A Conspiracy of Silence:

The Authorial Potential of Full Masks in Performer Training, Dramaturgy and Audience Perception in South African Visual Theatre

Robert Ian Murray

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Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to Liezl, my co-conspirator and co-artistic director, who also happens to be my favourite performer and without whom all the experiments and journeys in my life would have come to nothing. Together we knew nothing, started with nothing, and then discovered everything on a glorious ongoing journey that will still reveal untold treasures. For your eternal support, empathy, curiosity, dedication, and pure unbridled skill to create some extraordinary characters, I thank you. Big-foot, hobbit-foot, always put your best foot forward and may your life always be fruit-fool.

It is also dedicated to the memory of Tom – not only did we pogo-dance around the 90s with massive abandon and joy, but you were one of my most fervent supporters, often driving hundreds of kilometres to watch and critique my work. On top of this, you caught our spirit and gave me the best graphic designs I could ever ask for. And I miss you every day.

Abstract

Silent Mask Theatre in South Africa has the potential to cut across linguistic divides and deliver a product that offers an intimate, unique experience for the audience as well as the actor. South Africa not only has a complicated history, but also 11 languages (12 if one counts South African Sign Language – SASL -, which still holds a curious position of being counted official or not), and the one that theatre-makers choose to present in gives a certain "authority" to the production.

Silent masks remove the need for linguistic understanding, something necessary for more abstract thought, and focusses instead on the emotional relevance and interplay between characters. In doing so, it proves an important way to create relevance for an audience, creating a delicate dance between the Mask (character and thereby text), how the actor plays it, and then the closing of meaning through the audience experience. Thus, is created a trialogue between these elements that gives the production the opportunity to speak to the hearts and minds of the audience.

Globally, the study of silent character masks is still relatively new, with proponents of it only coming to the fore in the past few years (Wilsher, 2007). Mask Theatre has grown exponentially in the UK and Europe with companies like Vamos Theatre, exploring PTSD in works like *A Brave Face* (2018) or death in *Dead Good* (2021), and Familie Flöz either on the more whimsical side like *Hotel Paradiso* (2011) or the more hard-hitting *Infinito* (2006), gaining popularity and exposure.

In South Africa, there is strangely not an indigenous tradition of masks, as opposed to other parts of Africa. This is fascinating, and probably points towards a more "oral tradition" of South Africa/Africa.

However, the author aims to point out the ways that the silent mask entered South African consciousness at a time where more attention was being paid to "performing objects" (Proschan, 1985), and particularly in Cape Town with the advent of the Out the Box Festival.

This thesis aims to contextualise Visual Theatre and Mask Theatre in a South African context, seeing within it a movement towards a more global perspective of puppetry, material performances, and performing objects. Although "ghettoised" for a long time (Taylor, 2004), performing objects emerged and became a leading case for the primal "text" of a performance. Handspring Puppet Company, Janni Younge, and the author's company, FTH:K, became primary grounds of contestation against more conventional, text-based theatre.

Starting with a reflective account of the author's journey towards masks, the thesis branches out into a reflection on its author's pedagogical praxis, and how silent masks work, before critically reflecting on and analysing his key works, such as *Pictures of You* (2008-2013), which deals with home invasions and grief, and *Benchmarks* (2011), which deals with the wave of xenophobia that hit South Africa around that time. . This were built from the ground up, working with current issues both in the author's, and the country's, *mileau*.

In the last two decades, performing object work in South Africa has begun to flourish. This is the first thesis to investigate mask work in the country during this period. Its possibilities for Screen and Stage Acting are still being explored.

Chair of the Supervisory Committee:
Professor Anton Krueger

Department of Drama, Rhodes University

Acknowledgements

It's a cliché to say that a child is raised by a village, but, in my experience, true. In the writing of a thesis, I think it's more of a city. Suffice it to say I have to give acknowledgements to those that have been my village and, after then, my city. Huge kudos and thank yous to my first supervisors, Professor Andrew Buckland and Professor Juanita Finestone-Praeg (for screaming matches and early consideration), then to Professor Ruth Simbao (and the Arts Lounge crew). This has taken so long to finish, that I must include Professor Anton Krueger as the mentor to take over a stalled thesis and then to take me over the line, as well as Andy Grewar, my editor, who came in with such a sense of energy and humour when it was really needed at the end. Rest in peace.

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A huge shout out to the cast and crew of *Waterline* (especially Khaya Kondile and the sadly late Ayanda "Firestarter" Nongwala), and *Phitlho (The Hidden*).

Can I mention musical influences here? I do so. Nick Cave and Tom Waits in particular, who have not only been such an integral part of creation of works, but also the soundtrack of this thesis.

The staff of the Amazwi South African Museum of Literature (formerly National English Literary Museum, NELM – http://www.nelm.org.za/) for incredible help in tracking down articles and reviews anyone else would have thought long since extinct.

Big love and respect to the thousands and thousands of audience members, teachers, learners, students, audience members, critics, curious onlookers, and supporters over the years. We are nothing without you all.

And lastly, but certainly not least, all love to my long-suffering and ever-loving family.

So raise your glass if you are wrong
In all the right ways
All my underdogs
We will never be never be, anything but loud
And nitty gritty dirty little freaks
Won't you come on and come on and raise your glass
Just come on and come on and raise your glass[1]

[1] From *Raise Your Glass* by P!nk. Released on her 2010 album, *Greatest Hits…So Far!!!* Written by Max Martin, Alecia B. Moore, and Johan Karl Schuster. Published by Kobalt Music Publishing Ltd., Sony and ATV Music Publishing LLC.

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1.1. Introduction

Inside me a hundred beings
are putting their fingers to their lips and saying,
"That's enough for now. Shhhhh." Silence
is an ocean. Speech is a river.
When the ocean is searching for you, don't walk
to the language-river. Listen to the ocean,
and bring your talky business
to an end.
Traditional words are just babbling
in that presence, and babbling is a substitute
for sight. When you sit down beside your beloved,
send the chaperones away, the old women
who brought you together.
- Rumi[2]

In this thesis, I interrogate and investigate the emergence of Mask Theatre in South Africa – specifically full character masks that are silent. Mask Theatre burst onto the scene during the mid to late 2000s within the blossoming ethos of what has become known as Visual Theatre in this country. As shall become clear, the epicentre of this ethos, or movement, was situated primarily in Cape Town and owes a lot of its energy and drive to structures like UNIMA (Union Internationale de la Marionnette - International Puppetry Association) South Africa and a few years of the influential Out the Box Festival of Puppetry and Visual Performance (2005–2011), founded by puppeteers Janni Younge and Aja Marnaweck.

Although there had been iterations of masks within South African theatre before this, the full character mask emerged in 2008, through *Pictures of You*, created by myself and my main co-conspirator, Liezl de Kock. I'm not trying to boast, this is just a fact. Our interest in the silent mask form, as opposed to, say, the vocal half-mask à la *commedia dell'arte*, stemmed from the work we were both involved in with From the Hip: Khulumakahle (FTH:K) which integrated deaf and hearing actors in education and performance. Working in, and with, silence in the specific non-verbal approach that FTH:K developed piqued our interest and we were looking for a way to extend that into other practices. Having long been fascinated by masks, De Kock and I co-founded a breakaway ensemble, A Conspiracy of Clowns, in 2008, and unleashed *Pictures of You* on an unsuspecting National Arts Festival (NAF) Fringe.

[2] https://www.thesunmagazine.org/issues/158/this-longing-versions-of-rumi. "The Three Fish" Ch. 18 : The Three Fish, p. 196 - The Essential Rumi (1995)

Over the next few years, our experiences and growing understanding of how masks and puppets work flowed easily between FTH:K and its integrated approach and A Conspiracy of Clowns – to the point where the line between the two companies became blurred. This time also saw a number of influential productions being created – *QUACK!* (2009), *Womb Tide* (2010), and *Benchmarks* (2011) – with each one extending our development into Visual and Mask Theatre. These four works form the backbone of my analysis in this thesis, as each one contributed to raising awareness of – and appreciation for – Visual and Mask Theatre in South Africa.

From the outset, people (friends, colleagues, critics and scholars) have asked me, "why masks"? What is it about them that drew me to them, and makes me continue to use them as the core of my pedagogic and creative practice? The answer is not a simple one.

I am a theatre-maker and educator, and I have been active in South Africa for over 20 years. However, I have never formally trained in Mask Theatre. Nor in directing, really. I have assembled skills like a rabid puzzle enthusiast – always guided by instinct and curiosity. In a way that has always irritated the purists. I remain on the fringes of the theatre industry, abhorring the limelight, trusting more that the work will speak for itself. I am the epitome of what Henry David Thoreau wrote in his poem *I Am a Parcel of Vain Strivings Tied*:

> I am a parcel of vain strivings tied
> By a chance bond together,
> Dangling this way and that, their links
> Were made so loose and wide,
> Methinks,
> For milder weather.[3]

My own "vain strivings" have led to a life where I delight in contradictions, ambiguity, echoes, shadows, doubles, and distortions. Although it has not always been easy, I have come to accept and embrace that I live in a *liminal* state.

This is a word that gets bandied about a lot these days – to the point of it becoming unhelpful[4] or an overused cliché or catchphrase. So what do I mean by this? Theorist Susan Broadhurst (1999: 1) offers an explanation, and it is worth quoting her at length:

> Quintessential aesthetic features of the liminal appear to be hybridisation, indeterminacy, a lack of "aura" and the collapse of the hierarchical distinction between high and popular culture ... Other quasi-generic traits are experimentation, heterogeneity, innovation, marginality, a pursuit of the almost chthonic and an emphasis on the intersemiotic: that is, a significatory practice which involves such non-linguistic modes as those provided by the corporeal *gesta*, certain performances become a 'writing of the body itself' [quoting Derrida] ... A certain 'shift-shape', stylistic promiscuity favouring pastiche, is signalled, together with repetition (a repetitiveness which foregrounds not sameness but difference), parody, playfulness and a delegitimation of authorial authority.

[3] https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/46271/i-am-a-parcel-of-vain-strivings-tied
[4] Or, as a German friend insists on calling it, "unhandy".

The above is quite the list of traits of the liminal and – if you can bear with me – I will refer to them throughout this thesis.

It will come as no surprise that the above can easily pertain to masks also. As one of the oldest theatrical and cultural forms, they "collapse the hierarchical distinction between high and popular culture" – allowing them to be simultaneously very old, and startlingly new. Picking out a few other words and phrases – "experimentation", "innovation", "marginality", "intersemiotic", and "non-linguistic modes" – further emphasises this. Above all, it is my belief that masks, at their essence, allow for "playfulness and a delegitimation of authorial authority". In short, the mask, in its sculpted form, drives the authorial process forward, and performers, directors, and audience members get caught up together in a delicious dance of meaning-making.

I will endeavour to elucidate the underlying similarities more as this thesis progresses. However, before it gets properly started, I want to take an autobiographical detour to lay down a few core paving stones in order to sift through the "loose links" and "vain strivings" that have made up my life and journey to and with masks.

1.2. A Reluctant Auto-Ethnobiographer?

As a theatre-maker, I dislike the spotlight. Opening nights are horrendous for me, where I get caught up in difficult conversations with person after person while everyone else scoffs down the free food and wine. While these conversations are often quite nice, this perhaps speaks more to my social anxiety that plays out on such occasions. I've always thought the work should stand by itself, and not have much to do with the director. However, having said that, I do also acknowledge how much part the personal plays in the creation of work. Throughout this thesis, there will therefore be occasional jumps into the personal (anecdotal or otherwise) to augment the theory. I acknowledge that this is perhaps unorthodox, but I humbly ask the reader to go on this journey with me. It is not so much that my story is a spectacular one; however, it has certainly been eventful.

To return to the question of what interested me is masks, when I first began to be interested in theatre, I dreamt of being a performer, or writer, or at very least a director. I have never had direct training in masks – I trained at a department which was part of the advent of Physical Theatre (University of KwaZulu-Natal – back then University of Natal Pietermaritzburg) and later did my postgraduate training at a Physical Theatre-centred department (Rhodes Drama Department) where I specialised in contemporary mime performance and choreography. How then did masks attract my attention, and how is it that I've been devoted to them for almost 20 years?

It's only in the writing of this thesis that I have truly begun to unpack and reflect on my engagement with masks. The answer itself is not obvious, and points towards the Rumi poem I quoted at the front of this chapter, which captures for me the paradox of trying to reach for the inexplicable, of the meaning of silence.

As part of my theatrical journey, I have always been searching for some theatrical form that houses the many paradoxes, ambiguities, and a relentless shapeshifting in a manner that I feel can contain

such multitudes.[5] As will become clearer, I was always looking for something that stripped right through the noise which fills the world.

Why masks? This is a question I have been fielding since 2007 when I began my first true foray into the theatrical world, and it is a question that follows me to this day. For myself, my interest in masks stems from what they contribute to performance training and performance itself. This stands as a central question in this thesis, and all its related projects and experiences.

Why masks? There is no direct and easy answer to the question.

1.3. Strange loops

I see and experience trialogues everywhere. They fascinate me. I did not coin the word, which refers to a conversation between three parties or groups; however, in my work I've appropriated trialogues to refer to the meeting between mask, actor, and audience.[6] Trialogues, for me, open up a space that cannot be filled by only one perspective, one viewpoint, and only one authority. Their very presence demands participation by several differing ideological approaches (following Camilleri, 2009). My fascination with them takes me down some curious (and curiouser[7]) rabbit holes. It is an ongoing awareness and appreciation that perhaps first found footing when I was a student and encountered Douglas Hofstadter's 1979 opus, *Gödel, Escher, Bach: An Eternal Golden Braid*.[8] In it, he explores common themes in the lives and works of logician Kurt Gödel, artist M. C. Escher, and composer Johann Sebastian Bach, discussing how systems can acquire meaning despite being made of seemingly "meaningless" elements. Although its central concepts have over time been both adored and scorned (particularly the sections that contemplate a now outdated notion of Artificial Intelligence – AI), the book also discusses what it means to communicate, how knowledge can be represented and stored, the methods and limitations of symbolic representation, and even the fundamental notion of "meaning" itself.

In the preface to the 20th anniversary edition, Hofstadter clarifies what *Gödel, Escher, Bach: An Eternal Golden Braid* (*GEB*) both is and is not. In his own view, it is not about how reality is "a system of interconnected braids", or how "math, art, and music are really all the same thing at their core", but instead:

> *GEB* is a very personal attempt to say how it is that animate beings can come out of inanimate matter ... *GEB* approaches [this question] by slowly building up an analogy that likens inanimate molecules to meaningless symbols, and further likens selves ... to certain special swirly, twisty, vortex-like, and *meaningful* patterns that arise only in particular types of systems of meaningless symbols. It is these strange, twisty patterns that the book spends so much time on, because they are little known, little appreciated, counterintuitive, and quite filled with mystery ... I call [them] ... "strange loops".

---

[5] A nod and a wink to Walt Whitman there.

[6] Incidentally, I notice how close this is to Robin Nelson's "praxis of PaR [Practice as Research]" – cf. Nelson, 2013: 36.

[7] That's a little joke. For a reference, here it is: Carrol, L. (1865). *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. London: Macmillan.

[8] Douglas Hofstadter is an American scholar of cognitive science, physics, and comparative literature. His research focuses on consciousness, thinking and creativity. *Gödel, Escher, Bach: An Eternal Golden Braid* was awarded the 1980 Pulitzer Prize for general non-fiction.

It has taken me years to make the connection between animate and inanimate objects. However, looking at it now, I can easily see the link between the mystery of how Hofstadter writes about "strange loops", and my own view of mask work involving a trialogue between performer, mask, and audience. In some ways my own work echoes that of Hofstadter in his attempt to say how it is that "animate beings" (psychologically real characters) can come out of "inanimate matter" (full-faced masks).

It has taken me years to make that connection. However, looking at it now, I can easily see the link between the mystery of how Hofstadter writes about "strange loops", and my own view of mask work involving a trialogue between performer, mask, and audience. As I go on to tease out, my work in many ways echoes that of Hofstadter in his attempt to say how it is that "animate beings" (in my case, psychologically real characters) can come out of "inanimate matter" (in my case full-faced masks).

1.4. *The Triquetra*

A trialogue is similar to a *triquetra* - a triangular figure composed of three interlaced arcs or shapes. Visually, a triquetra looks like this:

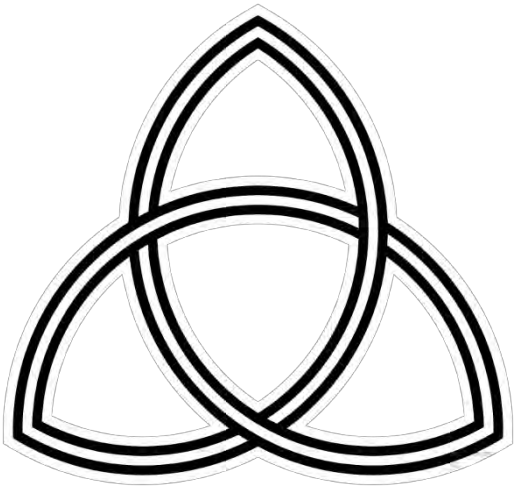

Figure 1: A *triquetra* showing 3 overlapping lens shapes

The *triquetra* is an example of a *trefoil knot* – named after the three-leaf clover (or trefoil) plant. In the study and development of mathematics (and I cannot claim to know exactly what all of this means, but I *can* determine patterns and echoes within my work), a trefoil knot is the most basic knot (sometimes fascinatingly called a "prime" knot) and is fundamental to the study of mathematical *knot theory*.M.C. Escher, a Dutch graphic artist, is known for his mathematical-inspired, optical illusions and mind-bending perspectives in woodcuts and lithographs. These feature almost impossible constructions, repeating patterns, and exploration of infinity.

It's no surprise that Escher created an etching of a trefoil knot in 1965.

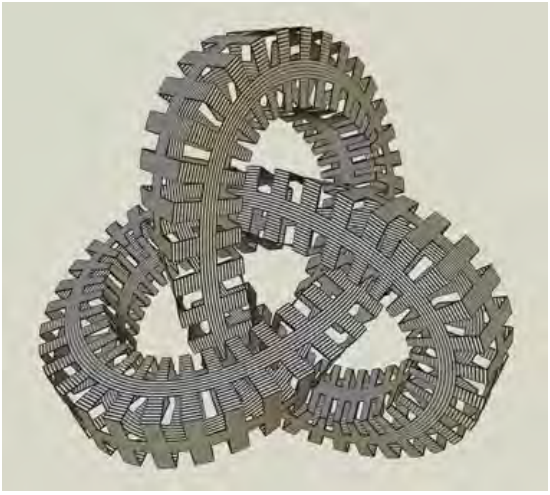

Figure 2: Escher's etching of a trefoil knot printed in 1965 from three woodcut blocks in red, green and brown.

The triquetra symbol was used as an ornamental design in architecture and in medieval manuscript illumination. Although it has come to be used in religious settings, such as the "holy trinity", the triquetra has links to a much older, pagan past, and is often considered a Celtic symbol of the Goddess, or, further North, a symbol of the Norse god, Odin. The reason for it passing from paganism to religion could be due to its reference to a unity that stems from the connection of life and nature, for example: birth, life, and death; mother, father, and son; sowing, crop, and growth; sunrise, midday, and sunset; childhood, adulthood, and old age; and past, present, and future.[9]

The above are just a few of the many instances of unities that occur within nature and life, and I do not want to get bogged down in them and lose momentum in terms of interrogating masks. Suffice it to say that the mask itself is a symbol – one that stretches back over time and creates within the receiver (both performer wearing it and the audience) a *frisson* that conjures up a unique world. As a "performing object", the mask straddles inanimate death and animate life continuously, and plunges both performer and audience into a liminal space of discovery. Joseph Campbell, famedAmerican mythologist, writer and lecturer who studied comparative mythology and religion, and writer of works like *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* writes

> The literal fact that the apparition is composed of A, a mask, B, its reference to a mythical being, and C, a man, is dismissed from the mind, and the presentation is allowed to work without correction upon the sentiments of both the beholder and the actor. In other words, there has been a shift of view from the logic of the normal secular sphere, where things are understood to be distinct from one another, to a theatrical or play sphere, where they are accepted for what they are *experienced* as being and the logic is that of "make believe"—"as if." We all know the convention, surely! It is a primary, spontaneous device of childhood, a magical device, by which the world can be transformed from banality to magic in a trice. (21)

This, for me is the point of the mask existing within a triquetra and engaging in a trialogue between the performer, the design/shape/geometry that makes up the character of the mask, and the audience. In order for the mask to come alive in the minds of the audience members, this trialogue needs to be concentrated on every second the performer is wearing the mask, and this allows for

[9] These were taken from https://blog.spiritualify.com/the-spiritual-meaning-of-the-triquetra/

the world to be "transformed from banality to magic in a trice". If this drops, even for a moment, the mask "dies" and returns to being an inanimate object, and the magical transformation happening in the here and now is lost.

This then creates a very particular "strange loop" (following Hofstadter) that is never completed until the moment of the end of the performance when the performer removes her mask. It is a continual loop of trialogue between performer, masks, and audience (be that facilitator on the training floor, director in rehearsal, or audience during a performance) that is driven by a fluid and ever-aware collaboration.

It is this nature of collaboration that needs some investigation at this point.

1.5. The Fluidity of Collaboration

The fluidity of collaboration is crucial to understanding the nature of how the mask works in terms of actor training, performance creation, and audience interpretation – as shall become explicit too during this chapter and the next.

In the field of theatre making, one calls this "collaboration", and is a crucial term for me as a practitioner. Furthermore, any collaboration demands a devising process, or methodology, with all participants embarking on a journey bound together by Lecoq's notion of *complicité* (that is, "playing the same game") that doesn't lead to a prescribed destination, but which, rather, enables and empowers explorers to enter into a space of "astonishment at shared discovery" (Sherman, 2010: 93). In other words, the process is not one of transmitting knowledge, but rather of how knowledge is *found*. This enables the company of theatre makers to "plunge themselves into the world" (Merleau-Ponty, 1968). In her seminal work, *Devising Theatre: A Theoretical and Practical Handbook* (1994), Alison Oddey considers this "plunge" as such:

> The process of devising is about the fragmentary experience of understanding ourselves, our culture, and the world we inhabit. The process reflects a multi-vision made up of each group member's individual perception of that world as received in a series of images, then interpreted and defined as a product. Participants make sense of themselves within their own cultural and social context, investigating, integrating, and transforming their personal experiences, dreams, research, improvisation, and experimentation. (1).

I do not want to dwell too long on devising here, as the topic will be engaged with more thoroughly in Chapters 3 and 4[10], but suffice it to say that Oddey's writing about the "fragmentary experience of understanding ourselves, our culture, and the world we inhabit", as well as her belief of the process reflecting a "multi-vision", becomes very important when reflecting upon any working with mask.

Implicit in the above, however, is an ethos of responsibility shared by the group, which recalls Joan Littlewood[11]'s oft-repeated belief: "I do not believe in the supremacy of the director, designer,

[10] And I have written about it in my 2001 MA thesis.
[11] Affectionately known as the "grandmother" of workshop or devised theatre.

actor or even the writer. It is through collaboration that this knockabout art of theatre survives and kicks" (quoted in A. Hodge, 2010: 131).

This, too, points towards a democratisation of the playing field working within this approach, and again connects strongly, as shall become evident, to working with the mask. The "I" and the "ego" need to be subsumed – in an ensemble – to the participants one is working alongside. And in mask work, this includes the mask itself. In both instances, this creates an endless world of possibility – one doesn't know where one is going; very often one has to lay low, watching and waiting, and let the possibilities present themselves.

In this, the process of devising is one very close to that of improvising. Cultures and opinions clash, construct and deconstruct, ambiguities abound, and identity is simultaneously solid and fluid. In 2002, I had the fortune of working with renowned choreographer, improviser, and integrated dance (integrating the disabled and non-disabled) pioneer, Adam Benjamin, and one of the core things he drilled into the then Remix Theatre Company was: "Ideas are everywhere – they buzz around us all the time; the trick is to [bam! He gestures grabbing something out of the air] grab one…and have the balls to see the idea through to the end of the image or moment"[12].

If ideas are available to everybody, then this levels the playing field, and democratises the process, plunging an ensemble, or any number of players, into a journey. The ground of this journey, and all the landscape of the search, becomes pliable, viscous, which leads to a space of ambiguity with regards to the role that one plays in the process. In many ways, one could call this an embodied ambiguity – one is in an ambiguous presence; or, the presence of ambiguity. In his book, Benjamin goes on to attempt to conceptualise this journey:

> Faced with creating something out of our [disabled and non-disabled] meeting, and without yet knowing how our physical differences might lead to a dance experience, we must explore the unknown territory together, and, rather like children, our research takes the form of play; we have to make it up as we go along, in other words we have to improvise: **composing as one goes along** from Latin *improvisus*, 'unforeseen', from IM- (not) + *provisus*, from providere *to forsee* (Benjamin, 2002: 7).

Whilst this is a very empowering and open space to be in, it also leads to hesitation and doubt, and therefore, at times, an acceptance of the insecurity of the process. However, it is this very doubt that fuels the interrogation, calling to mind Merleau-Ponty's notion of "perceptual faith". This is reflected by theatre-maker and pedagogue, Jon Foley-Sherman, who writes about "the shared astonishment of discovery" (Sherman, 2010: 93). The only way out is through. Once the commitment is made to that search (in many ways the commitment to being lost), and one enters truly and ethically into the miasma, it is only then when the strange alchemy can start happening – something coalesces, coagulates, and open-ended metaphors begin to emerge, and these solidify over time and perseverance into a "text". In short, narrative emerges, regardless of what form is later chosen to retell that narrative.

[12] This anecdote is recorded and quite possibly paraphrased in my notebook for the process of creating *Taking Care of Small Things* with Remix Theatre Company (2002). But it is one that has stuck in my mind ever since.

If I am really honest with myself, my own personal and peculiar "strange loops" began much earlier – it was perhaps only in reading Hofstadter's book that it dawned on me that there was some theory behind what for me had always been an intuition.[13] If nothing else, it was a comfort to realise that I was not alone.

