bausch. It is noted that "Bausch has defined the benchmark of template against which late twentieth-century Western dance and physical theatre can be considered"

(Murray and Keefe 77). Bausch's work influenced many others, including an artist named Lloyd Newson. He decided to bridge this gap between these two medias and created a company known as "DV8." Their mission was to take risks, both aesthetically and physically, and break down the barriers between dance and theatre. Since the beginning of the company, Newson has "rejected the abstraction that had permeated most contemporary dance and sought to find meaning in movement through narratively driven work" (University of Bristol). Due to DV8's success in this amalgamation, many choreographers have started implementing this practice within their work. Although physical theatre has been showcased in various dance performances, it is still an area that many dancers are not aware of or do not fully understand. I argue that dancers should be knowledgeable about physical theatre and comprehend its importance as a useful tool for choreography and performance.

Physical theatre was not a term used explicitly until the late 1960s; however, there have been multiple theatre practices over the past 2000 years that have been "ascribed as physical theatre" (Murray and Keefe 14). One of these theatrical practices is mime, which began in the fifth century BCE with Sophron of Syracuse. The history of mime can be traced back to ancient Greece, where individuals performed without spoken word and instead relied on amplified gestures and full body expressions to convey human emotion. Mime theatre progressed into *commedia dell'arte*, pantomime, and harlequinade from the fifteenth to the nineteenth century (Invisible Ropes). In the late nineteenth century, practitioners no longer used the word "mime" due to its narrow range of theatrical endeavor. Jacques Lecoq denoted mime as a theatrical malady and claimed it lacked the power to connect to a contemporary audience (Murray and Keefe 20). One aspect that mime theatre brought forward is the use of gestures, more specifically, how gestures can convey human expression without the demand for spoken words.

Lecoq believed that “gesture precedes knowledge, thought, and language” and that the operation of bodies moving in space will allow individuals to “know the world” (Murray and Keefe 21). Gestures resemble and produce symbols relating to people, places, objects, or feelings in coordination with body language, facial expressions, and hand gestures. Semiotics is the study of signs and symbols, and how they are used to create meaning, which is often referred to when discussing gestures in physical theatre (School of Critical Design). Semiotics has multiple branches that describe these different aspects, one of these branches being kinesics, which:

Attempts to provide a code for translating and interpreting the movement of the body on stage, in other words, how an actor’s (or dancer’s) movements, mobility, gestures, facial expressions, and postures can be constructed and controlled to communicate the meanings which are intended by the script, director (or choreographer) and performer (Murray and Keefe 24).

Symbols can possess a different meaning than the spectator may assume. A smile can be viewed as enlightening and welcoming, but it may also be used to hide someone’s true expression, such as jealousy or rage. Kinesics provides a procedure for reading gestural physicality and understanding the director, choreographer, actor, or dancer's meaning behind the movements. However, with that in mind, art is subjective, and an audience will create their own meaning from the information they are given. Humans inherently view others as we view ourselves, and because of this, empathy plays a huge role in physical theatre. The mind, body, and spirit of the spectator all correlate to how they perceive art. This recognition and identity within the work assist in the impact that physical theatre has on an audience. At the very root of this art form is human connection and the need to express the human experience. As mentioned prior, Pina Bausch remains one of the most influential artists to incorporate this ideology into her work and

is still known as a pioneer for utilizing physical theatre. Bausch paved a new approach for showcasing gestures on stage to encapsulate the vast expressions of the human body through aesthetics, choreographic gestures, and pensive themes.

Pain, love, loss, relationships, sexuality, and death are all themes that Pina Bausch incorporated into her work through the integration of physical theatre in a dance spectrum. Bausch remains a notable figure in physical theatre for her unification of this art form and dance. Her work is raw; it stems from her lived experiences and is portrayed through uncomplicated, natural movement that is easy for an audience to grasp. Bausch's work contains basic human actions, including "walking, running, falling, crawling, shuffling, dragging, chasing, and embracing" (Murray and Keefe 78). Starting with these concepts, Bausch managed to dissect and analyze the connotations of these motions and how they relate to the burdened topics she incorporated in her works. In 1973, she became the artistic director for Tanztheater Wuppertal, which further developed her choreographic investigation within this aesthetic. During her time with Tanztheater Wuppertal, she created one of her most influential pieces titled "*Café Müller*" (1976). This piece serves as an homage to her father's café in Germany during the time period of World War II. The stage is dimly lit and filled with empty wooden chairs and tables, which depict a deserted space (Murray and Keefe 78). The six dancers utilize the basic movements noted earlier (i.e., running, walking, crawling, etc.), bumping into chairs as they move throughout the space. There is constant repetition during the piece, creating the cyclical nature of depression during a time of war. Gestural movements are generated through the exploration of Bausch and her dancers' lived experiences and are then used as a tool for further conveying the narrative of the piece. Murray and Keefe state, "Bausch takes quotation, physicality, and gestures and turns them into something extraordinary, awful, and sometimes sublime through precision,

