

The Yesyesnow Conspiracy Blog: **Notes from the Front (and the Back)**

By Marya Sea Kaminski, October 2012

A series of installments based on a week of training in movement, mask and individual clown at Giovanni Fusetti's Helikos School in Florence, Italy. Warning readers: These are actually notes. Not necessarily well constructed thoughts. Think process not product. Skip or skim to your heart's content. May skipping content your heart.

DAY ONE: Movement and Physical Characters with Sarah Foster

Undulation: The head drops with face up, then face down, knees bend, pelvis forward, plexus forward, head up and drops again with face up. The inhale naturally comes when the pelvis begins to move forward and the torso expands.

Experimenting with different phases of the undulation:

1. Undulate
2. Find a position to lead (the hips forward or the hips back, plexus forward or back)
3. Breathe into this position and let breath lead to movement and likely to walk
4. Keep breathing and let body lead to behavior with the room or people
5. Breath and behavior can lead to voice

BELIEVE
BEHAVE
BECOME
BEHOLD

Walks/Characters:

"The Good Student" based on walking backwards with awareness, head goes down and arms go still, uberaware, this walk forward creates someone careful and eager to do things the right way the first time

"The World is My Bathtub" is the opposite of the good student with her head up, arms free and shoulders undulating informing a sway in the hips. She enjoys herself and is entitled to enjoy herself. After all, the world is her bathtub.

CHEST FORWARD, ARMS AND SHOULDERS FOLDING BACK LIKE A CAPE - leading with the heart, curious, joyful, but carrying a heavy lower body, trying to let breath pick her up and lighten her feet, the wind and her curiosity blows her

around, strong heart energy fighting with shoulders wanting to collapse and be protected and skeptical

HIPS FORWARD, UPPER BODY LOOSE - non-impressed, judgmental, moves easily, thinks she has high status though she does not, "Maureen"

CHEST BACK - timid, worried, makes friends with spots on the wall in private moments and becomes self-conscious when these moments become public, she comforts herself but people cause her concern, "Thelma"

CHEST BACK AMPLIFIED, BIGGER - inspecting the architecture, dissatisfied! judgmental of the state of things in every specific way, arms out and away from the body holding up the space above her, "The Landlady"

"Live in the character's body and let her speak or write her own monologue."

"Speaking off the cuff makes me nervous."

"Then don't speak. Let the character speak. There's a weight off of you!"

Play:

- Is eternally in the present.
- Listens to the present movement and lets the movement lead.
- Is not possible to achieve with 'smart actor brain' it must come from some other place.

"Is it always fun? I mean, does it always feel good?"

"There are ways of feeling bad that can feel really good if you fully allow them. Uncomfortable! Tension in my jaw!"

Lecoq's Seven Levels of Energy:

0. DEAD OR ASLEEP. No energy.

1. MINIMUM ENERGY. Can barely stay standing up. Drunk. Exhausted. Falling forward or back. Might actually collapse into a puddle but then must get back up again.

2. COOL ENERGY. Enough energy to notice but not enough energy to care. Cowboy swagger. Contains conversational, pedestrian gestures. Very hip. Too cool for school.

3. ECONOMY OF MOVEMENT. Start a movement (I will walk to that wall), then complete it. The end. Do not let the movement echo or resonate. Do not comment. Simple, direct, specific. One thing at a time. Completed. Then the next one thing. This is the bare minimum amount of energy necessary for

performance. In Level Three, we may observe impulses for action or emotion rise up in our bodies. We observe them but stay economical.

4. PROJECTING SPACE. Alert like primitive man, moving in big, open space but alert to potential opportunities and/or dangers. Pauses resonate. You carve space with your movement, gesture and also your stillness. There is a movement in stillness. A pebble thrown into water creates ripples. Gestures extend. Level Four is not about size, just awareness, it can be quite small.

5. ACTION. DECISIVE, IRREVERSIBLE ACTION. Do something (I will walk to this wall, I will sit on this stool, I will take this imaginary baseball and throw it through that real window). Do it. Let it complete without apology or comment. Then do the next action.

6. ACTION WITH EMOTION. Action informed by an emotional state, which tends to crescendo with repetition. Action/emotion amplifies until it reaches some peak and becomes something else, another action and/or another emotion. This crescendo of emotion can take place through repetition, action, gesture, or partner work.

7. PEAK PARALYSIS. Action/emotion crescendoes until one is absolutely overcome and fully flooded with this action/emotion and thus cannot move. Level Seven reaches paralysis but not because of stillness, but because of being filled with energy to capacity.

