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“The Necessity of Form: 
An Exploration of Mask and Movement through Carlo Goldoni’s The Venetian Twins”

A thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements
for the degree Master of Fine Arts

in

Theatre and Dance (Directing)

by

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2016
The thesis of Jesca Prudencio is approved and it is acceptable in quality and form for publication on microfilm and electronically:

______________________________
Chair

University of California, San Diego

2016
DEDICATION

To my husband Idris Ademola for being my source of encouragement and inspiration, my parents Drs. Jose and Estela Prudencio for supporting this passion my entire life, and Gabor Tompa for his mentorship and the opportunity he bestowed upon me in accepting me into this program.
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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thank you to the cast of Venus and The Venetian Twins, who pushed themselves mentally and physically throughout the process, and the designers for their hard work until the last second of each tech. I thank Judy Dolan for her eyes throughout the Venus process, Robert Castro’s guidance on the The Venetian Twins, Charlie Oates for his movement and fight choreography on every production in my UC San Diego career, and of course, Gabor Tompa for his mentorship on both productions.
ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

“The Necessity of Form: An Exploration of Mask and Movement Through Carlo Goldoni’s The Venetian Twins”

by

Jessica Prudencio

Master of Fine Arts in Theatre and Dance (Directing)

University of California, San Diego, 2016

Professor Gabor Tompa, Chair

As artists, what do we seek? I came to UC San Diego’s MFA Directing program to “bring out a depth in my process that would help me create a better theatrical experience of revelation, empathy, and contemplation, and find my own signature form.” In preparation to direct my thesis production of Carlo Goldoni’s The Venetian Twins, I embarked on an intense training in the artform of mask performance in New York, Italy, and San Diego. Theater is a living and breathing event that is the intersection between several art forms in one moment in time. I discovered that the use of form must stem from a detailed concept rooted in the larger question with which the artist is wrestling.
In 2013, I was a young artist working full time for Ping Chong + Company, a theater company based in New York, spending any extra time at night and on the weekends directing and curating new plays, readings, and workshops. It was a comfortable life balancing a satisfying day job while pursuing my passions as a director during my off time. The staff at Ping Chong + Company focused on building a foundation for Ping to create projects and pursue ideas specifically in interdisciplinary theater. During five years of working with Ping Chong, I collaborated on the creation of new works, developed and implemented the education program that focused on documentary and devised theater in accordance to the mission statement of the company, “To create works of theater and art that explore the intersections of race, culture, history, art, media and technology in the modern world.” Working in support of Ping’s voice, I realized that mine had not been truly discovered. I grew significantly as an artist, but needed to branch out on my own. According to my Statement of Purpose written four years ago, I came to UC San Diego’s MFA Directing program to ‘bring out a depth in my process that would help me create a better theatrical experience of revelation, empathy, and contemplation, to find my own signature form.” Now at the end of this three-year journey, I can confidently say that I have accomplished just that.

Each process begins with an issue that is keeping me up at night. For my second year project, Venus by Suzan-Lori Parks, the issue was the objectification of the ethnic body. In Carlo Goldoni’s The Venetian Twins, it was looking at the exclusivity of a community and how outsiders are no longer welcome. My mentor, Gabor Tompa
encouraged me to look at Goldoni’s plays for his playfulness and strong use of language. His plays are charming and comical, with an array of characters driven by simple desires for love, sex, and money. The play highlights three different communities: the archaically odd hierarchy of an academic Verona, the free-spirited romantics of Venice, and straightforward impulsive simpletons of Bergamo. The comedy is in the cultural clash among the three in the city of Verona. In *The Venetian Twins*, this tension becomes a game of power, deceit, misfortune, and manipulation, which eventually leads to the death of the outsider. As a proud New Yorker and Filipina American, I have carried pride from my home to La Jolla. I am constantly negotiating and adapting to new environments as I work to make my home here more like my home there. People make assumptions of me based on a first impression, and I make assumptions of them. This dangerous game of expectations and stereotypes only leads to tension and misunderstanding. Clearly I wanted to direct the play, but how could I find my signature form in this classic comedy of mixed identity?

