

Myth, Archetype and the Neutral Mask: Actor Training and Transformation in Light of the
Work of Joseph Campbell and Stanislav Grof

by

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Wain, A. (2005). Myth Archetype and the Neutral Mask. *International Journal of
Transpersonal Studies*, 24.

Abstract

This paper explores the influence of transpersonal thinking, including the mythological perspective of Joseph Campbell and the holotropic perspective of Stanislav Grof, on actor training using the neutral mask. An outline of training in the neutral mask is given, focusing on the approach of David Latham, as experienced by the author in his own training. Points of correspondence with the vision of Campbell and Grof, and their influence, are discriminated and discussed. These correspondences open up two areas of inquiry: the transformative effect of the mask work when conducted in a transpersonally-oriented set, and the use of the neutral mask as an approach to the study of myth and archetype. Both are discussed, and some preliminary conclusions drawn based on experiences reported by student-actors and the author's observations during his own research and his practice as actor and teacher.

In his preface to *The Masks of God*, Joseph Campbell writes that within its four volumes are given are all the motifs contained in the unified symphony of humanity's spiritual heritage, "with many clues, besides, suggesting ways in which they might be put to use by reasonable men to reasonable ends—or by poets to poetic ends—or by madmen to nonsense and disaster" (Campbell, 1991a, p. xx). In the years since the publication of *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (Campbell, 1993), Campbell's insights into this symphony—the artefacts of which, whether works of philosophy, psychology, theology or folklore, he placed together under the umbrella of "myth"—have been put to use in fields as varied as screenwriting and organisational learning, and others. In this paper, I will offer an account of how those clues, and the larger vision put forth in his writings, have served poetic ends in actor training and performance, particularly in work with the neutral mask, a powerful contemporary mask widely-used in actor training in Europe, Australia and North America. The influence of Campbell's vision on this area of the arts can be seen to have two major elements: the use of the monomyth as a guiding structure for improvisations in the training process and, secondly, how Campbell's vision, because it is amazingly congruent with mask work, provides an excellent orienting vehicle for the unique combination of creative work and personal transformation that this work represents. The nature of this transformational environment will be further illuminated by setting it alongside Stanislav Grof's model of healing in non-ordinary states of consciousness (Grof, 1985, 1987). The second part of the paper will describe the experience of actors who do this work—the transformations they report—and how the mask be a way of research into the myth, archetype and journey, and what it has revealed regarding these in my own research.

Personal background and mask training

There are many different approaches to the neutral mask, and while there are many similarities and common or recurring elements in these different approaches, there are also important differences. Joseph Campbell's vision of myth has come to be a part of the mask work through my teacher, David Latham. When I write of “the mask work” in this context, I am acknowledging that there is a broad tradition, but I am specifically referring to the neutral mask work as I learned it from David Latham. Yet, artists tend not to stay the same for too long, so I should also add that I am referring to how he was teaching it ten years ago, when I trained with him, and to my own interpretation and development of that work. The following account of the neutral mask, based on my own experience as an actor, observer and teacher, will serve as an introduction to the broad outlines of the work.

I trained as an actor at the Victorian College of the Arts in Melbourne, Australia. When I arrived from my hometown of Perth, a few thousand miles away, to begin training, I had just finished a degree in philosophy and politics and I was intellectually-oriented—not very aware of my body or my feelings. Our training was three years full-time—a very intense three years—and in the first six weeks we were completely immersed in exercises to increase our awareness of body, breath, impulses, and imagination. In voice, we spent six weeks lying on the floor sensing our breath, lengthening our spines, and releasing all kinds of tiny muscles. In movement we practised Feldenkrais work (Feldenkrais, 1980), Alexander (Alexander, 1984), ideokinesis, stretching, and many other exercises. In acting we did a great deal of work to become aware of impulses, and specific exercises to prepare us for the mask, exercises that loosen and awaken the body and imagination and connect these with the breath, exercises to evoke *movement that is inspired by breath and infused with image*. We worked to make the spine responsive, flexible and present to awareness.

Preparation for the mask also involves work with the various centres in the body (chest, groin, solar plexus), imagining the breath moving down the front of the spine into the centres, attending the images and energies that emerged there, and then moving from these energies. David Latham never used the word “chakra,” however, which for novice actors carries associations of the new age or Hinduism. Using concepts like chakra in an acting class causes some people to become resistant and others to become over-excited. It is unnecessary. In acting, the immediate experience and one’s capacity to communicate it is the important thing—the actual energetic freedom and creative mastery of the actor. Too many concepts associated with other realms of endeavour and modes of discourse can become a serious obstacle.

We also began to journey inwardly, lying on the floor, simply telling the story of our imagination to a single witness as it unfolded. These inner journeys and the movement improvisations might begin with personal themes but they soon move through violence, sexual places, religious places, or just plain weird places. David Latham always affirmed wherever we went.

