

Saving Face: Embodiment and Play Through Masks in *Commedia dell'Arte* and *Kathakali*

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COLL-C 103

Final Project

December 16, 2019

### Abstract

Masks, as used in performance, designate the face as a bodily play space, with the mask becoming a facilitator for play and amusement. This concept of fully, yet momentarily embodying someone else to conform with the iconography of a character is a fundamental tenant of theatre performance. Theatre masks serve as a more direct method for performers to 'become' their character, wherein the performer is playing with the audience's perception of identity and suspending disbelief in order to foster a narrative within the performance-reality of the stage. In literally putting a different identity on oneself, there is a clear indication that the mask-wearer has commenced a performance – something to be appraised as distinct from the regulations of reality. On a material level, the way actors interact with the composition of the mask itself in efficiently playing their character – whether that be detachable from or affixed to the face of the performer – conveys a new insight into theatrical embodiment as a whole. Masks serve as a stylistic convention within theatre forms such as *kathakali* and *commedia dell'arte*, but their respective uses of the mask in performance extends beyond theatre theory, but into the realm of play. By adapting the mask into a plaything for performance, *kathakali* and *commedia dell'arte* embrace the foundations of play that encapsulate theatre performance.

In the event someone's 'mask slips off,' they have revealed an unexpected and manipulative presentation of themselves. When we are trying to 'save face,' we aim to preserve our best perceived projections of self for the sake of popularity or appeal. Masks have become ingrained within colloquial rhetoric to refer to an identifiable shift in perceived identity, as masks possess the ability to simultaneously conceal and reveal something dormant about its wearer through simply obstructing one's own face and imposing another. This seemingly casual, yet pivotal change from an unmasked person to a masked character is a change that both theatre and play cherish, wherein the mask is "decisive in creating [a] symbolic reality" with new conventions and rules distinct from our non-performance realities,<sup>1</sup> such that the 'masked character' becomes more than what seems regulated to the structure of the mask.

Masks can be represented as the metaphysical and semiotic culminations of theatre and play. Victor Turner classifies play and theatre as "antistructures," wherein both "[liberate] the human capacities of cognition, affect, volition, creativity, etc., from the normative [social] constraints" of everyday life through careful subversion of select constraints.<sup>2</sup> Where play is able to justify the deconstruction of the monotony of daily life by embracing individual and social amusement, theatre illustrates infinite narratives with alternate perceptions of reality that audiences can witness and exist within during the duration of a performance. Masks act as concrete representations of the liminal space that performance is contingent on – the veneer that separates a physical yet iconographic object from the personification of that physical object's iconography with the aim of contributing to a narrative performance. By donning a mask and removing this veneer, a performer becomes a player by toying with the liminality masks provide. Theatre forms such as *commedia dell'arte* and *kathakali* utilize masks as facilitators for play in their respective conventions of performance based on the material value presented by the masks, the influence the masks hold in characterization and identity, and in the socio-cultural significance metaphorically impressed within the masks. By evaluating the intersections of the utilizations of masks in effectively serving *commedia dell'arte* and *kathakali* performances, we are presented with new insights on masking as more than an element of costume; in vitalizing an inanimate

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<sup>1</sup> Schechner, Richard. "Chapter 1: APPROACHES." In *Performance Theory*, 1–33. Taylor & Francis Ltd / Books, 1988, pg. 9.

<sup>2</sup> Turner, Victor W. *From Ritual to Theatre: The Human Seriousness of Play*. New York: PAJ Publications, 1982, pg. 44.

thing such as a mask into a character in a performance within our animate world, we aim to fulfill our existential need to be unified and embodied individuals behind the mask.

### Putting Names to Faces: Archetypes and Masks



Figure 1. A *commedia dell'arte* performer playing Il Dottore. October 6, 2011. YouTube. National Theatre.

In Rudlin and Crick's *Guide to Commedia dell'Arte: A Handbook for Troupes*, Rudlin prefaces by making a distinction between his usage of “mask” and “Mask” – the first meant to indicate an object, with the latter indicating the specific character that was represented by a mask.<sup>3</sup> The immediacy in associating character to mask<sup>4</sup> is an iconic feature of *commedia dell'arte*, wherein stock characters – distinct characters with distinct subsets of personality traits and mannerisms that allowed for reuse and reimplementation of characters across performances – are essential in fostering a concrete environment for improvisational comedy. There are eight

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<sup>3</sup> Rudlin, John., and Olly Crick. *Commedia Dell'arte: A Handbook for Troupes*. London: Routledge, 2001, pg. xiii.

