

Thomas Leabhart

Jacques Copeau, Etienne Decroux, and the 'Flower of Noh'

Many of Copeau's students and colleagues in the first half of the twentieth century used a specific vocabulary to describe successful performance. The performer was 'in a trance', or 'possessed', or in an 'altered state of being'. Decroux spoke of 'evicting the tenant from the apartment so that God could come to live there'. For Copeau and others, the mask was an important tool in the discovery of this optimum state. In this article, Thomas Leabhart suggests that the ideas of the American theatre theoretician David Cole might help us to explore what this language means in terms of shamanic voyages. Thomas Leabhart is Resident Artist and Professor of Theatre at Pomona College in California, editor of *Mime Journal*, and author of *Modern and Post-Modern Mime* (Macmillan, 1999). He is also a member of the artistic staff of the International School of Theatre Anthropology (ISTA) and teaches workshops and performs internationally. Leabhart studied with Etienne Decroux from 1968 to 1972, and served as his teaching assistant and translator.

The whole being of the actor keeps, in this human world, traces of other-worldly dealings. He seems, when he comes back among us, to be leaving another world.

Jacques Copeau

The actor's deep conscious or unconscious desire to be something other than what he is in daily life – 'to become' another – permits him to live an intense human reality and to penetrate into an unknown world.

Jean Dasté

I

Mysterious exercises in Boulogne-Billancourt

ETIENNE DECROUX (1898–1991), as a student at the Ecole du Vieux-Colombier in Paris and later in Burgundy in 1924, was greatly influenced by Jacques Copeau, and was especially impressed by Copeau's exercises with masks. He subsequently undertook a lifetime of research and discovery in *mime corporel*, a form which, in contrast to nineteenth-century pantomime, articulated the trunk and de-emphasized facial expression and hand gestures.

During my four years with Decroux, from 1968 to 1972, he taught in the bright blue basement of his house in Boulogne-Billancourt, a near suburb south-west of Paris. In addition to daily technique classes, he lectured every Friday evening on a wide variety of topics. A class in improvisation followed these lectures. Part of my thought all week was fixed on the approaching and terrifying Friday night improvisations, which, for me, were mysterious exercises.

For my first year or two *chez lui*, I had no idea what was required during these stressful and intimidating experiences in which Decroux asked individuals or groups of two, three, or more to stand at one end of the basement studio, in a pool of what he liked to call, with a flourish of his fat fingers and a mocking affectation in his voice, *lumière artistique*. His only instructions were words on the lines of: 'Portray a thinker. After a while, you will become Thought. Emotion leads to motion. Thought begets immobility. Begin!'

These enigmatic guidelines seemed to intensify rather than dispel the uneasiness surrounding the conundrum of movement/immobility, making us think that, in these improvisations, we were damned if we moved and damned if we didn't.

What Decroux wanted, and what most of us eventually found – although it might take years, tears, and discouragement – was a state of being in which the student actor was relaxed yet alert, very much in the moment, and poised on the razor’s edge that separates movement from immobility. Until we were successful, neither our movements nor our immobilities were sufficiently charged with their opposite qualities. Decroux’s worst criticism of an improvisation, delivered in heavily accented English, was: ‘Human, too much human.’ In other words, it was apparent that the student had not sufficiently ‘evicted the tenants from the apartment’, as Decroux put it.

We were told that if we did not succeed in evicting those tenants, God could not come to live there. These startling words came from Decroux, the avowed atheist and *anti-clérical de père en fils*. What he seemed to mean was that one had to get rid of the voices that habitually fill thought, the self-consciousness, the concerns; when this process of emptying out was accomplished, it allowed the moment of being ‘struck with a thought’ – an important moment in Decroux’s teaching. This moment of being taken over by a force exterior to oneself, yet still remaining aware and alert, was often one of complete, vibrant immobility, and was usually followed by a movement imbued with qualities of that immobility. Here, Decroux was fond of quoting Chaplin: ‘Mime is immobility transported.’ After being struck with a thought, one became a thinker. Further into the improvisation, with enough experience, one was able to portray or become what Decroux called pure Thought.

Even though masks were not worn in these improvisations, the students were instructed to have an inexpressive, mask-like face. Decroux described it as a noble face, like the stone carvings of Buddhas in the temples at Angkor. But how to achieve that? The beatific face, the present-yet-absent state, and the process of achieving them seemed difficult or impossible to describe, and mysterious. But we all knew, in watching the improvisations, which of our classmates had succeeded and which had not. Those who succeeded looked larger than life, radiant,

almost possessed. Those who had not, looked uncomfortable, small, and petty. Those who succeeded looked as if they had crossed over into a different world, whereas the others, by trying too hard, remained very much (and painfully so) in this one.

More than twenty years after my work with Decroux, in studying the writings of Copeau and certain of his chief associates and disciples, I saw the origin of these seemingly mysterious exercises. I realized that Decroux was teaching us what Copeau had taught him: a method for achieving theatrical presence through absence, an optimum performance state that must be experienced to be understood. The exercises were not really mysterious; it only seemed that way, as words are so inadequate to describe this fundamentally non-verbal process.