When the mask is introduced, it is done quite formally. It’s a definite moment: “Today we begin work with The Mask.” Various elements come together to create a sacred space and the impression of an initiation: the way the teacher handles the masks; the presentation of definite taboos; the fact that students are only permitted to wear black, plain clothing; the division of the room, like a theatre, into a performance space and an audience space; those who are not performing are always in the audience. There is never any clapping. Masks, of course, have long been an important part tool of initiation and transformation. It has been argued that the mask is the most ubiquitous of human artefacts. It is found in nearly every culture and its association with ritual and with non-ordinary states of consciousness is well-known (Eldredge, 1996).

First, students are asked simply to wear the mask in front of the group, sometimes in conjunction with an image, such as being in a desert, often without. This simple exercise yields a range of often powerful experiences, which demonstrate the extraordinary capacity of the mask to induce shifts in consciousness. The student-actors often report experiencing a sense of peace, freedom, or terror. Some pull the mask off quickly, others say that they felt “possessed.” One student reported that she felt “her breath” moving through her in a circle, up her spine and down the front of her body, another spoke of an intoxicating and seductive power like he had never experienced before (Holloway, 2001). The students are not told what they should experience, and they are told very little about the nature of the mask. It is up to the students to discover what it is through their own curiosity, by acting in it, and by observing it as an audience member (Saint-Denis & Saint-Denis, 1982). For the actor understanding is a matter of action, of doing.

While it is important to allow the performer to make their own sense of the work, based on their own experience, it is possible to make some general remarks about its nature. The neutral mask is not a particular character. It has no psychology, no problems, no past. It has no inner conflict; it lives in a state of inner calm. It has no differentiated attitude. It does not hold to a fixed point of view. It does not do one thing on the inside and another on the outside. It is what it sees; it is action. It is totally transparent. It has no plans, no agendas. It teaches an actor to be simple, and to be present.

Jacques Lecoq, the late, renowned teacher of neutral mask, writes that “To enter into a mask means to feel what gave birth to it, to rediscover the basis of the mask and to find what makes it vibrate in yourself. After this it will be possible to play it from within” (Lecoq, 2000, p. 55). The story of the birth of this mask is very illuminating. It was discovered in the theatre of Jacques Copeau, a Frenchman, the founder of the Vieux-Colombier theatre and its school (Copeau, Rudlin, & Paul, 1990). Copeau was disillusioned with the superficiality and clutter

of the French theatre before World War 1 and with the Vieux-Colombier he attempted to create performances that had simplicity, resonance, freedom and elemental aliveness. One day in the rehearsal of a difficult emotional scene, an actress found herself blocked, unable to play it, however hard she tried. In desperation, Copeau took his handkerchief and covered the actress' face. To everyone's amazement, she was then able to play the scene freely and truthfully.

After this Copeau asked his students to make themselves simple "neutral" masks, simply to cover their faces. Copeau's son-in-law Jean Daste, wrote about how this became "the discovery of a mysterious world." They "would make up very simple exercises with various themes: waiting, discovery, fear, anguish" such as "the families of sailors, watching from the shore for the arrival of a boat. It has been shipwrecked; we wait; we realize the sailors will not return." Somehow these simple themes and simple actions brought forth, in the mask, great emotion and a power that astonished their audience: "the characters possessed a greater reality and a greater vitality" (Copeau et al., 1990, pp. 237-238).

In the simplest terms, what a mask does is make the invisible visible. It shares with ritual and spiritual practice an interest in a normally invisible reality. Unlike many spiritual practices, which seek to touch this reality inwardly, mask, theatre and often ritual are concerned with *making this invisible reality visible on this plane*¹. This invisible inner reality could be a realm of spirits, the eternal archetypes, the imagination of a playwright or the psychological world of a character. The important thing is that some facet of this unmanifest world is made manifest through the body, voice and speech of the performer or shaman. The use of a particular mask determines, of course, what invisible thing or being will come through. We can begin to see the affinity between mask and Campbell's vision of myth when he suggests that "the basic theme of all mythology--that there is an invisible plane supporting the visible one" (Campbell, 1988, p. 71). There's a roughly equivalent duality in Stan Grof's

work in which he distinguishes “holotropic” and “hylotropic” states or realities (Grof, 1985, p. 38). The actor’s transformation into the mask character could be seen as the holotropic reality emerging into the hylotropic.

If masks reveal the invisible, one approach to understanding a mask is to ask, “What of the invisible world does it make visible?” Because the neutral mask has no past, it lives outside time, in a world that is “prior” to culture, in which everything is done “for the first time.” It is a world of essences, of elemental beginnings. It is always interestingly, an outdoor world, intimately connected to nature. Jacques Lecoq, the late, great French acting teacher says that it “allows one to find the essential...the word of all words” (Wylie, 1994, p. 78). He calls it “the mask of masks” and says, “Beneath every mask...there is a neutral mask” (Lecoq, 2000, p. 40).