<sup>4</sup> Since my discussion will be based primarily on masks as props within *commedia dell'arte*, I will not use the term “Mask” as Rudlin does when referring to the stock character. Instead, I will be just referring to the stock characters by their archetype's name to alleviate any confusion.

prominent stock characters and respective masks that not only illustrate different rhetorics within the contexts of *commedia dell'arte* performances, but reflect distinct social rhetorics that we blindly accept. According to McGehee, this can be attributed to several notable shifts in post-Renaissance ideology, particularly in the decline of humanism, the rejection (or at least doubt) of man as autonomous self-makers, and in the concept of socio-hierarchal structure possessing greater influence over our perceived individuality.<sup>5</sup> However, rather than simply abiding by the formalities posed by hierarchal structure, *commedia dell'arte* sought to create exaggerated informalities of these formalities, further adding onto this by placing the disparities between different social classes together while they are all in their most caricatured states. Il Dottore is pretentious because he is a scholar, but he didn't come to be a scholar through being pretentious. When a self-renowned scholar like Il Dottore has an oafish gait, the tendency to point at everything and filibuster while constantly mistaking and misquoting his studies, and a mask with unsightly bushy eyebrows that still shows the actor's flushed cheeks, this openly mocks his pretentiousness and emphasizes his many potentially un-scholarly aspects. As Il Dottore takes himself very seriously, in surrounding him with characters like Arlecchino and the Innamorati that are completely whimsical and non-serious by nature, this allows for the characters to feed off of each other's distinct approaches to their archetypal text-realities. By taking each stratum within a social hierarchy, pushing each one to an extreme, and reinterpreting the repressiveness of structure out of pure enjoyment, the stock characters of *commedia dell'arte* demonstrate a foolproof framework for comedy through absurdity. Masks in *commedia dell'arte* provided an inhuman method of presenting our most human attributes through our social allegiances, such that "the fixed and essential nature of the world crumbles to become ambiguous, ever mutating, ever changing, and ever inverting to reveal a world of endless possibilities."<sup>6</sup> While an archetype that encompasses a mask can seem objectively limited, it can actually better cultivate and make sense of play.

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<sup>5</sup> McGehee, Scott. "The Pre-Eminence of the Actor in Renaissance Context: Subverting the Social Order." In *The Routledge Companion to Commedia dell'Arte* edited by Judith Chaffee and Oliver Crick, pg. 9-17. Accessed December 3, 2019. ProQuest Ebook Central. Created from iub-ebooks on 2019-12-03 13:06:04, pg. 11-12.

<sup>6</sup> McGehee, Scott, pg. 12.

While the stock characters of *commedia dell'arte* are the most prominent example for masks as an archetypal indicator in performance, *kathakali* masks function to transcend the narrative performance space into the sacred by intertwining aesthetic, iconography and play in creating its archetypal characters. *Kathakali* employs rigorously trained actor-dancers to perform adaptations of ‘story plays’ from traditional texts such as the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, with these performers connect precise choreography with elaborate costume and makeup design in order to create mortal representations of notable gods and demons for the stage. There are nine character types with specific makeup styles that designate the intentions of the character. For example, *pacca* characters and *katti* characters are both divine or nobles and may appear similar based on their green foundation and protruding black eyebrows and eyes, the red mustache of *katti* indicates his inherently arrogant, self-serving, evil nature, while the *pacca* character is wholly good and divine. However, these makeup styles are a base-level archetypal feature for performing any of the nine characters. In the process of mastering over five hundred dramatic hand gestures known as *mudras* to attaining a hyper-proprioception that allows a performer to carefully choreograph every eye movement and facial expression to reflect preset emotional states (*bhavas*) and the audience’s intended responses (*rasas*), a *kathakali* performer goes beyond simply encompassing the attributes of a character, but their arduous training necessarily prepares them to compose a concrete and established archetype onto their physical being, such that both the performer and archetype feel synonymous, wherein the actor is “initiated in his craft to the point where he does not use his powers of expression to ‘illustrate’ a stage truth – his physical being *is* that truth.”<sup>7</sup> *Kathakali* archetypes and the actor-dancers’ interpretations of these archetypes – as informed by their training – create the stage as more than just an actor’s fictional play space. These archetypes are pre-written into a “cosmic script” for “cosmic play” to take place in, wherein gods and demons commence in the eternal battle of good versus evil; in having performers gradually unveil the intentions of their characters through their archetypal features, the audience can more blatantly assume good necessarily prevailing over evil with every performance.<sup>8</sup> Play is an

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<sup>7</sup> Zarrilli, Phillip. *The Kathakali Complex: Actor, Performance, Structure*. New Delhi: Abhinav, 1984, pg. 190.

<sup>8</sup> Zarrilli, 1984, pg. 213-214.

essential component within this storyline *kathakali* is contingent on, wherein gods are playful beings that treat this constant moral duel as an existential form of sport.



Figure 2. A *pacca* character in full costume. Gopalakrishnan, K. K., Kathakali, *Dance-Theatre : A Visual Narrative of Sacred Indian Mime*. New Delhi: Niyogi Books, 2006, pg. 9.

The mere concept of establishing archetypal characters can arguably be considered metaphorical masking in itself; by setting forth necessary and consistent parameters for characters within a narrative, there is specificity that creates an inherently unrealistic identity that we knowingly can't achieve. Playwrights expand upon this by creating a fictional context for that exact identity to exist in composed within a – a metafictional mask – that permits a performer to exploit their creative aptitude to satisfy an imaginary play identity and play world. Belting even argues that this very concept of the mask within performance being both literal and metaphorical is one reason why modern theatre isn't particularly contingent on masks in defining characters within a performance, as “the public has become accustomed to perceiving face and mask on one and the

same surface... [applauding] an actor who has performed a role so well that his face has become the mask.”<sup>9</sup> What this contemporary evaluation of masks in performance doesn’t distinguish, however, are the instances wherein the mask in question is ephemeral and temporary rather than eternal and permanent. In other words, what do different variations of masks afford performers in optimizing their arena of liminality?