II

Copeau’s readings as interior journeys: absence allows for presence

Though he was not always as successful in acting characters on stage, Copeau was a master at achieving this optimum performance state as he held audiences spellbound during public readings of plays. The best account of Copeau’s power as a performer is by Joseph Samson, describing a reading Copeau gave for him and a few others in Copeau’s study in Pernand-Vergelesses in the 1940s. This long quotation serves our purposes by illustrating different phases of performance, as Copeau gradually ‘disappears’ and is slowly taken over by the characters he incarnates:

He [Copeau] spoke little, in sentence fragments which sometimes didn’t finish, often cut by silences. After a while, we saw he was holding a book. He leafed through it as if by chance. We became quiet. Words began to come to us again from the large armchair where he was sitting, back to the window. These words were at first like the continuation of our conversation. Then, there was something a little new; the sentences took a more organized form, the syllables seemed to be measured, the accents became more intensified, the voice started to be modulated. Furtively, Philippe Chabro and I looked at each other, like people similarly moved: the reading had

begun. Reading? Yes. It was still Copeau. But already it was not Copeau any more; Peguy, author of *The Legend of Three Ducats*, had borrowed his voice. Little by little, the tone became more elevated, certain inflections occurred which belonged to song and to the most authentic speech, the most spontaneous delivery. Copeau was still immobile in his large armchair. Only his face, directly across from us, never stopped moving: the eyes, the mouth. . . . Aside from that, not a gesture, unless it was a light movement of the hand that raised or lowered. Immobile, yet each of the fable's characters came to us with its vital tone, its accent, its personality. They responded to one another. It was like a string quartet when the violin dialogues with its associates. And we, we were caught up in the net of the adventure. Mixed up in it. These distresses, we felt their anguish. They captivated us. We are obsessed by them. Copeau, we've forgotten him. We don't know if he's still there. There remains only the poor man who is going to be hanged, and a queen who wants to shield him from torture. This was the virtue of the symphonic incantation which unwound its magic through the September Sunday twilight. When the music stopped, we stood up. Philippe stammered a thank-you and we left. We went back to my place, which, that summer, was next door to Copeau's. We returned in silence, like two men who had just been confided in, had just been given a secret, and who were so careful to keep it that they didn't dare to speak even between themselves.

(Sampson, p. 5–6)

III

Copeau and his colleagues use a similar unusual vocabulary to describe this ideal state

Reading the abundant texts of Copeau and his main disciples – among them Jean Dasté, Michel St Denis, Charles Dullin, Etienne Decroux, and Jean Dorcy – we are struck by the frequency of certain metaphors. Each of these men uses similar language to write of a certain ideal mental and physical state for the actor. Let's try to hear these words with fresh ears. They are terms that are frequently used to describe the actor's experience. They are received terminology, now everyday words. They are, then, terms that have lost, at least in part, their original strength. Let's try to hear them as if for the first time, the better to discuss them later.

Jean Dasté said he was 'possessed' and that he experienced 'moments of frenzy'. Dullin



Jacques Copeau as the Magician in *L'illusion*.
Costumes and mask by M.-H. Dasté.

writes of an 'altered state of consciousness'; Jean Dorcy uses the word 'trance'; while Copeau writes of a character who 'comes from outside, takes hold of him, and replaces him'. An actor under Copeau's direction in *Les Frères Karamazov* used Dullin's vocabulary – 'altered state of consciousness' – to describe how, after having been seriously injured on stage, he continued to act, despite his wound and the flowing blood. And Decroux often said that the actor should be 'inhabited by a god'.

The religious origins of theatre, so evident in many non-western theatre forms, were well covered up by the early twentieth-century commercialism of Copeau's time. It was against this way of acting, this 'commercial' rather than 'religious' approach to theatre, that Copeau reacted. It is impossible for me to determine if this vocabulary was current in the theatrical milieu before Copeau (for example, the great nineteenth-century French actor Mounet-Sully is supposed to have said of a failed performance, 'The gods did not descend').

With Copeau it was a question of giving back to these images their original vitality, their physical truth, by rediscovering the mask as an antidote to ham acting. This study of the mask, which became in Copeau's school an integral part of training young actors, finally became an important rediscovery for twentieth-century western actors. Masked exercises, which to us seem completely normal, were at that time exceptional.

It can seem original and surprising that these men, who lived and worked in the country of Descartes, where reason and clarity are gods, found a shamanic tool, the mask, to help them develop sincerity and presence in their acting. Without a deep knowledge of non-western systems and approaches, they discovered a tool, the mask, also used in non-western disciplines. And they wrote and spoke about this tool, using a specialized vocabulary, a vocabulary one also finds in non-western systems. One could say that Copeau reminded us of the longstanding masked tradition in the West at the same time.

IV

*David Cole's paradigm:
an optic through which to view
Copeau and his associates*

The paradigm developed by the American theatre theoretician David Cole in his book *The Theatrical Event* (1975) seems ideally suited as an optic through which to view Copeau's work with masks. Cole asserts in his book, in which he acknowledges a debt to Mircea Eliade, that theatrical activity can be looked at using a scheme of (1) shamanistic quest, a

psychic journey to another world, the world of the script; followed by (2) a kind of psychic takeover (called rounding or possession) by the script character; and subsequently (3) a return to the everyday world, where the inspired performance of the possessed actor is given to an attentive audience.