What I have discovered over the course of writing this thesis is exactly how tangled and strange my personal loops are. I initially wrote a long autobiographical section of how my life has always been in-between and caught between different poles of influence and inspiration. Life has been an incredible journey, and the real gift of the thesis has allowed me to see my life in minute detail and how everything has led up to this point. (The autobiographical section is now included as Appendix A.)

This reflection on my own process was inspired by a reading of Eugenio Barba writing about his dramaturgical journey and the various phases and currents that shaped and formed him. *On Directing and Dramaturgy: Burning the House* (2010), is a fascinating read into one of theatre history's great minds and offers many colourful and dense metaphors on the craft of theatre-making – particularly within a non-mainstream theatre paradigm.[14]

In it, Barba writes that although just about every artistic endeavour has a subjective component to it, this can usually be separated from an artist's biography, working conditions, and personal style. However, that said, he counters this by writing: "Directing is peculiar in so much as it is a practice that can be defined only *in relationship to a particular theatre milieu* [his emphasis]" (Barba, 2010: xviii). Barba continues by reflecting on different approaches to directing (for example, the seasoned professional, the co-ordinator, the artist, the wanderer looking for companies of actors to lead, or the systematic leader of a particular group often responsible for the group's training) before returning to the idea of a "particular theatre milieu". He says:

> Often, at the origin of a creative path, there is a *wound*. In the exercise of my craft I have revisited this intimate lesion to deny it, question it or simply be near it. It was the cause of my vulnerability and the source of my needs. It had little to do with aesthetics, theories, with the wish to express myself or to communicate with others. This *wound necessity* has acted as an impulse to remain close to the boy I was, and from whom time removed me, pushing me in a world of constant change (Barba, 2010: 1).

As a theatre-maker, I find this fascinating, And I have learnt, over the years, to as "near it" as possible. The works I assess later have very specific time and life implications – *Pictures of You* was created just after I was married, and deals with the nature of home invasion and grief; *QUACK!* was devised during the time of Jakob Zuma coming to power and his shenanigans of politicking; *Womb Tide* came at a time of contemplating having children; and *Benchmarks* followed a traumatic episode of xenophobia in our country and my response to it.

The root of the word "wound" according to Gabor Maté, comes from the Greek word meaning "trauma" (2022), which often originates in our formative years. Similarly, in his prologue to

[13] And this link has taken me all of 30 years to make.
[14] I am going to lay aside the temptation to delve into the differences between mainstream and more independent theatre.

Demian,[15] Hermann Hesse writes: "I cannot tell my story without reaching a long way back. If it were possible, I would reach back farther still – into the very first years of my childhood, and beyond them into distant ancestral past." (Hesse, 1970: 3).

Reaching back, as per Hesse, and in Barba's spirit, I would like to reflect here on some of my own "wounds" and what makes up my own personal, particular *milieu*. In approaching the question of how it came to be that I've devoted my professional life to working with masks, I'd like to try to take a broader view. For me, masks are one of the ultimate in-between tools and forms to use in performance, and this echoes all the way through my life, where I have often experienced this state of being "in between".

In tracing my dramaturgical roots, failures, learnings, a continuous search for a home and a way to, as Samuel Beckett wrote: "stain the silence", I realise the tendency to all too easily fall into anecdote and personal mythology. What, one might ask, has this all to do with masks, silence, and the point of this thesis? The answer is a perplexing nothing and everything. What I am tracing here is the evolution of my experience and thinking that led me to Mask Theatre. And even though it took several years to properly reduce this thinking to some kind of essence, or semblance thereof, there remains much to learn and experience. Every time one turns a metaphorical corner, or crests a hill on one's journey, one encounters traces of people, concepts, and the various experiments undertaken before one's arrival. Sometimes more than traces are left. I am reminded of a Khoisan tradition of leaving a rock or piece of clothing on a growing cairn of similar artefacts as a mark of respect and good luck. I think theatre-journeyers leave little cairns all over the world. Eugenio Barba (2010: 2) writes:

> In the beginning, on the path of the profession, every stone reminded me of the wayfarers who had preceded me. To each of them I asked the questions that I asked myself.

I wonder if by taking the time to place one's stone to the growing pile, the action of doing so allows one to consider other stones already there – shape and texture, weight, negative spaces, colour, or even the way the light strikes them. What happens in that moment? In that transferral?

In writing classes with the late Reza De Wet and Andrew Buckland (1999), we were always taught to "write your influences out of yourself". This I see as similar to Barba's stones of his preceding wayfarers – it is a process of travelling similar ground before measuring one's own journey against that which has gone before. There are similarities, sure; but if one accepts that a director is made by his or her specific *milieu*, the differences win in the end. Barba (2010: 2) continues:

> There existed dark forces within me which influenced my choices. They rode me suddenly, they sensed an affinity with a person just met, they persisted in refusing reasonable solutions. Much more than ideas, aesthetics or conceptual categories, these forces have steered me through the tangle of circumstances. They have forged lasting loyalties with dead and living people, with ideals and dreams, with places and books; they have distilled *superstitions* which I have justified to myself and to others with logical, political and artistic arguments.

[15] Hesse, H. (1970). *Demian*. (16th Printing, Translated from the German by Michael Roloff and Michael Lebeck). London, Toronto, and New York: Bantam Books.

I was aware of similar "dark forces" influencing what I was doing; as mentioned earlier, each work was made from a very specific point of view, tied in to the South African situation. I am also aware of how they steered me through my own various tangles of circumstance, connection, or combinatorial creativity that led me to embrace the devising and improvisational process of latter years.

1.6. Reflection On My PhD Journey

Continuing the subject of "dark forces", the writing of this thesis has coincided with what has been the most tumultuous period of my life. This has conjoinedly had an impact on each other, especially when things were at their most turbulent. My journey began when I was still recovering from the hit of a divorce from my long-term partner, where I was in hindsight not in the best space to deal with the demands the doctorate placed on me mentally, emotionally, and psychologically. This led to a drawn-out process of therapy, failed relationships, a developing substance abuse issue (and now recovery), anti-depression and other medications, changes in supervisors, relocations a-plenty, and in general a hot mess of a life that was not conducive to focusing on academic work.

As a snapshot of the above, near the end of 2015, I applied for, and was offered, the job of Artistic Director of the Amsterdam Fringe Festival. This was a huge opportunity for me to emigrate, start a new life, and build on my burgeoning international reputation. However, disaster was soon to follow. I moved from (then) Grahamstown back to Cape Town, sold my house, and started packing up my life, getting ready for the move.

And then the worst thing happened – my visa was denied (long story) and I had to step down from my position and suddenly found myself homeless, jobless, and at a complete loss as to what I was going to do with life. 2016 was a very dark year for me. I had no capacity to deal with most of life's struggles and ended up suspending my PHD while I tried to work it all out and reboot everything: work, living space, future, and the general will to continue.

It took a while, but I ended up relocating (again) for a job in Johannesburg, whereupon I reinstated my doctorate, and kindly was allocated my fourth supervisor to date, Prof Anton Krueger, and by the end of that year began picking up the pieces of research and trying to find the elusive balance between writing and a full-time job, as well as occasionally staying in my field of practice.

As things were starting to find purpose and traction again, and life was beginning to somewhat settle down, the world was plunged into a pandemic which turned everything on its head – life, work, relationships…well, I do not need to say much about this as it was a shared experience. Suffice it to say that as I neared completion for the submission of my thesis, the world was cautiously emerging from the pandemic, and the ramifications thereof were just starting to make themselves known. Working in the educational field, I witnessed firsthand the effects it had on my students, and on myself and my colleagues, as well as friends and the general public. Everything had been turned upside down. New paradigms of educating, researching, working, and the like, were emerging, and even though we can now say we are post-pandemic, the legacy of what happened has changed our lives.

I write the above not as any apology or excuse for my thesis, but to give you a taste of a very deliberate strategy that I employed in its writing. In a nutshell, that is the combination of academic research and writing, along with a very personal autobiographical account of who I am and what I have been through to where I am at present, and how these have shaped the dramaturgic and pedagogic journeys I have been on – with specific reference to my working with silent character masks, and their introduction to South African theatre.

This also acknowledges the sheer amount of *time* that I have taken in completing the thesis, and the challenge of how much I have changed over the years. I started off with clear objectives in my mind, and as I changed, and the world changed, I realized that I was not the same person who set off on this journey in 2013. Indeed, things had become a lot more personal, and this led to a schism in style in my initial submission where I was pulling together early writings and thoughts towards a much more philosophical and auto-ethnobiographical manner that I employed in more recent writings. This thesis is my attempt to bring those two sets closer together.

This schism is notable in several areas. Of the most important, firstly it speaks towards me being a theatre practitioner and educator primarily, with academic research being a newer field for me. That is not to say that I don't research works I make, nor curricula I develop and teach; however, that is a far cry from writing scholarly articles. Secondly, it started to become clear to me what the writing of the thesis was doing to me, myself, as a human being and theatre-maker, i.e. – it allowed me reflection and insight into the kind of person I am and how I operate in this world. This I think is an underrated area of research and is an area that is gaining more attention – particularly post-pandemic. The position of the researcher and their experiences and practical insight enriches the written, insomuch as the written word and academic rigour enriches the work done on the floor (be it in class, workshop, rehearsal, or performance).

What is notable is how I feel I have always been caught between two poles in my life, and operate somewhere in the murky, liminal, space between them. Not in a *binary* of one thing or the other, but in between. This is a fluid space between duality and dualism, where it is difficult to state, for a fact, how I feel or think at any given moment, as I am always aware of other possibilities and that life doesn't exist in binaries, but in *continuums* – usually in a delicate and furious dance with various points along any given continuum. I once fancifully said we are the "Gap Generation" (trying for another spin on our being Generation X or GenX) as we find ourselves flailing in these gaps that appear between concepts, thoughts, and experiences. My generation, as others throughout history, has seen an inordinate amount of expansion into the technological age – the development of the home computer, the invention of the internet, as well as leaps forward in terms of healthcare, psychological diagnosis, healthcare, Artificial Intelligence (AI) to name just a few. In South Africa, we also witnessed a huge change in law and governance, with the dismantling of Apartheid and the change to democracy when we were at an age of becoming socially and politically conscious. This had a huge impact globally, but also personally, as, quite literally, the world opened up for us.

The gift of this was a greater freedom to explore ourselves as humans, as well as an opportunity to contribute in some way to social rebuilding and development. Although today one may cast a jaundiced and slightly cynical eye on how nearly 30 years of this has gone, the fact remains that for many of us it gave us the space to explore a great many areas – gender, sexuality, identity, individual diversity, and the like.

1.7. Than Vlachos and "Ugli Bob"

I first met Nathanial Vlachos, when he spent time in South Africa in 2014 doing fieldwork research for his doctoral thesis in Anthropology from Rice University in Utah. He spent a few months in Grahamstown, observing and interacting with a number of theatrical practitioners, educators, and local community artists. At the time, I was beginning the *Uyabona Ke?* project with a group of the afore-mentioned artists, and Vlachos attended a number of workshop sessions – observing, recording, and at times participating in exercises with the group. His field notes and chapter reflecting on his experiences will return in Chapter Three when I reflect on my pedagogy of teaching Mask Theatre and Performing Objects.

In his completed thesis (2017: 68), he describes my then position at my institution: "Rob "Ugli Bob" Murray occupies an intermediary and somewhat liminal position in the Department of Drama at the UCKAR[16]."

Let me get the nickname out of the way first before I go on, as it does actually play a part in the personal narrative I'm unfolding here. "Ugli Bob" has been my personal moniker for the past 20 years or more – much to various publicists I have worked with eternal chagrin. It was given to me by friends who had tried various others beforehand: Spikey-Bob was one, Angsty-Bob was another. This has always been common in my life as I have shifted identities, and I have flirted with other names – among them R. Kendal Murray (after my Grandfather), Bobby, Georgie (long story), and even Bobo. Nothing stuck until my friends and I watched an episode of the animated series *South Park* (1997-present) that was all the rage amongst our group in the late 1990s. In this series, the characters watch a meta-animation (i.e. an animation within an animation) called *Terrance and Phillip* where the animation is even cruder and the characters baser than their *South Park* counterparts. In one specific episode, "Terrance and Phillip in Not Without My Anus" (Season 2, Episode 1: 1998), the titular Canadian characters meet a certain Ugly Bob. The joke is that he looks exactly like Terrance and Phillip, but they regard him as "so ugly it looks like someone tried to put out a forest fire with a screwdriver on his face" that they make him wear a paper bag over his head. *Et voila* – of course this would be given to me as my nickname. And this time it stuck. (See Figures 3 and 4.)

[16] This acronym stands for the "University Currently Known As Rhodes" – a name that was adopted by the student body and some staff members after the #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall protests in 2014 and 2015. The renaming of Rhodes University remains a point of contention at the time of writing.

Figure 3: Ugly Bob in South Park.

Figure 4: Ugli Bob in Grahamstown, 2014. Pic by N. Vlachos.

To this day I still use it, and people still call me by it – particularly in public because it gives them a little thrill.

Vlachos writes:

> "Ugli Bob" is a nickname typically used in association with [Robert Murray's] work with the South African clowning collective A Conspiracy of Clowns ... "Ugli Bob," like the names "Johnny Rotten" or "Sid Vicious," tags a certain punk rock ethos that is evident in his physical appearance: his hair is often spiked and pushing out in a riot of different directions, and he is more likely to wear a ripped and shredded Jack Daniels T shirt while conducting a workshop than any kind of formal workout couture. More importantly, the name "Ugli" in its misspelling also underscores a certain irreverent playfulness, which finds its expression in his physical theatre, miming, and clowning work. Ugliness is of particular salience in the ways that his own projects touch various facets of the grotesque: excesses of rubbish, rot, and decay, (both social and physical) are prominent in works like *Piet se Optelgoed* and *Crazy in Love*. "Ugli" in this sense connotes an aesthetic that plays in the terrain of excess and the grotesque, retrieving humor from trash heaps and pools of bodily fluid. (2017: 68)

It is interesting (and edifying!) that this made such an impression on him that it made its way into his PHD thesis.[17] It is a nickname I have accepted and internalised. It is very much in line with Punk and the taking on of a new name like Johnny Rotten for John Lyndon, or Sid Vicious for Simon Richie. Interestingly, this echoes in the world of clowning where the performer accepts a new moniker as their character. And in deliberately misspelling it, I wear it as a badge of honour. Also, it does have its uses – for example, whenever I give a workshop or class to a new group of

[17] It might have made more of an impression on him, since he is well-groomed and mostly clean-cut from a Mormon background.

participants, invariably I open with: "My name is Rob. I am also known as Ugli Bob ... or just Ugli for short." This gets a guaranteed laugh – a release from tension the group is probably feeling – and I immediately lower my status to the group and have started the process of gaining their trust and buy-in for the workshop or process at hand. In one stroke, I lower myself from a dictatorial presence, create common ground, get a laugh, set the tone, and initiate an empathetic (albeit one stemming from embarrassment or shame of myself) response: "you're not that bad".

It is a mask I wear.

Returning to the "intermediary and somewhat liminal" position I held in 2014 at Rhodes University, Vlachos (*op cit*) continues:

> As a PhD student, he is under the direction and guidance of various faculty members, although he also engages them as colleague in informal reading groups and other departmental events. As a lecturer in the department, he is also acts as pedagogue to others; particularly through improvisation classes taught to third year drama students.
>
> While located within the department of drama, Rob is also frequently outside of Grahamstown at one or another festival, in one or another country, with one or another of the faculty or students who have devised a work that is on tour.
>
> Through his workshops and mentoring, Rob is also an important touch point of the interface between the university and the "community" of Grahamstown, a term that typically refers to residents of the nearby township. Rob, like many of the faculty, constantly oscillates between these different worlds, which bleed together more often than not.

The above is a fair description of me and the role that I have settled into over the years. On the one hand, I come with a wealth of experience and embodied knowledge from my years as a theatre practitioner. On the other, I have returned to study and have had difficulty in accurately positioning myself in the space between practice and academia. As such, I often occupy the "intermediary" position Vlachos writes of above.

This sense of intermediary and being liminal extends to the work I carry out – my experiences have shaped my approach to training and making a form of theatre that is not predominant in South Africa. Intrinsic to this is a focus on the liminal.

In terms of working within a field of theatre not predominant in South Africa, by the "dominant" I mean a reliance on language, the authority of the writer, and the whole chain of theatrical hierarchy – from producer, writer, to director, designer all the way down to the performer as "interpreter" of the script. I originally wrote the last lines in 2021, but even though this notion has been radically contested and interrogated over the last few decades (and continues to be), the overarching default setting for theatre seems to be a dialogue-driven play. The forms that I work in (Visual Theatre, Mask Theatre, and Performing Objects) remain outliers.

I want to state up front that I do not want this thesis to devolve into a defensive, reactionary diatribe against dialogue-driven dramas. Yet, in any discussion of contemporary theatre with a practitioner of Performing Objects, I think some defensiveness is likely. As an example, in 2021, Basil Jones and Adrian Kohler of Handspring Puppet Company celebrated 40 years of

Handspring's existence[18] and one might expect that after 40 years they might have attained a sufficient portfolio of success to have elevated the status of their art form to mainstream acceptance. True, in the early 2010s, their workshop had expanded into a factory where sets and sets of horse and other puppets were constructed to be shipped out to *War Horse* productions all over the world. Walking through their Vrygrond factory was indeed a thrill – a meander through puppet wonderland. And while they have indeed hit major national and international success (for example, with their incredible work in designing and directing the horse puppets in *War Horse* [2007]), they were for many years in a "ghettoization" of puppets (as per Sichel, in Taylor, 2009).

I will address this matter more closely in Chapter 4, and unpack it further; however, what I want to say here is that I accept that the work I do, and the forms that I am passionate about, are not necessarily mainstream or hugely popular for 21st-century audiences. However, they also no not exist as a binary opposition to more traditional western theatre – if anything, they exist on a *continuum*. There could not be a 20th and 21st century Physical Theatre and Dance, without there having been Ballet. Neither could there be non-verbal Visual Theatre without there being verbal-based traditional theatre. I believe that one can choose one's positioning somewhere in this continuum.

For myself, I am at ease with choosing an "intermediary" and "somewhat liminal" positioning – between practice and academia, between institution and community, and between non-verbal and verbal.[19]

Working with masks demands a special need to be present and mindful, because they are slippery agents of chaos. As I write in my thesis, they have the ability to disguise and reveal, as much as they traverse the liminality of what is possibly awkwardly defined as a *frisson* between a deeply-rooted sacred superstition that one is experiencing an object and presence that casts one back into a more primal state where one is unsure if something is real or not, alive or inanimate. The mask is a tool facilitating meaning-making. This creation of meaning is a *trialogue* between the mask itself, (as text), the actor giving life to it, embodying the subtext or surtext, and then the audience encountering it: an urtext. That is to say that the design of the mask – its geometry and shape guide the actor playing it in a certain direction. This is explored and developed with the director as "first audience", and then shaped and developed for an audience to experience the masks and close off the meaning-making situation. This thrusts the mask directly into the world of Visual Theatre, an umbrella term that looks at embracing various elements of "performing objects" (Ponia, D., Orenstein, C., Bell, J. 2015; Bell 2012). Similar to puppets, silent masks handle relationships between characters very well, and while this may give thought towards more abstract situations, if one is looking to deal with those, then you need spoken words.

When I started my research journey, there was very little information published about silent character masks. The field was relatively new, with only a few companies embracing their use. These were mostly British or European companies that leaned heavily on the teachings of Jacques

[18] As well as their wedding anniversary.
[19] For some further thoughts about this, in relation to Visual Theatre, and working in a liminal space, see a self-presentation I made in 2010: https://youtu.be/GARwkBOBdP8

Lecoq (1921-1999) and his now world-renowned school in Paris, *École internationale de théâtre Jacques Lecoq*

As a theatre-maker, I have developed the ability to "pre-visualise" certain scenes, or moments in shows. This learnt ability connects to what I mentioned about Adam Benjamin's statement on their being good ideas flying around us all the time; and that the trick is to grab one and then to have the courage and curiosity to follow it to its logical (or illogical) end.

A similar thing has developed in my teaching over the years. I started off, nearly 30 years ago, teaching as all young teachers do – that is what they know, and in a way that was taught them. As I have aged, my teaching has developed beyond the wild, energetic early days into a much easier and, some might say, languid appreciation of the moment – of just being present and being able to respond in real time to what a student is discovering moment by moment, exercise by exercise. I hope that I have leant the gift of listening and generating empathy; these seeds which grow from silence. I am far less interested in a student who speaks beautifully, or learns lines quickly, as I am in a student who intuitively knows how to occupy space, how to respond to internal and external stimuli. I am most interested in performers who can stay in the moment and see where it goes. This is particularly true of their engagement with another body in space.

For myself, performance is all about triadic relationship – myself in the space, myself in relation to another body, and in relationship with an audience. I'm interested in how tensions ebb and flow in the playing out of a scenario; and how some performers are able to inhabi space as interactions play out over time. One never truly knows what is going to happen. And as an educator and theatre-maker, this process fascinates me. Being able to do this puts one into the space of the "shared astonishment of discovery" (Foley-Sherman, 2010). This is nothing new to any theatre-maker, nor a physical theatre creator. In my experience and opinion, masks take this to another level. As indeed, any engagement with a performing object (puppet, material, object, etc.) does – it takes the performer out of themself and allows a much deeper understanding of a fundamental trait of the human condition: of being and not-being, of life and death. Great performances are able to assist audiences in their experience as they witness this *frisson*. Simply put, this is the biggest power of the performing object – the ability to allow a rumination on the human condition, to be able to give rise to rumination on the part of the audience, to facilitate their meaning-making.

It is important to note that while this may very well give rise to abstract thought on the part of the audience masks and performing objects don't deal well with abstract thought as an essence (Wilsher, 2007). While a couple I know used the experience of watching *Pictures of You* to dissect their failing marriage, this was not the "intention" of the piece. Susan Harris (1984) writes about masks in modern and postmodern theatre. In her book, she argues how masks can feature in as signifiers, or semiotics, or dream features that extend the abstract thought of the playwright, but this could also manipulate masks into a subordinate space where they "serve" the playwright's ideas. Examples of this can be seen in Eugene O'Neill's *The Great God Brown* (1926) where characters wear masks to present and reveal their dual natures, both figurative and literal. Jean Genet also uses masks in *The Screens* (1961) in a Brechtian distancing effect, making the audience focus less on empathising with any one character and more on understanding the overall political themes Genet wanted to critique regarding French colonial rule in Algeria.

This is something very different to contemporary silent character masks, where the masks are the starting point of the narrative and are thus considered the primary text.

My thesis is that masks act as primary texts – not to serve the theatre-maker or writer, but as a core fundamental and guiding principle on which the entire production is based, giving the mask a primary authorial power – in much the same way as puppets and other performing objects do in theatre, in what is loosely grouped together as Visual Theatre in SA.

By doing this, masks and other performing objects in the contemporary sense, draw a clear line in the sand between them and masks and objects of antiquity and tradition. There is no set way to perform them – instead, through exploration, experimentation and using them as a guiding principle, they become "authors" of the production.

Chapter 2. A Brief Overview of Masks Prior to the 21st Century

2.1. Introduction

Masks have always fascinated humankind. They are adored by anthropologists, pored over by poets, pondered by philosophers, hunted by historians. They have captivated the childlike, confused critics, polarised practitioners, and ridiculed researchers.

Wordplay aside, the aforementioned point to the many areas of contestation and critical thinking that swirl around any investigation into masks – particularly in relation to their use as a theatrical tool. Many articles or books on the subject of masks preface their work by linking them to their sacred origins, the development of masks as spiritual, religious, or social totems, and their evolution to a sense of cultural identity. There is evidence of this in all the major continents – Africa, Asia, Europe, the Americas, and Australasia. In a nutshell, all masks deal at some level with a sense of self. It's not so much about what they conceal as what they reveal.

Inih Ebong (1984: 1), former associate professor in the Department of Theatre Arts, University of Uyo, Nigeria, writes:

> Historically, the mask is synonymously presumed to date the human society. Even though its true origins may be shrouded in an enigmatic and mysterious whirlpool, yet it could be speculated with some certainty and accuracy that mask and mythology share common origins and ancestry: both are living conceptions of the human mind, with the one explaining the other, and designed principally to teach, amplify, and reinforce the religions, history, aspirations, hopes, fears, morality, etc., of the community.

This shrouding in an "enigmatic and mysterious whirlpool" is a constant refrain when looking back at the prevalence and use of masks in antiquity, and aligns itself with an ongoing fascination with masks. Masks are mysterious objects, and any encounter with them engages with this mystery. When I enter a classroom or studio, open my suitcase to bring the masks out, they are often met with a considerable *frisson* of equal parts fascination and horror. I find that people either hate masks or love them.

In developing communities, masks played a vital role "expressing integral aspects of the culture's myths, beliefs, world view, life-style, and traditions" (Massanari, 2000: 280). Ebong (1984: 1) continues:

> Masks are, in fact, concretized and emblematic actualizations of mythological abstractions, specifically contrived to amplify, reinforce, and codify the beliefs, metaphysics, and cosmology of the community, including their basic and essential philosophy of life and existence. Therefore, its enigmatic origin notwithstanding, there is a considerable degree of unanimity about its artistic, religious, social, and other roles or functions in nearly every culture that has used the idiom. For example, it is almost universally accepted that the diverse applications of the mask idiom have their origins and roots in the religions, rituals, and theatre crafts of the so-called "primitive," non-literate societies.

What Ebong writes about plunges one into the ambiguity I mention above – the mask is not easily distinguishable from its spiritual and ritualistic origins, and yet, for audiences unaware of the specific socio-cultural reference points of an historical mask, they still carry a powerful affect. And also, even if the mask is created as a purposefully "secular" tool, merely for theatrical effect, there is a presumption about them that connects them to their mysterious, enigmatic roots – regardless of what the intention of the designer might have been. Consequently, masks are believed to be artistic creations of "universal duality" (Baisch, in Ebong, 1984: 2-3)[20]. I believe this to be one of the fundamental paradoxes in working with masks – audiences will always read something more into them than what is there at – pardon the pun – face value. Interesting also is Ebong writing about masks' links to a "pre-literate" society. The full-face mask with a closed mouth cannot "speak". Hence, the semiotic communication, be it codified or not, occurs at a non-verbal or even pre-verbal level.