The play begins with a big welcome for the monetarily desired visitor, Zanetto from Bergamo. From the beginning, he is treated as an object of wealth from the Professor, the leader of this town. To his bride-to-be Rosaura, he is the prince charming she has been dreaming about her entire life. To our villain Pancrazio, Rosaura is a symbol of purity and chastity that he wants to keep all to himself. This is a world where people retract to the traditions of where they are from. Their culture breeds their “situation.” The situation, as explained by Martin Esslin, “The meaning of the words spoken in drama
derived (beyond its purely lexical, syntactical, referential, metric and other meanings open to a purely literary interpretation) from a consideration of WHO does WHAT with those words TO WHOM under WHICH CIRCUMSTANCES. Or, more concisely, in drama the meaning of the words derives ultimately from the SITUATION from which they spring." (Field of Drama, Esslin)

The characters are passionate and hungry people whose passion drives them to act irrationally without thought of repercussions. The characters see each other as simple objects of desire. My personal fascination with objectification continued through this process, and there was opportunity to depict that in a new form. The characters existed in another reality and became larger than life. As my mentor Gabor Tompa once said, “Theater is not a mirror to life, it’s much stronger.”

In the Directing and Design Process Course led by Judy Dolan and Gabor Tompa last fall, I wrote a fable for a proposed production of Don Juan. For my thesis, I approached this production as a fable of how one community’s greed victimized an innocent man. In many conversations with my mentor and in developing the “how” of my production, one aspect was clear: the form must feel necessary to my production and concept. Having been a part of the downtown experimental theater scene, with great theater artists like Ping Chong, Meredith Monk, and Liz Swados, who have collaged different theatrical forms in one given piece. Rarely do I ask, “Why?” It just works. Goldoni’s body of work rejected the Italian theatrical tradition commedia dell’arte, so it is possible that my interest in bringing an artform to Goldoni’s play is going against the spirit with which it was written. Before I decided whether the masks of commedia
dell’arte should be used in my production, I embarked on a summer immersing myself in this traditional Italian theatrical form.

It began with me burying myself in biographies about Goldoni and getting into his inner thoughts through his memoir. It was clear that Goldoni was a true theater punk of his time, like Artaud, Brecht, Meyerhold, and Kantor. Commedia dell’arte was popular theater that felt cheap, empty, and predictable. He used it to grab his audiences, but he began to veer away from the improvised scenarios with the masks and via writing scripts. His plots were more intricate, and reflected the towns he visited. By the end of his career, his plays did not have any masks in it. Goldoni was wrestling with the spectrum between archetype (masked character) to the human (the unmasked). The Venetian Twins was written in the middle of this transition. On one hand, the piece had the commedia characters Brighella, Professor, Colombina, Capitano, Arlecchino and the Innamorati. On the other hand, it contained a plot driven by the innamorati with subplots and a death, which had not been done in comedy at the time. Goldoni himself grappled with the form of commedia dell’arte and eventually veered away from it completely. But why was he so against this theatrical form of commedia dell’arte?

I am an extremely physical director who creates with my body as well as my mind and voice. In order to understand the tradition to which Goldoni was reacting, I studied commedia with Christopher Bayes in New York. This workshop changed how I see comedy. It must come from an equation of clear situation, authenticity, and musicality of the moment. “Craft your disaster,” he would say. The objective was to set our characters to fail as grand as possible. We also explored the lazzi, or “game” in each situation usually sparked by extreme victories, losses, and tension between the masters and
servants. I witnessed and experienced the incredible amount of precision and detail that goes into crafting a comedy first-hand. But most importantly, I was able to live through the mask. It was then that I knew my company of actors at UC San Diego should experience the freedom and fun in breathing life into a given physical identity. Masks are not a disguise, they are another truth. The most memorable theatrical moments in theater involve an impressive mastery of another form. In the search to find my unique theatrical voice, I want to create work that is relatable, moving, and virtuosic.

Soon after this workshop was over, my studies took me to Venice where I visited Goldoni’s home and got a taste of the city he so passionately longed for throughout his travels through Europe. Venice today is very different now from what it was then. It is a town that thrives off tourism. The streets are filled with men on the street forcing the passersby to purchase roses, take Gondola rides, or buy a fake purse. I knew my production needed to have a subversive side to the comedy. At Teatro Goldoni, just down the street from our hotel, I witnessed a Goldoni production by the local company that was disappointing. The production played into all the misconceptions of commedia: stilted and inauthentic. The production was a museum piece that used masks as an exhibition, rather than a truthful act. It was slow with bad projections and too much overacting. Despite this disappointing experience, the ending was extremely subversive. Right as all the happy endings wrapped up, the actors looked out to us in the audience in front of a projection of their town being demolished by a cruise ship. The Venetian players were telling us to get out. Again, the theme of outsiders and suddenly feeling unwelcomed had followed me all the way to Venice.
Full of experiences from my rich summer abroad, I had come to a decision. Masks will be used in this production to highlight the grotesque self-indulgence that has taken over the town of Verona. Those consumed by these insatiable desires lived through these masks. They should not be worn as a disguise, but as a persona in which they feel most alive. These players need the masks in order to live this fable. I reconnected with mask makers Tragicomica in Venice, and ordered a set of genuine leather commedia masks for our production.