### Making (False) Faces

When considering how masks in performance enable performers to take on a character, it is obvious that masks in costume are ineliminably transformative, such that masks possess a sentiment that character and identity are fluid for a performer. According to Tonkin, “face masks contradict the ordinary expressiveness of faces by their fixity,”<sup>10</sup> adding that “because masks in performance conjoin opposites, they often dramatize crossovers from one state to another.”<sup>11</sup> In this presentation of performance masks as substitutes for identity, the factor of fixity in masks that Tonkin emphasizes applies more directly to masking within *commedia dell’arte*: the transition from performance to reality is marked by detaching the mask from its performer in its entirety, such that the mask and individual are still maintained in their entireties separately. However, the implication that all masks are fixed is an implication that practitioners of *kathakali* would take issue with. *Commedia dell’arte* maintains a traditional view of a mask, as something that is simply taken on and off and is tangibly transferrable with every performance, while *kathakali* demands the two-to-four hour creation and post-performance destruction of mask as a cyclical, conventional practice. As such, the widely used term ‘man-made mask’ takes an umbrella view in its portrayal of masks within performance – *commedia dell’arte* and *kathakali* masks are both man-made: they just assume different material forms with different material values.

The relationship between mask and performer could very well be reinterpreted as a formulation of the mind-body problem, wherein we consider how the mind of the actor projects onto the mask of a

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<sup>9</sup> Belting, Hans, Thomas S Hansen, and Abby J. Hansen. *Face and Mask: A Double History*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017, pg. 49.

<sup>10</sup> Tonkin, Elizabeth. “Masks.” In *Folklore, Cultural Performances and Popular Entertainments: A Communications-Centered Handbook*, edited by Richard Bauman, 225-232. New York: Oxford University Press, 1992, pg. 226.

<sup>11</sup> Tonkin, pg. 228.



functional character's bodily representation. Descartes' formulation of mind-body dualism posits the body as an illusory creation by the mind that functions as a vessel for the mind, wherein the mechanical composition of the material world requires that the mind and body are inherently distinct on ontological and metaphysical levels. Furthermore, it is required that the mind and body be evaluated respectively as objects (wherein the mind is discreet in nature and the body exists only relative to its purposes, physical operations, and affordances) and as substances (wherein the mind is solipsistic and necessarily existing and the body is simply a vessel that the mind resides within).<sup>12</sup> In relating this to a reconstruction of how masks operate and exist within *commedia dell'arte* and *kathakali*, it may help to create a taxonomy that properly establishes the material affordances that masks provide in the context of performance and play.

For my purposes, I have designated two terms referring to masks in their specific creation and usage. A **physical mask** is created to depict and maintain a fixed expression, to cover certain features of its wearer to present a character, and is hollow, such that neither the structure composition within the mask nor the covered features behind the mask change; the physical mask can be removed from the mask wearer without altering its form, allowing the physical mask and mask wearer to continue in their original forms whether the mask is on or off. The mask wearer in relation to the physical mask is intended to be objectively discreet, with the mask itself permitting the affordances associated with the character and expression depicted.

Substantively, the physical mask is meant to simply be a vessel for a performer to enact a character, wherein the mask and its wearer are physically independent entities, but the embodiment of character is dependent on the physical mask being on its wearer; the separation of mask from performer serves as a representation and a performer's guiding tool to reinforces the fourth wall separating audience reality from performance reality, subsequently separating non-play from play in performance.

Conversely, a **cosmetic mask** is created with cosmetic materials via direct application to the face of the performer, wherein the expression created amplifies certain features of the mask wearer; as a result, the cosmetic mask is not hollow, as the mask wearer is bound to the cosmetic composition on their face for the

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<sup>12</sup> Robinson, Howard, "Dualism", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2017 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2017/entries/dualism/>>.

preservation and presentation of a character. In removing the mask, the performer returns to their normal appearance before the cosmetic materials were applied, but this requires that the cosmetic artwork be completely erased, thus the cosmetic mask is ephemeral and unable to exist independent of the mask wearer. Objectively, cosmetic masks befuddle Cartesian mind-body dualism by creating a unity of the intended discreetness of the performer and the relativistically individuated mask: what the face does, the mask does, and what the mask and face do, the projected character does. The cosmetic mask, however, cannot be structurally independent from the performer due to it being momentary for the purposes of the performance space and duration of the performance. Cosmetic masks create an actor, character, and mask gestalt that intentionally breaks through (or at least blurs) the fourth wall of performance and conforms slightly more to what the liminal holds in play.