repetition, and exaggeration” (Murray and Keefe 78). The work that Bausch generates does not aim to console, but rather to invoke. The movement is political, and the subject of the performance challenges the audience to fully grasp and understand the context of the dance. Grasping the meaning of Pina Bausch’s work is principal when divulging into the world of physical theatre. Not only did she generate an innovative form of branching dance and physical theatre, but she also inspired copious artists to follow.

It was not until Jacques Lecoq was seventeen years old that he discovered the art of theatre through sports, particularly running. He was fascinated by “the contraction or elongation of the runners’ shadow thrown by the sun slanting across the stadium, where the rhythm of running sets in” (Lecoq 3). This obsession with the convergence of movement led him to the realm of theatre, where he studied at the *Travail et Culture* (TEC). Through this program, Lecoq learned about “mimed improvisation” with Claude Martin (a French actor) and realized that the fundamental gestural language he improvised with was based upon the sports he played (Lecoq 4). Later, Lecoq discovered the masked performance through Jean Dasté, who exerted a powerful influence over decentralized theatre. As Lecoq became more invested in this work, he traveled to Italy in 1948 to work as a creative practitioner and teacher at the University of Padua (Lecoq 6). This experience introduced Lecoq to *commedia dell’arte*, which is characterized by its use of masks, improvisation, physical comedy, and recognizable character types” (Wilson). While studying in Italy, Lecoq began to understand authentic *commedia dell’arte*: characters having a passion for life. He was a spectator watching peasants selling their cattle and lifelong friends reconciling at a bar, all living their own lives. This close examination of everyday movements made him realize the importance of the body in relation to storytelling. He began to wonder how the body itself can convey these emotions without the use of facial expressions. As a result, later

in Lecoq's methodology, he introduced and founded the concept of the neutral mask to his students, which emphasized the notion of simplicity, specifically in acting. The neutral mask paved the way for physical theatre practitioners and students by highlighting the physical sensations of the body in reaction to external forces such as sound, touch, etc.

Interwoven in physical theatre is the concept of the neutral mask, "an object with its own special characteristics" (Lecoq 36). The significance of its neutrality is simple: the mask contains no inner conflict, a state of receptiveness, and a state of neutrality before action. It is a reference point that actors should utilize when performing to understand how expression affects the face. The neutral mask is a physical mask that actors can wear, but should not be confused with the white masks that are worn in carnival (noted as a "dead mask"), which denote the opposite of neutrality. Lecoq mentioned that in his classes, he gave his students masks consisting of leather made by Amleto Sartori. When an actor assumes the mask, they become a "generic being" as opposed to a character (Lecoq 38). The neutral mask presents a physical sensation of tranquility; in turn, it allows the actor to be hyper-aware of how they react to movement, sound, touch, etc. It is important to note that "beneath every expressive mask or commedia dell'arte masks, there is a neutral mask supporting the other" (Lecoq 38). The basis of the actor's movement should initiate from the concept of the neutral mask. As mentioned prior, mime is an important fundamental of physical theatre and inherently the neutral mask. Lecoq notes, "Miming is a fundamental human action, a childhood action; children mime the world to get to know it and prepare themselves to live in it" (Lecoq 22). If an individual consistently acts, such as driving a car or hammering a nail, it becomes an automatic part of life. Similarly, the art of mime conveys these illusory presences that support the very center of theatre. This integration of everyday gestures is varied by the person and depends upon their lived experiences. The details of these gestures become

amplified when conforming to the neutral mask because the body becomes the face of the performer. The mask opens the space for the actor, allowing them to tune into every detail of their movement and making for a more heightened level of performance. While the neutral mask serves as a significant fundamental in physical theatre, masks of other denotations often convey similar importance.