General Notes:

- When your hips are circling, observe how your head is making opposite circles.
- Marya, you're funny when your body goes loose and your face stays serious.
- Keep breathing, especially through the mouth. Sometimes the character can be almost fully realized but then be hampered down by the face. Let the face relax so the character can come through.
- Tendency to hold mouth and thus breath. Make space around the mouth. Also true of the torso and shoulders, limbs can be free but torso stays held. Make space. Allow. Relax.
- If something you do makes you break, that is, laugh or cry, then there is something interesting there. Explore it.

A series of three installments based on a week of training in movement, mask and individual clown at Giovanni Fusetti's Helikos School in Florence, Italy.

DAY TWO: Journey of the Mask with Matteo Destro

I just spent the day working with a mask maker and theater artist from Padua, Italy named Matteo Destro. A wide-eyed man in black with a burgeoning command of English and an easy, generous, resonant mastery of mask making and performance. I spent three and a half hours and could have spent three and a half more; I never felt tired or bored or needed a break. We spoke about space and connecting to the big Unknown through space and time and mask, like the Unknown that is responsible for the sun and for the animals and for the feeling of love. The work felt like a big and most profound endeavor.

He spoke to me about the history of the mask and specifically the neutral mask, as developed by Jaques Lecoq as an exercise for the actor. There are many different kinds of neutral masks, he says, but the best ones are made by Sartori in Padua, the son of the Sartori that developed the neutral mask idea with Lecoq. Very difficult, this, he says. A neutral mask is like a blank chalkboard, you can notice even the tiniest mark, the tiniest upturned corner of the lip, the tiniest squint of the eye and suddenly you have expression. You have character. A neutral mask is open and possible, no character, and made out of leather. The substance matters. A metal mask, no matter how neutral the expression, "pings!" And a neoprene mask "screams" it's shape. Leather is neutral.

Before we brought any of the masks into the space, we reviewed the physical techniques I'd learned on Tuesday with Sarah Foster. Undulation, both forward and backward. Undulation as the underlying form of all movement. For Action, we push from the ground into an undulation. For Reaction, we take in the space and the undulation begins at the head and moves backward. This is acting, of course, and the challenge is to do it with neutrality. To let the body and head be moved by the space without drama or conflict or implied relationship or opinion.

Also, he added Fixed Point exercises as well as the French word "éclosion" to our working vocabulary. Loosely translated, éclosion means 'to bloom' or 'to hatch from the egg'. An impulse that starts the motion of the entire body at once. In undulation, the body moves one piece at a time - head, knees, pelvis, plexus, head. In éclosion, the body moves and sees at the same time.

We worked briefly at the initial, deceptively simple, exercises of finding neutral. Begin in a squat, then there is an éclosion, an impulse that begins the body moving all at once, up into standing with arms outstretched seeing the space in front of you. Letting the neutral mask lead. Very difficult, this. I am filled with small expressions - my open palm tells the story of a dropped wineglass, my assertive chest insists on a story of bravery in the face of adversity, a lean backwards to look forward creates a world bigger than me that I must conjure the strength to approach, my leading pelvis reveals collapsed and fearful shoulders determined to move forward any way, too long a glance at the sea creates a nostalgic past with the shore. Not neutral. Not simply seeing the space and letting it lead my

body simple point to simple point. I struggled toward neutral and kept forgetting to breathe while my bare calves were mosquito meat, a sacrifice for a great good.

We talked about what it is to see on stage, a question that is very urgent to me as I teach from Declan Donnellan's incredible book, *The Actor and the Target*, and am constantly encouraging imagination in my acting students. Don't act for yourself, act because there is a target in front of you - your scene partner or an image of the bully on your school bus or a vision of what your love should be. You see in front of you and you react to what you see. We also deal with this in Suzuki training, always having a three-dimensional image on stage. "When is an actor onstage without an image?" my mentor Robyn Hunt would ask us. Sadly, often, I think. Or we imagine the world in front of us the size of our television screens, or in flimsy two-dimensions like our facebook pictures. If the actor must see to react and thus to act, how do we see? How much? How detailed and how expansive? How much time do we take to let the image form just right before we react and we see something new?