While he does not claim a sacred dimension or religious function for drama as Copeau did, Cole finds ritual practices useful analogies for theatrical ones. To quote:

Shamanic activity and possession behaviour frequently resemble theatre, while contemporary rehearsal and actor-training methods often recall the practices of shamans and possession specialists. In the moment of an actor's passing from shamanic voyager to possessed vehicle, the theatre, as an event, is born. (Cole, p. v)

A shorthand version of Cole's paradigm might be stated as follows: (1) shamanic voyage to the *illud tempus* or world of the play; (2) discovery of it, and subsequent being taken over by it, called possession or 'rounding'; (3) the actor's return to our world, possessed by the Image, yet also in control of himself. This is the part of the activity Cole calls 'hunganistic return', so named after aspects of Haitian rituals.

For some, this may sound like a trendy Southern Californian attempt at 'channelling' (an initiated living person serving as mouth-piece for a dead one); however unfortunate the resemblance to certain 'new age' practices, Cole's paradigm would seem, at least for the actors and directors we are concerned with in this paper (and for other more contemporary ones as well), an accurate way of describing the actor's craft.

V

*The mask:
shamanistic tool for actor training*

In the notes for *A la rencontre de la mime*, Jean Dorcy has given remarkably detailed instructions on how to put on (*chausser*) the mask. They seem to be instructions for entering into the shamanic quest. Note the flavour of Dorcy's language, the resonance of the words chosen to describe his journey:



Alongside, from left to right: Monique Schlumberger and Yvonne Galli wearing neutral masks, made to follow the face of the actor wearing them.

Below, from left to right: Mask of the Spirit of Comedy (mask made by Michel St Denis) worn by Suzanne Bing in *L'illusion*; Mask of Le Célestine (mask made by M.-H. Dasté) worn by Suzanne Bing in *L'illusion*; Mask of the Magician (mask made by M.-H. Dasté) worn by Jacques Copeau in *L'illusion*.



Here I indicate the rites I follow to be able to act with a mask:

(a) Well-seated in the middle of the chair, your back not leaning against the back of the chair. Legs are just enough separated to ensure good balance. The foot is flat on the floor.

For this opening of the search, the actor (shaman) is advised to be relaxed but alert (back away from back of chair).

(b) Extend the right arm shoulder-high in front of you, horizontally; it holds the mask, hanging from its elastic band. The left hand, equally extended, helps in putting on the mask, the thumb holding the chin, the index finger and the middle finger grip the space between the lips.

(c) Simultaneously exhale, close your eyes, and put on the mask.

Here, in (b), is a practical yet codified way to put the mask on. In (c), the shaman/actor is required to block out the reality of this world by breathing out, and by closing the eyes. Simultaneously with blocking out this world, he puts on the tool which will take him to a second, different world.

(d) Simultaneously breathe in and place the fore-arms and the hands on the thighs. The arms, as well as the elbows, touch the chest, the fingers placed a little short of touching the knees.

(e) Open the eyes, exhale, and then, simultaneously, close the eyes, breathe in, and lean the head forward. In leaning the head, the back rounds a bit. In this phase, arms, hands, chest and head are completely relaxed.

The most important instruction here is the total relaxation, what Dasté called creating the void and prior to what Decroux called 'evicting the tenant'. This forceful eviction is seen in the next step:

(f) It's here, in this pose, that one clears the thought. Repeat mentally or audibly if it helps, and this for as long as necessary (two, five, ten, twenty-five seconds), 'I am thinking of nothing, I am thinking of nothing, I am thinking of nothing. . . .'

If, because of nervousness, or because the heart is beating too fast, the 'I am thinking of nothing' is useless, focus on the blackish, grey, steel, saffron, blue or otherwise coloured shadows on the inside of the eyelids and continue this in thought infinitely; almost always this focus stops the workings of the mind.

These may sound like techniques for entering into a state of meditation or trance. The operative words seem to be 'stop the workings of the mind'.

(g) Simultaneously breathe in, sit up, and then breathe out and open the eyes. Here, the masked actor, sufficiently collected, may be possessed by characters, objects, thoughts; he is able to act dramatically. (Dorcy, 1958, p. 145–6)

VI

Why the mask?

After the inaugural 1913–14 season of directing productions at the Vieux-Colombier, and acting in some of them, Copeau's work was interrupted by the First World War. He took advantage of this interruption to visit Appia, Dalcroze, and Edward Gordon Craig. His earliest mention of masks is in his 1915 journal entry in which he writes of Craig's 'glass cases containing masks' (1991, p. 718) at the Arena Goldoni, which Copeau visited that year. In their conversations, Craig asserted that, 'One can do nothing artistic with the human face' (p. 719).

Whereas Craig did little practically with masks, Copeau was, in the years to come, to take these masks out of glass cases and to use them as tools to revitalize a moribund theatre. Craig's dictum that 'the mask is the only right medium of portraying the expressions of the soul as shown through the expressions of the face' (p. 13) became, a few years later in Copeau's career, a call to action. He also must have known and remembered Craig's assessment of Henry Irving's face as 'the connecting link between that spasmodic and ridiculous expression of the human face as used by the theatres of the last few centuries, and the mask which will be used in place of the human face in the near future' (p. 12–13).

Copeau and his disciples were to react strongly against that 'spasmodic and ridiculous expression of the human face' in a number of ways. Some advocated performing with a mask, others performing with an expressionless or mask-like face. In any case, covering the face, or limiting its expression, immediately made the body a more important element in communication.

Jean Dasté modelling masks at Morteuil, c. 1924.