Echoing this line, Ron Jenkins claims:

> The power of the mask is rooted in paradox, in the fusion of opposites. It brings together the self and the other by enabling us to look at the world through someone else's face. It merges past and present by reflecting faces that are the likenesses of both our ancestors and our neighbours. A mask is a potent metaphor for the coalescence of the universal and the particular, immobility and change, disguise and revelation (1981:21).

Furthermore, "At its most fundamental the act of masking is an embodied paradox: the wearer has a face and a not-face, he is transformed by that which dehumanizes him" (Tonkin in Ebong, 1984: 2). That is to say that masks reveal and disguise the human figure, but paradoxically also reveal double and multiple images of humankind's "being in the world". This sentiment, in particular, holds a key not only for training in mask work, but also watching masks on stage. To my mind, this is one of their fundamental, and embodied, paradoxes.

Working with, or watching, masks always involves an immersion into this embodied paradox, as well as the many ambiguities that spring from it, and such tensions remain at the heart of contemporary mask work today, with some important departures which split the manner in which masks have been approached.

On the one hand, there is reverence to the "spirit" of the mask, clearly still aligned with its primitive roots, with practitioners who believe that one needs to enter into a trance-like state in order to play a character mask. This is a view presented, for example, by Keith Johnstone (1992: 143–205). On the other hand, others reject this notion and have tried to eschew the distinctions made between masks as being either "sacred" (belonging strictly to the religious and social world of ritual), or "secular" (belonging to the theatre, to the world of entertainment).

[20] "Jon Baisch (1977: 18) contends that masks are the artistic creations of "universal duality." That is, they are visceral statements about the "duality" of man and his ever-changing universe; they symbolize the dual personality of man and the changes in his psychic and physical composition; they are powerful reverberations of the paradox of revelation in concealment and vice versa: masks are devices for concealment and disguise, but in the process they reveal the multifarious forms and attributes, polarities and essences of life, being, and existence. That is, they present double and multiple images of the psycho-physical composition of man and phenomena. Thus, in a relatively parallel argument, Robert Benedetti (1972: 72) concludes that the mask idiom is a principal psycho-physical "mechanism . . . designed to project a sense of the self." (Ebong, 1984: 2-3).

UK director and former Trestle Theatre founder, Toby Wilsher sums this up best:

> Under the heading of sacred come all the masks where the society in which they are used truly believe that the transformation that takes place when someone dons a mask is magic, and that both the wearer and the mask itself is are imbued with that magic ... In a secular society, all the above is not true, and if people say that it is, then I would suggest that the experience of watching or wearing a mask is an excuse or metaphor for something else to do with that person, such as a longing for some belief, or a form of psychotherapy that is fulfilling a need. (Wilsher, 2007: 12-13)

This "fulfilling a need" is a fascinating turnaround for any preconception of the performing object being child's play – this is explored further in Chapter 4. It is as if humans, too mired in their adult "being in the world" (Merleau-Ponty, 1968), and too rooted to conventional ways of perceiving the world (or the world being reimagined for them on stage), have difficulty managing the ambiguity thrown back at them.

2.2. Ambiguities of Visual Theatre

What is this ambiguity? It is a tightly wound and core existential element of Visual Theatre. It is a maddening ambiguity where a thing is *both this and that*. Or any number of things. Central to this argument is the ambiguity of the mask-puppet as object becoming the very subject and creating a massive disturbance through its occupying a double space of being both dead and alive. Or, as Ebong quotes Tonkin above: "At its most fundamental the act of masking is an embodied paradox: the wearer has a face and a not-face, he is transformed by that which dehumanizes him" (Ebong: 1984: 2).

An inanimate object becomes animated, is jolted into life, and when this happens in a time and space that directly involves us as seer-audience, then our preconceptions of reality and illusion are exploded, and theatre becomes a place it was always maybe meant to be – the ambiguous space of a double life, alive and dead, between humankind and the gods, between rationality and madness, a place where, following Artaud, the act of experiencing theatre furnishes the spectator with the "truthful precipitate of dreams" (1993: 63).[21]

What does this all mean for the mask? Ebong (1984: 3) continues:

> From these views, we could deduce, at least, three important universal absolutes about the mask, namely: the mask is a (1) melange of cosmo-physical powers and attributes, (2) symbol of the universal paradox and duality of the cosmo-human personality, and (3) visceral matrix for the comprehension of the metaphysical paradox of man and phenomena.

This might all sound a bit dense, anthropologically. This all speaks to the mask's positioning as a liminal object that even today spans the spiritual as much as in contemporary use it can just exist as a character. As I have written before, there is an undeniable energy when one confronts it – it is the paradoxical and metaphysical nature of "man and phenomena" that shudders through students and audiences alike.

As mentioned earlier, Joseph Campbell (1960: 21) tries to put it more plainly:

[21] This phrase of Artaud's has long been influential to my thinking about theatre creation, and plays a large part in the development of the works cited herein for reflection and analysis.

> Moreover, the mask in a primitive festival is revered and experienced as a veritable apparition of the mythical being that it represents – even though everyone knows that a man made the mask and that a man is wearing it. The one wearing it, furthermore, is identified with the god during the time of the ritual of which the mask is a part. He does not merely represent the god; he is the god. The literal fact that the apparition is composed of A, a mask, B, its reference to a mythical being, and C, a man, is dismissed from the mind, and the presentation is allowed to work without correction upon the sentiments of both the beholder and the actor. In other words, there has been a shift of view from the logic of the normal secular sphere, where things are understood to be distinct from one another, to a theatrical or play sphere, where they are accepted for what they are *experienced* as being and the logic is that of "make believe" – "as if."

The ability of masks, or any performing object, to allow for a shift of logic from the "normal" into a dream world of "make believe" highlights an enormous authorial power; and one encased in a relatively simply made object. It almost beggars belief that an object made by *papier mâché*, or leather, or plastic, can influence one's imagination so much, but it does. Ebong (1984: 4) sums it up:

> The actor attains a "dual" or "double" consciousness in the process of recreation, of recreating himself and redefining his being within phenomena. First, he is the *known* personality who, behind and inside the mask, is fully conscious of the uniqueness of his identity and the uniqueness of the role he is playing as *actor*. Second, he is the *unknown* personality, the unpredictable, "weird" *presence* – the masked actor who, having absorbed the cosmological vitality of the mask, has become possessed by, and unified with, forces by far greater than, and beyond, his mortal estimation and control, and has therefore become transformed into both a receptacle and a vehicle for the "terrifying" forces of his subservience.

By recognising all of these realms of fascination that have come before, I would like to acknowledge the dense intertwining of masks in the evolution of societies as well as their senses of self; but at the same time, I am drawing a clear line to delineate that all the above is *not* what this thesis aims to take on. There is a vast spiritual significance of mask work in religious rituals which is fascinating, but I'm not going to get into that. The actor has their familiar persona as a performer knowingly playing a part. And in absorbing the mask's power, they also become a vessel for more terrifying, supernatural forces. As Ebong states, this suggests the actor identifies and unifies with and simultaneously loses control over the mask's energy and spirit. The actor transforms into a receptacle for these cosmic vitalities that subsume their mortal being.

The quote alludes to the mask allowing a kind of possession, where the actor connects with and gives themselves over to mythic, spiritual dimensions within the archetype. This implies there are psychological and mystical dynamics occurring simultaneously. This approach to mask work is all too familiar with how mask work was experienced and taught in universities during the mid to late twentieth century – as students we were encouraged to give ourselves over to the spirit of the mask. This is relevant to many African masks, which are mostly symmetrical in design, and are specifically made to release a spirit or animal. This is also true in traditional mask work, like *Commedia dell'arte* or Noh Theatre, where the mask is a set character based on hundreds of years of tradition, and there is an established way of playing them.

The contemporary silent character mask is completely different, although it retains traces of the mask's spiritual power. Asymmetrical in design, they are available to be interpreted by the

performer as a "text". In the same way as one could get ten actors and each plays a different version of Shakespeare's Hamlet, one could get ten actors playing the same mask in ten different ways. Wilsher (2007: 13) writes:

> In a sacred society, a mask is totemic, shamanic, an object linked to deity, a liminal tool that stands at the threshold of the world they know and the world they don't. Masks in this society are unequivocal, unambiguous and never metaphorical. In a secular society, such as Britain, masks are used for entertainment.

I would thus like to make the distinction between masks used for sacred, spiritual purposes, and those used for "entertainment", yet which does not deny the efficacy of socio-cultural and psychological work which feeds our contemporary mythologies in an essentially materialistic *weltanschauung*. Historically, masks have been used as entertainment in theatre in many diverse forms – for example, Balinese Kaccan, Noh Theatre, Greek theatre, *Commedia dell'arte*, and the like. These forms had both ritual, religious and entertainment values. Each of these are fascinating and many books and theses have been written detailing their usage and legacies, however I am more focused on contemporary Mask Theatre, which is relatively new, and tied to a specifically Western perspective.

During the 20th century, masks came in and out of vogue and interest. Susan Harris (1984) details the use of masks in Modern Drama from a North American viewpoint. Sears Eldredge (1996: 16), also from an American perspective, writes that: "new masks appear in times of psychic upheaval and transition". In his case, he is referring mainly to the two World Wars of the 20th century, and the recurrence of masks as a psychological need for reinvention. It is an appealing thought though – the link between masks in theatre and how they appear in times of upheaval and transition.

Globally, though, it is probably Jacques Lecoq who resurrected interest in theatrical masks in the 1970s – from the Neutral Mask, through larval[22], half-face commedia masks, and three-quarter masks, all the way to the clown's red nose what he calls the "smallest mask in the world" (Rolfe, 1972: 38). His school[23] has produced thousands of graduates who have then returned to their home countries to set up companies and schools that have continued his legacy. Many of the most prominent physical theatre makers in South Africa during the last three decades have trained at his school. These are best known for their "physical theatre" style, rather than mask work as such. In terms of mask work, specifically there is a school called Helikos[24] in Italy, run by Giovanni Fusetti who is probably the most prominent of Lecoq's disciples. And his graduates are likewise advancing the pedagogy embedded there, as well as training in various forms of Mask Theatre.

2.3. The Silent Mask Enters the Picture

[22] Larval masks are unformed character masks – usually just an over-exaggerated nose or forehead. They are based on carnival masks in Basel where, once a year, there is a parade of masks through the town. People buy the blank white masks and then decorate them as they see fit. Lecoq saw in these blank masks a step before character, and introduced them, undecorated, as larval masks, to his school. Working on the floor with them introduces one to anarchy, as they exist in an alien naiveté and hardly respond to human commands or norms.
[23] http://ecole-jacqueslecoq.com/
[24] www.helikos.com

In terms of companies using the theatrical mask in Britain, graduates of Lecoq's school formed Moving Picture Mime Show in the mid-to-late 1970s. Then, in the 1980s, Trestle Theatre emerged in the UK and made important ground-breaking mask work.[25] Working with them were important directors like Toby Wilsher and John Wright – both of whose writings will feature prominently throughout this thesis.[26]

- Despite this blossoming of Mask Theatre during the 1980s and 1990s, the form did not take off globally – with perhaps the exception of a company like Mummenschantz (also Lecoq graduates) who still make beautiful non-verbal work using "body-masks". Any teaching of masks relied heavily on historical traditions – most notably *commedia dell'arte*. Since the 2000s, however, there has been a renaissance of sorts, and currently there are a few very important companies who utilise masks as their primary theatrical expression. Leading the pack these days are: Familie Flöz[27] from Germany – they have had tremendous success over the last few years across Europe and at international festivals such as Edinburgh. Flöz have also been running an annual mask residency in Italy for the past 12 years or so, and many of their members teach at tertiary institutions.[28]

- Vamos Theatre[29] from the UK – they make amazing work tied strongly to social issues, for example early onset dementia, PTSD, death, and so on.[30]

- Wonderheads[31] formerly from Portland, USA, but now based in Canada – they do lovely cartoonesque work.

- Kulunka from Spain.

There are other schools in Europe, USA, and Australasia that feature mask work, but the above have had the biggest impact.

"The full-faced and thus silent mask", writes Toby Wilsher in his seminal work, *The Mask Handbook*, "has for centuries been a carnival tool, or an aid to ritual. As a silent expressive medium in itself it is relatively new." (2007: 26).

[25] Trestle are still going, but don't do exclusively mask work anymore.
[26] Wilsher's 2007 *The Mask Handbook* remains one of the best theoretical and practical books in existence for Mask Theatre. It was the primary text that we used to teach ourselves and which helped us create *Pictures of You* in 2008.
[27] https://www.floez.net/start.en.html
[28] They are a great bunch of people – in 2011 we met them at HIFA (Harare International Festival of the Arts) and were treated to a backstage tour to see how they do much of their work. We also got to participate in a workshop with them.
[29] https://www.vamostheatre.co.uk/
[30] Also an amazing group of people – I met them in Cape Town in 2016 and purchased a set of training masks from them.
[31] https://www.wonderheads.com/

Figure 5: Neutral Mask training at AFDA JHB.

South Africa's indigenous cultures do not actually have a tradition of masks. This has always amazed me, as African masks are some of the oldest in the world and there is a rich and varied tradition as well as a plethora of ubiquitous African masks at galleries, markets, collections, and museums. However, these originate north of our borders and do not seem to have made a journey down south. There is some evidence in cave paintings and the like of the original inhabitants of South Africa, the Khoisan, utilising body-masks (covering the whole body and not just the face) to re-enact a hunt, or to invoke the hunt in a shamanic way. These would probably be seen as "sacred" masks that link to animism and sympathetic magic that we see around the world in religion, festivities, and the like. However, there is no tradition of masks in South Africa.

Despite this, and a few iterations of more western mask approaches (such as *Commedia dell'arte* masks in the 20th century), during the first decade of the 21st century, masks suddenly started to leak onto stages, and slowly a small group of practitioners groped towards embedding Mask Theatre into the public and scholarly consciousness.

Figure 6: Afrocentric Neutral Masks by Iman Isaacs at UCT.

For myself, I got into theatrical masks from working with Deaf and hearing actors in our company FTHK, and a distinctive non-verbal and silent approach to make theatrical work that really

foregoes any language barrier and is accessible to all. This is a necessity in our country which has eleven official languages, with SA Sign Language as an unofficial twelfth. For the last 15 years or so, I have been developing pedagogies and approaches and works that look for a South African relevance and feel to the full-faced, silent, character mask. Works such as *Waterline* (2014-2015) and *Phitlho* (2018) were made predominantly with black actors and transcend the feeling that mask work is more for European predilection.

Notwithstanding my own integration of Mask Theatre as a core principle to my pedagogy, there are few institutions that teach it. In Cape Town, Jennie Reznek (herself a Lecoq graduate) and Mark Fleishman are founding members of Magnet Theatre. While they do not teach Mask Theatre *per se*, Reznek incorporates elements of neutrality into her teaching and training. And at the University of Cape Town (UCT), Iman Isaacs has designed what she calls "afrocentric" neutral masks which she uses in her teaching. (See Figure 6.)

Most recently, in 2021 in Johannesburg, peers of mine opened the Johannesburg School of Mask and Movement Theatre[32] where the core principles are led by Roberto Pombo, a Helikos graduate. I'm looking forward to seeing its ongoing development.

UP (University of Pretoria) also runs a mask module, and in 2023, WITS started one also, borrowing masks from me to facilitate its course.

The emergence of Mask Theatre in South Africa, and its potential for actor training and creation, will be taken up in much more depth in Chapter 4. In doing so, the thesis aims to take a synchronic approach to a certain period of time within South African theatre development in the 21st century where full-faced character masks made their appearance on theatrical stages and have led to a certain pedagogy (mine and others) of teaching performance within a greater awareness and appreciation of "performing objects" (a term coined by Proschan, 1985) by audiences and practitioners in this country – a larger umbrella term that is also called Visual Theatre. In doing so, I never lose sight of the complementary diachronic approach that has led to such an appearance. his then always lends itself to the very heart of the matter – the dualism of the mask, and all the attendant ambiguity, fluidity, and porosity that this brings to the fore. Also, in contemporary Mask Theatre, whenever there is a mask present, there is always the *contramasque* (counter-mask). Layer upon layer, fluid ambiguity, and a delicate dance between *stasis* and movement, as well as disguising and revealing – all this from a sculpted, and fixed object; all this playing out for performer and audience alike in a subliminal *frisson* of an encounter between life and death.

As Kenneth Gross writes about puppets: "A wooden head contains many strange worlds" (Gross, 2011: 4).

[32] https://jhbmaskandmovement.co.za/

Chapter 3. A Short Meditation on Silence

3.1. Introduction

The expression "a conspiracy of silence" appears to be a negative saying as it conjures up one or more persons colluding together to remain silent about a specific act or issue. This is prevalent in contemporary society as one constantly reads about (or indeed experiences) conspiracies of silence to bury details of, for example, gender-based violence (GBV), the #MeToo Movement, #BlackLivesMatter, the state capture of South African government departments, and many many more. Keeping silent about any of these issues becomes an ethical issue, in that society should be flooded by sound and testimony to expose the conspiracy and open up a place for transformation and healing.

In 1980, The Clash sang: "Kick over the wall 'cause government's to fall / How can you refuse it? / Let fury have the hour, anger can be power / Do you know that you can use it?"[33] In their *milieu* of Thatcherite Britain, many supported their angry outcry. Currently, there is still support for the need to speak "truth to power". The last few years have seen a groundswell of protests, demonstrations, riots, and lootings around the globe. Many were followed by acts of authoritarian backlash to quell such uprisings. The world is a very loud and angry place, with conflicting emotions, ideologies, and beliefs literally shouting at each other. There would appear to be little space for silence itself.

What is silence, though, and how can one think about it? In its very basic definition, one could call it an absence of sound. Or, in other words, the binary opposite of sound. However, this is not particularly useful, as it once again reinforces the negative connotation of the word. This can be seen in the proliferation of sayings or expressions that support this: to "silence" someone is to hush them up or to tell them to be quiet; censorship silences free speech; corrupt authorities or criminals pay "hush money" to keep potential whistle-blowers quiet; and popular *noir* fiction and films take this to an excessive level where to silence someone is literally to kill them.

There is thus a level of obedience and compliance in silence, where the established order remains satisfied that they are in control, that things are calm and at peace. There is an English proverb, possibly dating back to the 15th century, which states that "children should be seen and not heard" – a phrase usually followed by "do not speak unless spoken to". Furthermore, the dreadful colonial saying (often used in a humorous context) of "the natives are restless" points to the breakdown of order and a loud, noisy population festering rebellion. "Silence is golden" sang the Tremeloes in 1967: "Talking is cheap, people follow like sheep / Even though there is nowhere to go / How could she tell, he deceived her so well / Pity she'll be the last one to know / Silence is golden / But my eyes still see".[34]

[33] Lyrics from *Clampdown*, written by Joe Strummer, Topper Headon, Mick Jones, and Paul Simonen. Off the *London Calling* album, produced and released by CBS Records: 1979.
[34] *Silence is Golden,* written by Bob Crewe Bob Gaudio, as recorded by The Tremeloes on *Silence is Golden*, produced by Epic Records: 1967.

Despite some of the negative connotations, there is another side to the story – where silence is seen as something positive. Suburban neighbourhoods get tetchy when someone activates a loud leaf-blower, or someone starts a car-boot party with thumping bass music on a Sunday morning – this is, after all, meant to be the day of rest; a respite; a *blaas-kansie*.[35] In the 1980s, I grew up listening to the Lexington cigarette advertisement on the radio: "after action – satisfaction" that played on this very moment; once one is finished, one deserves the right to take a silent moment of contemplation (and, in this case, a cigarette) and reflect on a job well done. This (and many other examples of that anachronistic genre of the cigarette advertisement) conjured up a nostalgia and yearning for those particular moments of serenity and peace – a campfire, the end of a day, and the night sky above. No need to talk. All is quiet and all is well.

The above calm and silence are also present, I believe, in more spiritual situations – whether it be meditation or religious prayer. Many Buddhist meditation retreats maintain "noble silence" for all or part of the day[36] an opportunity to not be constantly distracted by engagement with other people and to allow one's thoughts and inner emotions to settle. In the Christian tradition monks could take a "vow of silence" in order to commune more directly with their deity. And, of course, in theatre there is that magical moment when the houselights fade, and the audience hushes expectantly for the play to unfold before them, an opening up of space, a place to play. It is as if the audience breathes together and casts a silent spell of suspension of disbelief before the lights rise and the world of the play reveals itself.

The pause between notes. The calm before the storm. The silence of God's departure.

3.2. The Silent Performer

In a foreword to *The Blood Knot* (1961), Athol Fugard writes:

> ... the actor and the stage, the actor on the stage. Around him is space, to be filled and defined by movement and gesture; around him is silence to be filled with meaning, using words and sounds, and at moments when all else fails him, including the words, silence itself.

The above quote has been with me throughout my journey as a theatre-maker – how one could best use silence itself on stage. Here I am going to go nowhere near the rabbit-hole of the classical silent mime form. Not only have I written an MA thesis on that particular area, but also, it is a form that became codified in its use of silence. In short, speech was literally "silenced" and much of the frustration associated with mime stems from watching performers who could clearly speak, but chose not to. Classical mime, like ballet, and many forms of movement, is in essence the creation of a different language – each with its own codification and recognisable syntax. In this sense, the "silent mime" was never silent.

What interests me more is grappling with the rawness of silence in a non-verbal context, and the impact this has on the performer, the dramaturge, and the audience. Writing about the process he employed with his students, in a more *open mime* approach, the late Jacques Lecoq (2000: 29) wrote: "We begin with silence, for the spoken word often forgets the roots from which it grew, and it is

[35] An Afrikaans saying that literally means "small chance for a breath".
[36] I cannot claim authority here.

a good thing for students to place themselves in the position of primal naïveté, a state of innocent curiosity."

While the above use of "primal" can be seen as problematic in more contemporary times, the general thrust of Lecoq's words indicate a beginning point, a double-zero, a reset position from which observation and reflection might flow; followed by the technical wherewithal and artistic sensibility to create a form of theatrical expression. The state of "curiosity" which pedagogue Giovanni Fusetti (in many ways the inheritor of Lecoq's quest) also fervently believes in, is one in which one can stand and listen to the world around one and feel connected through time to one's ancestors, forbearers, one's own *milieu*, and one's own lineage. Lecoq continues:

> In any human relationship two major zones of silence emerge: before and after speech. Before, when no words have been spoken, one is in a state of modesty which allows words to be born out of silence; in this state strength comes from avoiding explanatory discourse. By taking these silent situations, and working on human nature, we can rediscover those moments when the words do not yet exist. The other kind of silence comes afterwards: when there is nothing more to be said. For us that one is not so interesting (Lecoq, 2000: 29).

While I do see the pedagogical value of the above for students, I wonder what absurdist playwrights like Samuel Beckett, Eugene Ionesco, Harold Pinter, and others would have to say about the latter part – the silence afterwards, when "there is nothing more to be said".[37]

Although this is not an exhaustive treatise on silence, what can be seen is that silence holds a central and often contradictory position in our lives. It is pointless to consider sound and silence as polar or binary opposites – if anything, they exist on a continuum running from positive to negative, from absolute silence to a loud *melange* of noise; and this continuum twists and turns through one's life like renegade strands of DNA. Any contemplation of silence will have to plunge into this complicated mess, and consider some of these strands pushing and pulling in different directions.

Consider a candle in the darkness. This is a situation very relevant to South African life certainly from the mid-2000s to present day.[38] In the absence of electrical light, the candle takes on a different lustre. It is somehow brighter, more focused, and more comforting, as it ekes out a tiny moment of lux from the surrounding darkness.

The same can be said for a music player running on batteries that are constantly losing power – the sound that it produces feels different; even richer, if one knows that time is limited. This is made poignant by the fact that it will eventually run out; but for the moment it is rich and warm,

[37] That is perhaps also because I am not a young human anymore and have experienced a fair amount of silence, and time, on my own. The distance between those two points also suggests a beautiful story to explore – but that is another matter.

[38] In the mid-2000s, many South African power stations began to malfunction due to mechanical neglect, a lack of governmental foresight, and the increased demands on the electricity grid. This resulted in a long-lasting and infuriating series of "rolling blackouts" as well as what is now known as "loadshedding". In this, certain sectors of municipal areas are subjected to blackouts for hours at a time. Although there are attempts to schedule this routinely, the blackouts can be random and happen at very frustrating or inconvenient times. South Africans being who and what they are have adapted to this and begrudgingly live as the "loadshedding generation".

and lyrics and melodies seem more potent or personal. Similarly, in the near darkness, cheap red wine tastes better. Fabric feels different against the skin.

It is in moments like these that one is tempted to switch off all the lights that one knows one left on – to try to extend these fleeting moments, and not be interrupted by the return of electricity. There is a casual intimacy in that moment of candle, temporary music and wine; the various elements of the situation conspire together to create a personal and individual experience. It can be shared, but usually is one best experienced alone. Turn the power back on, restore the electricity, and the candle, music player, and wine begin to feel fake.

They begin to feel artificial somehow, as if, within the restored electricity, the artifice of a simple candle no longer holds us in its sway. The "make believe" of a candle, or a battery, or of cheap wine pretending to be better than they really are, cannot make up for, nor take away from, the nagging feeling that if one just turned on a light, then it would expose the candle and battery and wine for what they are: a lump of wax and string, a chemical reaction that has a limited lifespan, and cheap wine is ... well, just *plonk*.

What gives the candle its power? The battery its allure? What makes us believe so fervently in that wax and string, that chemical reaction, that wine, when it comes down to our simultaneous knowledge and belief that we *know* that that is all they are?

Consider a campfire, or any fire. Like all the elements, it holds within it considerable power to protect and provide – as much it holds the potential for mass devastation. Who hasn't sat in stark fascination watching a million stories roil in a fire's unstrained need to survive, to thrive? The darkness gathers around us; we draw closer, our faces melting and shifting in its light. Stories begin, mythologies are resurrected. Then consider the power of a dying ember. The burning-out candle, the running-down battery. The dysfunction of an object. The brokenness and impermanence of everything in life. The out-breath; one's final breath. The tragedy of materials – exert any force on a material to alter its shape and structure,[39] and it will fight to regain its original form. The tragedy is that this is impossible to achieve, but the material strives in vain to achieve this goal. Similarly, we will never again be who and what we once were.