Upon return from my travels abroad, I shared these discoveries with my designers. We embarked on a collaborative process in which people kept bringing in images and materials to share with the group. We arrived at a concept. Verona was a town who have chosen to tell this fable through the masks of commedia dell’arte. The masks were rich, grotesque, and playful. This would be told in an Italian contemporary landscape with rich patterns and colors. The set acts as both a castle for this rich Verona masked world, as well as a playground which can role across the stage, swipe actors in and out, be climbed up down and all around. It could become walls, fences, windows, hallways and rooms. Cinematically it will help frame the scenes as well as help us zoom in and zoom out. Together with the flying Venetian blinds, the set should evoke the privacy of a country club or gated community. The set should trap and confuse the twins. It should be constantly shifting, a distrustful set that constantly surprises. The sound is playful acoustic guitar like that of Jason Mraz. The mask was the score and the performance is the music. Every character brings a song and rhythm with them. My sound designer created themes for each character and played when the desire was high. We were operating under the rules of commedia that I studied in my summer intensive,
but reimagined through our young American souls. The audience walked into a theater with masks on music stands, as one would at the beginning of a concert symphony.

Following the commitment to commedia, I needed to get my actors on board. I enrolled in the mask performance class with the second year actors to find a way to bridge my mask experience with theirs. With the help of movement teacher Charlie Oates, and my dramaturg Jim Short who studied *commedia dell’arte* in Italy, I felt armed and ready to teach the actors these new techniques. In an MFA Acting Training program focused on American realism, would it be worth the attempt to teach them a new form? Would they resist or be excited for the challenge? Both acting and directing faculty warned me about this. In fact, I was encouraged to use another kind of mask or no masks at all. The style of comedy was difficult enough, why create a bigger barrier between the actor and the audience? My mentor Gabor always told me to take risks, and if I am going to fail, we should fail big. I had committed to commedia and I wanted to pursue it through before I cut it. It felt necessary to my production.

We started the rehearsal process with a commedia bootcamp. My dramaturg led a day introducing us to history of *commedia dell’arte*. We watched parts of Strehler’s production of *Servant of Two Masters* where he recreated the traditional form to bring joy back into the community post WWII. I then led a series of exercises around truthful, playful, improvisation taken from my summer intensives. We introduced each mask with the body and personality traits, then each actor got to try on the masks. The most useful exercise involved the actors creating non-verbal lazzis pulled from situations in the play. Here are three lazzis generated from workshop week used in my production:
1. Zanetto & Beatrice: Zanetto believes this woman is the devil attacking him, and Beatrice wants to have sex with the fiancé she hasn’t seen in two weeks.

2. Professor & Colombina: Colombina threatens to tell Rosaura she is not his real daughter, and Professor shut Colombina up.

3. Lelio & Florindo: Lelio impresses Beatrice with money and riches, while Florindo impresses her with his strength.

I understood that a one-week intensive will not result in commedia virtuosos, but I believed that if my actors could capture the spirit of commedia, then it would be worth the attempt. My work is neither shy nor stiff. The workshop week brought the ensemble together and created a key sense of trust between the actors and me.

The lazzi work was a perfect segue into tablework. The form and mask training meant nothing without understanding the situation and the actions of every scene. We identified the situation in each of the thirty scenes. My secondary mentor Robert Castro encouraged me to divide my script into units, or beats, and write out the main action of each scene. Before I got too caught up in masks and movement, I needed to go back to the events. Form must feel necessary to the situations. I cut out any extraneous jokes or gags that did not contribute to the big idea of the play. Between workshop week and tablework, the actors were hooked in, committed and very responsive to this process. This is the most vocal and interactive I have ever been with a company. I encouraged them to see their character as simple with a big heart and big needs. They should never judge, mock, or comment on their character. They are real people, just simplified.