The actors begin to discover this through performing simple human actions—waking up for the first time, throwing a stone, the last goodbye to the beloved. They discover that for the mask to work, to have life, they must pare back unnecessary gesture and action; they must shed their idiosyncrasies, and so release what Reich would call their character armour. The mask covers the face, the persona, the “daily mask.” The actor must adapt their body and action to the mask; it must be the body of the mask, a body without conflict, without attitude. Its actions must be prior to culture, prior to conditioning, “for the first time.” We are searching for simplicity and universality, so that any person, from any culture, would be able to understand: “ah, she said goodbye; ah, he discovered something.”

The work moves on to *identifications*, with the elements (Water, Fire, Air and Earth), with archetypes (e.g., The Warrior, The Innocent, The Seven Deadly Sins, the Major Arcana of the Tarot), with substances (Plastic, Olive Oil, Aluminium Foil, Glass, Rubber, and so on), and even onto colours, music and words. These identifications often begin with an invitation to the students to contact an image. The mask improvisation involves “completing the image.”

Completing the image—entering into it, embodying the invisible presence (which is, at the beginning, felt within) *while in contact with an audience*—makes up the crux of the actors work; it is what we practice again and again.

This is what Lecoq calls mime but it is *mime de fond*, mime of depth, not mime of form. He explains it like this: “Take for example, the observation of a tree: in going beyond the ideas which surround it, and the personal feelings it arouses, one encounters a physical sensation which reveals the dynamism of the life of this tree... It is as if the body had a skin for touching the space within and another for touching the space without” (Wylie, 1994, p. 80). The same process is applied even for identifications with elements that do not, on the surface, appear to have movement, like colours. We ask: what is the living gesture of a certain colour? How does yellow move? *Mime de fond* “involves an identification with things in order to make them live...mime is a way of rediscovering a thing with freshness” (Lecoq, 2000, p. 22). This work frees and connects the imagination and the body and expands the actors’ range of expression and feeling.

Journey & the Monomyth

Beyond these simple identifications there are Journeys based on the monomyth (Campbell, 1993), in which *many possible identifications are integrated into an unfolding story of transformation*. This represents one major influence of Campbell on my teacher David Latham. The actor will be told something like:

You wake up. You receive the call to set out on a journey, and you answer the call.

You cross a threshold and enter a new world. You travel along a road of trials where you meet forces that help you and forces that hinder you. At the end of the road of trials you face a great test. When you pass this test you are given a gift, you return with this gift to the world you came from. You share the gift and you sleep.

They must improvise this *with complete physical and imaginal commitment, with no planning or guidance about the specific content this structure brings forth*. The details of the journey are changed all the time. Sometimes it occurs in pairs or groups; sometimes it is given in great detail, sometimes very simply.

Many students will ask for the structure to be repeated, but they are told, “what happens, happens. You will remember what you remember.” The point is not to tick the boxes: that would be a travesty of the work. The point is that, like the elements and archetypes, is in the actor, and it can come out. The point is to go through the personal associations to the mythic resonance. The point, because we are actors, is to really do it, to find it truthfully and become it completely so that the invisible is made visible and palpable. Of course, it is not about making something up; it is not about “acting it out.” The forms arise from the deeper physical and imaginative connection with the structure itself. In experience they seem to arise from the body. You see the image, you are the image; the image is in you and you are in it.

David Latham has a way of talking so that the words resonate in the body, they have impact, so that one can feel memories waking up inside. When he said "You Wake Up," it was clear that it was no ordinary waking up—that "You Wake Up" was an action of intensity and scope. The impact of hearing this for the first time, as a student before any contact with Campbell's work, was extraordinary. There was a sense of remembering, as if I was touching something archaic within myself.

My first journey was spread out over two classes:

I rode a dragon, killed a giant snake, and got stuck on a beach-wasteland facing the ocean, until I understood that my journey was into the ocean, where I was torn apart by fish, ending up in the arms of a great Silence I knew was God. I lay there for a long

time, not wanting to leave, until He told me to “Do it with love.” Then I got up and took off the mask.

A powerful element of this experience was the sense of necessity which imbued my actions, as if there was only one way the story could unfold, according to a precise inner logic that was at once my own and beyond me. The mask knew what had to happen, and *I knew too*, in an archaic place inside myself. All the personal associations, the mythic metaphors and the actual physical actions in all their rhythms, were one harmonious and *necessary* unfoldment.

Afterwards David Latham told me he thought I had died. I tried to explain that I had and there was some confusion until I realised that he thought I had actually died, because I had lain there so still for so long. He asked if I had been given a gift. I said “no,” but he kept digging until I mentioned what I had been told just before the end. He said “that’s your gift.” After that I understood how being an actor, an artist, could be a truly profound journey. David talks about this work as nourishing the roots of one’s talent, and this first experience remains for me a touchstone, one at the roots of both my artistic life and personal being, and one which has proved both unexpectedly rich and difficult to live out fully.