Now – consider all of the above again from the perspective of silence. What this thesis sets out to do is to consider all the above from the perspective of the silent mask.

What I am attempting to foreground here are some of my personal reflections of, and experience with, silence and masks with the aim to contextualise what I mean when I write about them.

At the turn of the Millennium, the story goes that the Royal Theatre of London attempted to reach out and appeal to a younger audience. In order to do so, they conducted a survey to gain insight into their intended audience. When the data was analysed, instead of the expected call for sex, drugs, and violence, what became crystal clear was a desire for, and I am paraphrasing here: "great visuals and a kicking soundtrack!"[40]

[39] This is a Jacques Lecoq exercise.
[40] This story may be apocryphal as I cannot find reference to it – I heard it from Jacqueline Dommisse in the mid-2000s.

As society has advanced technologically, activities and actions have been automated – all in the name of advancement and efficiency.[41] While many of these advancements have been beneficial and often life-saving – or at very least life-enhancing – there has also been a techno-pessimism that it has filled life with more clutter and taken away certain moments of contemplation or time itself. Everything moves faster, is bigger, glossier, and noisier. In his seminal dystopian novel *Fahrenheit 451* (1953), Ray Bradbury writes: "The zipper displaces the button and a man lacks just that much time to think while dressing at dawn, a philosophical hour, and thus a melancholy hour."[42] Nature, after all, has a *horror vacui*, and pours in to fill the available space. So too does technology.

In the Industrial Age, and subsequently the Information Age, the rate of change multiplied exponentially. And so too did noise – the world has become a much noisier place. In the foreword to *his* dystopian novel, *Crash* (1974), J.G. Ballard writes: "Over our lives preside the twin motifs of the 20th century – sex and paranoia". With the advent of the internet, this has never rung truer, and it is difficult to escape from the endless news-cycles of catastrophe, ideology-clash, advertisement, and pornography. Society is beset from all sides by a continual stream of visuals with a soundtrack.

It seems silence, in its capacity for personal contemplation, reflection, and therefore experience, is in short shrift and has very little place in the world.

It also begs the question – is there such a thing as silence? Pure, unadulterated silence?[43] Again, this is a much bigger contemplation and will not be able to be answered in an introduction or contextualisation of a different thesis.

From my experiences of working with the Deaf Community, I was taken aback to learn that total deafness is actually a very rare condition. I realise that this was such an awful assumption on my part but was intrigued to learn that most deaf people can hear a spectrum of sound – even at thirty to forty percent hearing capacity.

3.3. John Cage and Silence

20th century composer, artist, and philosopher, John Cage, was always fascinated by the concept of whether true silence existed and how it could be utilised. Among other influences, he was an ardent student of Zen-Buddhism throughout the 1940s, and the practice of silent meditation would have sparked much of his fascination. According to many sources (Gann 2010, Kenny 2011, Olivieri-Munroe, 2011 and Cage 2011), one of the central stories of his quest was his experience of entering an anechoic chamber at Harvard University in 1951. An anechoic chamber is a room designed that the walls, ceiling and floor *absorb* all sounds made in the room, rather than reflecting them as echoes (Olivieri-Munroe 2011). In essence, such a room is sound-proof, internally and externally. Cage entered the chamber expecting to hear silence, but instead heard two sounds – one high (his nervous system) and the second low (his blood).

[41] And let's not forget – to cut costs and boost profits.
[42] (Bradbury, R. 1953. *Fahrenheit 451*. USA: Ballantine Books: 85).
[43] There are very few places left without human made noise: https://www.bbc.com/future/article/20140117-earths-last-place-without-noise

Cage (2011: 21-22) realised that:

> ... silence becomes something else – not silence at all, but sounds, the ambient sounds. The nature of these is unpredictable and changing. These sounds (which are called silence only because they do not form part of a musical intention) may be depended upon to exist. The world teems with them, and is, in fact, at no point free of them.

The following year, 1952, he premiered a new work for an unsuspecting audience: *4'33"*. Now infamous[44] as a seminal avant-garde work, conductor Charles Olivieri-Munroe (2011) writes that *4'33"* is:

> ... a three-movement composition written for any instrument (or combination of instruments). The score instructs the performer not to play the instrument during the three movements (the first being thirty seconds, the second being two minutes and twenty-three seconds, and the third being one minute and forty seconds).

With the only visible action being the raising and lowering of the piano lid (if a piano is present), the effect of the composition has been fascinating. I have yet to experience it live (only on filmed versions), but I can imagine all too clearly the feeling in the room. An embarrassed cough here. A hushed whisper there. The scrape of a chair. A nervous leg judder. However, as Olivier-Munroe continues, the actual point of the piece was not to attempt an impossible way of "writing" or "performing" silence, or uncomfortably trying to be quiet, but rather:

> Because Cage could not find silence, we, the performers and audience are likewise not supposed to look for it. Musicians consider it too difficult to perform *4'33"* because they are concerned about what the audience will think and how they will react sitting in silence. Many people probably feel they need to almost stop breathing for the duration of the piece so as not to upset the atmosphere. They do not understand that they are meant to relax and take in the music that occurs spontaneously around them. It actually should become a fascinating and intriguing experience to concentrate and really listen to the sounds within the concert hall emitted by any number of sources – not just audience and performers.

I believe that this observation is crucial in beginning to understand how silent masks work. As Olivier-Munroe states *4'33"* does not demand of the performer nor audience to be stifled by an imposed *silencing*, but rather, it is an invitation to relax into a unique moment, allowing one's senses to take in other sources of stimuli. There's a foregrounding of a completely sensory experience, which allows one to reconsider the dramatic narrative one is experiencing from a different angle. Another perspective. The candle in the dark adds more than light. It also creates – by making space for – experience.

Silence does not exist. It cannot, by itself. That eternity is too great for one to contemplate. And yet, it is omnipresent and necessary; for without it, sound, as per Cage above, could not exist. Silence marks the beginning and end of a sound in the same way that stillness marks the beginning and end of a movement. Without those gaps, those pauses, those silences, one would battle to

[44] The café at Amsterdam's famous Muziekgebouw aan 't IJ (a centre for contemporary classical and avant-garde music) is called Grand Café 4'33 – https://www.433grandcafe.nl/

comprehend what a movement or sound is. Silence itself could be said to rely on sound. And sound on silence.

Speaking about the audience's reaction after the *4'33"* premiere, Cage said:

> They missed the point. There's no such thing as silence. What they thought was silence, because they didn't know how to listen, was full of accidental sounds. You could hear the wind stirring outside during the first movement. During the second, raindrops began pattering the roof, and during the third the people themselves made all kinds of interesting sounds as they talked or walked out.

They didn't know how to listen – maybe this is the kernel of truth to take away from this discussion on silence, before I dive into masks. In the loud and violently visual contemporary world, we forget how to listen – we certainly battle to listen to one another, and to the world around us. Everyone seems to be shouting. And as such, we are losing, or letting slip, opportunities to really find a connection.

Writing and reflecting on the work of American performer Deb Margolin and her fascination with silence as a failure of language, Gwendolyn Alker (2008: 124) writes:

> It's not that silence is universalizing in its sameness; in fact, Margolin is adamant about the way that the silences change throughout the span of her performances. It's that the silence of performance is a universal invitation to witness so that each audience member takes responsibility for the clarity of her or his own meanings. And these meanings, in turn, are a gift to the performer who has initiated the interplay. Silence, in Margolin's eyes, is an opportunity to understand her own work better, and an invitation for her audience to join her in whatever ultimate interpretations they may have, in the hermeneutical process.

This opportunity, for an audience and oneself, is a powerful one for all involved to take "responsibility" for clarity and meaning. Working with Deaf and hearing company members for a number of years, we eventually distilled this, and our Visual Theatre approach, into:

Figure 7: Listen with your Eyes

What I have been discovering in the research and reflection offered by this thesis, is to articulate what I might mean when I talk of silence – as much as it does my own personal journey with masks. Looking back on my life I see an explorer buffeted and tossed around by the storms of life (see Appendix A). In as much as it has seen me on shaky ground, the journey has allowed me to build a vessel, a house, a cairn of stones on which to dwell and to carry me forward. Perhaps not a home just yet – the pattern of early uprooting and displacement has certainly continued with me; however, perhaps this can be something of a cornerstone. A hearthstone.

How do I consider silence presently? I keep returning to that image of the candle, burning steadfastly, surrounded by darkness. It is a calmness and silence in the absence of *distracting* noise. This distraction comes in the form of loud, omnipresent chatter, political rhetoric, dissenting voices, calamity in the world, as much as it comes from our own "nuns in our heads" – the chaperones that were sent to be with us. Here perhaps I am contemplating a calm *sureness* where I don't have to shout or beat against a wall for attention. A mature calm. A calm of knowing who I am and how I link to the world. As Rumi writes: "When the ocean is searching for you, don't walk to the language-river. Listen to the ocean, and bring your talky business to an end."

Send the chaperones away and leave me with my beloved.

Chapter 4: A Conspiracy of Objects – Conceptualising Visual Theatre in South Africa

> One definition of "physical and visual theatre" has traditionally been that it is theatre that doesn't work on the radio – so this was one of the teaser questions thrown to the Salon. Perhaps surprisingly, radio was embraced as a medium for physical/visual performance by many of the practitioners present: "I first heard Monty Python on the radio and found it funnier on the radio than on TV!" said Richard Cuming of Winchester University. Marianne Sharp said "Radio is a very physical medium – and all physical theatre work has a rhythm and a sound running through it. You can see sound and hear action. Some people hear the phone ring in a colour." So perhaps it is time for a name change – from Total Theatre to Synaesthetic Theatre?
>
> No, no – Total Theatre will do. On the question of definitions – they've preoccupied us all for a long time, too long perhaps. Rather than add more definitions to a term that has been bandied around a fair bit (from Wagner to Artaud to Moholy-Nagy to Grotowski to Schechner even before we got our hands on it) let's focus instead on the work, and let that serve as a "liquid map of shifting territory" as dramaturg Phil Smith sees it.
>
> -Dorothy Max Prior, (2005: 8-11)

4.1. Introduction to Visual Theatre

The threads of what has come to be loosely termed "Visual Theatre" are many and do not necessarily tie together in a neat and ordered package. The field is vast and encompasses elements of Physical Theatre, mask work, puppetry, object theatre, object-based theatre, experimental work, and current technological advances in image and video projection, holograms, table-top theatre, right up to and including Augmented Reality (AR), Virtual Reality (VR), Mixed Reality (MR), and 360° film.[45]

Consequently, a comprehensive definition of what Visual Theatre is seems almost impossible. South African-based Handspring Puppet Company embraces the term, seeing Visual Theatre (or "visual performance") as an umbrella term marking "a multidisciplinary entry point to contemporary performance and its many branches such as performance art, movement, theatre, multimedia, mask, video, puppetry, stage design and visual art, amongst others" (Van Deventer et al., n.d.).However, as will be shown, such an embracing is not necessarily commonplace, and both researchers and practitioners have for decades been falling over themselves to arrive at a more suitable conceptualisation.

In this chapter, I attempt to investigate and discuss many of the threads and prominent theories around this ever-shifting field in order to place my own evolution as a theatre-maker in a South African context. In doing so, I attempt, as per Dorothy Max Prior above, to "focus instead on the work, and let that serve as a 'liquid map of shifting territory'". Accordingly, I have divided this chapter into a further reflection of my development, and have then grouped thoughts together under three broad themes which I believe to be pertinent:

Theme 1. A Wooden Head Contains Many Worlds: What's In A Name?

Theme 2. Child's Play – The Struggle for Agency and Acceptance.

Theme 3. Technological Excesses and Lo-fi Adaptations.

In the preceding chapters, I have sketched out a few biographical details of my interests and inspirations. In the next one, I want to look at some prominent student experiments that led to where I am today. These intersect and integrate strongly with my ongoing understanding of Visual Theatre and how it includes and sustains Mask Theatre within its threads.

4.2. Theme 1. A Wooden Head Contains Many Worlds: What's In a Name like Visual Theatre?

How does one go about conceptualising Visual Theatre when it incorporates so many disparate fields? There are so many complementary terms already in existence – one could easily exchange Physical Theatre for Visual Theatre, or Total Theatre (as per Dorothy Max Prior earlier), or Performing Objects (as per Frank Proschan, 1985), or Material Performance (Posner, Orenstein, and Bell, 2015). And, if one is then further looking to write about Mask Theatre and separate it

[45] In 2019, A Conspiracy of Clowns participated in a workshop series devoted to exploring the possibilities of combining objects, puppets, sound, and 360° film at William Kentridge's Centre for the Less Good Idea in Maboneng, Johannesburg. The sessions were the precursor for the curation of Season 5 to be held at the Centre early 2019.

from Puppetry or Puppet Theatre, isn't one just tying oneself up in knots? Let us venture into this tangled skein to see what similarities we can find first between the puppet and the mask.

Mask in contemporary Visual Theatre stems from the many ambiguities that mask work embodies. To recap, the mask is both dead and alive – it disguises, and it reveals. It is static, and yet seems to move. Toby Wilsher is still one of the world's leading authorities on mask theatre, even though he is no longer a practitioner. He worked as Artistic Director with Trestle Theatre Company in the UK from 1981–2004 and in his seminal book, *The Mask Handbook* (2007), he breaks down the use of mask in society into two broad sections: sacred and secular. In terms of the "sacred", Wilsher writes that these are:

> ... the masks where the society in which they are used truly believe that the transformation that takes place when somebody dons a mask is magic, and that both the wearer and the mask itself are imbued with that magic. This could include the wearer as well, who is transformed mentally by wearing a mask, into a state of trance (Wilsher, 2007: 12).

Into this categorisation, one can easily see the traditional masks of Africa, Asia, Europe, the Americas, and the Antipodes, where masks were and still are used in rituals and ceremonies – even if such rituals and ceremonies have largely been appropriated as consumable commodities for tourists.

On the other hand, "secular" masks deal primarily with entertainment. Furthermore, Wilsher continues, in sacred societies such as the ones mentioned earlier, "a mask is totemic, shamanic, an object linked to deity, a liminal tool that stands at the threshold of the world they know and the world they don't. Masks in this society are unequivocal, unambiguous and never metaphoric" (Wilsher, 2007: 13). In a secular world, however, the opposite is true, and it might be argued that masks *are* ambiguous, metaphoric, and equivocal. In short, it might be more accurate to argue that contemporary masks are at once both secular *and* sacred. I know I stated earlier I am not going to go into the sacred, or masks of antiquity – that's another thesis; however, I am not unaware that masks walk the line between the two and are experienced by actors and audiences in this way.

How is this even possible? As previously mentioned, when I open my store of masks in class and present them for the first time to students, or when audiences experience masks for the first time on stage, there is a veritable *frisson* in the room, as if all onlookers are confronted with an existential moment of doubt. For myself, that moment is one of the most powerful theatrical disruptions there are. There is something familiar about the contemporary visual *milieu* (particular within the pandemic where masks are everywhere) and our developed sense of visual narratives (as well as the array of animated faces, puppets, mascots, and increasingly robots and AI we are privy to), and yet at the same time the moment propels the viewer back into a deep primordial commotion. In this sense working with objects – whether inert or technological – is both extremely contemporary and ancient.

This is something that links to what Kenneth Gross, calls the "uncanny" puppet. In his meditation on the puppets he's encountered around the world, he writes of the "madness" of puppets:

> The madness lies in the hidden movements of the hand, the curious impulse and skill by which a person's hand can make itself into the animating impulse, the intelligence or soul, of an inanimate object – it is an extension of that more basic wonder by which we can let this one part of our body

> become a separate, articulate whole, capable of surprising its owner with its movements, the stories it tells (Gross, 2011: 17).

This "extension" sees within it a curious integration of body part and inanimate object to jolt it into life, even just for a moment. Who hasn't sat at a restaurant or home dinner table, and picked up a salt and pepper shaker to recreate a scene, to animate a story of two people? Not everyone may have the skill of a master puppeteer or manipulator, but we all buy into that moment of liveliness. Gross continues:

> I call it madness, but it is perhaps better called an ecstasy. It lies in the hand's power and pleasure in giving itself over to the demands of the object, our curious will to make the object into an actor, something capable of gesture and voice. What strikes me here is the need for a made thing to tell a story, to become a vehicle for a voice, an impulse of character – something very old, and very early. The thing acquires a life. (Gross, 2011: 17)

Madness. Ecstasy. Uncanniness. Words like these see Gross groping for a way to write about his encounter with puppets in a recognition of something "very old and very early", that is happening right now in the present – life and death in one moment. This goes some way to also encapsulating that *frisson* I experience in class or in performance – something very profound happens that one can't quite put one's finger on. It is both familiar and strange – *unheimlich* if you like; uncanny. Gross continues:

> What you feel is the presence of a composite or double body, animate and inanimate at once, a relation perhaps echoing some image of a soul within a body, though never simply – it may be a body within a body, or a soul within a soul (55).

Adrian Kohler and Basil Jones, in conversations and presentations about manipulating puppets talk about this extraordinary moment of the object reaching for a soul – bringing an inanimate object to life, by giving it breath through movement, plunging the audience into the most basic narrative of all: the will to live. Each moment on stage, or in the story, the object is in a desperate struggle between life and death. Jones writes:

> But now we are at a curious state of exchange between the performers and the audience as authors. Truly this is the *inter-play*: a subtle realm of hermeneutic interchange between viewer and viewed. Between actor and those acted upon, where meaning is being created, but we are not sure by whom (in Taylor, 2009: 262).

This is the trialogue that I mentioned earlier – the curious and vital interplay between inanimate object, performer, and audience. No one can exist without the other. This I believe is a crucial aspect of how Performing Objects work and thus can be grouped together – it is an essential learning moment for anyone training in this fascinating field. And while the audience may not have this knowledge, they experience it at a subconscious level. Jones continues:

> Breath and silence on the part of the puppet stimulate, in the minds of the audience, proposals as to the thoughts and emotions in the wooden puppet they are watching. These moments can be some of the most powerful experiences a puppet play produces. The audience, in noticing the tiny in breath and out breath of a puppet, enter into an empathetic relationship with the object that is being brought to life. This breathing is physical, yet it has a profound metaphorical power. This

> non-existent substance (air) that is passing through this mechanical being represents the very essence of life: the soul (Jones, in Taylor, 2009: 262).

The puppet or mask does not have to do much to achieve this "empathetic relationship" and very often the smallest movements – reaching for a cup of tea, a look, a tiny inclination of the head in consideration – are as powerful as the greatest line of dialogue.

If one extends the idea of mask to be embedded in an ongoing conversation with puppetry and performing objects, one can benefit from transcribing to the mask other unique essences which Gross sees in the puppet:

> ... its ardent indecorums, its talent for metamorphosis, its dismemberings [sic] of language and transformation of scale, its materiality, its commitment to giving life to the unliving, its negotiations with death and survival, its love of secrecy and shadows, its literalness, its fundamental strangeness (Gross, 2011: 4).

Like the "uncanny puppet", then, the mask can be said to not only be existing within a liminal space, but actually *being* a liminal space itself – a threshold, if you will.

This invites metaphor. How else can one write about this duality of life and death? And, as Milan Kundera writes in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*: "Metaphors are dangerous, metaphors are not to be trifled with. A single metaphor can give birth to love" (Kundera, 2003). That is a wonderfully rich and poetic phrase, one I have always liked. However, it does point to some of the challenges one faces when writing about the diverse field of Visual Theatre. If one reads "love" in this context as its own form of madness, an *amor fou*, or obsession on a subject, it skews the way that a subject is being written about. It becomes the writer's need to understand the situation through the lens of their own particular obsession, often to the detriment of the subject itself. The subject becomes irrelevant as one puts it upon a pedestal and then sets off to write more about the pedestal than the subject itself.

One of my challenges in researching this thesis has been in assessing an array of theoretical and framing devices that could be placed on the subject, (or, in this case, object), in order to try to "fix" it in time and space. However, trying to pin down a definition of Visual Theatre is a fool's errand, and it is more helpful to attempt a conceptualisation of it as a term – this is like what I discovered in my MA thesis, in the conceptualisation of contemporary mime and clown.

In South Africa, Visual Theatre, as a term, also blossomed within the groundswell of puppet work, and owes a large due for this thanks to the Out the Box Festival of Puppetry and Visual Performance, which erupted in a specific place (Cape Town) over a specific period, 2005–2011.[46] This festival was initiated by Janni Younge after her return from training at the French National School of Puppet Theatre (*École Nationale Supérieure des Arts de la Marionnette*) in Charleville-Mézières, and spearheaded by Younge and Aja Marnaweck. The Handspring Puppet Company website recognises its importance, by stating:

[46] I have approached Janni Younge and the board of UNIMA for documents, plans, reports, and the like for this unique festival, but unfortunately the organisation's archives are to date not accessible. This is a pity, but does point towards someone taking on the documenting of the festival properly in an as yet unwritten thesis or article.

> Out the Box began as a highly experimental one-day event of performances and workshops at the Little Theatre in Cape Town that grew exponentially within two years into the largest, and only, puppetry festival in Southern Africa. What made the festival unique was that it was run and created by puppeteers. The festival holds a large focus on experimentation, multidisciplinary crossovers and artistic development in fringe venues (Handspring Puppet Company. n.d).[47]

The importance of this festival cannot be understated – its appearance in the mid-2000s gave many practitioners not only a home, but also a name to solidify themselves as a community, away from a more old-fashioned "puppetry" to a "Visual Performance" one; or, as became more *de rigour*, "Visual Theatre". As mentioned above, FTH:K only adopted "Visual Theatre" as its primary drive around 2008 – in the company's earlier form, it highlighted integrated theatre, or, as with its break-through show, *GUMBO*, in 2006, and then touring nationally and internationally 2007-2009 as a company performing, "deaf and hearing clowning". However, what we were doing was Visual Theatre. And this is why we switched its branding.[48]

As charted in my extensive memoir of influences in the appendix, I had already experienced "Visual Theatre" in various forms – the first, and strangely still most impactful, on me were Marlene Blom's *Vêr Innie Wêreld* (1995), and then Derevo (1998); but the name hadn't caught on. Blom's work was probably called "dance theatre" at the time, and Derevo were called "anti-clowns" – Butoh from the ends of the earth.

In South Africa, Gary Gordon, Juanita Finestone, PJ Sabbagah, Anthea Mazarakis, and the like, claimed Physical Theatre as possibly more Physical Dance Theatre, and this most widely what it is known as in South Africa today. *Woza Albert* and all its imitators in protest theatre, as well as Theatre for Africa, Magnet Theatre, Andrew Buckland, and the like, possibly pushed for more of the theatrical side of Physical Theatre[49]. I think, in a similar vein, several practitioners and companies rose in the mid-2000s to the clarion call of Out the Box and Visual Theatre and began to claim the title.

One of the difficulties here is that Visual Performance, or Visual Theatre, can become a catch-all phrase, and in spreading itself so extensively, becomes more divisive than it needs to be.

Puppetry in South Africa has been well documented by Marie Kruger (2011) and Jane Taylor (2009); I don't wish to replicate this research. Looking at Mask Theatre, though, I find similar patterns and themes – this has led to me all too often assuming a defensive tone – as if I believed I had to "prove" the relevance of the existence of masks on South African stages. Looking at the available literature, I have sensed a similar approach – a need to find a metaphor or framing voice to defend performing objects.

There are a number of writers and scholars who have attempted to frame Visual Theatre - theorising on making theatre with masks and puppets. Dr W. Keith Tims is a professor and

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47 https://www.handspringpuppet.co.za/south-african-puppetry/the-impact-of-out-the-box-festival-of-puppetry-and-visual-performance/

48 *GUMBO* unfortunately never featured at Out the Box. Although members had been involved in the festival from its outset in workshops or likewise, FTH:K or Conspiracy of Clowns were only represented through *Pictures of You* (2008), *QUACK!* (2010), *Benchmarks* (2011), and *Kardiavale* (2011). There was also the development of *Little Jackie Paper* (2011) as a puppet show, but that unfortunately had to be abandoned. But that's another story.

49 This is another thesis.

practitioner at Georgia State University, Atlanta, and a specialist facilitator in performance training, theatre making, and the use of masks. In his doctoral dissertation, Tims takes the lens of "Sartre's *Imaginary*" to focus on what he terms the "imaging consciousness" in terms of mask performance (Tims, 2007). Puppeteer, designer, and former Artistic Director of Handspring Puppet Company, Janni Younge, in her MA thesis (2007), utilised a philosophical perspective from Madhyamika Buddhism to explore the creation of "Resonance in Emptiness" with regard to puppetry and Visual Theatre. Furthermore, Dr Keith Garret (2009) attempts a "definition" (albeit one not "fixed") of Visual Theatre by seeing within it an embracing of "puppetness" and the "Cinematic".

In many ways, I read them, alongside others, also as authors accepting the invitation of metaphor. Masks, puppets, Visual Theatre, the cinematic – these are all highly poetic forms that are not fixed nor easily defined. In the world of Performing Objects, they are ambiguous, and contain within themselves a perplexing continuum of affect. They also fall into a growing body of scholarly works that attempt to create a community of practice around a particular approach to making theatre.

For my part, for the longest time I held onto the idea of the emergence of the mask on South African stages as a "black swan" event. This derived from the premise of Nassim Taleb's treatise *Black Swan* (2007) which investigates the impact of seemingly improbable incidents on historical events, and makes the point that history doesn't crawl, it jumps. Taleb sketches out three key points that make an event a "black swan". Firstly, it must have an "outlier status" – it should be extremely rare, like a black swan, and thus outside the norm. Secondly, the event must create an extreme impact. Thirdly, despite the event having outlier status, it must potentially be explicable *after* the fact so that it might become predictable (xvii-xviii).[50]

Although he focuses more on global socio-political and economic events such as 9/11 or stock market crashes, Taleb's concept of the "black swan" is a tantalising notion with which to reflect on contemporary theatrical mask development, particularly regarding Visual Theatre in South Africa. After all, according to Toby Wilsher (2007), the full-faced character mask is one of the more recent developments in mask practice globally. In South Africa, it arrived almost out of nowhere in the mid-2000s heralding several works which could be argued to have had a major impact on the local industry. And yet, when looking back after the fact, one can argue that the appearance of mask work has been part of a growing awareness of, and appreciation for, contemporary visual performance in the country.

