

***Mask Work and Improvisations:
A Classroom Adaptation Based on the French Tradition***

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ABSTRACT

Both historically and currently, mask work provides excellent body training for actors and mimes. This article offers a brief history of French mask work as well as step-by-step instructions for a mask workshop that moves students from simple to abstract mask improvisations. The mask workshop also functions as an icebreaker and builds class camaraderie.

Mask work, long utilized for theatrical body training, in fact, has a rich tradition in French acting and mime. Jacques Copeau, a French theatre critic who opened the Vieux-Colombier Theatre, a theatre training school, used mask work to teach more natural movement (Leigh 8, 31). Inspired by the mask training at Copeau's school, Etienne Decroux, the creator of both illusionary and corporeal mime, spent the next sixty years developing ways to train the body (Leabhart 128). Because Decroux thought the trunk of the body should be the focal point of a performance, he worked with either a masked or immobile face (91-4). Yet another Frenchman, Jacques Lecoq, created a mask-training sequence as part of his performance regimen (61). Lecoq's use of a neutral, leather mask challenged students to perform strong and honest characters with a minimum of movement or energy (36-8). Still today, requiring the body alone to tell the story is still an effective educational tool for performance training.

Based upon this historical tradition, I have created an activity that challenges students to perform stories silently—without using words—only their bodies while their faces are masked or covered (38). This activity helps performers express “essential attitudes” with their bodies (53). Another benefit I have personally observed is that students become less inhibited as they experience some degree of success with each round of improvisations. Also, since multiple groups are performing simultaneously, all students are performing their stories to an audience of two to three people, which helps to reduce the fear of “disapproval” from the entire class (Spolin 9). Consequently, this activity has benefits beyond body training.

Objectives/Goals

Students should learn the following concepts from this activity:

1. Students learn freedom of expression in the body. Too many performers rely upon their faces to carry the message and do not utilize the body to its fullest capabilities.
2. Students become aware of their own postures and gesture habits. Students challenge one another to rid themselves of personal physical habits in order to assume and clarify new characters and situations.
3. Students develop as critics. Students offer both positive and corrective critique after each mini-performance and, consequently, learn that they can help others and, hopefully, serve as their own self-critics for future performances.
4. Students learn to take direction from others and immediately apply it to their next improvisation.

Courses for this Activity

This activity works well for all levels of acting and mime classes. The improvisational situations can become as sophisticated as the level of acting or mime class requires. Mime/pantomime classes or even single-day mime workshops can utilize this activity to help performers move away from stereotypical movements. Oral Interpretation students enjoy learning how to use their bodies through this activity. Directing classes would benefit from this activity because they not only learn to critique body movements but also to demand it from performers. Finally, actual rehearsals could benefit from this because the director can briefly describe character scenes and ask the actors to create the scene using only their bodies in order to make the scene more physical and dynamic.

Description of the Activity

Using large squares of white fabric to cover the students' faces (i.e. the masks), students are asked to improvise three types of mimes: simple, complicated, and abstract. Also, since students are not graded on their improvisations, they can relax and let go of their inhibitions as they progress through the levels of mime.

Implementation of the Activity

Materials for the Activity

I created white masks the size of bandannas from an old white sheet by cutting squares approximately 21 inches and hemming them on the sewing machine. Purchased bandannas would work; however, these colorful bandannas may distract from the improvisational situations.

Also, I remind students the class period before the activity to wear jeans, trousers, or sweatpants so that they can freely improvise. Instructors will need the list provided later for the improvisational situations.

Directions for the Activity:

1. The length of activity is 60-80 minutes. It can be lengthened or shortened by the number of improvisational opportunities given to each student in each round. For example, to speed up the activity, I give each student one improvisation opportunity/round and to lengthen the activity, I give each student two improvisational situations/round. I often adjust during the activity so that it ends on time.
2. Number 1-? to get the class into groups of 3-4. This usually breaks up friendship groups. Then the instructor must physically arrange the groups so that students' performances and comments minimally distract each other. Depending upon the facility, this means the performer or the mini-audiences should not observe two improvisations at the same time. In order to accomplish this, I often place performers next to the wall and observers facing the wall and the performer. All groups should improvise simultaneously in order to move quickly through the sequence and to keep the class' attention on their small group of 3-4.
3. The instructor gives everyone a mask to use. Explain to the students that too often we rely upon our faces to communicate more than our bodies. This exercise is intended to help them communicate more truthfully and fully with their bodies. Remind students that these are silent improvisations, and they are not to speak or make any type of sound. Also, instructors should remind the students that the masks are washed after every use. This is important to some students. As I distribute the masks, student creativity emerges. Some tie the masks behind their heads and flip up the bottom when not improvising. Some simply lay the mask loosely over their heads, while some re-tie them each time. I am often surprised by new methods for attaching and wearing the masks.
4. Mask Improvisations
 - a. The instructor offers students the following guidelines:
 - 1) Don't go for laughs.
 - 2) Don't play stereotypes.
 - 3) This is not charades. The first to "guess" the improvisation does not win a prize.
 - 4) Bodies, not faces, must "tell" the message.
 - b. The instructor shows each student the statement that describes the situation to be improvised.
 - c. Students must perform the character and situation for their groups. After performing, students must remove their masks and have the following discussions:
 - 1) Each group describes what they saw in the improvisation.