By way of contrast, Lecoq’s journey relies for its structure on the natural world, with very specific content. He will tell students:

At daybreak you emerge from the sea; in the distance you can see a forest and you set out towards it. You cross a sandy beach and then you enter the forest. You move through trees and vegetation which grow ever more densely as you search for a way out. Suddenly, without warning, you come out of the forest and find yourself facing a mountain. You 'absorb' the image of this mountain, then you begin to climb, from the first gentle slopes to the rocks and the vertical cliff face which tests your climbing skills. Once you reach the summit, a vast panorama opens up: a river runs through a valley and then there is a plain

and finally in the distance, a desert. You come down the mountain, cross the stream, walk through the plain, then into the desert, and finally the sun sets (Lecoq, 2000, p. 41).

It's important to remember that as the mask moves through these environments it becomes them; it is what it sees. The image is in the actor and the actor is in the image.

Later, the actors rerun the journey in extreme conditions:

There is a raging sea and the wave throws you up onto the beach. The sand is being swept by a rainstorm. The forest is on fire. Once you are on the mountain there is an earthquake followed by avalanches, and you slide down towards the river, which is in flood. You manage by grabbing hold of the trees. Finally you reach the desert, where a sandstorm is blowing up (Lecoq, 2000, p. 42).

Campbell's orientation as a facilitating vision or "set"

Lecoq encourages his students to be aware of the "symbolic overtones" of the natural environments they move through—crossing the river can be a metaphor for adolescence, for example. In David Latham's work, however, metaphor is central, and this points to the second significant way that Campbell's work has influenced it: it serves as the cornerstone of an overarching, facilitating vision, a kind of meta-framework—what Grof would refer to, in non-ordinary states of consciousness work, as the "set" (Grof, 1976, p. 14n).

By the time I met David Latham and began working with him, he had been absorbing Joseph Campbell's work for nearly twenty years, and the philosophical basis of his work had become the triangle of myth, art and psychology. He was interested in "training an actor in such a way that the actor's work exists in the duality of that which is psychological and that which is universal" (Latham, 1992, p. 2). Part of doing this is uncovering the "roots" and nurturing these roots, the universal depths, and this is where the neutral mask is very effective. David writes that his work

is not about invention; it is not about methods; it is about revealing; revealing at a deeper and deeper level, making connections that have psychological connotations and universal connotations, and not only bringing those to the work, but allowing them to be the driving force of the work in its content and its form. The foundation of the craft thus reaches into the deepest source of our being, the essence of our humanness, individually, communally and culturally. (Latham, 1992, p. 4)

Although it might be simplistic to try to analyse, in the space available, something as profoundly integrated and organic as an individual teacher's art, developed over long years of personal struggle and innovation, I would like to point to two elements that seem important. Firstly, David Latham affirms wherever his students journey to in their imagination and their improvisation. To use Campbell's phrase, he says "'yea' to it all" (Campbell, 1991c, p. 20). This distinguishes him very clearly from the Lecoq tradition, which uses the *via negativa*. Although it seems simple, such an attitude has depth and richness, to maintain it honestly requires great personal trust, heart and openness and its effect on the working atmosphere are profound and significant.

I remember David's appreciation of all the places we went—not just allowing but appreciation of the powerful, perverse, sexual, violent, emotional. He was interested in all of you--whatever you wanted to bring out, he affirmed it. I once asked him what he began with when he started teaching. He told me that he just knew that he wanted people—his students and actors—"to bring out what was in them." Something deep within responds to this attitude. Underlying it is a sense of trust that wherever you go will be OK, an understanding that the depths of the individual are universal and that these depths will eventually emerge. In this way, we can go to the universal *through* the personal, not by negating it. We can experience how, beneath our surface characteristics, the profoundly personal, the most intimate places, are universal.

The second element of Campbell's vision that David brought to the work was a profound and intensely lived understanding of metaphor. For David, the mask is a metaphor, myth is a metaphor and theatre is a metaphor (Latham, 1992). Even the physical exercises serve as metaphors, for acting, for inner states. More than this, the work occurs within an atmosphere of play, but also a holy atmosphere; it is, as Campbell would say, "a highly played game of 'as if'" (Campbell, 1991b, p. 28). The power of the images is deeply respected, but even the most powerful identification is regarded as a symbol: it lives in and through the body of the actor, sometimes in terrifyingly powerful ways, but nevertheless it is still theatre. At the end, the actor takes off the mask. The only thing David said more than "yes" was "let it go."