As tantalising as all the above seemed, I ultimately had to let it go as I realised it manifested my very own *amour fou*, which wanted to place the impact of burgeoning mask work in South African theatre in the same category as an event such as 9/11! Perhaps this shows my level of commitment to the form…

Another of the central challenges of this doctoral research has been shifting my role from theatre practitioner to that of "practitioner-researcher" to use Robin Nelson's term (2013). When I reflect on my evolution as a practitioner, research has always been a part of what I have been doing (namely, the search for what I consider the ideal combination of narrative and form), even if it has

[50] Human nature is good at concocting explanations *after* the fact.

not always been conscious. Nelson (2013: 25) identifies and unpacks three research areas in common usage:

- *Personal research* – finding out, and sifting, what is known;
- *Professional research* – networking, finding sources and collating information;
- *Academic research* – conducting a research inquiry to establish new knowledge.

The first two areas can be seen as a blueprint of what was to evolve in terms of my work with FTH:K and A Conspiracy of Clowns. The third area above, "academic research", took the form of work with *Uyabona Ke?* and the writing of this thesis.

For me, this shift from practitioner to practitioner-researcher has not always been an easy one. My chosen field and developing research question did not assist this, as it focuses on a time in my life that is shrouded in the vagaries of memory and deeply embedded in my psyche not only as a theatre-maker, but also as an experiential human being. From the outset of this thesis, I have had to walk an extremely delicate (and at times fragile) line of not straying into whimsy or sentimental reflection about my own past.

This past involved the setting up of a Non-Profit Organisation, FTH:K, that sought to integrate Deaf and hearing performer-creators (with their unique cultures), and make the work accessible to a wide range of audiences. During my time with the company (2003–2011), I led the development of an integrated and inclusive training programme that slowly evolved the company's approach to making theatre. Significantly, this led to the company adopting the genre of Visual Theatre and significantly developing performance technology and training towards an established theatrical genre from 2008 to 2011.

Training and creative practice was heavily influenced by Jacques Lecoq and Giovanni Fusetti's teachings which included direct and indirect participation on my part in their processes. It was during this latter phase that mask work came to the fore, which spawned the creation of the four works identified in my current research as my main case studies: *Pictures of You* (2008), *QUACK*! (2009–2010), *Womb Tide* (2010), and *Benchmarks* (2011) as well as *Waterline* (2014-2015) and to a certain extent, *Phitlho (The Hidden)* (2019).

Returning to an academic environment, I find myself reflected almost verbatim by Nelson:

> Advanced students engaging in PaR bring with them to the praxis a baggage of prior educational experience and, typically, specialist training. Most hold a first degree and masters-level qualification and many have significant professional experience. Accordingly, they know how to engage in their practice ... They all have 'know-how' which manifests in Schön's seminal idea of 'knowledge in action' which supposes that praxis involves an intrinsically intelligent 'dialogue with the situation' (2013: 42).

Developing these thoughts into what he calls 'embodied knowledge', Nelson highlights two key practical implications for a PaR context: embodied knowledge is often taken for granted by practitioners, and the articulation thereof is almost impossible. A challenge for a practitioner-researcher is therefore to "make the tacit more explicit" (Nelson, 2013:43).

For me, this reflects a tension that occurs between practitioners and academics in terms of writing about work. Practitioners, by and large, tend to have the "embodied knowledge" of their fields and as Nelson writes, they take this for granted. Part of the reason for this is that the world of Visual Theatre is primarily a *practical* one – practitioners learn by experimentation and apprenticeship, slowly building on their knowledge base after years of work.

This can bend towards placing masks in a position of opposition against the established order of how things are done – be it performer training or audience reaction andmeaning making. Consequently, the danger of this is that it might put the researcher again in a defensive position, and encourage responses in a passive-aggressive tone, which is undesirable. Renowned UK theatre maker and founder of the companies Trestle Theatre and Told By An Idiot, John Wright states:

> Mask-work doesn't require you to reject everything that has gone before. After all, once psychology's out the box, you'll never get it back in again. But research in psychology and developments in neuroscience have completely changed the landscape, and change the way we look at acting since Stanislavsky's day. *Enquiry* [emphasis mine] is more acceptable in actor training today than it was even a decade ago. I meet more and more practitioners who are interested in posing questions rather than making categorical statements about the work they do (Wright, 2017: xv-xvi).

What Wright is alluding to here, as he does in both of his books, *Why is That so Funny?* (2006) and *Playing the Mask: Acting Without Bullshit* (2017), is that within the multiplicity of acting approaches, no one view really has the final authority or dominance over another. There is no Vatican for actors and directors, which is not necessarily the same as saying that each is as good as the other. I have read a few appalling books on Mask Theatre and performance in general. It is, in Wright's opinion, within the ability to really play and be outside oneself, that great acting takes place. Masks are but one of many "tools" that can be utilised to open up and reveal the player and the character or narrative being played – and this occurs through the paradox of disguising the performer. It is up to the pedagogue or facilitator to lead the enquiry.

Within this comes another concern for Wright – that of an influential figure or pedagogue (or "guru", as he calls them) becoming overly-revered for what they do. All too soon, "What starts with a prophet invariably ends with a policeman" (Wright, 2017: 3). That is to say that even a process that starts with an open-ended spirit of enquiry and curiosity can quickly ossify when the performer starts to believe that there is only one way of working. In so doing, not only does the process start turning inside out and working counter-intuitively against the very spirit it started in, but it creates silos of opinion, influence, and otherness. As he puts it: "The Stanislavsky police have been around for years, but the Lecoq police are a new and very sad development" (Wright, 2017: 3).

This othering, or compartmentalisation, is at its core anathema not only to mask work but also to the evolving concept of Visual Theatre. And in terms of theoretical work, it points towards a danger. Wright concludes his police analogy: "the more you teach that process, the more that process is analysed; and the more it's reconstructed and taught again, the more it becomes codified into doing 'the fundamental journey'" (Wright, 2017: 4).

This is as true with practitioners as it is within academies – teaching or learning institutions are increasingly becoming more privatised and driven by economic demands to monetise their

curricula. This has disrupted the conservatory model of theatre training that has largely held sway for the last century and more – especially in South African university drama departments that were initially modelled on British training conservatories and have had to work out how to shoe-horn academic research into their programmes.

I am indebted to Mark Fleishmann's Performance as Research (PaR) presentations at Rhodes University Drama Department, recorded in 2010 for this. Fleishmann was leading the charge to lobby for doctoral research in performance studies to shift from its predominantly literary focus to include PaR – as is the case for many British and Australasian academies. This is an area that remains in progress in South Africa. In the last few years, creative outputs have now been acknowledged as research in that they can also attract subsidy from the Department of Higher Education, in the same way as published research articles. But this still remains a contested area.

Frank Camilleri (2009: 26-34) muses over ground-breaking practitioners in the Twentieth Century (including Stanislavsky, Copeau, Grotowski, Barba, Lecoq, and the like), who researched their own theatre pedagogy to support and further their work. This journey of discovery he then discusses in terms of latter-day pedagogical concerns, seeing a conceptual shift in the 21st century from an "ethical" ethos to that of an "ideological" one. By "ethical", Camilleri focuses more on:

> a *modus operandi* that is also a *modus vivendi*. In other words, a committed form of training that is integral to a performer's life to such a degree that the principles and techniques investigated and practised in the laboratory shape one's life (27).

Camilleri contrasts this vital approach to living and working, searching and researching with what he terms "ideological", favouring that word over "institutional" or "systemised". In this, he outlines some of the challenges facing performer training in contemporary times, namely the "compartmentalization and marketing procedures that involve technique training" (26), leading to a situation where he feels training opportunities are becoming ever more commodified and cut off from their wider socio-cultural and socio-political contexts.

This has certainly been the case in my journey. Through personal practice-led experience stretching back throughout my work, coupled with theoretical research, as well as years of community of practice conversation, collaboration, and intersections, I argue that any such attempt at the voice of "an expert", though interesting, can lead to a disservice to the work undertaken on the floor. In my experience, there is ultimately no "specialist" viewpoint that can be taken, as will become clear, but rather a dedication to confront the mask as it is to see what is jointly discovered – by the performer, the director, the designer, and ultimately the audience. That is not to say that the position of the director or pedagogue isn't specialised, or that their presence as a provocateur is not recognised, it is more that their position needs to be open and flexible. The potential for the pedagogue to become part of the "Lecoq police" is always present – the idea of playing the mask, or puppet in only one certain, fixed manner, is horrifying. It must be in an open field of discovery and interpretation.

As an example of this, in 2011, myself, Liezl de Kock, and Jayne Batzofin travelled to HIFA (Harare International Festival of the Arts) in Zimbabwe. We were there to research xenophobia and the country for our new work, *Benchmarks*, but also, conveniently, to watch Familie Flöz in

their production, *Hotel Paradiso*.[51] Not only did we watch their work but we also had the rare opportunity of participating in a workshop with them. During this workshop, we worked with masks from the performance itself, and attempted to jolt them into life. When my time came, I chose what appeared to me a meek and mild "husband" mask and attempted to bring it to life alongside a fellow "wife" mask – these were the immediate decisions that my partner and I made for the scene. However, when we watched the show, the "wife" mask turned out to be something of a "shrew" – a conniving, capricious character. The "husband" mask turned out to be one part of a police duo – a little bit dim, a little slow, but a comic foil to his more expressive and physical partner. The two never really interacted, and the improvisation in the workshop proved the point to us that every mask can come alive in a playful situation, that there is no fixed meaning to a mask. Familie Flöz did not dictate what their experience of the masks suggested, but rather let us discover what they could be. This was an important lesson.

This makes me call back the separation between "ethical" and "ideological" approaches which Camilleri defined and acknowledging that these do start heading towards a binary. And yet, Camilleri goes on to acknowledge that this separation probably exists more on a spectrum somewhere between the two, or "the extent of territory shared by both" (29). The important thing here is the observation of a propensity within not only the avant-garde but also the academy itself: today's innovation becomes tomorrow's ossified genre – codified, compartmentalised, and monetised. This talks back to Wright's pithy remark about the "Lecoq police", and as contemporary life continues to speed up there is perhaps less and less time for Wright's "enquiry" and the posing of the questions he advocates.

This creates a paradox of sorts – even though mask work and Visual Theatre is evidently on the rise, is this kind of work, and are the processes described in this thesis already anachronistic?[52]

One of the challenges of this thesis will involve this plunging into paradox itself (both in terms of the mask and Visual Theatre) and attempt not to proselytise. As will be seen, this is in line with the potential for mask-work to be a democratic and counter-colonising process of performer training – one that is equally open and accessible for an audience.

Although I have already briefly looked at conceptualising the Mask in the preceding section, I shall return to it properly in Chapter Four. For now, I'd like to turn to ways of placing mask work within an evolving and multifaceted approach to working with objects, material, and things of a paradoxical nature, in order to piece together a zeitgeist which has allowed for its emergence.

Garrett takes a stab at a conceptualisation in his doctoral dissertation. It is worth quoting at length:

> Visual Theatre is a theatre which deals in images, manipulated, controlled, (puppetised) moving images. As such, while one can discuss it in Physical Theatre and Dance terms such as choreography, it makes more sense to use terms more commonly associated with images, both still and moving. The influence of the cinematic in Visual Theatre practice can be seen both in the sensibility at play in the creation of the work, and from the image received by the audience. Visual

[51] Which we watched, twice, gloriously, and then got an exclusive backstage tour to see how they did things, as well as hung out with them for the night. Best night ever.

[52] The counterargument to this is, following Wilsher (2007), that it is *precisely* the anachronism that is maybe needed to create wildly imaginative and immersive work for an ever more cynical and jaded contemporary audience. But this will be taken up more in the next chapter.

> Theatre revels in the liveness of what it presents, but it also plays with notions of the recorded, of cutting, splicing, montage and mise-en scène. It speaks the language of theatre, yet it also speaks the language of film with its meticulously planned shots and camera angles, and integration of elements such as light, sound and music with the image presented on screen (2009: 78-79).

There is much to admire about this idea, and since I have been working in a Motion Picture and Live Performance institution (AFDA), the ideas that Garrett puts forward make more and more sense. Incorporating technology from film media is certainly something I have noticed during my career and experiences with Visual Theatre. I think this speaks to a core idea about what live performance these days could constitute (particularly during the global pandemic). In my experience, certainly Visual Theatre talks to "notions of the recorded, of cutting, splicing, montage and mise-en scène. It speaks the language of theatre, yet it also speaks the language of film with its meticulously planned shots and camera angles, and integration of elements such as light, sound and music with the image presented on screen."

Still, Visual Theatre beggars a definition, or conceptualisation. During the two years of the pandemic (20202021), theatre has seen a challenge and endless buffeting of what it is at a core essence – are we now Virtual Theatre? Digital Theatre? Theatre on Screen? The term "Visual Theatre" is still being used. As Garrett writes:

> ... there is such an entity as 'Visual Theatre'. What exactly the term refers to, what it might encompass, is still an open question, to which this research aims to provide some insight, and some answers, based upon an analysis of the form and some of its important antecedents (2009: 66).

If we track it through history, the term, "Visual Theatre" appeared first in the twentieth century (mainly in Europe and the United Kingdom) and has flitted in and out of usage – always shifting shape, always evolving. As mentioned previously, within South Africa it perhaps came into common usage as a mid-2000s term following Dorothy Max Prior's discussion on Total Theatre[53] (which she calls "a living, breathing, mutating art form – not something carved in stone") to capture a puppetry and visual movement. I think what is important in this link is that Prior goes on to say that "definitions are important – not to pin a thing down so that it can no longer live, but in order to communicate and collaborate" (2001: 7).

Garrett muses over the term itself:

> It might be argued that all theatre is fundamentally visual in nature, or at least that the visual is always an important element: in which case, might a term like Visual Theatre be tautologous, and therefore essentially meaningless? For the tag 'Visual Theatre' to have meaning, we need it to tell us something new about the world, to describe a movement or mode of practice suitably distinct enough from those which came before it, to warrant a new moniker being applied (2009: 66).

While this is true, here we see the reactive and defensive nature a researcher can be forced into by being confronted with, in my opinion, a facile argument such as the one he refers to. Talking about Visual Theatre, I find the response of "but all theatre is visual" somewhat insulting. Not only does it harken back to a very outdated yet similar response to Physical Theatre ("but all theatre is

[53] Another term that could be synonymous with Physical and/or Visual Theatre.

physical"), it leads the practitioner or researcher having to adopt a confrontational position in order to defend it. Garrett himself falls into this positioning:

> To start with a philosophical approach, it is perhaps easier to begin to define Visual Theatre by stating what it is not: that is to say, the context in which it emerged, and the dominant form(s) against which it rebelled. Though even this may be problematic, because the status of Visual Theatre is changing: whilst this makes it ripe for an evaluation it also means that statements one could have made just a few years ago such as "Visual Theatre is not mainstream theatre" or "Visual Theatre is what is not on in the West End" are no longer completely accurate (Garrett, 2009: 66).

For the most part, discussions around Visual Theatre hark back to, and echo, many of the debates surrounding the emergence of Physical Theatre over the last few decades. In this, it seems to be revisiting much of the same ground that has already been trodden (Murray, 2002), as well as inevitably setting up contesting binaries that one could do without. For instance, the very term, "Visual Theatre", sets up the inevitable clash with how to then talk about what is essentially "non-Visual Theatre". At various times this has been characterised by such terms as "text-based", or "conventional", or "straight" theatre, all of which are equally problematic as they harken back to the incessant hold on a mind-body split. And yet this is the territory that we continually circle back to and have to repeatedly contest. Within performance research in Physical Theatre, this hurdle appears over and over and sets up a continual feeling of conflict: Physical Theatre versus Conventional Theatre.

Attempting to manage such hurdles, Giovanni Fusetti (n.d.: 2) is quick to point out: "In this duality *Physical* versus *Straight* we find the explanation of this useless and damaging conflict".[54] Continuing this line of thinking, however, Fusetti goes on to elucidate how "straight" implies a more linear thinking organised by ideas and structures that finds its manifestation or concretisation within theatrical texts, whereas "physical" implies a more bodily-based fluidity and dynamism manifested in curves and spirals – such thinking quickly taking one back to a core mind-body split that has characterised civilisation's "split consciousness between matter and spirit, body and logo" (Fusetti, n.d.: 3). Such a binary is unhelpful to research in a complicated and fluid field, and one is always mindful to shift the "either/or" towards "both/and".

For the researcher, this has tremendous implications as one attempts to analyse and synthesise, in as logical and linear a fashion as one can, something that is intrinsically non-linear. Any attempt at developing an argument for a theatrical field is always going to walk a very fragile and delicate tightrope between often irreconcilable ideas – both stubbornly attempting not to fall into the trap of setting up binaries and hierarchical positions of power while also acknowledging their existence. From my experience, this is the power of the trialogue – it disables the binary. Within the trialogue, there is always a third party as part of the meaning-making process. Perhaps a better way is as Prior

[54] It must be surmised here that Fusetti is talking more about a "dualism" – that is, in a strict dictionary definition, a division into two opposed states, such as "good" versus "evil". The word "duality", on the other hand, supports the idea of a state of having two parts or characteristics. In other words, an approach towards making theatre can have two different and possibly contradictory traits. This is a subtle, but important, distinction to make for this research. It stands to reason that so too, then, can an object have two (or more) different and contradictory traits. Unsurprisingly, the word "duality" is one that will crop up repeatedly within puppet and mask fields.

writes at the start of this chapter: "let's focus instead on the work and let that serve as a 'liquid map of shifting territory' as dramaturg Phil Smith sees it."

Both Garrett (2009) and Younge (2007) see the antecedents of Visual Theatre practitioners stretching back into the turn of the 20th century experimental practitioners. Similarly, Janni Younge (2007: 32-38), , traces certain late nineteenth and twentieth century theatre makers and thinkers, such as Jarry, Appia, Craig, Artaud, Brecht, Schumann, Foreman, and (to some extent) Robert Wilson as personalities and pioneers whose work impacts on contemporary Visual Theatre.

The term itself only first makes its appearance in the 1970s[55] with a special edition on Visual Theatre from *The Drama Review* (1973: 3) citing it as:

> ... a useful theme because it allows us to bring together a wide variety of work from different areas. Dance, of course, is a prototype of visual theatre. We also can study the approach of painters and sculptors when they work in the medium of theatre. This concept allows us to deal with the technical aspects of performance.

Without the term seemingly catching on, Visual Theatre reappears in the 1980s with the work of Jacques Lecoq and his graduates who had a profound impact on theatre creation particularly in the United Kingdom and Europe.[56] Simon Murray (2003: 34) writes:

> Over the last two decades, much of this [interest and focus on the performer's live body] has come to be labelled 'physical theatre' or 'visual theatre'. By and large, the term is more of a marketing tool than a useful framework for analysing new developments in theatre practice.

In this, one can see the great need for performers devising their own work (rather than relying on existing texts) to differentiate themselves from more mainstream practices, which by and large have remained weighted by a dominant

> ... literary dramatic tradition going back at least to Shakespeare, Marlowe and Jonson. That an upsurge of *physical theatres* is particularly evident in the UK is sometimes explained as a long-overdue reaction to the dominance of text-based theatre – a much needed "catching up" with the practices of continental Europe and beyond (Murray, 2003: 36).

However, one also glimpses the vagary of taxonomy, and the usefulness, or arbitrariness, of labels. Is Visual Theatre – as Simon Murray writes – just a *marketing* tool? This is something we actively did at FTH:K as we started to rise in prominence from 2006. From our initial labelling of ourselves as "integrated Deaf and hearing theatre", we placed a far greater stress on "Visual Theatre" as we advanced.

In Australia, with the rise of puppetry in the 1980s, Visual Theatre also put in an appearance, not necessarily as a unifying call but one driven by the need to shift mainstream perceptions of its dramatic territory towards something fresh or alternative. Speaking about the influence of seminal companies such as Handspan, Australian puppeteer Jennifer Pfeiffer (Pudumjee, Pfeiffer, and Sen, 2006: 94) mentions how it became fashionable to replace "puppetry" or "puppet theatre" with the broader term of Visual Theatre – itself deriving from "Object Theatre", an approach not

[55] However, contemporary writers now speak about the "Visual Theatre of the Russian Avant-Garde" (see Spasskaia, 2018). As the term makes more sense, so it gets applied to historical precedents.
[56] Now also expanding across North America

necessarily referring to the animation of an anthropomorphic figure, but "rather to a series of images and transitions that show a sequence; episodic frames that in their theme tell, or suggest, the narrative". Object Theatre, as outlined by Younge (2007: 30), while in similar territory as puppetry, finds its distinction in that:

> When the found object is manipulated it becomes a puppet. However, unless it is combined in a figurative composition it is unlikely to be referred to as a puppet. Theatre using objects in this way is referred to as Object Theatre. It is a sub-category of puppetry as is Shadow Theatre.

Critically, as attested to by many writers, the 1980s also brought with it a significant game-changer in the form of Frank Proschan, who coined the phrase "performing objects". He writes:

> Performing objects, as we use the term ... are *material images of humans, animals, or spirits that are created, displayed, or manipulated in narrative or dramatic performance*. [sic] While puppetry is at the center of this definition, it is not alone. The definition is necessarily broad, but we must tolerate that breadth for three reasons. First, I contend that there are numerous elements that unite the diverse traditions encompassed by this definition, and that consideration of the entire gamut can ensure the soundness of our analyses of particular traditions. Second, we wish to avoid any definition that privileges our elite western notions of what puppetry or masking is (noting further that those notions, themselves, are often contradictory or problematic). A preliminary task, especially for the study of exotic forms, is to ascertain the indigenous definitional and typological distinctions that bear on our subjects. We cast our net broadly, drawing together all of those fish too large to swim through, but we are not oblivious to the differences separating the species we catch. Third, as I noted, the commonsense understandings we may hold of what puppetry or masking is are often self-contradictory or inadequate as definitions. Narrow definitions of puppetry or masking invariably exclude forms that commonsense tells us deserve to be included, even if we restrict ourselves to one ethnic or intellectual tradition. We have, then, a diffuse field of performing objects, within which are two clear foci, 'puppets' and 'masks'. Arrayed around these focal points are numerous intermediary forms whose status might be argued, and more peripheral forms that few would call 'puppets' or 'masks' despite important shared characteristics. It is possible, however, to specify the terms of our definition with greater precision (Proschan, 1983: 4-5).

By coining the phrase "performing objects", Proschan seems to be at pains to include as wide a net as possible – albeit looking for "greater precision". While this is admirable, and there is some awareness and responsibility taken for what he calls "elite western notions of what puppetry or masking is (noting further that those notions, themselves, are often contradictory or problematic)", I am not always sure that he achieves this greater precision. At the very least, however, there is an acknowledgement of how difficult the terrain is to map.

During the late 1990s, the need for an umbrella term such as Visual Theatre may have its roots in Bell's (1999: 15) belief that although performing objects (including masks and puppets) are central to some of the oldest performance forms, "they have rarely been the subjects of sustained systematic academic attention in this century". Furthermore, most literature focuses on folklore, anthropology, semiotics, art history, or theatre history, resulting in "the submersion of performing object writing into other disciplines [which] has meant that to a large extent it has been an invisible field" (Bell, 1999: 15). This invisibility is being challenged, primarily by puppeteers and theorists in the field (Taylor, 2009; Gross, 2011; Blumenthal, 2004; Kruger, 2011), with differing ideas, as "a wooden head opens up strange worlds" (Gross, 2011: 4). That this invisibility was being

challenged finds an echo in contemporary writings which indicate that this field is gaining the attention and debate that it deserves. It is edifying that Bell seems to change his mind a decade later. In 2015, he writes:

> Although puppets might seem to have only recently emerged urgently into our cultural range of vision, they have, in fact, been with us all the time. Likewise, although many might consider the literature and criticism of material performance to be scant if not nonexistent, it can, in fact, be found within a rich network of interwoven discussions among a variety of disciplines. The histories of puppets, objects, and other elements of material performance are not told simply by dramatic texts, histories of theatre practice, artists' accounts, and theories of performance, but also by philosophical, theoretical, and scientific studies that attempt to understand the nature of *things*; by oral histories connected to puppet practices around the world; and by the "texts" of the actual puppets, masks, and performing objects (in Posner et al., 2015: 7).

Proschan had earlier written:

> ... we would expect that puppetry, masking, and related genres would long have interested semioticians, and indeed puppetry was a major concern of the pioneer semiotician Petr Bogatyrev. The last few years have also seen a flurry of considerations of masks from various semiotic perspectives (demonstrated by the 1981 conference *'Nel Senso della Maschere'* sponsored by the *Centro Internazionale di Semiotica e di Linguistica* and others). Yet for the most part, puppets, masks, and performing objects have not figured into the growing corpus of semiotic inquiry. They are glaringly absent, for example, from most recent writings on the semiotics of theater or drama, a lacuna with serious intellectual consequences touched upon below (1983: 4).

This observation of Proschan points towards an unfortunately still widely held belief that "performing objects" occupy a lower position on the dramatic or theatrical hierarchy; I shall address this later.

During the 2000s, the challenges resurface. In his seminal work, *Postdramatic Theatre* (2006),Johannes Lehman outlines certain 'postdramatic theatrical signs' as an overview of his thesis; these include: parataxis, simultaneity, the density of signs (too few or too many), musicalization, visual dramaturgy, physicality, irruption of the real, and situation/event (Lehman, 2006: 97-118). He goes on to state:

> Theatre is catching up on an aesthetic development that other art forms went through earlier. It is no coincidence that concepts which originated in visual arts, music or literature can be used to characterize postdramatic theatre. ... Important theatre practitioners often have a background in visual arts. There is little reason to be surprised that it is only in the theatre of the recent decades that we have seen trends that can be described with keywords such as self-referentiality, non-figural, abstract or concrete art, autonomization of the signifiers, seriality, or aleatoric art (Lehman, 2006: 105).