The leather physical masks of *commedia dell'arte* have become hallmarks of *commedia dell'arte* and its stock characters as a whole. Physical *commedia dell'arte* masks take a physiognomical approach by projecting the characteristic attributes of a stock character within the literal features of the mask. For example, Arlecchino's cherub features and small eyes mimic a fox-like, monkey-like, or feline appearance, which then can take on an acrobatic or agile physicality and mischievous, whimsical nature. This linear connection as expressed by Arlecchino's physical mask and associated character became synonymous with the physical mask becoming a sub-definition for the Latin term *persona*, referring to "an assumed role or character in a play."<sup>13</sup> In creating a physical mask that could properly reflect the characteristic attributes of the *dramatis personae* (*persona* but specific to dramatic performance character) that the Arlecchino mask depicts, there needs to be an associated set of real-world characteristics that a mask maker can imprint to better simulate the essence of Arlecchino as a live character that the actor can consciously mimic. The persona presented by the mask as a liminal tool generated a personality that was intended to overtake the mask wearer in performance.

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<sup>13</sup> "Person." In Oxford English Dictionary. Accessed December 15, 2019. <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/141476#eid30948551>.



Figure 3. Actress Claudia Contin as Arlecchino. Photo by Fausto Tagliabue, 1999.

Every element of *kathakali* performance involves some dissolution of the assumed boundary existing between the actor-dancer and the character they portray within the context of performance, and the predominant use of cosmetic masks is emblematic of this sentiment. Cosmetic masks in *kathakali* are created by making outlines of the more prominent or decorative features, such as the eyes, eyebrows, and the forehead, using various plant or herb-based pigments; white, black, red, orange, yellow, and green are the only colors used in *kathakali* makeup. After this, layers of rice past are applied to the jawline to create a structure for the face and to act as an adherent for additional facial adornments, such as faux paper beards or hair beards. Once these adornments are applied, the lips and foundational color for the mask is filled in. Finally, a small called a *cuntapuvvu* is placed under both lower eyelids to slightly irritate and redden the eyes, in order to make the eyes more prominent and emotive. Of the four elemental *abhinayas* – the forms of histrionic and

dramatic expression required to carry the audience forward through the performance – the *abarya abhinaya* is dedicated to the night-of-performance preparations, such as makeup, costuming, and stage design. These elements all function symbiotically, but masking in particular holds unique connections with the *sattvika abhinaya* – the actor-dancer’s internal experience when acting – and the *angika abhinaya* – the actor’s external, audience-perspective experience of acting.



Figure 4. A *kathakali* performer getting *pacca* makeup applied by a makeup artist. YouTube. Eyakkam Dance Company, December 11, 2018.

In these material distinctions that *commedia dell'arte* masks and *kathakali* masks carry in performance, there are subsequent differences in what is implied by ‘getting into character’ by getting into the mask within their respective performance conventions.

### Characterization, Enculturation and Animating the Inanimate

An underlying element that informs both play and performance involves the projection and reception of meaning. As different modes of communication, play and performance are necessarily ambiguous because they serve as experiential intermediaries, wherein context plays a key role in transitioning between being in-the-moment or out-of-moment. The turning point of play to non-play requires that an action between players transitions from being noticeably less serious to noticeably more serious, such that a dualism for being in a state of play forms. Physical masks and cosmetic masks serve as this pivotal point in the context of embodying and portraying a character, creating different linkages to how the performer is able to thrive within the performance play space through the mask. Performers of *commedia dell'arte* and *kathakali* alike aim to live up to the mask by living within the mask, such that a coordinated and appropriate level of play must be achieved in order for the mask to serve its purpose in expressing their respective narratives. In order to respective 'appropriate levels' of character embodiment, performers in *kathakali* and *commedia dell'arte* have different modes of expression when playing the mask, playing within the mask, and playing with and/or for the audience.

The most obvious distinction between physical masks and cosmetic masks involves how the mask exists on the performer, i.e. whether the mask is separate from the performer or attached to the performer. It would be easy to assume that the closer a mask is to being one with the performer, the more effectively the actor can become wholly embodied in that mask and character, thus the cosmetic mask should afford more to the actor. In the same way we look in mirrors and study the peculiarities of our own expressions (since we don't typically get to see them live in-action), *kathakali* actors similarly undergo countless self-evaluations as a component of their training. Within this facial training, there is the study of faces as that of an expressive actor – in trying to relay a particular *bhava* to generate the correlating *rasa* – and as that of the makeup's archetype. *Sattvika abhinaya* considers the actor's expressiveness with regard to informal training, through the personal experience of emotions that can internally actualize as one of nine *bhavas* (erotic, comic, sadness, wrath, heroic, fear, disgust, wonder, and peace). In terms of *angika abhinaya*, this *bhava* is externally expressed as a *rasa* gesture (that has developed as a result of formal training) that can align with the audience's internal

perception of their own emotions. Facial gestures combined with cosmetic masking create a live, ever-active mask that better serves the goal of composing an environment of play intended to mimic cosmic play.

Furthermore, these *rasas* appear more as interpretations of traditional emotional expressions that function to delineate from reality and keep the *bhava* internal and discreet. According to one of the *kathakali* actors interviewed by Zarrilli, “it is not right to have real tears on stage...the emotion of crying must be there and it will effect the audience.”<sup>14</sup> In this sense, playing with one’s own facial expressions becomes a serious matter.