There are many connections and correspondences between Campbell's vision of myth and metaphor and masking generally, as he eloquently demonstrates at the outset of his four-volume masterwork, in *Primitive Mythology* (Campbell, 1991b, p. 21-26). The affinity is even more acute when we consider the neutral mask specifically. The essence of the neutral mask is silence and stillness. In it, the actor transforms into the elemental forms of reality and lives through the movements of the world, and yet mask remains the same. In Campbell's terms, it is the World Axis, the centre of "the turning wheel of terror-joy." Neutral is "a fulcrum point which doesn't exist" (Eldredge & Huston, 1995, p. 123). The seeming paradox within these images is literal with the mask: it doesn't move; it is made of papier mache. It is the still point and the silence that makes movement and speech possible. Campbell says, "Myth is the revelation of a plenum of silence within and around every atom of existence" (Campbell, 1993, p. 267); and "Myth is a directing of the mind and heart, by means of profound informed figurations, to that ultimate mystery which fills and surrounds all existence" (Campbell, 1993, p. 267). The forms that arise in the mask are nothing if not "profound informed configurations."² Like myth, the mask is prior to time, and all are playful: between the stillness at the centre and the dynamism of the world's and the mask's movements, when both

are present in awareness, there comes the sense of play. Finally, Campbell's whole conception can be seen to turn on the metaphor of masking: he writes about the "*Masks of God*," the costumes of that transcendent Source from which words (and, I would add, particular forms) turn back.³ Behind all the masks, there is the neutral mask, the principle of masking itself, the principle of play and transformation. David Latham would say, more simply, "the mask is theatre."

Once I came across Stanislav Grof's writings, a whole other set of common elements and parallels became apparent, some of which his model shares with Campbell. These are important because they bridge Campbell's vision with the process of personal and transpersonal transformation that is so much a part of such in-depth performance training. The first of these is the 'as-if' framework and the idea of the cosmos as a play of the divine: in Grof's cosmology, realms of the unconscious are like movies the creative principle is screening on different channels (Grof, 1998, p. 73)—another version of the masks of God metaphor. In *LSD Psychotherapy*, Stan writes about the importance of the "as-if framework," calling it "that territory of experiential ambiguity which seems optimal for therapeutic work" (Grof, 2001, p. 196). In other words, one can get stuck by literalizing one's experience, by "menu-eating."

Latham's approach to the mask also shares with Grof's work a willingness to affirm whatever comes up, a trust in the overall trajectory of the psyche, the movement of the process from personal to universal or transpersonal, and the use of non-ordinary states of consciousness. Grof writes that "The main objective of the techniques of experiential psychotherapy is to activate the unconscious, to unblock the energy bound in emotional and psychosomatic symptoms, and to convert the stationary balance of this energy into a stream of experience" (Grof, 1987, p. 166) and "The NOSC tends to change the dynamic equilibrium underlying the symptoms, transform them into a stream of unusual experiences, and consume

them in the process" (Grof, 1987, p. 167). From my description above, it should be clear that there is a similar process going on in the mask. Finally, the journey of the student through the mask training looks like a journey through the transpersonal level of Grof's cartography: identifying with Fire, with The Tree, with different kinds of matter, with archetypes, as well as the acting out of the monomyth, which Campbell explicitly associated with the spiritual journey (Campbell, 1988). The structure of the mask training therefore parallels the transformative path that the soul can take spontaneously in other kinds of non-ordinary states of consciousness work. It is, given these similarities, a powerful crucible for deep personal transformation, and I will now discuss the kinds of changes actors report in this work.

Effects of Journey Work

The transformation mediated by the mask training is not aiming at therapy or at some version of enlightenment: it is a transformation of the talented beginner into an artist-craftsman in the service of theatre. The point is to support the actor to discover in themselves deep sources for their work while at the same time developing their capacity to express those sources in performance. The craft of the actor is in large part to do with the development of their instrument, themselves. The practice of "completing the image" brings the actor up to and through their physical limitations again and again, and so clears the channels of expression and feeling in the body. The transformation of the actor-person builds the actor-instrument; the body becomes not just a vehicle for the imagination, but in a sense saturated with imagination; it becomes permeable to essences. The journey awakens the channels of energy in the body and after the training, the body remembers the forms—the rhythms, weights, gestures, actions—that evoke particular connections. The actor becomes the metaphor, the one who carries across the meaning of the invisible, who brings the invisible into forms that point back to the silence.⁴

This offers an actor an incredible range of physical expression they probably have not imagined up until this point. More importantly, it opens up inner experience, new rhythms and feelings, sensations of greater weight or sublime lightness, a whole universe of body memories, which are more than merely physical. These become sources for the actor, for characters (fiery revolutionaries, air-heads, slippery characters), or for whole theatrical creations.

While the main trajectory of discovery in the neutral mask is toward the theatre, nobody could work with the neutral mask, I am convinced, without discovering, as Lecoq says, that it also points toward life. He writes that “For everyone, the neutral mask becomes a point of reference” (Lecoq, 2000, p. 38). For myself, it became a reference point not only for acting but, perhaps even more so, for the world; it has become like a pendulum that swings between theatre and life. The experiences and insights of the mask point both ways, and I have kept returning to it, each time making discoveries about theatre, the world and myself. In my own research I wanted to include this second trajectory, and actors were invited to comment, if it seemed appropriate, on the effects of the mask work on them beyond the studio.