In diagnosing student work, Copeau remarked at about this same time, 1915, that 'the student, from the moment he conjures up a human feeling (fatigue, joy, sadness, etc.) to motivate a specific movement, a mime bit, immediately and perhaps unconsciously from necessity, he allows the intellectual element to predominate in his action, the play of facial expression. It is the open door to literature and ham acting' (Kusler, p. 52). It was exactly in order to block this open door, this facial play, that Copeau's earliest experiments with the mask were made, placing a stocking on the student's head.

With the 'escape route' of the face closed off, the student was forced to undertake different, more complex, more difficult, and ultimately more satisfying journeys: 'Interior journeys in search of psychic components that correspond to external realities are the speciality of a class of religious practitioners called "shamans"' (Cole, p. 11). Another way

of saying this is that acting exercises, sense memory, and meditation can lead an actor to find elements of his own personality which correspond to elements within the character he is to portray. One of the students with whom Copeau first worked on this exercise, Jean Dasté, describes it this way:

With the mask, it is impossible to cheat. When we try to express a feeling or an emotion, if we do not feel impelled by an interior force, we know that we're not 'with it'. Every contrived gesture was a false note; wearing masks taught us also to be sincere. (Dasté, 1987, p. 88)

Jacques Prédat wrote of a visit to the School in Burgundy:

Since they wore masks in their exercises, why wouldn't they make them themselves? This could only refine their knowledge of the laws which governed facial expression. Their experiments, the trial and error of their fingers in the clay, must also ripen and deepen their knowledge of man as

revealed in the face. And these fringe benefits were not negligible. But it remains to be explained why, harking back to the *commedia dell'arte* and to ancient Greek theatre, Copeau revived the use of the mask. (Prénat, p. 377–400)

We are beginning to answer Prénat's question: why did Copeau use masks? And perhaps just as important a question is: why did Copeau have his students make their own masks? Copeau was convinced that, like many of the first Noh actors, his students could learn from making masks as well as by acting through them. While perhaps they were originally maskmakers by default, early Noh actors and Copeau's apprentices may have realized that the process of mask making enriched the actor's process; nowadays, when most Noh actors rely on specialists to make their masks for them, as do most western actors on the rare occasions they are required, one might argue that something essential has been lost. That essential thing may well be, as Prénat noticed, the 'trial and error of their fingers in the clay . . . [to] ripen and deepen their knowledge of man as revealed in the face'. Copeau, Bing, and their students knew instinctively that these were not, again quoting Prénat, 'negligible' fringe benefits.

VII

'Saül' and masked acting

By the 1921–22 season, mask experiments with the apprentices at the Ecole du Vieux-Colombier had progressed far enough beyond placing a stocking over the head that apprentices made their own masks and performed as the chorus in André Gide's *Saül*, a re-working of the biblical story.

As preparation for this performance, students studied animal movements and masks, and eventually made demon masks and created demonic movement for the chorus. In the *mise-en-scène* specified by Copeau, the masked demons appear from behind curtains, heads appearing first, followed by the rest of the body: 'The demons entered cautiously, like mice in an empty apartment, making quick steps, turning the

head from left and right to the middle at the moment that two other demons entered, etc.'

Copeau's description of the demons' movement, as well as the following reviews, give us a sense of what the production might have looked like. The reviews, in their differences of opinion, let us know that not every spectator saw the appropriateness of the masked performances, and not every performance was equally 'rounded'. One reviewer described the demons as 'appear[ing] on stage in flesh and blood, with their bestial forms, their insidious murmurs, their lacerating and burning words' (*Paris Journal*).

While not well received by all audience members or critics, one critic remarked that 'the scenes where Saül is visited by the demons are fiercely hallucinatory, savagely grand, as is the scene in the cave with the Witch of Endor' (*Excelsior*). Another critic, however, found that: 'This appearance of frowning masks which exchanged their immature chit-chat seemed ingenious the first time; as the fantasy repeated itself in each act, it finally became tiring' (*Le Gaulois*).

While the results may have been uneven, the use of a shamanistic tool like the mask is not unexpected in a play that is rife with sorcerers, predictions, fate, and adumbrations. As the demons part the curtain to appear head first, Cole's vocabulary would have them coming from the '*illud tempus* (the world of the play, Heaven, or in this case, the Underworld), bit by bit becoming manifest in this world thanks to the shamanistic quest' (Cole, p. 104).

VIII

Emptying out the apartment

In a letter to me of 29 January 1994, Jean Dasté writes of using the mask:

Before each exercise, we had to prepare, to create in ourselves a kind of void in order to allow another self to live. I discovered, in changing faces, that I was no longer my usual self, my everyday self; it was as if I were possessed by another, and that other existed in a dimension that was not mine, and that the exercise that I was trying to express commanded my body to perform other gestures, different attitudes.



Left to right: Monique Schlumberger, Yvonne Galli, Eve Lievens, Madeleine Gautier, and Charles Goldblatt wearing masks made for the chorus of demons in André Gide's *Saül*.

Dasté here is confirming Cole's model: the preparation for most acting and most shamanic ritual is relaxation, the giving up of the conscious self. This is the void Dasté speaks of. Possession or rounding is the experience of being taken over; his body was then commanded to perform other gestures and attitudes – gestures and attitudes which belong to the mask and not to him personally.

Dasté's language is similar to that of Jean Dorcy, who wrote:

When one puts on the mask, what happens? He removes himself from the external world. The night he imposes on himself permits him first to reject everything cumbersome. Then, by an effort of concentration, to attain the void. From that moment on he can relive and act, but dramatically this time. (Dorcy, 1958, p. 30)

Elsewhere Dorcy writes: 'The mime, from the moment he puts on a mask, no matter what

its nature, empties himself out and fills up with another substance' (Dorcy, 1962, p. 91).