Matteo kept talking about 'seeing space' in front of me, and letting this space move me, move me forward with economy and neutrality. "But you, Matteo, what do you actually see when you are doing this work?" I asked in (I'm embarrassed to admit) a strange, Italian-inspired accent. A big question, he responded. "Now finally, in all my years of experience, working with masters that insist we must imagine the tree in order to see the tree, I realize that what I actually see is space. The space of the mountain. And as I deal with the space, as I am compelled to move forward or touch or climb the mountain, the details of its ledges and rocks and textures become clear tiny piece by tiny piece as I need them." If we fill in all the details and see the entire sea specifically at once, we go inside. We leaf through everything we know about what a sea should look like. If we look out and just see the vast space of the ocean, we let the audience fill in that space themselves, rather than focusing on us and the details of what we are imagining for them, we simply carve out the space for them to complete with their own imaginations. It is a gift. It is not about us, or our experiences as the performers. "What the actor feels may be real, but it is not always true." When she is working best, with humility and generosity and courage, the actor creates space and story that lives in the room and stays with the audience long after the actor has left the stage. We create the space first, then we see it.

Time flew and we began to work more quickly. Matteo lined one wall of the room with Larvel Masks. White, small-eyed, large-faced masks, innocent like children. Poetic in their simplicity. The faces move in a direction, creating blunt clues for the body. They reflect the shape of the body that fills them. Don't do too much, Matteo kept reminding me, It takes great courage to be simple. Just receive what is before you and feel your reaction inside the mask's body. First, receive and let the mask feel, then play. Later, with more mastery, we can let the mask take action.

Then Matteo introduced me to the population of masks he has crafted. Expressive flesh-colored topographies that could line the local bar or man the factory or argue prices at the market. These flesh-colored masks stare through a universe at you, wrinkled and shadowed and boldly shaped. They contain the decisive direction of the Larval Masks but they imply more detailed pasts, more complicated relationships with the space before them. A good mask is not stuck, he said, it changes expression. And as he tried one on, the room transformed from ugly to terrifying, from empty to full and then to not full enough. He allowed me to try a mask he had just finished. Furled eyebrows, one askew and a grimace drawn up toward the nose like it was caught on a fish hook. I put it on. I tried to let me body fill the mask, mirror its valleys and swells, I turned to him. He explained that my bicycle had been stolen. And I had an idea about this mask, that she was grouchy and dissatisfied but then she looked at him, and to where her bicycle had been, and she began to feel very sad. Mistrusting. When I took the mask off, I felt moved, teary, on edge and Matteo clasped his hands to his heart and said, "Yes, this is very good. You have sensitivity. Marya, this is very, very good."

Matteo explained that he grew up in Padua, the birth of Commedia d'elle Arte. It is in his blood. It is an art that uses masks. Then he went and trained at the Lecoq School and was introduced to the poetic simplicity of the Larval Masks and when he returned to Commedia, he found the expanse between them too vast a difference. So he began making masks to bridge this expanse. "Commedia masks are about wanting to eat, wanting money, wanting to fuck - they are simple," he explained. "In our world now, we need different masks. Perhaps in the nineteenth century, we could identify with feeling hungry and very much wanting food. But now we are not hungry, we are lonely. We are not desirous, we are scared. I make masks like these."

The final family of masks I met today were Matteo's signature, Directional Masks. Their features move in one, exaggerated direction. Flesh-colored and wrinkled, they stared at me from the floor, one of them all pulled up into the forehead, worried and observant. Another all nose and bones out front, skeptical and disruptive. They have upper lips that shape a voice when you wear them and they have whites around the small eye holes to direct your sight. They live. And finally become more refined into his half-masks, who tell a direction in more subtle folds around the mouth or the arc of the brow. He told me a story of working with a company new to masks as a director and crafting masks so full and powerful that they pulled the company forward into stronger technique and courageous presence. The mask can overpower and redirect a beginner's enthusiastic sloppiness or the ego's pushy details.

When I left the studio, having already worked with Matteo longer than we'd been scheduled, I took a walk. And everyone's face looks like a mask to me right now. Each face has its own obvious direction, drawn more severe through time and

habit and softly reflected through the body. I would like to study this more, I think. To learn how to make masks, how to connect to this curiosity and wisdom through my hands and then give it to other actors, and then master how to use them. Very difficult, this.

DAY THREE, PART ONE: Individual Clown, Physical and Vocal States with Liz Baron

Today was one of the most liberating, challenging, terrifying like a rollercoaster I want to go on again and again days I have spent in a rehearsal room in a long, long time. I met Liz Baron, a masterful clown and voice teacher from Colorado, and she gently lead me into the deepening ocean of this work. We discussed the state of physical presence, the delicate internal releasing that occurs in a true undulation, the terror of the moment and countless other secrets and insights about performing and the creative process.

Eventually, we did the exercise Entrée. I entered. In my red nose. And I connected, both with my eyes and with my breath with the audience, and with Liz's guidance I kept saying 'yes' to whatever arose in my body and my emotional state. These were the directions:

Your clown enters.
She connects to the audience.
She lives.
She exits.
She dies.