One research intensive I conducted involved actors working with the monomyth on a daily basis for two weeks, in conjunction with many other exercises, which were chosen specifically to support the development of their journey work. I’ll talk about two things that emerged from this research: what the participants reported about changes in themselves, and what we learned about archetype, the monomyth and myth generally. The following accounts are based on the experiences reported by the actors during this intensive, on the reports of other actors I have trained or observed and on my own experiences with the mask.

Spiritual Emergence(y)

Perhaps not surprisingly, one of the rare effects is something like a spiritual emergence(y), in the Grofs' terms (Grof & Grof, 1995), by which I mean that the work provokes a transformational process that continues explicitly and strongly outside of the class, and which can include powerful experiences likely to be pathologized by mainstream psychiatry. For myself, it was as if the mask work opened the inner floodgates, emotionally, imaginatively and energetically. At various times, I would experience, outside of the class, an enormous upsurge of elemental energies, sudden, huge waves of emotion, and powerful dreams that would continue after I woke up, like another reality overlaying this one. One actor wrote, after a powerful experience of Water: "I couldn't sit still, from deep inside of me was flowing a stream of clear, bright, clean energy and it wasn't stopping. I had forgotten that life could feel like this, and it wasn't stopping, I couldn't even sit down, I kept jumping up on my feet and even that wasn't enough... it was another day and night before it began to subside" (Holloway, 2001, para. 1). For this student the mask was one catalyst for a powerful spiritual emergency that continued for months afterwards.

Awakening of Energy and Essence

Various energetic experiences frequently occur. It is quite common for the energy of the elements to keep flowing for some time. One student reported that she "noticed quite a lot of heat in [her] life...an inside heat, like [she was] burning up." Another after becoming fire talked about "the fire in [her] belly consuming and burning through [her] resentments" in the days after her Fire identification.

Many actors also report energetic effects not specifically related to the specific identifications. One actor, who had done some work with the Diamond Approach (Almaas, 2004), reported that she felt what she called, "little poofs of magic cloud" in her chest. During the mask work, these "happenings" would sometimes be the source of her mask work, but

they would also occur outside of the studio, often when she thought of the work. Her description suggests more than an emotion, and is more reminiscent of the *lataif* level as Almaas describes it—a level between energy and the substance of essence (Almaas, 1998). She describes “sifting through the thoughts, the emotions, the ratty commendations and condemnations to get close to the POOFS.” Other students give reports that suggest something similar, “qualities opening up inside” and “intimate movements that are more than physical.” An increase in their sense of presence and the presence of their fellow actors is also a common observation.

Changes in perception of the world

Participants often report a change in their perceptions: thinking new thoughts, the world becoming new and different, seeing in a different way. This makes sense if we consider that once you have identified with a tree, for example, in its depth, you will never look at trees the same way again.

One participant in the two-week intensive reported quite a remarkable change, which began to infuse her personal life more as the work went on:

For a short while after each session, I experience a type of bliss - a re-experiencing of myself in the world, in my environs. I feel enveloped by the world, literally held by it, as if it is guiding me, and yet I feel my own profound stillness within its flow, and within my own movement. I am of the world and its greatness; it gleams brilliant intelligence - and I am part of that. It is utterly beautiful, and each movement - of the light, trees, people, cars and so on - is so astounding. I feel I have surrendered to the world and have an immense trust of it - there is no fear. I am released from all burden and control, I am basic and simple - PURE - and everything makes wonderful, indescribable sense.

Discovery of intrinsic intelligence/non-mental knowing

The same student talked about contacting a guiding intelligence through the work: “beyond our own intellectual knowing or constructs... lodged in our body's instinct.” She found that this intelligent guidance “came out of the clearness of the space.”

Mask and Mime as Research into the Mythic Dimension

The second line of inquiry in the research intensive was to do with what the mask work can teach us about myth, archetype and the monomyth generally. The performer's craft distinguishes the mask work from therapy and mysticism, but it also points to what it can contribute to these areas. For the performer it is not enough to simply have the inner experience; you have to find the form—etymologically, “per-form” is “by means of” or “in accordance with” the form (Soanes, 2001, p. 663). This means that, like a shaman, the performer can then use their craft as a kind of research. Lecoq is very explicit about this: "Mime is pre-eminently a research art" (Wylie, 1994, p. 75); “The action of miming becomes a form of knowledge" (Lecoq, 2000, p. 22); "Man understands that which moves by his ability to 'mimic' it; that is, to identify himself with the world by re-enacting it with his entire being" (Wylie, 1994, p. 80). One part of his school in Paris was a Laboratory for the Exploration of Movement, where architects would mime the spaces they designed.