This idea of theatre catching up on other forms (such as fine art) is one taken up by practitioners like Janni Younge (2007) and is taken up by another key text – Maaike Bleeker's *Visuality in the Theatre* (2008). This thesis interrogates the role and function of the audience, the spectator, and outlines a new role for them – that of the 'seer'.

Wilsher (2007: 5-8) offers an alternative to the Visual versus Non-Visual binary, not by necessarily removing the binary altogether, but couching it in terms of "fringe" as opposed to "mainstream" theatre. In this, he bemoans the fact that since the 1960s countries in the global North have led to a much more "visually literate culture, through our exposure to cinema, television and advertising" (Wilsher, 2007: 5)[57] and great strides have been made in art, fashion, music, and the like. As I paraphrased earlier: "great visuals and a kicking soundtrack". And yet, very little of the development in formal, serious theatre can be seen on mainstream stages:

> Mention the "new" in theatre and there is often a sharp intake of breath. Why is this? Because, for all the developments in so many different areas of performance and culture, mainstream theatre [since the 1950s] has undergone virtually no change at all (Wilsher, 2007: 5).

This is obviously a contentious statement and one can easily argue that this is not the case – theatre studies history is littered with incursions from the "fringe" or "alternative" onto the "mainstream"; the very term *avant-garde* has become synonymous not only with a historical period but a genre of itself. Furthermore, it is and has always been part of the artistic spirit to decide to either move with the general *status quo* or to rebel against it. his is certainly something I have always felt, and how I have moved and shifted to call my work various genres over time – hence the deliberate move to call what we did with FTH:K "Visual Theatre" in 2008.

If one is consistently productive and good at marketing one's work, there will come a time where one catches the right wave, as it were, or the temper of the times, and almost overnight one shifts from fringe artist to a bankable mainstream career. Within this shift, and any artistic breakthrough, joining the so-called mainstream brings with it the inevitable pressure of choice: repeat oneself and one's winning formula in order to cash in on one's success, or continue the search and re-search that drives one artistically even if it means alienating one's income stream?

One could also ask if Wilsher's contention about the "new" and "mainstream" is strictly true in 21st century theatre that has embraced the development of technology and can now display a very rich blending of media on stage. To re-quote Garrett: "statements one could have made just a few years ago such as 'Visual Theatre is not mainstream theatre' or 'Visual Theatre is what is not on in the West End' are no longer completely accurate" (Garrett, 2009: 66).

This can especially be seen with cases like Handspring Puppet's *War Horse* (from 2007) at the Olivier Theatre. It can also be seen throughout Europe, for example Germany or The Netherlands, where hardly any new work that is staged in the main state theatres is strictly "conventional" in terms of plot, characters, dialogue, and the like. It's all Post-dramatic and stripped down, deconstructed, and, following Bleeker (2007) repositions the role and indeed positioning of the audience. This is becoming even more prevalent in the past years with the effect of COVID-19 on the performance industry. More and more, critical thinking and practical exploration alike have centred on questions around what it means to be "*live*".

While all the above may seem to distract from the term itself, Visual Theatre, terms and shared languages are necessary to be able to debate emerging fields of work. In my opinion, the politics

[57] To this, one could easily add the internet, gaming, social media performance, online stories and podcasts, as well as the recent shift online precipitated by the COVID-19 pandemic, and one can confidently state that in the last decade since Wilsher's book, this has increased exponentially.

of language and nomenclature is an area fraught with contestation and power – with questions of authority itself.

For example, from 2002-2003, when I was working with the multi-disability and integrated Remix Theatre Company, founded by Nicky Visser and wheelchair-user Malcolm Black, we had to describe our work (or indeed the company itself) for press releases. Remix was a company of mixed disability and ability artists, and, following the disabled community's lead, we fought hard to correct the public's opinion that the company was made up of "abled and disabled" or "abled and differently abled" members. To claim back power over this, we very consciously used the term "disabled and non-disabled", inverting the power set up of "abled" being the norm. Similarly, within FTH:K, we again purposefully led with the description "Deaf [capital 'D'] and hearing company". Making the switch later to a term like "Visual Theatre", we again were mindful of the need to promote it in a positive sense, and not by exclusion or in opposition to another term. This again points to the trialogue – the work we were engaging with required two disparate threads coming together, needing the third thread (the audience) to complete the meaning-making cycle.

Returning now to the term Visual Theatre itself, it is perhaps playing it somewhat safe to try to create and promote a "catch-all" term. If a term is too loose, it can work counter-productively. So, what are some of the binding constructs or ideas that underpin this term, and how has it been used over the last few decades?Within this, we see Garrett revealing his theory of the two ideas underlying Visual Theatre: "*puppetness*, and the *cinematic"* (78). He says that "These ideas can be examined as discrete phenomena, but are better seen as existing on the same continuum, and as part of the same sensibility" (78).

In this, Garret reflects on the contemporary fascination with image and the borderlines between what is real and what is imaginary, and how those borderlines are becoming more and more fluid. He highlights the "visuality" of theatre and it does make sense to speak about it more in terms of the cinematic than to the physical. And yes – Visual Theatre does involve the tight control of the image – both in terms of what is seen and how it is seen.

Perhaps some of the difficulty of writing about Visual Theatre is due to the fact that it is still in becoming, even if it is a contemporary iteration of an older forms. Writing about performance is always out of date.

This is the current awareness of Visual Theatre that we find ourselves in: as awareness increases about this form, the minute we place a finger on it and try to pin it down – the next moment it slips away and cocks a thumb at us. In 1983, Proschan writes:

> Among the most ancient and widespread of cultural traditions is the use of material objects in narrative or dramatic performance. The form most familiar to us is puppetry – the manipulation of inanimate figures by human hands in dramatic performance. Yet puppets are not the only objects we invest with the powers to speak or to move. Dancers who wear masks, bards who use scroll-paintings or dolls to illustrate their narrations, children who create dramatic scenes in dollplay, worshippers who bear icons in a religious procession, and storytellers who trace images in snow or sand all manifest the urge to give life to nonliving things, as they animate objects in dramatic performances and use material images as surrogates for human actors. Whether the dramatic actor is a miniaturized wood-and-cloth puppet or a gigantic, extrahuman phantasm, and whether the performance context is one of secular entertainment or sacred ritual, the creative energy that

> animates the images is the same – the impulse to create objects to act in our stead, objects through which we can project intensified, artistic, and often holy speech and action
>
> (Proschan, 1983: 3).

The universal urge to construct figures, and invest them with narrative power, and perform through them points to core human desires for amplified self-expression, drama, spirituality, and play manifesting across history. What I find fascinating is how Proschan discusses how we commonly displace facets of identity into experience into inanimate things then reanimate them. We also see here a call-back to the sacred/secular challenge raised by Wilsher (2007). Animating these objects stems from a deep creative impulse to make artifacts that represent intensified, artistic, "holy" projections of ourselves.

Twenty to thirty years later, similar issues are still being debated, and as written earlier, Mask Theatre jumps straight into that debate. I often feel that there is a simultaneous moment of the secular and sacred happening every moment in a mask work I produce.

There is still no easy answer; but at least now there is a fair amount more *debate* and discussion around it.

Following on from Proschan, in 2015, Dassia Posner (2015: 5) writes:

> In 1983, Frank Proschan revolutionized the definition of the puppet by articulating this performance form as a subgenre within a much wider category of "performing objects" – that is, "material images of humans, animals, or spirits that are created, displayed, or manipulated in narrative or dramatic performance" (Proschan 1983: 4). Interestingly, given the rise in Europe of *theatre d'objets* – theatrical performance that animates everyday objects – during the same decade in which Proschan's essay appeared (Margolies 2013), Proschan centered his discussion on objects – masks, puppets, ritual objects – that were designed with performance in mind. Common usage has since conflated the two terms, "performing objects" and "theatre of objects," so that many puppetry scholars and practitioners now consider any object that is given independent life in performance – a match that self-immolates, a flying metronome, a piece of swirling cloth – to be a performing object.

This is a key shift in conceptualising how "performing objects" coalesce into the broad catch-all of Visual Theatre. For me, and my use of "performing objects", the use of any material (set, prop, costume, and the like) can be incorporated to drive a narrative forward.[58]

Posner continues:

> Today's proliferation of expressive objects reflects a current cultural context beyond the stage, concerns that preoccupy *our* times. As we revise our understanding of humanity in regard to both the man-made and natural elements that surround us, these new views simultaneously transform our concept of what a puppet is and how puppets manifest in performance. Describing this new understanding of puppetry and the themes and questions that emerge from it is a central project of this collection (2).

[58] In 2013–2015, while we were creating and performing *Crazy in Love*, Andrew Buckland had an "aha!" moment with regards to how we conceptualised the show's relationship with Performing Objects – the puppets and objects we utilised jumped the narrative forward, without the actors having to do "the heavy lifting".

By "this collection", Posner means her co-edited book (2015) that collects together a community of puppet, mask, and material performance practitioners. This lands as a sort of relief for anyone in the industry, as much as Proschan's paper (1985) or, indeed, the Out the Box Festival in South Africa.

Suddenly there is a community of people speaking a similar language. Suddenly the misfits do not feel too out of place.[59]

4.3. Theme 2. Visual Theatre as Child's Play – The Struggle for Agency and Acceptance

It is interesting to still read, in the 21st century, interviews with puppeteers and mask practitioners, being asked to defend their work as suitably "adult". Could this be due to a popular misconception that Performing Objects belong to what is ostensibly children's theatre (see Janni Younge 2007)? It is interesting to note the role that language plays in this, and how the very words "puppet" or "mask" have come to contain an ambiguity of both positive and negative connotations. Writing about the "uncanny" life of puppets, Kenneth Gross (2011: 3) writes:

> There is something so loaded, so odd about the very word "puppet" in English that it can't help but evoke different responses in those who hear it, even those who are themselves involved in the art. The word derives from the Latin *pupa*, for little girl or doll, a word still used in entomology to describe the mysterious, more passive middle stage of an insect's metamorphosis, as the larva is covered in a chrysalis, and awaits emergence as a winged thing. Such an analogy has some resonance, and yet the word "puppet", itself a diminutive, still sounds like a child's word, as well as being a word for a child. Used metaphorically, it gets applied to a thing or a person both insignificant and subjected to the power of others – not a word people will readily apply to themselves.

Gross's reference to "pupa" also calls to mind the word "puppy" – which is also a diminutive – and which, as he suggests, could have its etymological roots in Old French: *poupee* – a doll or toy. Playing further linguistically, one can ascertain other condescending uses of "puppy" – for example, 'puppy fat' is the fat on a child's body that will disappear as they grow up, and 'puppy love' is a strong, albeit short-lived, love felt by a young person. This seems to imply that all things connected to these childish things or states needs to be set aside at a certain age. The *pupa* will emerge from its metamorphosis, emerge from its chrysalis, and eventually fly off as an adult. As the bible entreats – "put away your childish things".

The above image of a *pupa* still in metamorphosis stage perhaps also points to a certain indeterminacy of *things* themselves. Dassia N. Posner (in Posner et al, 2015: 6) writes:

> In her recent book *Vibrant Matter*, political scientist Jane Bennett argues that all matter, even matter that is not technically alive, contains agency and efficacy, what she terms "vitality." She explains: "By 'vitality' I mean the capacity of things – edibles, commodities, storms, metals – not only to impede or block the will and designs of humans but also to act as quasi agents or forces with trajectories, propensities, or tendencies of their own". Bennett, paraphrasing Bruno Latour, also describes matter as an "actant", that is "a source of action that can be either human or nonhuman; it is that which has efficacy, can do things, has sufficient coherence to make a difference, produce effects, alter the course of events" (Bennett 2010: viii). Bennett describes the agency of the

[59] Perhaps this thesis will constitute a similar sort of place…?

> inanimate material world in terms that are similar to how puppeteers have long articulated their interplay with puppets.

The thought or suspicion of things having life, agency, and quite possibly rights (ala Phillip K. Dick's or Isaac Asimov's science-fiction novels), is an uneasy one for humans to ponder. Furthermore, the thought or image of an adult playing with her *pupa* or *poupee* or puppet, itself a haunted agent of metamorphosis living on the fault line of death and life, is an uneasy one, and the adult view of a puppeteer in society has in some cases been pejorative.

John Cusack's puppeteer character in *Being John Malkovich* (1999) finds a portal that leads directly to the mind of Malkovich. Similarly, the Puppet Master is a Marvel Comics villain (first appearing in 1962) who builds people from radioactive clay to control them; sticking pins in a voodoo doll is a horror film trope; and in the HBO series *Carnivale* (2003–2005), the sinister character The Mask Maker builds eerie death masks of characters that hold great power. If writers are looking for a malevolent character to threaten the hero, they do not have to look too far to see similar examples. Puppeteers could be seen as lost children, simple-minded, if you like, who prey on the edges of civilised sensibilities for traces of memory or loss of the illusions sustained by childhood. Adults are by and large wounded, and humans carry the wounds of adulthood which contain within themselves something of the loss of innocence – one's great disappointment with the world. Perhaps even more frightening for the adult sensibility is the power that puppeteers with their strange wooden or paper toys can begin exacting on the adult's child, and thus they become dangerous. Nefarious associations, particularly around issues of power, arise – one thinks here of the metaphor of a "puppet state" or someone becoming a mere puppet in someone else's hands. Not only are the use of puppets infantilised, an adult who continues playing with these toys becomes somehow not only immature, but sinister.

Jane Taylor recounts a conversation she had with Adrian Kohler of Handspring Puppet Company about his awareness of working "within a tradition that has often been trivialised in the West" (Taylor, 2009: 36). Taylor acknowledges that Handspring were facing a tough task of having to work against the preconceptions of their audiences, enculturing them to the idea that puppets could be serious, that they could present political, psychological and sociological material with depth and nuance, that they could make theatre for adults.

Adrienne Sichel, on her first encounter with Handspring's work, also recalls:

> What I saw and experienced that morning in 1985, at the Wits Downstairs theatre in Braamfontein, had an immediate impact on my then keen interest in and developing critical sense of indigenous South African theatre-making ... Any preconceptions I had about marionettes, glove puppets, and Jim Henson's then very popular Muppets disappeared ... The narrative was textured with gritty realism; it had a sense of real struggling, of people in a landscape, an African landscape. The play [*Episodes of an Easter Rising*] pulsed with a series of personal and socio-political rhythms, qualities I had never previously related to puppetry (Sichel , in Taylor, 2009: 151).

What Sichel mentions above about her "preconceptions" is very telling – and it is true that during the 20th century, puppetry was overtaken by, predominantly, children's entertainment. Cinema and television played a big role in this – in film, animations (particularly those from the Disney corporation) ushered in a clean, happy, sanitised version of inanimate objects; while on television,

the popularity of The Muppets entrenched the notion of puppets presenting family fun, as much as television shows of Marcelle Marceau captured the notion of The Mime as a white-faced, silent, and sentimental character.

Why was there such surprise for Sichel that a puppet production could provoke "gritty realism"? Bell notes that this might be due to "the variety of ways that the history of puppet theatre has been written, which involve various disciplinary approaches that often do not overlap." Under these disciplines, Bell includes:

> anthropology, folklore, linguistics, art history, dance history, semiotics, physics, performance studies, and (rarely) theatre history and dramatic literature. Generally speaking, mainstream theatre history sources and works of dramatic criticism (especially those focused on European traditions) do not deal with the subject since, from the perspective of European theatre, puppetry is a low-culture form which, as Peter Schumann points out, "is easier researched in police records than in theater chronicles" (Bell, 2008: 14).

And Taylor (2009: 36), following Peter Schumann (of the legendary Bread and Puppet Theatre), writes:

> Schumann suggests that it is the volatility inherent in puppetry as a medium that prompts us to denigrate it. It is not that puppets are not serious business. It is, if anything, that they are too serious. D.W. Winnicott, the object-relations psychoanalyst, has expanded significantly our understanding of how it is through play with objects that the child learns to manage anxiety about loss, control and order in its universe. The biblical injunction to 'put away childish things' suggests our disquiet about the power of these formative experiences.

I really like what Taylor suggests about the puppet (or performing object) as being "too serious". For me, it speaks to the core tension that Wilsher (2007) speaks about in terms of being split between sacred or secular; or, what I have said previously, perhaps *both*.

Gross (2011: 1) sets off on his meditative exploration of the uncanny puppet by musing:

> What is this thing that I recognize, that seems to know me, when I come upon it on a street corner, in a park, or in the shadows of a theatre, moving up on that small stage? What is this creature that burrows out of the shadows, into the light, a remnant of something, hardheaded, often squeaking and ugly, moving with such odd, unpredictable motion, or just lying still, folded up on itself, a little warm, patiently gathering strength for some new movement? I wonder about the world in which this creature lives. I wonder what it knows about our world.

This is the madness of the puppet, or, rather, the maddening uncanniness of encountering the puppet. There is a frisson of delight and fear that is activated, with wildly conflicting emotions stirred to life as if one were transported right back into Plato's cave trying desperately to make sense of the shadows on the wall. It is at once both familiar and strange, evoking a liminal state of madness as rules of life are disrupted, dead objects come to life, offering the audience a chance to plunge into a state of ecstasy – of being outside oneself. Truly, "a wooden head opens up strange worlds" (Gross, 2011: 4).

The madness, strange worlds, and liminality of the puppet mentioned above, leads to the puppet occupying a position of some power and freedom, almost anti-authoritarian; and as such can be

considered free and, to some extent, dangerous. Much of the perceived danger with performing objects stems from the general interference of the church and religious dogma over society. While puppets (Blumenthal, 2004: 11-35) and masks (Wilsher, 2007: 11-28) enjoyed a healthy and mostly formative role in Western theatre history, both forms were subject to severe restriction and censorship with the advent of Christianity. By adapting, their very survival was sometimes due to their being conscripted into use by the religious authorities themselves. According to Blumenthal (2004: 13):

> To the Christian religious authorities whose civil power grew after the fall of Rome, puppetry was anathema. It smacked of idolatry and fun, two well-known devices of the devil. Plus, female puppets raised the specter of carnal desire.

Despite this, the church leaned heavily on puppets to animate their pageants, with crucifixes rigged to allow Jesus to bleed and resurrect to heaven, or to show winged angels flying about, or to see the emanation of "souls" from dying bodies (Blumenthal, 2004: 14-15). Likewise, according to Wilsher (2007: 23), "Mysteries, miracle plays and mummeries all relied on the immediate audience recognition of the characters, with masks used to portray fantastical or devilish persona".

The latter description can clearly be seen right up to contemporary culture, as one considers the use of masks in the present day's predilection for superhero movies. Within this, masks are used by both heroes and villains as a means to disguise their identity, but also sometimes to utilise special powers. It is perhaps unsurprising, then, to see contemporary culture-makers still casting puppeteers, puppets, and masks, as possible forces of evil. Peter Schumann (1999: 56) of the legendary Bread and Puppet Company writes: "People exist as citizens, and puppets are insurrectionists and therefore shunned by correct citizens – unless they pretend to be something other than what they are, like: fluffy, lovely, or digestible".

Central to this is the ambiguity of the mask-puppet as object becoming the very subject and creating a massive disturbance through occupying a double space of being both dead and alive. An inanimate object becomes animated, is jolted into life, and when this happens in a time and space that directly involves us as seer-audiences, then our preconceptions of reality and illusion are exploded, and theatre finds itself at a place it was always meant to occupy – the ambiguous space of a double life, alive and dead, between humankind and the gods, between rationality and madness, a place where, following Artaud, the act of experiencing theatre furnishes the spectator with the "truthful precipitate of dreams" (1993: 63).

4.4. Theme 3. Technological Excesses and Lo-fi Adaptations

In contrast to Sichel's view on the "ghettoising" of Performing Objects, Claudia Orenstein reflects on how we are perhaps today in a "puppet moment". She writes:

> Although puppets and puppet-like figures go back to the earliest periods of human culture, today they seem to be springing forth in astonishing abundance. Puppets, performing objects, and a wide variety of manipulated creatures appear on Broadway stages (*The Lion King*, *Avenue Q*, *War Horse*) and their international equivalents, garnering some of theatre's most coveted awards. They show up likewise in *avant-garde* venues, clubs, cabarets, and puppet slams, and on both our small and large screens. With such a preponderance of puppets, we find ourselves in what we might call "a puppet

> moment," a juncture when cultural attention has turned forcefully towards the manipulated theatrical object (Posner et al., 2015: 2).

This view that puppets are springing forth "in astonishing abundance" is not only heart-warming, but also echoes the situation in South Africa where, after many years of what Marie Kruger (2011: 13) calls: "a tale of a tentative starts, evolving prejudices, new and lost opportunities, and a fresh momentum", puppets, performing objects, and masks have spilled over onto stages and garnered a fresh appreciation and respect. I will deal with this in more detail but for an extensive historical documenting of South African's puppet lineage, Kruger (2011) is a good place to begin, as well as Zuhanda Badenhorst's MA thesis (2005).

Garrett goes on to tap into another feature facing contemporary theatrical work – the rapid advancements in technology and how this is incorporated on stage, saying that "Visual Theatre might also be characterised as an advocate of new technologies" (Garrett, 2009: 79).If one looks back at the first real appearance of the term Visual Theatre, *The Drama Review* (1973: 3) writes that: "[t]his concept allows us to deal with the technical aspects of performance." These "technical aspects" point towards what could be a misconstruing of the potential a concept like Visual Theatre offers theatre-makers.

An emphasis on technology also leans toward foregrounding an aesthetic value placed on the *mechanics* of theatre, rather than as a driving force of enquiry and research. As such, this line of thinking aligns itself with a formalism within theatre that stretches towards the spectacle as theatre technologies developed with the ever-increasing sophistication of stages in the 21st century.

Using a term like Visual Theatre potentially runs the gamut from simply playing with an object on stage, to high-concept technologically sophisticated contemporary performance. This presents a number of challenges – both conceptually: how can one compare/contrast a work by an artist such as Robert Wilson or Heiner Müller on a major stage in Europe or America, with a performer playing with brown paper in a fringe theatre converted from a church hall? Also, in terms of scale – how can one compare a lavish *Cirque du Soleil* spectacle performed by the same performer who was previously playing with brown paper? All can be argued as examples of Visual Theatre in that there is a strong emphasis placed on the visual aspect of the work and its primacy in the meaning-making process.

In "Our Image Culture and Its Misguided Ideas About Freedom" (2001: 51), architect and author Juhani Pallasmaa writes despairingly of architecture:

> Today's architectural publications project an air of self-assurance, excitement, and optimism, presenting alluring formal innovations as signature objects of art. Concealed beneath an explosion of architectural imagery, however, is a less encouraging prospect: architecture is becoming an endangered art form. Architecture is threatened by two opposing tendencies of our obsessively materialistic and hedonistic culture: paradoxically, shrewd techno-economic exploitation simultaneously turns buildings into instruments of vulgar utility and objects of calculated visual seduction.

That is quite the indictment, and clearly points towards a contemporary paradox – as technology advances, mechanical reproduction and mass consumerism lead to an art form turning into instruments of "vulgar utility". This harks back to Andy Warhol and the explosion of Pop Art

from the 1960s, as much as it does to earlier iterations of rebellion against commodified art – here one thinks of Duchamp's mechanical sculptures. And also, as written about earlier, the devolution of early Physical Theatre in Britain and Europe into an empty, athletic "Euro-crash" form.

If one takes Palassmeer's words (with apology) and replaces "architecture"/"architectural" with "Visual Theatre"/"performative", consider the following:

> Today's performance studies publications project an air of self-assurance, excitement, and optimism, presenting alluring formal innovations as signature objects of art. Concealed beneath an explosion of performative imagery, however, is a less encouraging prospect: Visual Theatre is becoming an endangered art form. Visual Theatre is threatened by two opposing tendencies of our obsessively materialistic and hedonistic culture: paradoxically, shrewd techno-economic exploitation simultaneously turns productions into instruments of vulgar utility and objects of calculated visual seduction.
>
> We live in an era of shallow, momentary impressions that emphasise image over essence in everything from individual behaviour to fashion and politics. Theatre productions even compete for attention with consumer lifestyle commodities. But a collection of idiosyncratic productions does not make for a sane Visual Theatre culture. The role of Visual Theatre is not to entertain or thrill us but to structure our understanding of the world and of our very existence, to articulate how the world "touches us", to use an expression of Maurice Merleau-Ponty. Visual Theatre creates frames for action, thought, and emotion. It gives expression to human institutions and establishes a hierarchy for them. It articulates the interplay between background and foreground, normality and uniqueness, greyness and colour, the commonplace and the celebrated.
>
> Today's Visual Theatre, however, seems to have become increasingly detached from its cultural context and collective soil. As a consequence, Visual Theatre is losing its authentic existential ground and turning into aesthetized fabrication. Instead of structuring and integrating experience, our productions frequently contribute to disorientation and meaninglessness.
>
> One reason is that the values and ideals of the theatre profession have become confused. Formalism and whim have replaced a sense of balance, arbitrariness has replaced reason, and arrogance has replaced compassion. True dramaturgical talent is not to be found in the realm of formal or spatial fantasy but in an understanding of the essence and hierarchies of the human landscape and mind. Visual Theatre calls simultaneously for expression and restraint, innovation and a consciousness of history, courage, and modesty.

Linguistic word games aside, the above would not be out of place in a contemporary criticism of Visual Theatre work. As technology develops and again gets us closer and closer to the creation of true realistic illusion, "arrogance has replaced compassion" and "true dramaturgical talent" is not found in formal or spatial fantasy, but in "an understanding of the essence and hierarchies of the human landscape and mind". One thinks here of some of the recent cinematic advances in de-aging technologies, shaving decades of age off actors such as Robert de Niro in Martin Scorsese's *The Irishman* (2020), or even resurrecting the dead, as with Peter Cushing and Carrie Fisher in *Rogue One: A Star Wars Story* (2016). Here one starts moving into the "uncanny valley" – as animation, robotics, and indeed puppetry moves closer to precise realistic illusions, the more fake they seem and instil within us a shudder of dread.

I am merely pointing again to the vastness of the field that Visual Theatre tries to throw a net around, and how this suggests an equally vast continuum. As such, a term like Visual Theatre begins to buckle under its own weight and perhaps cannot hold everything properly.