In addition to the neutral mask, Lecoq also taught his students about the three different types of “expressive masks”. These masks must be able to transform from multiple expressions (happy, to sad, to angry, etc.) “without becoming fixed on the emotion of a single moment” (Lecoq 56). The three expressive masks include “character, larval, and utilitarian masks,” and all serve different purposes. This introduction of the multiple expressive masks was not revealed by Lecoq to students until their second year at university. Lecoq would have his students design and build their own character masks that adhere to the proposed criteria. Students would work diligently on creating these masks and then bring them to class to display the final product. Subsequently, Lecoq did not want the students to wear their own masks. He realized they configured a relationship to these masks while making them, and inherently had a preconceived notion of how they would act wearing them. Therefore, he had his students wear another individual’s masks and understand how the creator intended this “character” to perform. Lecoq discusses this idea of “push and pull” that occurs when going through this process. The performer attempts to contextualize this mask by displaying various emotions through it. The larval mask is a rather “vague” concept of the expressive mask, lacking any human facial features besides a large protruding nose. This mask strips movement down to a simpler, almost animalistic approach to understanding one’s individual reaction to movement and other external stimuli. The last expressive mask that Lecoq introduces is utilitarian masks, which are masks that

serve a purpose in everyday human life. Examples of this include any mask created for a specific human function, such as fencing masks, welding masks, medical masks, etc. A unifying characteristic of these masks is their protective usage in everyday life. In understanding the use of expressive masks, one can note how important gestures become when expressing the feelings of the performer, especially for choreographers.

“DV8 is dance about something... I feel genuinely frustrated by most contemporary dance (Newson, 2015, as cited in Frost).” In 1986, Lloyd Newson brought together a small group of dancers in London to challenge the boundaries of traditional dance and the work that was dominating the field at the time. Pina Bausch was Newson’s central influence in producing pieces with a focus on physical theatre. The work that Newson produces is both extremely intimate and meticulous; everything has significance. His form of physical theatre is “centered around personal narratives, tackling issues of hegemony, homophobia, disability, sexism and gender politics” (Frost). In this company, performers collaborate through improvisation that is based on the theme of the work being presented. All movement comes from their lived experiences, and, through it, they bring new textures and perceptions to the choreographic process. The work that Lloyd Newson generates contains various theatrical elements, including spoken word, physicality of gestures, scenic design, props, etc. The movement is simple, yet captivating, and ranges from walking, running, and jumping to intricate motions of the limbs, similar to much of Bausch’s work. There is an emphasis on physical contact between performers, including moments of weight-sharing, manipulation of another performer’s physicality, and more. In Newson’s work, a spectator can clearly witness a heavy influence from Bausch and her use of the human body. While Newson mainly utilized the experiences of his dancers in his works, he also incorporated his own. In his piece *Enter Achilles* (1995), Newson described

through movement his experience “snapping his Achilles tendon, and, while in hospital recovering from an operation, observing the differing behavior patterns between his male and female friends that visited him” (Murray and Keefe 82). Newson was interested in integrating the use of conventional “masculine gestures” and complicating the stereotypical actions of a “man.” He played with shifting between these basic gestures, more codifiable dance movement, the relationship of the men on stage, and physical contact between the dancers. This piece is set in a heterosexual bar that furthers Newson’s idea of challenging the bodies in space and how they are defined by “sex and physiological construction” (Murray and Keefe 82). One way Newson complicates the relationship between dancers is by rupturing physical contact when contact is desired. Throughout this piece, the dancers utilize improvisation that is based on specific behaviors experienced by the performers. This showcases how Newson pulls from his dancers to create authentic movement that encapsulates their lived experiences. Newson continued this investigation within his works until his retirement in April of 2022. Though his company has come to an end, Newson’s work remains heavily influential in the realm of physical theatre. He pushed the boundaries of contemporary dance by embedding these theatrical concepts and capturing the human experience. A key element of his work was his use of gestures and their dynamic qualities, which can be traced to the efforts of Rudolf von Laban.

When discussing physical theatre and the use of gestures, it is crucial to understand Rudolf von Laban and his movement analysis. Laban, a Hungarian-Austrian artist, created a movement analysis known for dissecting actions into eight basic effort qualities. These efforts include “pressing, flicking, wringing, dabbing, slashing, gliding, punching, and floating,” and all of which contain different relationships to space, time, weight, and flow (Newlove 78). Laban was specifically interested in discovering where, how, and what kind of energy humans use in