In moving beyond the element of facial communication of character through masking, it is important to understand how the mask wearer can evoke character beyond facially emotive expression. The makeup types of *kathakali* are arranged according to their level of refinement, which directly influences other methods of communication a character can possess, such as vocal expression. Masks such as *pacca*, *payuppu* and *minukku* aren’t permitted to make any sounds because they are pure, self-controlled, and inherently good by nature, whether it be due to their divinity, nobility, or generally selfless disposition. The *katti* character follows behind in the spectrum of refinement such that *katti* occasionally makes sounds, but usually only vocalizes grunts or other verbal expressions of disapproval<sup>15</sup>; this comes as a result of his selfishness, but his nobility is still accounted for. Though white is often associated with purity within *kathakali*, the *vella tadi* (white beard) is considered less refined as a result of being more mortal while still being virtuous, with the hint of green on the character’s nose indicating a level of religious devotion evocative of a *pacca* character, so the character does typically make some sound. As we move past *vella tadi*, we approach the more gross and vulgar characters, such as *cuvanna tadi* (red beard) and *karutta tadi* (black beard). Both the *cuvanna tadi* and *karutta tadi* are equally evil and demonic, with their only differing feature being their tendency to manipulate others, so these characters are permitted to make raucous and enraged sounds. Lastly, the *kari* (primitive black beings) have no restraint in vocal expression, constantly shrieking and crying in an exaggerated manner. As the makeup types descend in refinement and decline in vocal communication, there’s an interesting note to be made on how the characters can become considerably more playful while simultaneously becoming less

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<sup>14</sup> Zarrilli, Phillip. *Kathakali Dance-Drama: Where Gods and Demons Come to Play*. London: Routledge, 2000, pg. 90.

<sup>15</sup> Zarrilli, 1984, pg. 179.

reverent. At our highest level of refinement, not vocalizing is indicative of these characters' necessary infallibility, as attributing something as human as speech would taint the illusory perfection of *pacca*, *payuppu*, and *minukku*. At the very end of this refinement spectrum lies *kari*; because *kari* is wholly impure, *kari* reflects the otherworldly opposite of what humans should aspire to. Cosmetic masks in *kathakali* not only demonstrate an altered mode for facial communication by uniting the actor and mask together physically, but this permeates beyond the face into vocal communication which determines the integrity (or lack thereof) for a character.

Though there is a rather literal separation of character that the physical mask presents, this doesn't equate to the physical mask being less fully inhabitable in terms of characterization. Stereotypically, physical masks should allow the wearer to 'flip a switch' and adapt to the attributes the mask is intended to relay. However, the wearer needs to be able to sustain this change and sense of 'being the mask' in order to convey the character. For instance, while someone may be able to put on Il Dottore's mask and feel pretentious for a moment, it's necessary to be able to sustain this in a way that one can create the essence of a full character and become Il Dottore. *Commedia dell'arte* relies on physical masks in order to be called comedy because the physical mask generates a brief moment wherein hilarity can exist and play is permitted. The mask of a stock character in *commedia dell'arte* "is a possessing spirit which would rather put up with the inappropriateness of your actions than return to the limbo of suspended animation."<sup>16</sup> *Commedia dell'arte* masks are characters themselves that only exist when there is an actor to wear the mask, contrary to what fixity physical masks have in Tonkin's interpretation. If the physical mask without an actor is disembodied, then mask with an actor must have some level of embodiment that extends beyond the fixity and hollowness of the mask itself. Furthermore, *commedia dell'arte* masks were always half masks, never extending past the actor's cheeks or nose. Though the physical mask is a completely hollow and fixed thing, revealing part of the actor's face attributes an animate corporeality to the insensate mask, reminding the audience that there is a living actor enabling this attribute of cognizance for a fictional character.

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<sup>16</sup> Rudlin, John. *Commedia Dell'arte: An Actor's Handbook*. London: Routledge, 1994, pg. 40.

Though *commedia dell'arte* is more immediately associated with the use of physical masks and *kathakali* with cosmetic masks, there are instances where both theatre forms implement the opposites of their more conventional mask types. The *innamorato* and *innamorata* characters (together referred to as the *innamorati*) within *commedia dell'arte* are two of the few unmasked stock characters. Instead of the traditional leather masks, the *innamorati* would be heavily powdered and rouged; paired with their elegant, lavish costumes, sufficiently communicating their elite social statuses within the contexts of *commedia dell'arte* narratives. Practically speaking, using cosmetic masking for the *innamorati* better suits the preferred typecasts of the characters; since the *innamorati* are meant to be young, exuberantly naive, and conventionally attractive lovers, it would seem both counterintuitive and redundant to use physical masks that would cover their faces and obstruct what is visually necessary for the 'young lover' archetype. The *innamorati* should be able to demonstrate their capricious adoration without the assistance of masks that have these exaggerations. In a metaphorical sense, the use of cosmetic masking better satirizes upper-class hierarchal courtship amongst Italian nobles and socialites during the Early Modern era by having the *innamorati* be used as direct reflections of potentially upper-class audience members. By using makeup that more realistically emulated their contemporary style and pairing this with a fanciful, ballet-like gait, flamboyantly poetic speech, and irrational histrionics in the name of young love, the joke was more outwardly communicated.