The five-week rehearsal process brought both victories and challenges. The first priority was identifying the situations and staging them. With thirty scenes, this became a
real challenge. At the end of each week, we would review whatever we had. In our final two weeks of rehearsal, it was clear that the technique learned in week one slowly started drifting away. I wanted to bring back the precision of the mask work, so I used Jim to tighten up the mask work in a handful of scenes. We were able to clean up and shape a few scenes in our remaining rehearsal. That said, the work was then tipping to form exclusively and I started losing the situations and the objectives. It seemed like I could only have one or the other: either a truthful realistic scene empty of energy or a precise movement pieces with exact gestures and head movements. The final run-through of the production moved very slowly. I watched a nervous company of actors painfully juggling situation, form, and playfulness at the same time. Had I misguided them? Was it too ambitious of a task to give? Form might be hindering their performance.

Tech brought many surprises. The set pieces could not move as flawlessly as discussed. The lights were too bright and took away all mystery to the set and costume. The sound felt too easy and relaxing for such a high-strung play. One thing that was clear: this was neither commedia dell’arte. In an effort to make the design more cohesive, I took out all the fence pieces for Act 2, kept them to two formations in Act 3, and made the lighting more mysterious and sculpted. I also discovered the beauty of silhouettes of bodies, masks, and the scenic grids. Suddenly, I was seeing a graphic novel come to life. The best decision was to embrace this new graphic comic book form and run with it. My original form did not feel necessary, but a new form emerged from what I saw in tech. After much discussion and contemplation, I decided to go with an alternate mask set created by my costume designer. The features were more exaggerated and the mask colors matched the costumes. The masks were more expressive in the Weiss and were
stranger and more grotesque. Originally the production started with my Venetian masks, now I had to let go of them in order to make the piece feel more whole. After a whirlwind of changes in tech, I decided to spend our final hours in tech with no tech, and no masks, just the actors doing a line-through, listening and playing with each other, truthfully. I had regained the spirit of commedia seen six weeks ago in my rehearsal room. This exercise brought back the buoyancy missing from my production. The rehearsal process with the actors had a lot of trust and safety between director and actors, which allowed me to continue to make big changes and detailed notes throughout previews and performances.

Ultimately, my concept became much clearer in tech and my production of *The Venetian Twins* morphed into a new creature. I was very collaborative along the way, and encouraged my designers and actors to make *commedia dell’arte* their own. This resulted in a lot of ideas on stage and lack of true understanding to how I wanted to keep the spirit of commedia in the production. It is not in our American theater culture, and it mostly has a bad reputation. With a heavier hand earlier on, the production could have stayed closer to the *commedia dell’arte* tradition, but being the only one with real formal training, it would be too much work in such a short amount of time. The form must feel necessary to the production and must feel necessary for our audiences to experience the production in that specific way. It also must stem from the concept and followed through and set up clearly in every scene. The situations, the concept, and the mask work operated independently and they needed to work organically collaboratively.

Looking through my body of work in my thirteen years as a theater director, I have directed all kinds of productions such as dance theater, musical theater, puppetry,
documentary theater, and new plays. I am no stranger to creating outside the box and pride myself in creating from a curious and imaginative place. Even one year prior to my thesis, form was an essential aspect in my production of Venus in 2015. The entire production was set in a freakshow and every scene was performed by the freaks as a company. We transformed the Shank Theater into a space between Venice Beach freakshow and a red light district. The play-within-the-play as a mask show where the freaks performed a piece for the Baron, about him. The freakshow as a form allowed us to create scenes that felt kitschy with a dash of burlesque, and engage with the audience in an uncomfortable way. This production successfully used form to cast the audience in a role that made them take part in this woman’s rise and fall as The Venus Hottentot. My productions are eclectic, yet specific to the rules of its universe.

There are three breathtaking productions, which have greatly influenced during my time here in graduate school. The one aspect unites them all: their unique use of form in support of the concept. The first is Complicite’s *Shun-kin*, which combined bunraku puppetry with live actors in this tale about teacher’s obsession with his student. Le Theatre du Soleil’s *Drums on the Dam* used a combination of masks, actors as puppets, and Kabuki to depict a Chinese village’s flooding to construct a dam. Finally, Kneehigh’s *Tristan and Yseult* told this love story through playful circus tricks and an in house band. Each production uses different theatrical forms to elicit a deep emotional response, two talking heads could not accomplish. This is all to say that I believe a director can create their own form. To make an exact replica of something that has been done is museum theater, or rather, cultural appropriation. Complicite, Le Theatre du Soleil, and Kneehigh established a way to infuse their productions with inspiration from different styles and
genres to create an inventive evening of theater, specific to the narrative. I aspire to take risk with form like these great theater artists. So what is a director’s position in the creative process?