Without pushing, but observing my fear and my nervousness and my delight, she lead me into the tension in my jaw and its deep hunger for power and control, and even more specifically, into my teeth. These teeth that compulsively bite off more than they can chew and cram sweets and pleasure and ambition into my belly. A delicate breath through my teeth let my fingers emerge, a tiny waltz on either side of my body, fingertips pointing and projecting a touch, demanding attention on either side of my hips. My hips, permanently uneven because of my scoliosis want to sway and buck between my dangling arms, devouring the room with calculating desire.

I was embarrassed. Oh my goodness, I was so embarrassed. My clown is lascivious and unabashed! Desirous and pushy. Delighted in pleasure and power and attention. She is all hungry jaw and seductive fingers. She is almost a complete list of the qualities about myself I am constantly trying to keep in check.

Liz reminded me that in this work, we do not ask why things arise. We only ask how. And then we ask how they move.

We moved more. We found more clowns that wanted out of the alcatraz of my torso. A young clown lead by the nose from wall to incense to feet to imagined forests and fragrant trees. This clown was so excited to follow her nose that I ran directly into a wall, turned to my teacher, rubbed the tip of my nose and silently asked for an explanation. She is young. Liz called this moment 'an outside' when one is more engaged with the outside world than with their internal world. It is good, this thing, if a little painful.

Another clown was a pleaser, pacing in front of the audience, bouncing off the walls with a skip in her step and two thumbs up. Yesssssss! This clown was all yes and leading with the heel and don't go anywhere folks I'll be right back or better yet let's go together.

But then she came back. This clown we found. And she stayed awhile. And she keeps wanting to re-emerge. This is what I wrote about her right after class:

She is teeth and jaw and so much power. She is an inhale, desirous, through the teeth and the fingers and then a slow exhale that keeps the heart forward and full. She is desire and hips, the left belly forward, the right hip out. She charges through her hips and charges through her breath. She is so hungry to eat and touch and travel and do. She is powerful and attracted to power. She does instant desirous calculations in a room and demands high, if not highest status. When she's caught she floats her hands up and exposes her torso, as though to say, "Sometimes there must be casualties." She walks with joy, heels first and with a bounce. Not seductive but strident. She does not collapse in the center (though Marya will collapse her when she gets too embarrassing to bear). Her arms pose and her fingers crawl and point and articulate. They claw for what they want. Which is all of it. Her jaw has so much tension and so much power. Do not fight it or let it go. Go into it instead. That jaw does not like to be told no or banished away. Its hunger and ambition lend enormous value to this form. She cannot stand to be told no and is outraged when things don't go her way, though she enjoys the 'pleasure of waiting.' She comforts people with mock sympathy and lives as though there is never enough of anything wonderful and she must have it all for herself all at once. She travels the world, her hungry teeth ready to consume and she enjoys a direct, confident relationship with her audience. She is Gertrude or Minerva or Candace or Christa or perhaps Cassandra. She is a queen but doesn't like to get bogged down with titles and protocol. She can navigate our present world though she is born from another time. She has high status but does not want the responsibility. She doesn't want to lead. She wants to desire and then consume. Food. Men. Power. She smiles through her teeth, when she is happy and also when she is sad and also when she is confused. Her countermask does not stay long in hurt or sadness but moves immediately to outrage and revenge. She does not speak words but all of her sounds can be felt in the body, in her chest or her shoulders or her head. A soft growl of invitation. A heady "whoop" for fun or sport. A full, chesty round laugh for delight or discovery.

She happens to be very comfortable with weapons. Paddles, samurai swords and explosives. She take off people's heads when its necessary and appropriate. She prefers not to give orders but to do the executioning herself. For sport. "Sometimes there must be casualties." Her jaw never forgets an injustice she's suffered and she can instantly calculate who has the power in the room and begin to navigate her way there. She does not like to share the stage, particularly with other women, but she shifts her mood instantly. Constantly. She is entirely charming, effectively seductive and absolutely unapologetic. She wants another cupcake before she's eaten this one, another lover before she has devoured the one she has, another adventure before she's finished the one she's on. She is dramatic. Her countermask is filled with pathos and outrage, she likes the word yes and cannot tolerate being told no. Despite being a clown, she fancies herself a leading lady and tends to travel with two men, sometimes walking arm in arm and other times one in the front so I can see his behind and one in the back so he can see mine.

She is wonderful.

I declare myself now, today, open to other opportunities to let her play and let us explore each other. I have my red nose in a delicate, transparent red bag with a drawstring. I will use that again.