Though physical masks used in *kathakali* have similarly artistically significant features like the cosmetic *abarya abhinaya*, the physical alternatives are circumstantial, as they are typically only used for certain animals, when a character dies and needs to reappear, or when a character is undergoing a transformation during the performance. Practically speaking, it only makes sense for the sake of continuing the performance to simply revert to a physical mask, as re-doing the extensive makeup process is simply not feasible for these circumstances. Beyond the practical applications of a physical mask in *kathakali*, a great deal of the value that cosmetic masks hold in creating a performance includes the ritualistic element of creating the visual character on the actor. If this integral process of creating something intentionally ephemeral were erased from the characterization process that occurs pre-performance in favor of physical masks that will always exist, this simultaneously removes part of what makes *kathakali* uniquely magical when creating a cosmic and



otherworldly atmosphere within the mortal boundaries of the stage. The understanding that these are human actors embodying sacred individuals is something that is meant to be cherished and unadulterated, something that physical masks would hypothetically be able to continuously repeat and recreate. Physical masks would make this sacred backdrop of *kathakali* more profane.

This is not to say that a physical mask is an easy diversion or is less materialistically valuable in mask-based characterization: the physical masks of *kathakali* still demonstrate a similarly detailed and high-level artistic talent, and developing an association between the physical mask, a character, and the mask wearer continues to be an embodied process. Because the physical masks used in *commedia dell'arte* are inherently profane and not necessarily culturally indicative, there is a more pragmatic explanation for keeping a physical mask that can be perpetually used in reiterations of the same characters beyond the stage. Arguably this brevity can be considered a limiting factor of *kathakali* cosmetic masks. In both *commedia dell'arte* and *kathakali*, though the mask's character archetype may be eternal, the staged representation of that character archetype is experiential.

The cosmetic mask itself creates an ephemeral time for gods to manifest on a mortal plane of performance, such that “there is always a sense of unchangeable truth about these character types... *pacca* is a *pacca* is a *pacca* – and will always remain so.”<sup>17</sup> Through *kathakali*, the sacred sentiments associated within Hindu ideology manifest in a seemingly profane form, in such a way that play becomes more formal and serious. The physical masks of *commedia dell'arte* are grounded in reality and consistently profane, but “the actor gives an artificial consistency, in a false, illusory environment, to persons and actions which already have a living expression superior to material contingencies and who already have that ideal and essential reality, characteristic of poetry, that is, a superior reality”<sup>18</sup>; *commedia dell'arte* aims to generate an idealistic, non-reality in the performance space, but not exactly at the cosmic level like in *kathakali*. In this profane nature, the options for playing within these physical masks as performers are less regulated to cultural norms. Referring to *commedia dell'arte* performers as players is perfectly revealing of this outward desire for play and comedic

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<sup>17</sup> Zarrilli, 1984, pg. 190-191.

<sup>18</sup> Pirandello, Luigi. “Illustratori, attori, e traduttori.” *Saggi, Poesie, Scritti vari*, Milano, Mondadori, 1960, p.218.

amusement – their job is to play with the audience and make laughter a mode of verbal communication behind the mask as a visual break in communication.

A common criticism in relating masks to a formal medium for a mind-body association for performers is in assuming that the character must be one with the actor via the mask alone, and that defining an actor's entire purpose behind an archetypal character mask as simply facilitating a character in performance creates a dull uniformity to the value each archetype carries. Zarilli argues that the makeup types of *kathakali*, “are often assumed to subsume the character... [erasing] the individuality either of the dramatic character as written by the author, and/or as creatively played by the actor.”<sup>19</sup> This uniformity is expressed in *commedia dell'arte* as the physical mask becoming merely a tool without a true identity to animate in a fantastic or unique way, wherein “the power and tension of [the mask's] mythical past [has] been lost forever.”<sup>20</sup> Actors in both *commedia dell'arte* and *kathakali* tend to dedicate themselves to one or two types of characters that have similar inherent natures about them. A *commedia dell'arte* actor may be proficient as Pantalone, but occasionally take on the role of Il Dottore since they are both *vecchi* characters. *Kathakali* actors are more multidisciplinary as a result of their wide-spanning training, but typically an actor that is proficient with a *pacca* character like Krishna will continue to perform other *pacca* characters. However, simply because both professions result in specialization for particular archetypes does not entail a restrictive uniformity, as each trained actor should be able to contribute something new to their specialized archetype in such a way that there is a unique reinvigoration to the character that only that actor can contribute. *Commedia dell'arte* actress Michelle Bottini describes this unity of character and actor that is needed to generate this new sense of being within the play space of the stage in her performance as Arlecchino:

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<sup>19</sup> Zarilli, 2000, pg. 56.

<sup>20</sup> Bihalji-Merin, Oto, *Great Masks*. New York: H. N. Abrams, 1972, pg. 75.