The neutral mask adds to the clarity of this research by mime because any personal idiosyncrasies are starkly illuminated by it and create a sense of dissonance in the observers and often the performer, which leads us to move beyond our conditioned responses, to enter the essence of a thing. An actor can understand a lot about Fire by becoming it, by seeing an actor become it: how it consumes, how it is related to inspiration; its extraordinary leaps and lunges, and the resulting bruises, teach about courage. An actor becoming toothpaste can reveal its banality. Becoming Earth can reveal the beautiful unity of suffering, compassion

and wisdom, or a movingly intimate understanding of ashes to ashes, the poignant and even beautiful humanness of the death and decay of our bodies.

The process of research then is guided, by the mask and our aesthetic responses, toward identification with essences, toward knowing as if for the first time, and toward knowledge by identity, which is a direct experience of the inner nature of the subject of the identification, usually accompanied by intuitive insights and visions in both the performer and observer. Over time these insights accumulate and integrate with other, more mundane observations about the qualities of presence that the mask manifests, what releases and blocks these qualities, and so on, gradually building a body of knowledge about the world in its inner, aesthetic, metaphorical dimension. The following observations and discussion grows out of this process.

Archetype

One thing I have observed about archetypes is that if the actor loses touch with the timelessness and stillness of the mask, the numinosity of the archetype fades. It loses its mythic quality; it ceases to have that mythic, metaphorical presence. A connected phenomenon is that the clarity and precision in the outward form seems connected strongly to the degree of openness and not-knowing that the actor feels. An archetype that they think they know, and so partly build out of concepts, rarely has the richness and resonance in performance of one that comes from that state of deep stillness and mystery. The best form comes out of nothing, not-knowing. This is, however, a dualistic way of putting it. I remember one actor who touched something very deep, but it seemed to come out a bit messy. Afterwards he said "I was disturbed by how far I went. I felt out of control." David Latham said to him: "When you're out of control, is there anything beyond that?"

Even though we speak of working with images, if an actor finds a deep personal connection with the image, it can go to a depth where he no longer sees any image at all. He is

being the stillness, centred in it, and the form seems to emerge out of the body itself. The body seems to shape itself, to find the forms independently as the actor observes it. You don't know what will happen in the next moment. This experience of the quality or archetype coming out of the body, or the intelligence of the body is something that Tarnas points to in Grof's work: participants often have the insight that the body is "the repository and vessel of the archetypal" (Tarnas, 1993, p. 428).

Another observation is that any archetype proves easier to contact when we have encountered its expressions in the natural world deeply and concretely on many levels. Most often the actor finds the useful sources in childhood or adolescence. Observing fire between classes does not usually bring the same numinosity, organic spontaneity and power that is often present when the actor draws on the memory of a bushfire tearing through their hometown. The muscles must remember.

Journey

In the case of the journey, this also appears to be the case. Cirlot writes that "From the spiritual point of view, the journey is never merely a passage through space but rather an expression of the urgent desire for discovery and change.... Hence to study, to inquire, to seek or to live with intensity through new and profound experiences are all modes of travelling, or, to put it another way, spiritual and symbolic equivalents of the journey.... " (Cirlot, 1971, p. 164). *To live with intensity through new and profound experiences*—how many of the young actors that we see have really journeyed? What are their frames of reference, their associations? Everquest? Outward Bound? How many of us have felt the long passage through different territories on a journey that we did not know we would return from? How many of us have come back from long years away and faced our place of origin and only then discovered that we were not at all the same? How many of us have absorbed the loss and the

maturity of that adventure? *Divorced from its physical dimension, the archetype of the journey can become a mere phrase, hackneyed and trite.*

As teachers of mask, we work to shake the concept loose of its easy associations, to wake up the actors' imaginations to the profound reality of the universal dimension. We work physically to do this, calling on the actor to find the limits of their strength in pushing, of their release in falling and so on. "The trials are designed to see to it that the intending hero should really be a hero," says Campbell (1988, p. 126). We often need to use a series of physical tasks to help the actor lift their energy to level of a true trial. What I'm saying here is that the mask teaches us that an archetype divorced from the physical loses its grandeur.

For the sense of a mythic journey to emerge, there is something important about going to the physical limit and just beyond it. I once tried to make a performance that would capture and express the magnificent theatre of mask class. We chose the most powerful and dramatic identifications from the training and we worked, using a very detailed process, to gradually find the impulses and the movement, so that the performance had a repeatable form, and although the work was fascinating and rich, and the relevant archetypes came to life, the *drama* was lost because, as the students rehearsed, their bodies became more open to the archetype. What had, in the beginning, pushed them to their limits was now something they could encompass. In a sense, they expanded to meet it, and while the performance was interesting, and was perhaps a more "perfect" embodiment of the archetypal form than the original improvisations, it didn't live in the same way as it did in mask, when the energies took the actors beyond themselves, however imperfect the form may have been.

When a thing is perfect, it is dead; it has no movement. Pir Vilayat Inayat Khan writes of the train wheel being turned from off-centre (Inayat Khan, 1994), and actually the neutral mask is not really neutral: there is a deliberate imperfection. If it was symmetrical it would be

dead. Symmetrical masks have no life. Something a little off-centre has to be turning the wheel, and this seems to apply to the actor as well.