The role of the director is to generate and edit. Reviewing my notes from my professors from my graduate career, the role of the director has been described in many metaphors.

- The director is a conductor, unifying performers, setting the tempo, executing clear preparations and beats, shaping the sound of an ensemble.
- The directors is a poet, assembling a verbal composition designed to convey experiences, ideas, or emotions in a vivid and imaginative way, characterized by the use of language chosen for its sound and suggestive power.
- The director is a chef, concocting dishes to be presented, consumed, and nourished.
- The director is a painter, an artist who uses paint to make a composition. Every brush stroke having specificity and intention.

Each of these roles is outside of the theater, and like the directing process, there is clarity and precision, within each one of their choices. All have a product; all deal with a sense – touch, sound, sight, smell, and taste. The concepts of directing can translate across mediums. I would like to add one more into this recipe of metaphors, which best articulates the director to me...

- The director in the editor-in-chief, a person in charge of crafting and determining the final content. One, who sets boundaries for a staff to work within, without
limiting the individual’s contributions. One who motivates, and mitigates. The editor is responsible for all content and held accountable for the end product.

I think it important to create a collaborative environment that stays true to the concept and vision of any work produced. Through collaboration, situations were created within the characters that supported the concept. Collaboration is a safe word that makes for a great process, but the product has to be above the process. One must maintain clarity while allowing others to give input that coincided with the concept. A vision may be compromised, if there are too many cooks in the kitchen. As the director, I must know when to take input, and when to cut it.

The director’s concept and vision lays out the givens, which is derived from the text. The text serves as guide that help us perceive and craft the situation. This given should act as a lens that every person part of the production creates though. From there, all ideas are fair game as long as we all continue to see through the same lens; the lens being the overall concept and theme of the production. This shapes the form of the play creating a cohesiveness the audience will connect to and understand. My responsibility as a director is to maintain the integrity and ensure all these collaborative elements coincide with my overall vision and concept of the production.

The key is for a director to empower their creative team to take ownership over their craft, and hold it to a high standard, and work in an environment that gives them permission to take risks and explore their own imagination, while staying true to the concept. The director, *the editor-in-chief*, takes material from actors, choreographers, set, light, sound, costume, and what ever other vehicle used in the process to execute his/her
vision. The director must be competent in their understanding of the play, and have the ability to make the right decisions, at the right time, for the right reasons.

The Venetian Twins was a clear example of Goldoni’s transition from commedia dell’arte to realism. During the initial stages of my process, I focused too much on form and ignored the main action in the scene. Situations were sacrificed due to my obsession with working the mask. In the final moments of tech, I realized how important the situations were and how that must carry a show. This is why it is theater and not dance, nor an installation. I had to return to those fundamentals. When I first read a scene, I start to visualize it with bodies in space with sounds, textures, and tableaus. I start to compose it in my mind before I figure out what is happening in the scene. Over the past three years, I understand how my productions can be deeper. The personal passion must link to the concept and that contains the entire theatrical experience. I felt that I made the right decisions to simplify and streamline the design to support the action and situations created by the actors on stage that successfully portrayed my vision and concept. The reality is that my production loosely followed the traditional aspects of commedia. I took on this project to learn about commedia dell’arte and mask performance, but in the end, like Goldoni, I was unable to maintain the somewhat rigid and strict traditions of commedia. While paying homage to the traditions of the comedic art form, my natural progression led to the addition of more theatrical elements not normally used. Commedia dell’arte is the performance of the heart. While humorous and intricate, it did not necessarily create the same substance that I seek as an artist. I wanted to create a situation that bred revelation, empathy, and contemplation. It shaped my overall concept of the show and led me to understand Goldoni’s transference of commedia dell’arte to realism.
Moving forward, I plan to continue to immerse myself in different performance traditions and let it seep into my work. Highly physical performers with a dark comedic touch characterize my signature form. The form cannot feel separate from the text, and I must keep my director’s frame in sharp focus as I funnel through the ideas generated in a rehearsal process. I took a risk sticking with commedia dell’arte and the masks through tech, and I learned how to let go of initial ideas and let the project evolve.

“The clarity of concept shapes the situation, in that a form is created.” – Jesca Prudencio