“I felt as if the mask was becoming animated with life of its own. It seemed to grasp my face and in a quiet voice, the mask said to me: ‘Ok, my friend, now follow me...’ Suddenly, my tension and my exhaustion seemed to vanish. I regained lucidity and waited. Arlecchino made a silent pact with me at that moment and I followed. I did exactly what he told me. At that moment my energy returned. I ceased trying to be interesting and entertaining on stage. I was no longer the star of a show. It was the extraordinary feeling that a weight had been lifted; the responsibility for the success of the show it seemed was no longer mine as the actor. I was becoming the servant. I began to take literally what the other characters were saying. I looked at the world with new eyes. Through those two little holes in the leather mask I began to see the world with the eyes of Arlecchino. Everything was suddenly clear, lucid and objective. My eyes had assumed the same childlike purity of the character. The people noticed the change and their laughter became more animated and they ended the show with a standing ovation. It was a triumph and I, jealous of my secret, felt indeed, like a hero.”<sup>21</sup>

In playing Arlecchino, Bottini’s experience of “becoming” Arlecchino can be read as out-of-body in the sense that she no longer felt like an actor within a performance, but entirely in-body when considering the experience of perceiving the internal embodiment of character that only the actor can feel, and the external embodiment that the audience can internally experience. Very similar to the separation of *sattvika abhinaya* and *angika abhinaya*, it requires that there is expression of individual character embodiment that is mutual with that of audience embodiment. It is the performer’s individual initiative and desired level of responsibility that can create such an indiscriminate line between the mask and themselves - not just in an internal sense, but also in generating this identification of unity in the audience. By making consciously playful, sensibly transformative decisions within the mask of Arlecchino that permitted the line between mask and performer to border being nonexistent, Bottini was playing correctly.

When a performer embraces the transformative nature of play through the careful choices they make when disguised by the mask, there is a distinct expression of character within the psyche and through the body. In Nandikeshvara’s *Abhinayadarpanam*, the *sloka* 36 is commonly referred to in discussing the psycho-

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<sup>21</sup> Bottini, Michelle. “You Must Have Heard of Harlequin...” In *The Routledge Companion to Commedia dell’Arte*, edited by Judith Chaffee and Oliver Crick, translated by Samuel Angus McGehee and Michael J. Grady, 55-61. Accessed December 3, 2019. ProQuest Ebook Central. Created from iub-ebooks on 2019-12-03 13:06:04, pg. 60-61.

physiological nature of character embodiment through *bhavas* and *rasas* in *kathakali*. The Malayalam phrasing and the literal English translation are written as such:

<i>yato hasta tato drishtir</i>
(where hand there eye)
<i>yato drishtistato manab</i>
(where eye there mind)
<i>yato mana tato bhavo</i>
(where mind there <i>bhava</i> )
<i>yato bhavastato rasab</i>
(where <i>bhava</i> there <i>rasa</i> ) <sup>22</sup>

There are several linguistic elements within the *sloka* 36 that strike at the concept of theatrical embodiment, particularly with the word *tato*. Zarilli notes that *tato* is a state-of-being verb that is non-conditional, in that it doesn't indicate any present or future sequence of actions; rather than the hand and eye following the mind and *rasa* rising from *bhava*, the elements inhabit the same states of being, such that the body aesthetic 'is there' with the psychological aesthetics of *bhava* and *rasa*.<sup>23</sup> As a *kathakali* performer matures and develops greater expertise, this unity set forth within *sloka* 36 begins to take on greater truth in fully attaining this embodiment, with the makeup types more literally conveying a body aesthetic for the face and identity specifically; the fully-trained actor-dancer is able to fill in the cracks that remain in the character becoming fully embodied reflexively. By taking on the duty of becoming a king as informed by the mask, the actor is subsequently honoring their own individual embodiment by embodying a deity for artistic representation. What the *sloka* 36 does for masks in *kathakali* masked performance is clear: it transitions play from being explorative and

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<sup>22</sup> Zarilli, 2000, pg. 91.

<sup>23</sup> Zarilli, 2000, pg. 91.

ambiguous to being distinct and necessary, such that the cosmic, sacred play of *kathakali* manifests embodiment.

The actor has to successfully play with the audience as an embodied character in order for the audience to recognize play is taking place, each audience member has to be aware of their own embodiment as spectators to both the actor's play and the narrative character's play, while both the audience and actor have to be embodied within their respective play spaces; the mask is liminally multi-dimensional not just for the performer, but for the audience as well. If we were to demarcate these spaces via a space of liminality, the audience and performer are able to share designated perceptual fronts, with the actor's being their character and the audience's being their roles as spectators witnessing (but still detached from) the fictional narrative on stage. These perceptual fronts are able to transcend this line of liminality and contribute to each other's embodiment within the performance experience. From the perspectives of the actor and the audience, characterization within performance is composed of two mutually exclusive experiences within a positive feedback loop that is able to fuel play, with the mask serving as a guiding facilitator in this process.