their movements to achieve certain tasks. Laban declares that “man moves to satisfy a need” and that these basic efforts are the result of inner impulses (Laban, as cited in Newlove 11). In this breakthrough, Laban realized that every action has a meaning, whether the individual completes it consciously or unconsciously. For instance, if a performer holds their arms out wide, reaching away from the body, this transmits a feeling of communication and openness. However, if that performer decides to cross their arms, intersecting their midline, this closes off their body, creating an inhibition of communication. An action that a person completes directly parallels their inner feelings (Newlove 27). This is why comprehending gestures is crucial when looking at physical theatre due to its heavy use of the body. Bausch and Newson experimented with this parallel of their dancers’ inner feelings with the movement they were portraying by allowing dancers to generate their own movement through improvisational exercises. These exercises then led to the discovery of specific feelings through motion, which in turn connect the dancer to the action. Although some may be more familiar with Laban’s movement analysis as a tool used for dance making, its foundation lies in acting. The concepts that Laban incorporated in his methods and teaching aim for a deeper understanding of the actor and the actions they are performing. However, over the years, dancers have extrapolated these concepts to assist in creating and dissecting movement. While the effort actions are the forefront of Laban’s method, the art form of acting is equally important for dancers to access. Newlove remarks, “For my part, I see no barriers between acting and dancing. Actors should be able to move naturally into dance if required to do so. Dancers should be able to cross into acting, without fear of the spoken word” (118). As noted with the neutral mask, a performer must comprehend the movement of the body and how it can express human emotion by utilizing the face. However, dancers should be aware that the face is a mere extension of what is being portrayed through the body. The intention

behind the movement becomes clearer once both aspects are working in tandem. In using Laban's method to understand the meaning behind the movement and expression through the face, dancers can fully incorporate this knowledge when working with physical theatre.

Physical theatre remains an exceptionally innovative approach to creating work based upon the physical body in relation to a person's lived experiences. The form contains methods of dramatic and kinesthetic research that heighten a performer's awareness of the body and its expression through movement. Pina Bausch and Lloyd Newson both executed a beautiful fusion of seemingly disparate art forms to create an investigative approach to dance movement through the lens of physical theatre. They challenged the contemporary approach to movement, which involved them taking risks and stripping down basic human movement to communicate emotion more concisely. Jacques Lecoq discovered the use of the "neutral mask" to assist in comprehending the articulation of emotions through the body as opposed to relying on facial expressions. He also incorporated the use of "expressive masks" such as character, larval, and utilitarian to further this idea in varied approaches for students. These masks aided in the students' understanding of sensations in the body and how they relate to transmitting mood and emotions. Similarly, this awareness of the body is a facet Laban notes within his movement analysis. With the eight basic effort actions, one can sense the meaning of a body in motion when it parallels the inner feelings of the mover through action. Although elements of physical theatre are becoming more commonly embodied in dance pieces, it has yet to become a well-known choreographic tool amongst dancers and choreographers. Incorporating features of physical theatre can generate a stronger relationship to expressing movement and emotion through the body. Through this connection, audiences will more firmly relate to the gestures utilized and be able to further comprehend their meaning through the effort actions. The goal for

any artist when presenting work is for the audience to connect to it in some way. Through this integration of physical theatre, I believe that dancers can find more success in how their audience interacts with movement, creating a deeper understanding between performer and spectator. As Pina Bausch contends, “I am not interested in how people move, but what moves them” (Pina Bausch 1997, as cited in Murray and Keefe 76).

As a BFA with a Concentration in Performance and Choreography in Capstone II, I plan to utilize the concepts of physical theatre to assist in creating my culminating capstone piece. I am interested in investigating the “neutral mask” as a way for my dancers to understand how the physical body can express emotion solely through movement. This will challenge them to not rely on the facial aspect of their dancing, but rather think diligently about the inner impulse behind their actions. In addition, I am considering using a physical mask as a prop (such as a neutral, character, or physical mask) in my work to incorporate a stronger comprehension of this element for the audience. For the movement, I plan on working heavily with gestures, whether they be conventional or unconventional. There will be a deep investigation of Laban’s eight basic efforts to assist in creating movement that parallels the feelings my dancers are striving to convey. In my rehearsals, I plan to include exercises from readings by Lecoq and Laban (Newlove) to generate movement material as well as to help my dancers become more comfortable in the acting portion of this work. I also desire to embed some form of spoken word, if members of my cast are willing to experiment. I am aiming for this work to reside in the experimental realm of dance, emphasizing the use of theatrics to convey a narrative. Through this piece, I hope to show my dancers how useful incorporating physical theatre can be in a dance work, and I aspire for the audience to have an emotional or physical connection to the movement and narrative being portrayed.

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