Jean Dorcy noted that one of his fellow students in Burgundy, Yvonne Galli, was more quickly successful than the other students with her 'mental cleaning, this getting into a receptive state'. He goes on to ask: 'Did she know the password? I never asked her how she triggered it.' It was Galli who expressed the most religious fervour when the students were asked to write the Ten Commandments of the Ecole du Vieux-Colombier (Kusler, p. 164–5). It is perhaps a coincidence that she could easily enter the trance state and that she was also devoutly, and perhaps to an unhealthy extent, dedicated to Copeau; a psychologist might call her suggestible or unbalanced, while an anthropologist might call her a shaman, reminding us that suggestibility is an ideal trait for that role (Cole, p. 21).

All these actors seem to agree that the first step, the relaxation or emptying out, is cru-

cial. Copeau wrote: 'I think that there is, as a point of departure, a kind of purity, a wholeness of the individual, a state of calm, of naturalness, of relaxation' (Kusler, p. 73). Similarly, M.-H. Dasté recorded in her notebooks of 1921–22 that meditation or contemplation was the act of taking time to put on the mask and collect one's thoughts, to free one's self for the influence of the mask (Kusler, p. 117). This process of emptying out the daily self in favour of the character was encouraged, with or without a mask, by Copeau among the mature actors with whom he worked as well as with the apprentices mentioned above.

IX

Then, God takes possession

Copeau, in his introduction to Diderot's *Paradoxe sur le comédien*, describes the activity precisely: 'You say that an actor enters into a role, that he puts himself into the skin of the character. That is not exact, as it is the character who approaches the actor, who demands of him everything he needs to exist at his expense, and who bit by bit replaces him inside his skin.' He continues: 'It is not enough really to see a character, or to understand a character well, to be able to become him. It is not even enough to possess him well to give him life. One must be possessed by the character' (Copeau, 1929, p. 13–14). This is similar to Charles Dullin's observation that 'the character takes him over and holds him' (Dullin, p. 36).

The state Copeau describes here is the hunganic return, when the actor is inhabited or possessed by his character. Cole writes that:

For the actor, as for actual shamans and hungans, the 'journeying toward' and the 'possession by' are inner experiences; but also as with actual shamans and hungans, these inner experiences serve a public function. The actor-as-shaman is the audience's envoy to the *illud tempus* of the script: he draws near that the audience may draw near. The actor-as-hungan is the script's envoy to the audience: he consents to possession so that the audience may have figures from the script *illud tempus* present in the flesh. (Cole, p. 14–15)

Charles Dullin describes his rehearsals with Copeau for *Les Frères Karamazov* thus:

Once some stage business the director gave me made me enter forcefully into an altered state of consciousness necessary to the actor. Copeau's intelligent critique served admirably my own efforts. Day by day I felt more possessed by my character.' (Dullin, p. 39–40)

Dullin's use here of the charged vocabulary 'altered state of consciousness' and 'possessed' indicates that he was not unconscious of the actor's process, stage business in this case being one of the doorways into the *illud tempus*. Dullin goes on to say that this 'manifestation, at the same time animal and spiritual, where the body and the soul feel the need to merge in order to exteriorize a character, gave me that possession of the character and dictated to me at the same time in a more general way one of the great laws of the art of acting' (Dullin, p. 40–1). This voyage to Dullin's 'second state' can be seen as a shamanistic quest, and the subsequent possession as an important next step essential in manifesting the *illud tempus* of the script.

Another actor in *Les Frères Karamazov*, Paul Ötly, said of complete concentration: 'This kind of unconsciousness is only possible, I believe, those evenings when one is in an altered state of consciousness, which is a grace infinitely rarer than some actors claim' (Cézan). In his case, and in the case of his acting partner Valentine Tessier, their concentration was so great that when Ötly accidentally cut his hand on stage and began to bleed profusely, neither he nor Mlle Tessier noticed anything until the audience insisted they stop the show and bind the wound.

Jean Dasté describes this process, again without the mask, in another way:

I have always remembered my first discovery of going beyond myself. . . . I was a twenty-two-year-old hothead; I wanted to do so well that I never did well. Always tense, never self-possessed, with a throaty voice, I articulated poorly and spoke too fast, thinking I was sincerely living the situation. . . . One fine evening, on tour . . . during my great love scene, without having prepared more than usual, I suddenly felt in possession of my voice, of my elocution, of my gestures, in control despite myself; I could prolong a movement, a

silence, an intonation. I found myself in a different time, a different space, in another dimension. When the scene was over, filled with an immense joy, I entered the wings, glowing; Jacques Copeau was waiting for me, he took me in his arms, hugged me and said: 'Tonight, you acted.'

(Dasté, 1987, p. 82)

It is apparent that, with or without a mask, Copeau encouraged this process of voyage, discovery, and return in all who worked with him. In this case, Dasté succeeded in making what Cole calls 'imaginative truth' present on the stage.

X

'Dédoublement' – present-yet-absent

Jean Dasté wrote that while one is in a sense carried away, one is also in control. Cole calls it a 'doubled consciousness which we have found to be characteristic of possession experience' (Cole, p. 50). A student in the school told M.-H. Dasté that she felt 'an unknown strength and security – a kind of balance and consciousness of each gesture and of myself' (Kusler, p. 117). Decroux called this a state of being present-yet-absent.