In the mask, the journey is about the intensity of the experiences, not about ticking the boxes of a pre-given structure. The structure is useless if the actor has no passion for adventure, no thirst for transformation. Theatrically, it does not work unless we see the actor transformed by the environments and events they are experiencing, not only in the outward expression, but more fundamentally in the centre, in the quality of their presence. I would say this is true for the world too: the journey isn't a journey unless you are actually changed by it, unless you are receptive to the terrain through which you move.

The Great Test is the apex of the journey, the fundamental transition at which the momentum—the energy and the rhythms—of the journey thus far, condense and reach their limit of intensity. The breaking open that happens with the gathering expression of all the hero's resources (catharsis), often seems to be a shedding of a coarser way of moving. It provides an opening into which—speaking in terms of energy not action—The Gift can descend. We observe that the moment of The Gift is almost always a transition into greater subtlety. On many occasions, this is when the journey really opens to a sacred dimension. Interestingly, it can come without a huge physical struggle, and yet this often the point at which rhythm and quality of the actor's movement will become most clearly numinous.

Unless the call is strong and specific (but not necessarily “known”) at the beginning, the hero very easily becomes transformed into the surrounding environment. There is no interest, no drama or epic energy in the journey unless there is a powerful forward movement, usually given by the call, facing enormously powerful obstacles. Without this, it is boring; it is bad theatre. Without a strong need to complete the journey, in the face of a raging river the mask becomes the river. We also find that an insipid call draws forth only a trickling stream. The question for the actor is “*What is the quality of your adventure?*”

"A hero is someone who has given his or her life to something bigger than oneself," Campbell writes (1988, p. 122), and indeed we find that the urge to go on the journey, the pull of the call, must be stronger, in fact, than death. If it isn't the work can attain a puffed-up, sticky-significant quality, which I call the "fake mythic." The chest lifts a little too high; the body becomes more rigid, less permeable. Significance is not given by the focused and specific intensity of the performer's presence as they face a specific trial, but attempted by creating a kind of honey quality in the movement, as if trying to expand the movement beyond itself. The mythic quality doesn't exclude the lightness and simplicity, the directness of the mask. In fact the true mythic quality requires them. I would say that the journey becomes mythic when there is a true and specific call that is stronger than death, when there is nothing that is added to the action, when it is pared down to the essential.

A strong call is connected to the principle of the end being present at the beginning. The presence of the mask is more than time, so the end is implicit in its presence at the beginning. As Joseph Campbell says "The basic principle of all mythology is this, of the beginning in the end" (Campbell, 1993, p. 269). We might also say that it is to do with the end in the beginning and the stillness within the movement. All of these elements together comprise, according to Michael Chekhov, the "feeling of the whole" which he views as essential to all art and a crucial element of the actor's art (Chekhov, 1991, p. xl). These correspondences point to the integrity of David Latham's triangle of myth, art and psychology, in that all three might be called, in Grof's terms, holotropic—oriented toward the whole, expressing the movement toward wholeness, toward the reality of the inner, of presence, the soul and the spirit, rather than toward matter. The use of mask and mime as a means of research also points to the importance of aesthetics to the processes of knowledge in this domain.⁵

Author Note

This paper is based on a presentation to the 16th International Transpersonal Association Conference: Mythic Imagination and Modern Society Palm Springs, California, June 2004

Footnotes

¹The mask is “engaged in making present a presence and making present an absence” (Eldredge, 1996, p. 15).

²Because the mask has no character, the actor must, in order to embody it, shed her idiosyncrasies. Because the mask has no past, the actors cannot carry their baggage in their body-armour. They have to find a neutral body, and this means that the primary images are not usually personal associations, as you might find in an actor trained in Strasberg’s method, but timeless or mythic associations. The neutral mask actor may be aware, and usually is aware, of all kinds of personal connections, as she moves through a mythic landscape, or performs an action like the last good bye, but the mask is innately universal. It has a mythic, not a domestic resonance. If we find the right body and behaviour, the mask tunes us into the mythic depths to actions that have universal resonance. That’s the invisible world of the mask, and it is also one of the invisible worlds within us, the mythic dimension of our own depth.

³The crucial thing though is that words, and forms, *point to*, if they are good metaphors; they point beyond themselves to the source of life, and carry new life across from that source into the manifest world. The metaphor is therefore the bridge, and metaphor means “to carry across.”

⁴Compare Grotowski: “*Performer* knows how to link body images to the song. (The stream of life is articulated in images.) The witnesses then enter into states of intensity because, so to say, they feel presence. And this is thanks to *Performer*, who is a bridge between the witness and this something. In this sense, *Performer* is *pontifex*, maker of bridges” (Grotowski, 2001, p. 377).

⁵In Wilber’s model, he deems the validity claims for knowledge in the interior-subjective domain of reality (the “I” quadrant) to be “aesthetic” (Wilber, 1996, p. 122).

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