I think the answer lies somewhere in the usage of technology in relation to the Performing Object.

As forms of technology, masks and puppets share many similar features. In this thesis, I've allowed a certain free-flow exchange between "mask" and "puppet". There are a few reasons for this deliberate blurring of lines. First, there is by far a greater body of theoretical writing on the puppet than the mask, and I find myself having to reach into the former to find some resonance for the latter. Second, in the minds of practitioners within the field, there is no great distinction between the two – indeed, techniques used to animate the mask or the puppet flow at will across both fields.[60] This will become more apparent throughout this thesis. And third, ontologically speaking, they are two of the oldest forms of performing objects that humans reached for in order to represent the nature of the world through external "things".

Given that, it could be said that a mask, as object, is a form of puppet. However, is the reverse true – is a puppet a mask?In one sense – yes; one could argue that most of theatrical design is a form of mask. By "design", I am contemplating set, costume, properties, and the like – all of which are three-dimensional constructions aimed at amplifying the narrative out into space and all the way to the back of the performance space. I have had many heated conversations with designers, performers, and students, about this – the idea that everything theatrically is presented to the audience as a form of a body or full masks. But in another sense, if one reduces the idea of mask and puppet to just an object, there is a simple yet quite clear difference.

Stephen Kaplin, New York-based puppeteer, designer, and director, who has worked with such luminaries as Julie Taymor and Bread and Puppet Theatre, offers up a fascinating thesis examining puppets from within the field itself by asking simply: "What is the puppet's nature?" (Kaplin, 1999: 29). Seeing the puppet as a "signifying figure" for the stage, much like the actor, Kaplin starts to move the two apart by presciently writing: "while actors animate a sign vehicle from the inside out, using their own feelings, bodies, and voices, puppet performers must learn to inhabit the sign vehicle from the outside in" (Kaplin, 1999: 29). In short, puppets as objects borrow, for a short time from their human manipulators, the necessary energy and life to present themselves in performance as sentient beings. Quoting Jurkowski (1983: 31), Kaplin writes: "The speaking and performing object makes temporal use of physical sources for its vocal and driving powers, which are present beyond the object". The complexities of this relationship and its "constant pulsation" define puppet performance (Kaplin, 1999: 29).

This echoes what Orenstein (Posner et al., 2015: 5) writes about "material performance" in an attempt to gain a more contemporary perspective on the ever-evolving form:

> By "material performance," I mean several things. At its simplest, this term assumes that puppets and other material objects in performance bear visual and kinetic meanings that operate independently of whatever meanings we may inscribe upon them in performance. The sheer phenomenological "thereness" of objects (Sofer, 2003: 15) can supersede or even erase spoken words because an audience's fascination with them is so intense; examples of this range from real water or animals on the stage to puppets that, in the words of Handspring Puppet Company's Basil

[60] In 2011, *Benchmarks* won the Handspring Puppet Award for Best Manipulation at the Out the Box Festival in Cape Town. Primarily a puppetry festival, the show won for its performers' manipulation of the masks. This was accepted without any dissention.

> Jones, "ignite ... a smouldering coal of ancient belief in us that there is life in stones, in rivers, in objects, in wood" (Lincoln Center Theater Review, 2011: 12).

At its very essence, it is the performer-puppet relationship dynamic that drives the form. And the same could be said for the performer-mask dynamic. Using this idea as a springboard, Kaplin launches into the really interesting part of his thesis – that of a "puppet tree" as a model for puppet performance. In doing so, he reflects on the idea of "distance" between performer and puppet, as well as "ratio" (1:1 or 1:many):

> By "distance" I mean the level of separation and contact between the performer and the object being manipulated-beginning at the point of absolute contact (where performer and object are one) and running through psychic, body, remote, and temporal degrees of contact. "Ratio" refers to the number of performing objects in comparison to the numbers of performers. Thus a "1:1" ratio indicates a direct transfer of energy from a single performer to a single performing object. A "I:Many" ratio means that one object is the focus of the energies of diverse manipulators, as with Bread and Puppet's giant Mother Earth Puppet, or a Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade balloon. "Many:I" indicates a single performer manipulating many separate objects, as a Javanese *dalang* does during the course of a *wayang kulit* performance (Kaplin, 1999: 32).

It is not my intention to repeat his entire argument here, but for the sake of clarity, it is worthwhile to see how he represented it pictorially (Figure 13):

Figure 8: Stephen Kaplin's "puppet tree" model. 1999. Computer imaging by Najma Harisiad.

This is a fascinating model, positing the actor and her character at the foot of the tree, not as a position of power or hierarchy, but more one of *distance* in relation to each other. At the top of the tree, at the furthest distant, comes the virtual object, created and operated by many. Playing up and down, or left and right of this continuum, appear a myriad of possibilities. As Orenstein contends:

> Virtual worlds engineered through computer technologies engender further philosophical explorations – and concomitant social anxieties: how does the virtual replicate, replace, reconfigure, or misconstrue the non-virtual? Both real performing objects onstage and virtual ones on screens provide opportunities for grappling, physically and directly, with answers. New technological experiments that intersect directly with puppetry include robot performers, robots manipulating string marionettes, computer-generated imagery (CGI), and motion capture. Puppeteers and

> scholars wrestle with how traditional ideas of puppetry and new technologies can inform and enrich each other, and find, despite the innovative tools and techniques at work, that these experiments re-invoke puppetry's recurrent philosophical issues: what constitutes a puppet? What is human agency? (Posner et al., 2015: 4).

The quote explores how virtual worlds and digital technologies have impacted philosophical ideas around the non-virtual and prompted related social concerns. Specifically:

- Computer simulations lead to questions about how the virtual replicates, alters, or misrepresents physical reality and being.
- Both actual performing objects on stages and virtual ones on screens let us grapple with these issues directly.
- New tech like robot performers, CGI, motion capture blends with puppetry to fuel further experiments.
- As puppetry embraces innovative tools, core philosophical questions recur:
- What defines a puppet?
- What constitutes human agency?

In summary, technologically-mediated worlds compel reexamination of assumptions about authenticity, identity, agency, consciousness, etc while contemporary puppetry operating with digital tech continues to invoke longstanding debates around the nature of manipulated objects/bodies and the self. The quote discusses this complex interplay of ancient and modern forms.

What is of particular interest to me here, is Kaplin writing:

> At some point, the increasing distance from the performing object means that the actor's own body can no longer physically accommodate the role. Makeup and costume, prosthetic devices, wigs and body extensions help to a degree, but eventually the performing object reaches the limits of the human body's anatomy and must begin to emerge with a physical presence of its own. This first happens with the mask.
>
> As the first emergence at the limit of human anatomy, the mask appears as a sculptured form worn usually, but not exclusively, over the face. As long as the mask as object correlates more or less to how one perceives a human form, even if exaggerated, a performer is still on a 1:1 ratio with handling said object, and its distance is close to the performer's body. As soon as that starts to shift (for example, to the top of the head, or outward from the body), a new threshold is crossed and the performing object has become detached from the actor's body, developing its own center of gravity, its own structure, its own presence. It is at this point, where the center of gravity of the performing object and the performer are distinct from each other, that the term "puppet" can be used. But like all the different zones of contact I outline here, the divisions are not sharp (Kaplin, 1999: 33).

Freed from the confines of the body, the object can then shrink or expand at an exponential rate, and the ratio can quickly extend to 1: many. And by now one is strictly in the realm of the puppet, and the mask remains somewhat more earthbound. In 2018, I had the fortune of witnessing the incredible *Royale de Luxe Compagnie* through the streets of Leeuwarden, Netherlands. The troupe of self-styled "inventors, stuntmen, poets and scrap-dealers" presented, over two days, their iconic *De Reuzen van Royale de Luxe* which saw a crew of about two dozen performers, machines, and technicians manipulate the giant Diver and Young Girl and her Dog to the delight of hundreds of thousands of spectators. It was a truly awe-inspiring event. Assisting this release from the confines of humanity for the puppet is technology:

> As the physical distance between the performer and the object widens, the amount of technology needed to bridge the gap increases. Moving the puppet's center of gravity outside the body of the puppeteer requires more and more sophisticated linking systems (Kaplin, 1999: 33).

This is critical when considering the differences and intersection between a mask and a puppet. While both objects require the performer to embody her relationship with the object, there is, in my opinion, and as can be heard echoed in Kaplin's writing, a much more human, and therefore intimate, relationship between mask and performer. It is, after all, a 1:1 ratio, and the mask lives or dies depending on the performer's ability to remain present and engaged.

Mask work is indeed its own form and can be followed to its own ends; and there is also, as suggested by its intimacy and embodiment by the performer, a far greater potential for development.

The *power* of such a form, and many of the forms held by Visual Theatre, is perhaps best summed up by Wilsher (2007: 7), where he writes:

> Masks are a folk art for the simple reason that they have an immediacy and connection with their audience that crosses cultural boundaries and leaps the centuries. Masks play the essential game of theatre, and are an antidote to the technological excess of film or the bland realism of television. They require the audience to watch as they did when they were children, wide-eyed and believing, to suspend their disbelief, their adult sensibilities, and their adult cynicism ... Masks offer us a spiritual experience when we least expect one – not in a religious sense, but certainly a feeling of being taken outside of our selves, a chance to lose oneself in the world of our imagination, much like listening to a great piece of transcendental music.

It would seem that, regardless of the form of mask, or puppet, or performing object, there is willingness on the part of the audience to "go along with the journey". Technological realism aside, an audience will believe and go with, as when they were children, or a childlike state of wonder of animating a salt or pepper shaker to illustrate a scene, a willingness to believe in the magic of something suddenly jolted into life. This is a call-back to Campbell (1960) who claims the mask is seen and believed to be (a) the human behind the mask, (b) the mask itself, and (c) the belief that a god walks amongst us.

As Wilsher concludes (2007: 7): "What theatre needs, I would argue, now, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, are more masks and more puppets."

4.5. Reflection

Visual Theatre as a term, is unwieldy, and cannot really begin to encompass all the many rhizomatic and contradictory arms of the field. However, it is also clear that as a term, or conceptualisation, it is in the process of *becoming*, and even though there has been little research to hold it, there is more and more evidence of a need to do so. As Garrett (2009: 79-80) writes:

> Beyond the definitions, or at least defining factors I have suggested here, there is without a doubt much more to say about what Visual Theatre is: the academic and theatre-making worlds are just beginning to find the words in which to say it, which is an exciting place to be. The plethora of uses of the term – both lowercase and upper-case – and the linking of them to a recurring roster of artists is indicative of there being such a thing as "Visual Theatre", in the minds of practitioners, producers, venues and reviewers alike.

It is indeed an exciting place to be, and I feel privileged to be part of it. From my perspective, I also recognise and acknowledge where I have positioned myself in terms of what Claudia Orenstein (Posner et al., 2015: 5) writes:

> The stubborn resistance of the puppet to a single definition says a great deal about its chameleonic nature. The puppet exists in an inherently ambiguous, fundamentally dual state: it operates, as Margaret Williams notes, "in the collapsed boundaries between the living and the inanimate" it remains independent even as it is manipulated; and it expresses the will and persona of its animator while imparting meaning of its own. In the words of Peter Schumann, puppetry is "an anarchic art, subversive and untamable by nature ... representing, more or less, the demons of ... society and definitely not its institutions" (1991: 75).

In many ways, based on my personal biography (and mythology), I read this as encouragement for my own involvement with performing objects on the low-tech side of the continuum of Visual Theatre. This is where the "magic" of masks and objects start happening for me. This is a space where they do not hold the distanced ambivalence of a Postdramatic theatre, where a thing could be this or that, and it's up to the "seer-audience member" to determine where she looks and thereby makes of the theatrical event but a maddening ambiguity, where a thing is *both this and that*. And here is where the mask enters the game, as a relatively low-tech object, low-down on the "puppet tree", which still maintains a close intimacy with the actor, between sacred and secular, in her physical presence in the moment, as well as across centuries.

Chapter 5: A Conspiracy of Silence: The Full Mask in South African Theatre

> ... the mask in a primitive festival is revered and experienced as a veritable apparition of the mythical being that it represents – even though everyone knows that a man made the mask and that a man is wearing it. The one wearing it, furthermore, is identified with the god during the time of the ritual of which the mask is a part. He does not merely represent the god; he is the god.
>
> – Joseph Campbell (1960: 21)

> I couldn't have done it otherwise. Gone on, I mean. I could not have gone through the awful wretched mess of life without having left a stain upon the silence.
>
> – Samuel Beckett (quoted in Bair, 1978: 640)

> ... furnish the spectator with the truthful precipitate of dreams.
>
> – Antonin Artaud (1993: 63)

5.1. Student Work and Transitioning Towards Visual Theatre

In this section, I want to take an autoethnobigraphical detour first, to set the scene for my foray into mask. Why this is important is engaging with a very particular approach to making theatre I had been exposed to and had been thinking about for a number of years, and one that would lead me to everything that has come afterwards. For a deeper reading of this, I refer you to my autoethnobiographical reflection in the Appendix. The concise version is that post Undergraduate training and experiments with more *avant-garde* theatre, tinged with the burgeoning Physical Theatre movement within South Africa, I went to the United Kingdom (UK) for two years. There I encountered work from a company that opened my mind to possibilities. Derevo are a Russian theatre troupe, who at the time dubbed themselves "anti-clowns", and make incredible mind-bending theatre. I sat in awe in two such productions – *Red Zone* (1998, London), and *Once…*(1998, Edinburgh). The former was apocalyptic, brutal, and violent – if anyone has managed to touch on Artaud's Theatre of Cruelty, I would argue that production was it. The latter was a dark, whimsical, contemporary fairytale – funny, sad, affirming, and heart-breaking. Both had such a huge impact on a young South African theatre-maker sitting in awe and glee in the audience.

It was clear I needed to study and experiment more. Unfortunately, economically, I couldn't do that in the UK or Europe. But I could return to South Africa and study with the top people there – I had saved enough money and had the passion. And so I enrolled at Rhodes University Drama University in Grahamstown (as it was still called) and 1999 began the true process that shaped me into what I am today.

I have never been a great student – in terms of marks I have been my own worst enemy. I have mostly gotten by due to the fact that I commit hugely to research and show up at seminars and the like with big ideas which I try to follow through in some fashion. So, coming back to studying was not my crowning academic glory – but where I was lucky was that I came to Rhodes University in the last few years of a "golden period" when I had access to some of the greatest Physical Theatre educators in the country: Andrew Buckland, Gary Gordon, and Juanita Finestone.

What this meant was that most days went as follows: 07.45 – morning class (mostly with First Physical Theatre Company), then 09.00 physical classes with one of the educators mentioned above, then 14.00 more classes, and after 17.00 we would rehearse our own work. Somewhere between we would manage seminars and academic classes. I have never worked as hard nor been as physically fit.

I came into the Honours course knowing exactly what I wanted to do: Physical Theatre, Writing, and above all, Directing. It was therefore a bit of a disappointment that the staff suggested I rather do Contemporary Mime and Choreography. In retrospect, however, this was an inspired decision, and through these electives I learnt the very valuable lesson of the liberation of technique, as well as a core set of values and disciplines that I rely on to the present day.

I also had to learn patience as I built up stamina, reintegrated into the country, and worked out how best to align all the contradictory pulls and pushes within me. 1999 was an interesting time in South Africa – then President Thabo Mbeki was pushing his African Renaissance idea, and while the country was in a fairly prosperous position, the first wave of the Rainbow Nation was ebbing, and we were all looking at the new millennium with equal parts optimism and suspicion.

In terms of the work I was making, the pieces were fine, but they didn't feel too different from the projects I had done in Pietermaritzburg during my undergrad. I was perhaps guilty of not fully committing to what I really wanted to say or do. With time running out in the year, I knew I had to do something drastic to achieve the metamorphosis I so keenly ached for.

Thus, was born the kernels of what would become *(phew) for a moment there* ... as my final Choreography project for the year. I had been re-reading a lot of Artaud, and was particularly drawn to his radio play, *Pour en finir avec le jugement de Dieu* [To have done with the judgement of God, 1948].[61] In this sprawling, controversial work, one of the final ones Artaud created before his death, he attempts to realise many of the traits of his Theatre of Cruelty. I had somehow managed to get my hands on a bad cassette copy of the version he recorded for radio broadcast. It is a very curious artefact: the cries and sounds that emerge from it as Artaud tries to articulate things that are inside him are unsettling, almost alien, and seemed ripe for millennial angst. The English translation of the text finds Artaud attacking, among other issues, American capitalism, religion, and the urgency of standing true to oneself, no matter how cracked or in pain one is:

> I deny baptism and the mass.
> There is no human act,
> on the internal erotic level,
> more pernicious than the descent
> of the so-called jesus-christ
> onto the altars.
>
> No one will believe me
> and I can see the public shrugging its shoulders
> but the so-called christ is none other than he
> who in the presence of the crab louse god
> consented to live without a body,
> while an army of men
> descended from a cross,
> to which god thought he had long since nailed them,
> has revolted,
> and, armed with steel,
> with blood,
> with fire, and with bones,
> advances, reviling the Invisible
> to have done with GOD'S JUDGMENT.[62]

This idea, of doing away with all things judgemental, whether that be in the form of a religious God, or an authority figure (parents, teachers, politicians, and the like) began to ferment in me the desire for one final spasm of anger, of rallying all the inaction that I had previously felt, as well

[61] Recorded for French Radio on 22–29 November 1947. The poem, featuring percussive sounds, cries, screams, grunts, as well as spoken text was due to be broadcast in 1948, but was banned from airplay a few days before broadcast. It was subsequently released as a recording and can be heard here online: https://www.ubu.com/sound/artaud.html

[62] Translated online text from https://surrealism-plays.com/Artaud.html

as the alienation and loneliness, and coalescing these into something brutally ugly and beautiful. The poem continues:

> however hard people press me with questions
> and however vigorously I deny all questions,
> there is a point
> at which I find myself compelled
> to say no,
>
> NO
>
> then
> to negation;
>
> and this point
> comes when they press me,
>
> when they pressure me
> and when they handle me
> until the exit
> from me
> of nourishment,
> of my nourishment
> and its milk,
>
> and what remains?
>
> That I am suffocated.[63]

I think that the image or feeling of suffocation is one that South Africans (certainly of my generation and background) carry within them, and looking back at the biographical detour in the appendix, I see it all too clearly. Our early lives were shaped by restriction and we could either fall in line with it in the late 1980s and early 1990s and be swallowed up in the state machinery, or, thereafter, get caught up in the "Rainbow Nation" rhetoric, or we could rebel and kick against it. In my younger years, that rebellion was a very internal one and in many ways a very negative one. In his poem Artaud says "NO then to negation" – and this was something echoing what was happening in my shifting consciousness. Anarchy is all very well, but if one has no idea what to do after a revolution, then it will quickly lose its way, and the anarchic act feels somewhat adolescent. I found myself in a position of not just wanting to kick against the walls, but to *build* something thereafter; however, in order to do that, I needed to kick down some of my own walls also, and use the destructive act as an act of creation. In his song *King Ink*, a young Nick Cave puts it this way:

> a what's in that room? a what's in that house?
> say something, express thyself, say something, express yourself
> express ... say something loudly Aaaaaahhhh ... [64]

[63] Translated online text from https://surrealism-plays.com/Artaud.html
[64] Written by Rowland S. Howard and Nick Cave, from the Birthday Party album, *Prayers on Fire*, released by Mute Records, 1981.

This was going to be my chance to express myself and "say something loudly". The work stands as a pivotal, metamorphic moment in my evolution, and it comes as no surprise to reflect that on my journey to silence, I would first have to make a big noise.

Artaud concludes in his poem:

> Because they were pressing me
> to my body
> and to the very body
>
> and it was then
> that I exploded everything
> because my body
> can never be touched.[65]

In Edgar Allen Poe's *The Fall of the House of Usher* (1839), the head character Roderick feels intimately connected to the crack running through his family mansion as if he and his sister, Madelaine, with whom he has a strange, almost incestual relationship, are connected to the decaying façade. In this, their nerves are turned almost inside out, and, as with the Artaud poem, if he is touched then everything will explode.[66] This condition captures what I was feeling towards the end of 1999 – needing to say something loudly, make a stand, but also feeling vulnerable.

Meanwhile, I had been drifting toward a new group of misfits and people with a similar rebellious attitude, both my age and younger, and felt like I had found the beginnings of a new tribe. Armed with our own personal stories and experiences, we entered the rehearsal room and got to work.

The title *(phew) for a moment there* ... is derived from a Radiohead song, *Karma Police*, where, after the singer has taken us through a melancholic and somewhat detached atmosphere of loss and longing, the song plays out with the repeated refrain:

> For a minute there
> I lost myself, I lost myself
> Phew, for a minute there
> I lost myself, I lost myself[67]

(phew) was performed in the Rhodes University Box Theatre, a small experimental 120-seat theatre, with the space reconfigured to have rostra set up against its four walls. In front of the rostra were a single row of chairs for the audience – allowing for a maximum capacity of no more than 60 people. The audience did not go completely in the round, for at the back left corner of the theatre was a large screen with an array of paints and brushes, and two galvanised iron buckets filled with ice cubes. The screen was used as a canvas onto which an artist was to paint her impressions of the action that was to unfold.

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[65] Translated online text from https://surrealism-plays.com/Artaud.html

[66] In 1999, I played Roderick Usher in the Steven Berkoff adaptation of this story, directed by David Alcock and choreographed by Gary Gordon.

[67] From the song *Karma Police*, written by Colin Charles Greenwood, Edward John O'Brien, Jonathan Richard Guy Greenwood, Philip James Selway, and Thomas Edward Yorke. Off the album *OK Computer*, released by Parlophone Records, 1997.

When the audience entered the space, the performers were already on stage in the final stages of their warm-up. Because the playing space was so close to the audience members, they had to cross very close to the performers to get to their chairs, and there was already the smell of sweat and tension in the room. This was emphasised by the performers' shaven heads, tattoos, and muscular actions – the males wore only trousers and had bare chests, while the females wore short skimpy slip-dresses. Under the pre-set lighting state, they glistened, gleamed, and radiated menace.

Receiving their beginners' cue, the performers took their positions on the rostra behind the audience. In very dim lighting, they started walking, whispering the English-translated text from Einstürzende Neubuten's song, *Prolog*.[68] The audience were not meant to hear the words at first, but each verse starts "don't you think" and ends "we could, but –" where the sound design would crash in – a clip off another Neubauten song, *Headcleaner*[69] that is just a sonic blast of noise and fury that lasts about ten seconds. In that blast, the performers writhe and throw themselves about, almost as if trying to tear their own skins off. Then it is immediately dropped and they go into verse two, with the same whispers, break and the same violent blast. Verse three they speak normally, intoning the text:

> Don't you think:
> We could sign
> Even resign our minds
> And in this land
> (Like nine day wonders)
> Play up and down and back and forth
> To return later on
> Completely stewed
> Long forgotten
> Just turning in ever-decreasing circles?
> We could, but – [70]

This time, there is no blast, but a drone slowly ratcheting up in tension, and a rattling. The performers writhe in slow-motion, and the audience now see that their movements are a choreographed pattern. The tension has to break, and indeed it does as the song crashes into a fast percussive industrial beat and German lyrics yelled by the singer. This releases the performers and, screaming, they leap over the audience onto the floor and go into a furious choreographic section of leaps, catches, sprints, cries, full of muscle and anger. At the climax, the performers assemble in front of the canvas, drop all movement, and as one turn to face the audience on all sides – sending out a fierce and unwavering glare. A line has been drawn in the sand. A challenge has been set.

This was my new tribe. These were my misfits meshing together, as I slowly accepted the mantle of leadership to drive them forward.

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[68] From the 1989 album, *Haus der Lüge*.
[69] From the 1994 album, *Tabula Rasa*.
[70] Written By Alexander Hacke, Blixa Bargeld, F.M. Einheit, Marc Chung & N. U. Unruh.

The piece proceeds with a number of visual and physical vignettes. There is no single narrative strand and the performers don't play characters but rather versions of themselves – unified by an unflinching physicality that veers from tenderness to violence.

To the tune of South African industrial rock group Battery 9's *Die Nugter Wals* (*The Sober Waltz*)[71], the cast play out a decadent scene of flirting at a bar, accompanied by alcohol and drug excess, with casual sexual hook-ups:

Daar is geen toekoms	There is no future
Wat ons nog kan vier	That we can still celebrate
So sit op jou blinddoek	So put on your blindfold
En staan teen die muur	And stand against the wall
Ons is in ons moer in	We are pissed off
So kry nog 'n bier	So grab another beer
Realisties gesproke	Realistically speaking
Is daar fokol plesier	There is fuck-all pleasure

A young man enters the space alone, eating an apple. An older man stalks onto stage, sees him, and a dangerous game of cat and mouse ensues. Eventually the older man pounces on the other and forces himself on him, ending up screwing the apple into his mouth and leaving him helpless on the floor. A young woman enters and tenderly bites into the apple still in the young man's mouth. Joined by the apple, they begin a gentle duet, as the other performers enter and reflect their movements as a chorus of onlookers. The young woman starts to get clingy, the young man bored. He ends up rejecting her and crushes the apple on her head – the cycle of violence passes on.

An older woman enters, singing a childhood song, and repeating a gestural motif taken from Milan Kundera's "longing for immortality".[72] The older man from earlier enters and sets the scene by speaking: "She lurched away through passport control, followed delightfully by her hips etc".[73] It is a departure, a leaving, an ending. They begin a duet that starts playfully with an adaptation of a game of "tag". This ends with him holding onto her. She tries to extricate herself from his embrace. The duet develops and become frantic, then violent, until she stands her ground firmly and breaks away from him. She turns and starts walking away again.

He follows her and the others join in, walking in a line diagonally across the space. As the front reaches the other side of the space, they turn and sprint to the back of the line to re-join the procession. The sound starts to bleed in, and it is a quieter part of Neubauten's *Headcleaner* from before. But again, the tension is rising as the procession repeats over and over, and an explosion is imminent. When it breaks, the performers scream and fling themselves to all parts of the stage and up onto the rostra behind the audience. Patterns of previous movements and sections pop up, but everything is fractured and broken as the hard, loud industrial music drives them inward and outward. Slowly they begin drawing together and the couples begin to target the final solitary male.