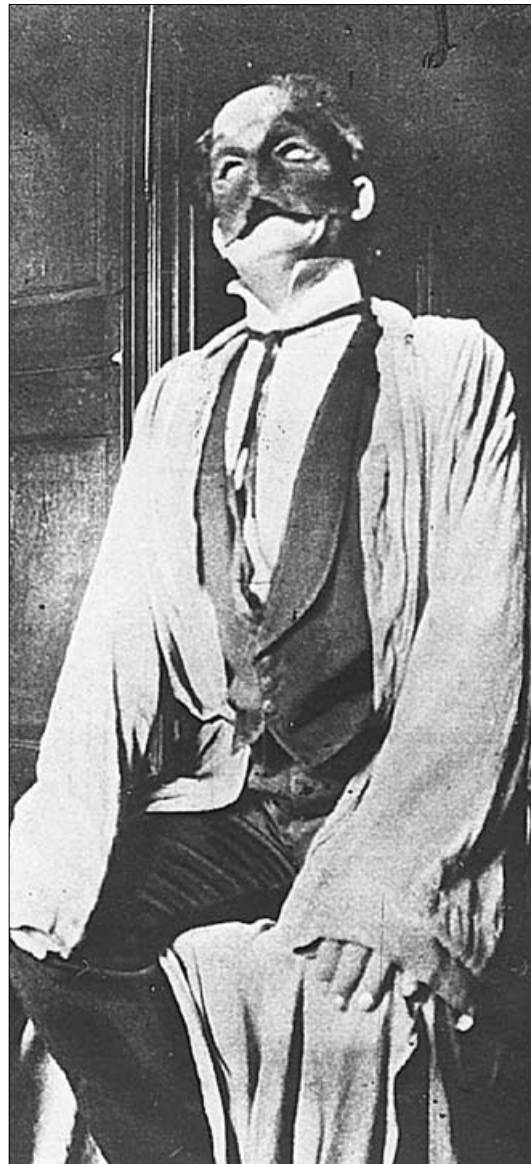
Jean Dorcy gives us a good notion of this 'doubled consciousness' in the following description of masked improvisation, which became an important tool for Copeau and his followers in teaching how to enter the ideal performance state:

With the maximum calm and self-possession, well immersed in his scenario, the improviser, his soul lying in wait, is attentive only to what can be born. Suddenly, something jumps out. For him a rebirth. He must begin again from this new situation, call up all his powers, project the possible developments of this unforeseen event. He must have the ear of the audience, and, above all, even in the depths of trance he experiences, he must not lose sight of the general structure of the improvisation.

(Dorcy, 1962, p. 92)

Copeau, again in his introduction to *Paradoxe sur le comédien*, says:

The actor who works with a mask gets from this paper object the reality of his character. He is ordered by it, and he obeys it irresistibly. He has barely put it on when he feels pouring into him-



Jean Dasté in his character of M. César, Pernand, 1925–27.

self a being he was empty of, which he never even suspected. It is not only his face which is changed, it is his entire person, even the nature of his reflexes where already feelings are forming which he was incapable of experiencing or pretending to have with an unmasked face. If he is a dancer, the entire style of this dance, if he is an actor, even the accent of his voice, will be dictated by his mask – in Latin, *persona* – that is to say his *personnage* or character, without life unless he marries it, which life comes from without and takes hold, substituting itself for the actor. (Copeau, 1929, p. 14–15)

XI

The flower of the Noh

Jacques Copeau was drawn instinctively by taste and tendency to a restrained theatre which was based in spirituality. Before many other theatre practitioners in the West, his intuition, seconded by his colleague Suzanne Bing, led him to a study of an ancient masked shamanic theatre, rich in chant, dance, and gesture – the Japanese Noh play, mentioned in passing earlier. I believe it to be of great importance in the life of the Ecole du Vieux-Colombier and in Copeau's life as well.

On 5 November 1923, the *Livre de Bord* of the Ecole du Vieux-Colombier recorded the first lesson on the Japanese Noh with Mme Bing. During that summer of 1923, while Copeau worked on such purely literary projects as finishing his play *La Maison natale*, Suzanne Bing prepared *Kantan* for the apprentices. They were, unbeknownst to them, preparing for the last season of the now world-famous Théâtre du Vieux-Colombier.

Copeau's play, which he had worked on for twenty years, was to be a failure, and was to mark the end of an era for him and for his theatre. Without reading too much into the failure of this seemingly autobiographical play, one can say that its demise marked the end of Copeau's aspirations as a playwright. But if *La Maison natale* closed a chapter, Madame Bing's project, *Kantan*, would open one. It was in working on this Noh play that Copeau saw his future and the future of the theatre.

Madame Bing's notes on their work are revealing: they indicate that during the summer of 1923, as they advanced in their study of the Noh, they were struck that:

the dramatic laws it obeyed were closely related to the laws that Copeau had developed for the school of the Vieux-Colombier. The Noh was an application of musical, dramatic, and movement studies which they had given their students for three years, so much so that the students' improvisations in this style were more related to Noh than to any contemporary style.

It is important to note here that Bing and Copeau were working from literary sources

only, and that neither had seen a Noh play performed, or had lessons in Noh, or had even spoken with anyone who had. Hence, their notions of what the Noh theatre was in reality were incomplete at best. But these literary studies gave them courage to continue in a direction they felt was important. And when Copeau finally did see Japanese theatre in later years, he wrote approvingly of it at some length (Copeau, 1930).