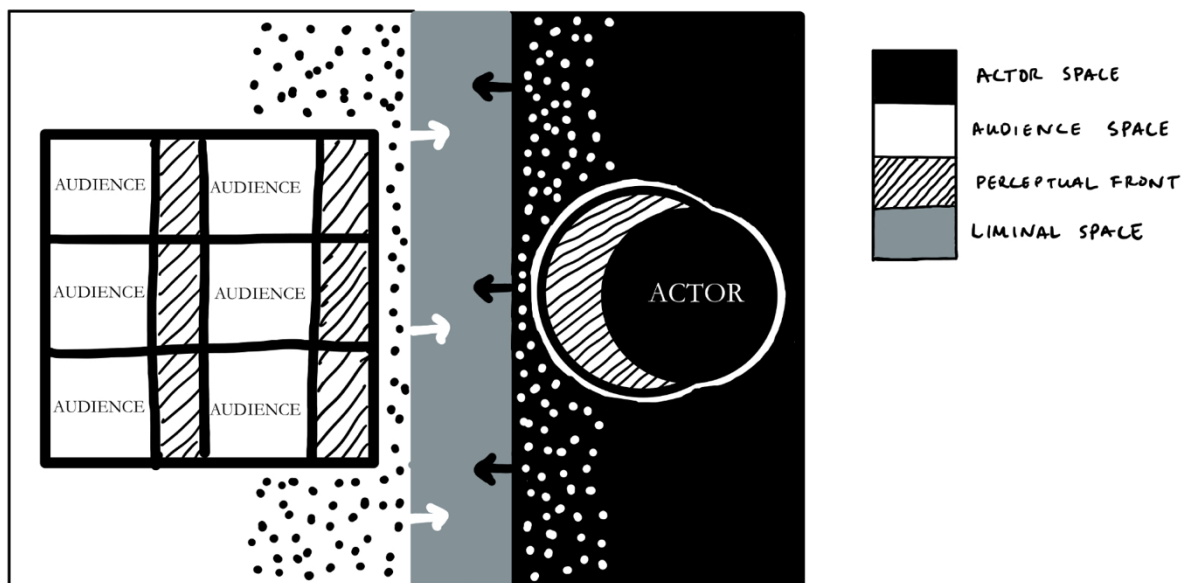


Figure 5. Visual representation of embodiment-characterization feedback loop. By Bre Castaneda. December 8, 2019.

## Conclusion

Answering the question of where theatricality exists within the body of a performer is hardly quantifiable. A dancer would likely say that theatricality takes over the entire body, wherein bodily gesture informs expression. A singer may consider the vocal cords the physical location for theatricality, as their internal creativity is fully expressed in song. However, masked performance poses an interesting perplexity in the idea of embodied theatricality. A mask is intended to alter the identity of its wearer in the eyes of a spectator, and based on the masked performer's engagement in the experience of being masked, the performer intentionally shifts their internal perception of self such that it corresponds with their externally altered identity. By covering the face as a more salient way to express theatricality, the mask serves as a new and non-bodily form of embodying dramatic performance – something that a performer has license to play with in bringing forth a character. *Commedia dell'arte* and *kathakali* both keep this sentiment in mind through their iconic, yet respectively distinct methods of masking in performance.

The archetypal stock characters that are represented by *commedia dell'arte* masks “represent the tempers, customs, classes, professions, passions and vices of the common people. They represent a universal human *commedia*.”<sup>24</sup> In performing improvised exaggerations of general societal standards, *commedia dell'arte* masks convey archetypes through lighthearted comedic stereotypes that the audience would be able to identify and engage with, taking part in the actor's play performance. By having humans attempt to portray otherworldly entities, *kathakali* makeup types and archetypes create a structured methodology to simulating divine play that would appease the divine characters being portrayed, if they were watching the performance.

Materially, physical and cosmetic masks aptly serve their predominant fixtures in *commedia dell'arte* and *kathakali*. Stylistically, *kathakali* cosmetic masks demonstrate artistic appreciation by meticulously crafting a mask that is inextricable from the performer, with every gesture made by the performer being equivalent to that of the character. In applying internal and external expressions of emotion such as the *bhava* and *rasa*, there is an artistically-founded taxonomy for playing with facial gestures to accommodate a cosmic

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<sup>24</sup> Estévez, Carlos García. “Mask Performance for a Contemporary Commedia dell'Arte.” In *The Routledge Companion to Commedia dell'Arte*, edited by Judith Chaffee and Oliver Crick, 130-138. London: Routledge, 2014. Accessed December 3, 2019. ProQuest Ebook Central. Created from iub-ebooks on 2019-12-03 13:06:04, pg. 131.

performance. *Commedia dell'arte* masks serve to make the abstract characteristic of their archetypes concrete, in such a way that the actor must align themselves internally behind the mask to match with what the physical mask has already established. In both instances though, the mask is inherently creating a text-reality for what the audience expects the actor to accord with, aiming to become the mask itself for the spectator.

Masks can be presented as apparatuses, imbued with clockwork that holds functional and structural aptitude with every shifting gear of gesture and underlying identity. In another sense, masks act as an unusual depiction of our utmost human-ness by design. If we are to evaluate the face as a communicative medium that engages a base-level presentation of self, then masks are our approach to playing with perception within communication as well as the internal conception of embodiment associated. Performance is grounded in play, wherein actors and performers evolve into players of reality (especially the human need for fictionalization). Even with the archetypal attributes and expectations that come with masks in *commedia dell'arte* and *kathakali* alike, “categories slip...what human rigidity proposes as law, settle opinion, and fixed tradition, play undermines, transforms, and recreates.”<sup>25</sup> Masks, with any form they take, afford performance the opportunity to extend play within the play context of dramatic performance and escape the boundaries of reality.

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<sup>25</sup> Schechner, Richard. “Drama Performance.” In *Folklore, Cultural Performances and Popular Entertainments: A Communications-Centered Handbook*, edited by Richard Bauman, 272-281. New York: Oxford University Press, 1992.

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