- 2) Each group states what was clearly performed and what needs to be corrected.
- 3) After listening to the above descriptions, performers tell their groups the intended improvisational character and situation.
- 4) Performers try to incorporate ideas that will improve the previous improvisation.
- e. Students perform the same improvisation again integrating the group's suggestions as well as adding their own new ideas.
 - 1) Once again, students ask the groups to describe what they saw.
 - 2) The groups explain specifically what was better this time.
 - 3) If the groups have any further corrective suggestions, performers listen carefully; however, no improvisation is performed a third time.
5. If time or inclination, at the end of class, all students can present their best mask improvisation to the class for comments.
6. The following mask improvisational situations can be drawn from three envelopes labeled: Simple, Complicated, and Abstract. However, instructors can also walk around the room and show students the next improvisation on a sheet of paper. This keeps the instructor walking around the room and also allows quiet intervention should that becomes necessary (i.e. making the situations easier or more difficult to fit the mood and skill of the students).

Improvisations List

Round I: Simple

1. Show your age, sex, and a physical reaction to a specific drink.
2. Show your age, sex, and a physical reaction to a specific food.
3. Show your age, sex, and a physical reaction to a received phone call.
4. Show your age, sex, and a physical reaction to a specific television show.
5. Show your age, sex, and a physical reaction to a specific class situation.
6. Show your age, sex, and a physical reaction to a specific sporting event.
7. Show your age, sex, and a physical reaction to a specific text message.
8. Show your age, sex, and a physical reaction to a specific book.

Round II: Complicated

1. An accountant who can't balance his/her checkbook.
2. A bank robber on his/her first robbery.
3. An astronaut responding to zero gravity.
4. An orchestra conductor conducting his/her favorite piece of music.
5. A carpenter building a bookcase for a beloved child.
6. A world-class surfer riding a great wave.

7. A bank robber on his/her 20th robbery.
8. A gardener trimming a large tree.

Round III: Abstract

1. Show some type of tree in a storm.
2. Show the life of a butterfly.
3. Show a wall with cats walking on it and the wall's reaction to the cats.
4. Show a log being burnt in a fireplace.
5. Show an egg being fried in a skillet.
6. Show a burning candle in a gentle wind.
7. Show food digesting in the stomach.
8. Show the heart pumping blood.

Evaluation of the Activity

Because this is an ungraded assignment—except for possibly participation points--evaluation is much more subjective. Nevertheless, several specific goals can be observed.

1. As students progress from the simple to the complicated, they become willing to risk performing the abstract. This willingness to try the abstract not only stretches the performer but also is delightful for all to observe.
2. The mask improvisations develop camaraderie as the students laugh together and grow to trust one another's instructive as well as complimentary comments.
3. Students gain some self-confidence: first in their own ability to perform without using their faces and then in their ability to critique others.
4. Hopefully, students will transfer this knowledge of physical delivery into their future performances; however, the instructor may need to remind them to use their bodies just as they did during the mask improvisational workshop. But after this activity, there is a clear reference point.

Reflections on the Activity

Since I give each group the same situation at the same time, I ask groups not to be too loud so that other groups do not hear individual comments. This activity is not merely advanced charades where a student is awarded for "getting" the improvisation first; this activity is meant to be enjoyable but the focus is on developing the body in performance.

I have used this particular activity for several years and students have consistently enjoyed it. As I walk about the room giving them their next improvisational situation, they smile and laugh as they learn to tell clear physical stories. Because I use this activity early in the semester, it functions not only for physical training but also as an "ice breaker." It sets a wonderful tone for future performances and gives us fond memories of improvising with others.