What Copeau and Bing were looking for in their research did not exist in France (and perhaps not in Europe). They were looking to Japan for the authority to establish in the West what they found lacking in the theatre of their time. Mme Bing's notes continue to explain the Noh project, by explaining that in French at that time there was no word to designate this new form. 'Lyrical drama' or 'dramatic poem' didn't account for poetry, drama, and music as well as dance, song, declamation, colours and forms, costumes, beautiful movement – above all, the accord among these elements – harmony, discretion, and communication with the audience (Bing).

Because one of the performers sprained a knee, there was only one preview performance of *Kantan*, on 18 March 1924, witnessed by students of the school, Copeau's friend André Gide, and the British director Harley Granville Barker. The latter praised the work effusively, the former found it disappointing. Copeau's own reflection was that it 'remains for me one of the crown jewels, one of the secret riches of the productions of the Vieux-Colombier' (Kusler, p. 150). Decroux told Barbara Kusler that it was 'the only time in my life I felt the art of diction'.

Twenty years afterwards, Jean Dasté and Marie-Helene Dasté, inspired by this remarkable performance, created and performed two adapted Noh plays in the first years of the Comédie de Saint-Etienne. Jean Dasté describes his experience as an actor in these plays:

Supported by the chorus, accompanied by the drum, punctuated by the flute, [the actor] speaks and mimes. . . . In performing . . . I experienced moments of frenzy. In Japan, during the performance of Noh plays, this frenzy occurs in the actor at certain moments during the play; un-



Left to right: Michel St Denis as Knie, Suzanne Bing as Célestine, and Jean Dasté as M. César in *L'illusion*, 1926. All photos in this article were given by M.-H. Dasté to the author in 1979.

expected, unique, the audience awaits it as does the actor; it never happens in the same way; it is called 'the flower of Noh'. (Dasté, p. 82)

Is what some of the actors and observers experienced during the students' 1924 presentation of *Kantan* a kind of 'flower of Noh'? Some spectators were moved enough to remember the presentation vividly years later. In any event, soon after the presentation Copeau closed his theatre and retired to the country with a small group of students, hoping to dedicate his full attention to the work of the school, undistracted by the demands of Paris and a theatre troupe.

XII

The macrocosm of the microcosm

Since we have followed Cole's paradigm thus far, and used it as a way of looking at Copeau's work, we might also use it as a way of looking at Copeau's life, which was, in a real sense, his work. (Likewise, if he was not

able to write the novel or the play he wanted, it might be argued that his two-volume *Journal* is a masterpiece of its genre.)

Might we, then, compare his work up to the student production of *Kantan* as the shamanic quest? Could we compare the performance of *Kantan*, in which it would seem he tasted the 'flower of Noh', some of what Dasté called 'frenzy', to the possession or rounding? His subsequent life, which to many seemed a failure, on the margins of theatrical activity (the period in which he performed brilliant readings of entire plays for audiences spellbound with his powers, one of which was described earlier; the period in which he created what he considered his most important *mise-en-scène*), was the hunganic phase, making present the *illud tempus*.

Was his retreat to the country in this sense an advance? It was during this final period of his life that Copeau was most overtly concerned with sacred drama. Might we then see these quiet years as in fact his most

productive, his years away from Paris as his most potent? Once he had discovered what the mask had to teach him, once he had 'rounded', he no longer needed the lessons of his theatre company or of his students, although it was hard for him to let go entirely, and this process of pulling away from the actor-students entirely took a few more years.

An unidentified writer opined that

In a few years of struggle, Jacques Copeau renewed French theatre. However, when the creative period was over, the 'Patron' lived a secret life, silent and more fertile than one guessed, united with God. (Sampson, p. 15)

Jean Villard-Gilles seems to have summed up the whole process of shamanic search, rounding, and possession, followed by hungarian return, for Copeau, when he wrote of 'theatre, place of communion, living presence of the poet through the medium of the actor' (p. 28). Or, with words Copeau put into the mouth of his St Francis in *Le Petit pauvre*: 'If you have the gift of silence and immobility, if you don't move, if you join yourself with the silent waiting glade, with the sweetness of the air and of the branches, you will see all creation come to you' (Copeau, 1946, p. 28–9).

Copeau's famous revolutionary stage, the empty stage he prescribed as a remedy for a sick theatre, required new actors to inhabit it. This empty stage finds a corollary in the interior shamanic void of the actor, that place of 'silence and immobility' St Francis spoke of. And the principal tool that enabled the actor to live this interior and exterior silence, to walk the razor's edge of dynamic immobility, was the mask. The mask permits the actor to rejoin his ancestors in the golden ages of theatre – ancient Greek theatre, the Japanese Noh, the *commedia dell'arte*. All of these, using masks, transformed the empty stage into a sacred grove, the 'silent, waiting glade'.

XIII

Back in Boulogne-Billancourt

Copeau always wanted theatre to remain whole, and he objected to the study of mime

for itself. Yet often in times of trouble, 'secret' teachings go underground, and continue on in basement schools of 'minor' arts, preserved by 'heretical' practitioners. Like seeds in hibernation, they await a more receptive climate, in the meantime gathering strength and power. There is a delicious irony, then, that the mime schools rather than the theatre schools have kept alive Copeau's teaching of actor presence.

In Decroux's blue basement, the name of Copeau was invoked almost daily; in the same spirit it was given a prominent place in Decroux's book *Paroles sur le mime*. However, above ground, during many of the years of Copeau's 'retreat' and after his death, he was all but forgotten, often seen as less than a central figure. Both the technical and the improvisational parts of Decroux's teaching were strongly based on the idea of building the actor's scenic presence through a process of emptying out in order to fill up.

Look at the titles of some of Decroux's exercises: 'Awakening'; 'God Fishes Man'; 'The Prayer'; 'Life Begins at the Bottom'; 'Life Begins at the Top'. Decroux's teaching maxims, of which there were hundreds, are studded with allusions to presence and absence, immobility and movement. And, lest we forget to read important sections of *Paroles sur le mime*, Decroux never thought theatre should be silent for very long – just long enough for the actor to reclaim control of the terrain.

Now, look around. We see as common practice everything Copeau rebelled against: the star system, elaborate scenery, overwhelming special effects, *cabotinage* (ham acting), the cult of the personality; while it is the mimes, almost alone, who have preserved the empty stage, the well-schooled body, the intelligent use of mask, a respect for craft, and the text in an honoured (but not overwhelming) place. When we point to the theatre of Ariane Mnouchkine as an example of Copeau's ideas in action today, we must not forget that they came to her through the school of Jacques Lecoq.

In October 1994, Eugenio Barba gave a lecture in Paris at the Théâtre Renaud-Barrault in which he described himself as an *homme de la périphérie* – which is difficult to

translate: 'marginal man' seems odd, and 'man on the outskirts' rings false; the meaning is clear, however: one who is not part of the established way of doing things. He spoke with authority of the importance of remaining on the outskirts, even if geographically in the centre, and cited the names of theatre workers with whom he felt an affinity. One of them was Copeau, another Decroux. Both, from their position as influential outsiders, created and kept alive a strong tradition of building actor presence through the mask as shamanic tool.

XIV

But is it really shamanic?

Can we correctly refer to the mask as used by these French practitioners as a shamanic tool? Decroux and Copeau would have denied that they had the intention of initiating students into a special practice, yet there is strong evidence to the contrary. Even a cursory reading of the *Livre de Bord* of Copeau's school gives us an idea of the religious structures Copeau had in mind. Well before that, he wrote of the importance of training actors from childhood on, before they could be spoiled by the world, and of 'renormalizing' adult actors who had already been ruined.

And Decroux, in his teaching (which began with his ceremonial ringing of a brass ship's bell – in some cultures the ringing of a bell being an invitation to trance), changed his students' spines, their movement and articulation patterns and possibilities, their breathing, and, through improvisations, initiated them into altered levels of consciousness. In some cases he gave certain students special names and different coloured ropes (used in training) when they became 'initiated' – when they became *anciens élèves*, advanced students.

Performances at his school were given only to a selected public made up of 'believers'. And for most students coming to his school, since a high percentage of them were not French, study with Decroux involved an important and radical change of language and of culture. But, while this description may sound daunting, Decroux's work was similar in its rigour and inclusiveness to

much other serious theatre, dance, or martial arts training in many parts of the world.

Decroux's teaching may not have been shamanic, but it was certainly shaman-like, in the same way that when dancers in the Alvin Ailey company speak of 'crossing over' during performance (as reported to me in conversation by Anna Deavere Smith), they may not be speaking from an anthropological point of view, but simply describing what they do. Is it possible that what we describe as 'shamanic' in some cultures has always existed in performance activity in European traditions?

Perhaps it has not been written about or discussed much by these practitioners, who were often considered in earlier years heretical because of what Copeau described as their '*commerce étrange*'. Somewhere between King David's dance before the Ark of the Covenant and Molière's burial in unconsecrated ground, a break in our understanding of the actor/dancer's role occurred. This break is only now being healed, despite the willingness of university professors to admit to shamanic practice in Asian theatre forms but not in those closer to home.

But some contemporary performers speak readily of the shamanic component of their work. Parisian dancer-teacher Elsa Wolliaston and the late Brazilian corporeal mime Luis Octavio Burnier are among those who have acknowledged trance and possession elements similar to those described earlier in the century by Copeau and his associates.

Perhaps it is less important to consider whether Copeau and his associates were shamans or simply shaman-like than to accept that this optic does provide us with a new way to examine Copeau's actor training work, especially with the mask. And, for me, thirty-six years after first meeting him, I discovered that Decroux's project in the blue basement in Boulogne-Billancourt was to build idealized bodies which were themselves neutral masks. The articulated movements of these bodies were the equivalent of facets and rounded surfaces of masks, which catch light and send it back to the audience in alternations of sudden bursts and slow unfoldings.

The mask exercises at the Vieux-Colombier taught Decroux how the nude body should move to achieve maximum visibility and impact on Copeau's bare stage. The architectural lines Decroux constructed in the body telegraphed heightened visibility and framed a surface on which the actor could splash colours of various dynamic qualities. And the nude body, on a bare stage, glowed with an inner light when the actor was able to 'empty out the apartment' and when 'God came to live there'.

So while Copeau's mask was a tool for altered consciousness in the actor, Decroux's body (transformed by corporeal mime) became that mask, created from the inside as Copeau's masks were sculpted from the outside. The history is circular: Copeau's first mask classes, called corporeal mime, inspired Decroux to create a form called corporeal mime, which in its turn became a heightened version of Copeau's mask.

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