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[71] From the album *Wrok*, released by One F Music, 1998. The song loses quite a bit in translation.

[72] As described in his book *Immortality* (1990): "Let us call the gesture of Bettina and Laura the gesture of longing for immortality. Bettina, who aspires to grand immortality, wishes to say: I refuse to die with this day and its cares, I wish to transcend myself, to be a part of history, because history is eternal memory. Laura, though she only aspires to small immortality, what's the same: to transcend herself and the unhappy moment in which she lives to do 'something' to make everyone who has known her remember her."

[73] This I adapted from something but for the life of me cannot remember what.

He tries to get away, but they close in on him viciously – eventually attacking him and ripping his trousers off. Exposed, in his underwear, he makes one final desperate attempt to escape, but collapses exhausted to the floor. The others race to fetch the buckets (remember them?) and in a blaze of floorlights, they pelt him with ice cubes, literally stoning him into submission. This continues until the music mercifully climaxes and cuts off to a high drone. Spent, exhausted, the cast stand panting, looking on at the violence they have perpetrated. In silence, they turn slowly to again encounter the audience, as if to rebuke them for what they witnessed and permitted to happen, as they are joined by their victim. *Headcleaner* finishes with its soft *coda*:

> the sun is rising, gloomy eclipse of the sun.
> everything is coated with ash
> like snow.
>
> we, however, who now know the danger and
> who are aware of it, even we cannot yet make
> up our minds ... [74]

A slight indication to the audience, derived from a martial arts' bow of respect, and the performers file silently out, leaving behind a stunned and shocked audience.

Running at approximately 30 minutes, and only having a few performances as part of our final practical exams, *(phew)* nevertheless became a mark in the sand for my development as a theatre-maker. It was the closing of a chapter, and the beginning of a new one, as I was sandblasting off my influences. This was an attempt at creating my own *Red Zone* (see Appendix) with a student crew. It was extremely physical, and I shall probably never make something as viscerally violent ever again. Even though my work has gone on to explore murder, death, crime, bullying, and xenophobic violence (among other issues), the level of violence required by the performers (even though it was choreographed) was quite extraordinary. And its effect on the audience members was tangible – for a few days friends and colleagues who watched the piece could not look us in the eyes. And while it was very Derevo-inspired, it gave me the confidence to pursue my own work using a visual, physical, and above all, non-verbal approach.

If *(phew)* was my *Red Zone*, then I suppose my next work was the closest I have come to my version of *Once*. In 2000, while I was reading for my Master's degree at Rhodes University, I was selected to direct that year's Drama Department entry to the National Arts Festival of Student Theatre. This was a production called *Through Blue*. Although the cast and crew were students at the time, the production had a professional ethos to it, transferring to the NAF Fringe, performing at the National Schools' Festival, the Free State Schools' Festival, and then touring to Johannesburg to perform at the Gauteng Schools' Festival.[75]

The premise was inspired by a Truman Capote short story, *Master Misery* (1949).[76] In it, Sylvia (the central character) arrives in New York to find fortune and love in the big city. She stays with family friends who have recently married and caught up in the trappings of normal life – Sylvia finds

[74] Written by Alexander Hacke, Blixa Bargeld, F.M. Einheit, Marc Chung and N. U. Unruh.
[75] For some context of the production, as well as cast and crew interviews, see a behind the scenes clip here: https://youtu.be/oj9lPZyTYWo
[76] Capote, T. (1949). *A Tree of Night: And Other Stories*. New York: Random House.

them insufferable (they call each other "Bootsy" and "Tootsy" in the story and have sentimental names for all their consumer objects). Sylvia works a nondescript job as a typist and quickly becomes disillusioned with the reality of the city. And then, one day, she answers an advertisement to "sell her dreams for money". This she duly does, and the reader is introduced to the antagonist of the story – a sinister therapist (later named Master Misery) and his secretary who record people's dreams and then recompense people for them. Sylvia also meets O'Reilley, anti-hero of sorts, who is down on his luck and seems to have history with Master Misery. They start a companionship and they live off her dream-wages, which he uses to buy alcohol, saying: "You can't travel through the blue without a bottle, baby". What follows is a downward spiral of addiction and alienation. Sylvia sells more and more dreams, withdraws from her friends and job, and starts using barbiturates to sleep, and thus to dream more. O'Reilley gets into trouble with the police and is jailed for a while. Winter falls hard on the city, and when O'Reilley is freed, he finds Sylvia unconscious on the floor of her apartment, having overdosed on sleeping pills. He revives her and there is a brief moment of hope as he leads her back to Master Misery's office to demand her dreams back. However they learn that her dreams have all been used up. The two part ways in the cold New York streets – two husks of the humans they once were, used up, alone.

These seemed like good material for a comedy. Well, a tragicomedy. The themes of urban alienation, loneliness, love, and survival were ones that resonated strongly with me. Furthermore, the idea of using dreams as currency was too delicious to resist. Thus was born the beginnings of *Through Blue* – a contemporary fairy-tale told by A Conspiracy of Clowns[77] with the tagline: "how long can you survive before selling your dreams?"

Using *Master Misery* as an entry point and as a loose narrative structure, we set about to collaboratively piece the story together. Entering into the process through the lens of exploring contemporary clowning, what was explicit was that none of us knew exactly what we were doing – nobody had received any training in clowning.[78] We were guided by a shared hunger for discovery and did it the hard way – trial and error. What this meant in my capacity as director, was that I couldn't talk down to the cast and crew, or teach them a particular "style" or "method." I was on an equal footing in the journey, and was only able to facilitate, guide, and provoke the cast and crew, to the same extent that they were able to facilitate, guide, and provoke me in return). Interestingly, although the lens was contemporary clowning, what the ensemble jointly discovered was a visual, non-verbal approach to work that in many ways set the blueprint for my future forays into an accessible, non-verbal, masked, and visual theatre. In short, while aiming for a certain goal, we accidentally stumbled on a different form altogether that was specific to that ensemble but which would also go on to inform my practice from that day forward. In short, this becomes an excellent example of Giovanni Fusetti's take on Grotowski's *via negativa* (literally by way of the negative, or opposite) which will be discussed further in the following chapters. The company did create a mask for the titular character of Master Misery that was affixed to an amorphous puppet that was planned to rise out of one of the set pieces at the climax of the show. This was ultimately removed from the show as our technical proficiency at manipulating the puppet was not good

[77] This was when I coined the phrase and was its first usage.
[78] The production predates the impact practitioners like Sylvaine Strike, James Cuningham, and Helen Iskander would have on their return to South Africa from the Lecoq school, when contemporary clowning became more *de riguer*.

enough and would spoil the ending. As a result, the character remained in the audience's imagination.

The approach we employed also proved that I could make theatre akin to what I had experienced with Derevo's *Once*. By utilising space, design, body language, movement, music, and lighting, we could create stories that held together with a narrative thread and were not only innovative and rarely seen on a South African stage, but through their use of humour and melancholy and relatable characters, were accessible and could potentially be very popular. It was a form I had been searching for and continue refining.

What is important to note that although the work was non-verbal, it wasn't yet entirely *silent*. The characters "spoke" a made-up form of gibberish when they did speak – each character was allocated a number of consonants and the actors had to work out how to integrate the sounds with their physical movements to suggest a language that the audience could understand. This is similar to the term used for half mask and other physical performances called *grammelot*. Anchoring this was also the use of popular songs as soundtrack – usually some playing on the theme of dreams – for example, The Chordette's *Mister Sandman* (1954), The Mamas and the Papas' *Dream a Little Dream of Me* (1968), and Eels' *Electro-shock Blues* (1998).[79]

Of equal importance was the set design which played a pivotal role in telling the story. At first it seemed deceptively simple – two large wooden boxes on wheels, two concertina flats, and two chairs. However, the boxes and flats had been "tricked out" (similarly to stage magicians' boxes) to become multi-functional and adaptable and everything was very portable to set up the various locations. Different sides of the boxes were also painted to suggest location or mood – one side of the boxes was painted with a cloud-dream motif (this in itself a homage to First Physical Theatre Company's Magritte clouds motif in The Unspeakable Story, 1995). Characters could hide in them, or disappear and reappear elsewhere through secret doors or latches. Characters could also be pushed on them on or off the stage, to allow for a smooth, shifting, fluid dreamlike world where nothing was quite what it seemed. Key props carried a similar cloud-dream motif – Sylvia's "book of dreams" was painted to echo this, and we worked out the convention of tearing a page from her book in exchange for payment. The pill bottle she used as her addiction spiralled had the same design on it.

For the rest, one of the concertina flats had a frame cut out of it with a mechanism that allowed the cast to change a picture in the frame unseen, or utilise the blank space as a concentrated image.[80] For example, when Sylvia tires of her friends' insufferable fawning over each, and the strains of *Mister Sandman* seep in, she returns to her little room where she has a painting of her home in its rural setting. As she settles to sleep, a light comes on inside the little house, and smoke comes out of the chimney, showing us her internal pastoral dreams of safety and security. Later in the story, as she is taking pills to sleep and dream, the picture frame opens up and a procession of characters passes slowly across the frame – the henchmen (our version of the secretary) menacingly watching her succumb to drugged sleep, Bootsy and Tootsy looking sadly on, and the tramp (our version of O'Reilley) locked up in jail. These vignettes, or images of action to catch up on others' situation in the story, allowed us to compress time and space, which, along with the use of movement

[79] The use of older or more retro music is another strand that runs through my work.
[80] This use of the picture frame device we would return to, and develop considerably, in *Pictures of You* (2008).

montages, was to become a common trait in all future work. It is also, incidentally, very cinematic. Finally, at the culmination of the story, on the reveal of the dreams being used up, Sylvia is literally packed away into the set, as if into a filing cabinet. The tramp is left alone with a bottle to travel through the blue, and the final picture is revealed – Ponte Tower and the Johannesburg skyline, while the Gereformeerde Blues Band's *Hilbrow* (1989) plays out into the swelling darkness. This finally revealed where the story was situated,[81] and the combination of action on stage, visual signifier, and sound was theatrically very pleasing.

Although only a student work, the quality and depth of conceptualisation and the execution in performance pointed to a very different beast slouching towards the South African theatrical landscape. The work was not seen by many – perhaps a few thousand overall, and mostly on the schools' festival circuit – but I had taken a huge step in concretising a developing approach towards making work. I had even named the company of student actors From the Hip – and it emphasised my desire and dream to work closely with a group of actors over time, refining a singular cohesive approach to creating theatre in South Africa.

These ideas and themes were already coalescing in my consciousness as I was completing my MA in 2001. I was eager to start a professional company and my positive experience of devising led me to conceptualise the idea of the *performer-creator* and formed the basis of the ethos I hoped to cultivate. In 2001, whilst finishing my MA on the *performer-creator*,[82] I sensed a tangible *frisson* of discovery in the air, fuelled by the desire to set up a permanent company. This is what I wrote in my MA thesis:

> ... there are a significant (and growing) number of solo practitioners but hardly any groups, or permanent companies that sustain training and creating work beyond a project-to-project basis. This is incredibly problematic – if the notion of the performer-creator is to play any part in the development of South African theatre or achieve any of its huge potential, then something more permanent needs to be set up. Somehow the funding, or committed pioneers, must be found or naturally gravitate towards each other. For this is the territory marked out by those groups that have made significant progress in this regard. The name of the game is research – research into both the performer as self and all the genres and styles available for use as well as the fostering of a group identity, if there is a group or ensemble. This would lead to further research and developments in performance trends and ways of expressing work physically on stage (Murray: 2001: 70).

Reflecting on this in 2021, I realise it reads almost as a blueprint for the subsequent journey that I embarked on, and which I am still on: a restless desire to keep evolving, and a drive to keep learning how to learn. This is not done in singularity but only really possible within a group ethos or process. This process holds within it the paradoxes that I embrace, as well as the fluidity of knowledge. Such a fluidity encompasses a belief that change is ever constant, and arguably the most believable or authentic way of acquiring new knowledge is through experiential field work – in a laboratory, on the floor, with a group, and/or through an embodied praxis of slow and sustained

[81] In the 2012 Ubom! remake of *Through Blue*, we adapted the story much closer to the draconian implementation of Apartheid, where individuals sold their dreams to the Orwellian state, and the characters were much more caught up in the socio-political machinations.

[82] And to this date, I cannot fathom why I did not write up the process of *Through Blue*, and my subsequent solo production *Little Jackie Paper* (2001), in my Master's thesis. At a guess, I would think it was during a time before the ideas of practice-as-research (PaR) and practice-led research took root.

experimentation.[83] Following this would lead to the establishment of From the Hip: Khulumakahle (FTH:K) in Cape Town and go on to span three phases during my time with the company:

- Environmental Theatre, seeking out a performance approach that blended Western physical theatre with indigenous African storytelling, 2003–2005 (works include *Touch Wood*, *Imbew'embi: The Bad Seed*, *Water Pockets*, as well as to an extent, *Birds' Eye View*[84]);

- Deaf and hearing integration, the development of an inclusive organisational strategy to training and performance creation, 2005–2007 (works include *Leap of Faith*, *GUMBO*, and *'Nuff Sed*); and

- Visual Theatre, significantly developing our performance technology and pedagogy, going beyond just Deaf-hearing integration to an established theatrical genre, 2008–2011 (works include *GUMBO, QUACK!, Ek Roep Vir Jou Vanaand, Womb Tide, Bench Marks, and Office Block: Business as Usual*).

All the works carry traits of Visual Theatre – innovative visual design, multi-use of props to the extent they become puppets or "performing objects"[85] – and all stem from a devised collaborative process. However, it was the latter phase that saw the company really go through a purple patch of creativity, accessibility, and audience development. This all started in 2008 with the creation of the mask work, *Pictures of You*, which, while not strictly speaking an FTH:K work,[86] stormed the gates of mainstream attention and thrust the company, and its evolving approach, into the foreground.[87] Therefore, it seems to me that an interrogation of work carried out through this phase will provide a rich focus for my current research – not only for training and creation, but also in terms of cultural inclusion, diversity, and a thoroughly accessible education and entertainment product.

I need to reiterate here that at the time, terms like "Visual Theatre" and all its peculiarities, never mind Mask Theatre, were not part of the lexicon at the time – these all came later, with the help of hindsight, and 20-20 vision. At the time, I was groping for some form of conceptualisation, guided by experimentation in form and conventions. It is easy in present day to see the strange and tangled loops starting to fold in on the other to create my own particular approach to making a visual, visceral, and physical theatre. Likewise, it becomes easier to see how my work fitted into global trends and movements that were, mostly unknown to me at the time fitting into a conceptualisation of Visual Theatre.

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[83] As the incomparable Nick Cave explains in a lyric from *Jesus of the Moon:* "'cause people often talk about being scared of change | but for me I'm more afraid of things staying the same | 'cause the game is never won | by standing in any one place for too long". (Nick Cave and the Bad Seeds, 2008. Lyric excerpt from the album, *Dig!!! Lazarus Dig!!!*}

[84] *Birds' Eye View* was a co-production between FTH:K and Eye2Eye Productions which saw the company mentoring two young AFDA Cape Town graduates, Porteus Xandau and Keenan Arrison. The play did have an environmentalist theme, hence mentioned here.

[85] For example, in *Water Pockets* (2004-2005), three male actors played all the female and male characters armed only with tin buckets that morphed from water containers to chairs, to toilets, and so on; and *Imbew'embi: The Bad Seed* featured the first collaboration with Janni Younge and the use of shadow puppetry to tell its story.

[86] *Pictures of You* remains the Intellectual Property (IP) of the breakaway collective, A Conspiracy of Clowns, headed up by myself and Liezl de Kock. Because the work was often co-produced and marketed by FTH:K due to its non-verbal nature and thus accessibility for Deaf and hearing audiences, it is often confused as being a *de facto* FTH:K production.

[87] This culminated in the company collectively winning the Fleur du Cap Award for Innovation in Theatre in 2012.

And finally, importantly, it becomes easier to see also how I was drawn towards Mask Theatre as my primary drive.

In this chapter I've tried to summarise what I consider my first two works, made while I was a postgraduate student. next, I would like to interrogate some of the origins and use of the mask in theatrical history and the various roles that they have played in the development of drama. I then isolate one particular strand of mask – the silent, full-faced, character mask – and continue to argue its emergence as "the latest development of which not much is written" (Wilsher, 2007: 26). By tracing, both globally and locally, a lineage of practice where companies and artists employ the silent mask, I'd like to investigate the impact its emergence has had on South African theatre.

This investigation in no small way intersects with my own ongoing journey as a theatre-maker, and it would be remiss here not to state that in order to trace such lineages as mentioned above, so too am I going to have to attempt to untangle the loosely-knotted skein that makes up my own artistic sensibility. I will, in due course, also engage with the embedded *hubris* that a statement like that brings with it. Suffice to say, if the previous chapter has established the mask within a continuum of "performing objects" available to a fluid conceptualisation of Visual Theatre, and one that contains within it paradoxes and doubles, then so too does my journey towards (and my subsequent journey with) masks straddle many threads that appear disconnected, and yet which somehow turn and twist over each other to create a particular knot that places me where I am – a knot not unlike a twisted strand of DNA.

This journey has not happened, and will not continue to happen, in a straight line; similarly, as has been seen previously, I will jump backwards and forwards in time in terms of my development. As mentioned earlier, I am looking to create a synchronic relationship to time to discuss the emergence of full, silent masks in South African theatre, and their effect on the theatrical landscape. What I offer up, as my journey, is a parallel diachronic journey of myself as a theatre-maker. These two areas flirt, flit, and fornicate with each other, and their offspring is not an answer to, but more a conceptualisation towards how Mask Theatre can be a provocation and potential for South African theatre going forward.

I shall endeavour to be as clear as possible in pulling on various threads to find the way to the tangled knot in trying to unknot it, without hopefully causing more of a mess – however, the process is not quite as simple as following a thread through a labyrinth, or a path of breadcrumbs out of a forest. There are many byways and detours, false starts, dead ends, and walk-backs. In time, when I come to reflect on my life as a much older human being, it may very well become possible to orchestrate the whole experience into a cleaner narrative – my own "hero's journey" à la Campbell. For the present, it demands a plunging into paradoxes and unstable shifting ground. As will become apparent, this is not unlike the process of devising, or the process of working with masks.

5.2. A Mythical Side-eye

The quotes at the start of this chapter are a few that have always in some form guided my personal evolution as a theatre-maker. Of particular interest to me in reference to this thesis, is Campbell's insistence that one's approach to the "mythical world" be guided by the "artist's eye", which in his

opinion has always had a "mythical slant" to it. I read into this not only the artist grappling with the grand mythologies that surround humanity's existence and evolution, but also see it as an inspiration and an encouragement to create new mythologies. Masks produce a certain freedom from censure in the performer, they embrace the performer and audience member in a particularly unique way of "making meaning", quite literally embodying change, and thus creating narrative. Masks can be seen as powerful tools in reflecting new narratives being created – in essence, they contribute towards forms of "world-building".[88]

Picture this:

It's 2008. You're in a Fringe venue at the National Arts Festival (NAF) in Grahamstown.[89] As the houselights fade, you are lulled by the sound of cheerful, chirping birds over the strains of Chet Baker singing "Look for the Silver Lining" (1954).[90] The lights rise. The stage *mise en scene* suggests a suburban living room and front door. You can dimly make out various pictures on the wall, and just out of the light, a chair with what seems to be a tied-up body slumped in it. Then: a Mask[91] (Frank) walks into the room. (See Figure 14.)

Figure 9: Frank (Dorian Burstein) arrives home to find the body of his wife, Janet (Liezl de Kock) tied to a chair. Image from *Pictures of You* (Murray, 2010a).

Frank is in his early 20s, with a hopeful, slightly goofy face, and a shock of curly hair. His cheeks are slightly red as if he gets embarrassed easily. He wears a long grey raincoat over his work clothes and wears what he considers a jaunty little hat. He bursts happily through the door, home from work. He hangs his hat on the back of the door, glances left, and double takes at the sight of the body. Instantly, the scene is plunged into an intense red light and Chet Baker is replaced by a sudden, brutal, and ascending sonic assault on the senses.[92] Frank rushes to untie the body and the lights fade quickly to black as the sound continues its assault. The lights rise quickly again on Frank standing by the chair, now holding the rope. The body has disappeared. Frank is in a state of high anxiety, trying to make sense of a tragedy. He shakes his head, denying what has happened, and the lights fade again. Moments later they rise to reveal an aged Frank – some 20 to 30 years later. He no longer wears the raincoat, but rather what he considers a practical cardigan over his shirt. His face is now

[88] For this, I am indebted to Nail Gaiman's online MasterClass series on Writing Fiction – cf. Masterclass Series. (2019). *Neil Gaiman Teaches The Art of Storytelling*. https://www.masterclass.com/classes/neil-gaiman-teaches-the-art-of-storytelling [accessed June-December 2019]. World-building is part and parcel of the narrative drive in fiction and theatre, albeit in various forms. It is an area of study that is also becoming more and more central to game theory, cinema, and curriculum design as the world moves into the 4th Industrial Revolution.

[89] The town name Grahamstown is used here for historical purposes – the name was subsequently changed to Makhanda in 2018.

[90] Chet Baker recorded this in 1954, but the song was originally written in 1919 and copyrighted in 1920 by J. Kern (music) & B. D. DeSylva (lyrics).

[91] I use 'Mask' here with a capital letter to indicate character. When I refer to 'mask theatre', I use a small 'm'.

[92] And when I say "assault", I don't use this lightly. James Webb, the sound designer, created an unearthly shriek of trauma. The brief was along the lines of "a high shriek of tearing metal", and what Webb conjured was the stuff of nightmares.

lined with grief and resolute stubbornness and his hair has receded from his forehead and is lined with grey. But it is unmistakeably him.[93] (See Figures 15 and 16.)

Figure 10: In the past, Frank (Dorian Burstein) mourns the tragic death of his wife, Janet. Image from *Pictures of You* (Murray, 2010a).

Figure 11: In the present, Frank (Dorian Burstein) is still haunted by unresolved and suppressed grief for the tragic death of his wife, Janet. Image from *Pictures of You* (Murray, 2010a),

As the sound mercifully bleeds out to static, Frank shakes his head once more – still in denial. As the lights now slowly fade and we start to recover from the shock of the visual and auditory attack, the sound slides into the soft chiming of a clock, heralding the first day of the story you are about to experience.

5.3. South African Masks

The above describes the first minute of the mask work, *Pictures of You* (2008 – see Murray, 2010a), where Frank, returning home from work, discovers the dead body of his wife, Janet. The scene is important mainly for two reasons: firstly, it holds the narrative key to the whole wordless piece in that it sets up the trauma Frank endures, and his repression of the entrapment, in spirit, of his beloved wife,[94] and secondly, it was designed and devised in such a way as to literally blast the members of the audience, to shake them out of any preconceived notion of what they were expecting, and to make them aware that what is to follow will require careful attention – meaning will need to be received in a different way to what they may have been used to.

This was the emergence of full-faced character masks on the South African stage. This was the appearance of *silent* masks.

What do I mean by this?

[93] In the darkness, the performer has swapped masks, as he will continue to do as the production switches between time zones.

[94] The same scene is replayed later, once Frank and Janet have undergone their respective journeys of discovery, and the audience finally puts the pieces together that the narrative they have been following is one where Janet is only living in the protective and obsessive mind of Frank.

Firstly, to be clear, I do not mean to suggest that it was the first time that masks had been seen on stage in South Africa. For example, in 1998's *Ipi Zombie* (directed by Brett Bailey for Third World Bunfight[95] – see Figure 17), there was a particularly memorable scene:

Figure 12: The zombies emerge from the closet for Brett Bailey's *Ipi Zombie.*

> Insect sounds fill the dark night; Devil opens cupboard doors. Inside waits a group of white-painted boys, naked but for loincloths, arms twisted behind their backs, and wearing long narrow African masks. They throng out onto the stage, bobbing like vultures, and gather to feed on Mrs Maguda, and to menace the audience. A thrill of crackling turntable sound, the spotlight comes up on Intombi 'Nyama in the cupboard. The zombies glance up as she breaks into an up-tempo and over the top lip-synch of Doris Day's 50's hit "Shaking the Blues Away", which tells troubled people to "do like the voodoos do and listen to a voodoo melody ...". The thrilled zombies caper around backing her in fifties musical song and dance. (Bailey, 2003: 72).

Figure 13: Susan Danford in *I, Claudia.* Pic by Guy de Lancey.

Furthermore, in 2007, premiering on the Main Programme at NAF, was Susan Danford in Canadian playwright Kristen Thomson's *I, Claudia*, directed by Lara Bye.[96] This production used half-masks to tell the story of the adolescent Claudia and her struggles with life, her parents' divorce, her relationship with her grandfather, and her goldfish. Written as a series of monologues, with each presented by a different character (Claudia, her grandfather, her father's new love interest, and an aging school janitor), Danford changed masks in front of the audience between each monologue. Keeping the mouth free, half-masks are highly verbal and physical, allowing the actor (and thus character) to speak. (See Figure 18.)

While hardly exhaustive, the above two examples offer an insight into the *perception* of masks in South African theatre prior to 2008.

[95] See http://thirdworldbunfight.co.za/ipi-zombi/

[96] Written by and starring Kristen Thomson, *I, Claudia* was first performed in full at the Tarragon Theatre in Toronto, Canada, and was the Winner of the 2001 Dora Mavor Moore Award for Outstanding New Play. It was adapted into a film of the same name in 2004.

In the first instance, Brett Bailey, is a director renowned for a highly visceral and visual style that he brings to the creative process. He combines a highly developed sense of the western *avant garde* and opera with a more traditional and ritualistic African embodiment. In his workbook for *Ipi Zombi?*, Bailey writes: "The two realms – showbiz and ritual – can work together: a high-speed show; the whole show is like a tumbling act, one scene flipping into the next, the intensity getting higher and higher. The play is presented on all sides, a drumming, banging, plinking, kudu-horning rave." (2003: 37). This description could easily come from the pages of any of the major *avant garde* theatre-makers of the early to mid-20th century, which Bailey seasons with a postmodern flair. Furthermore, the use of the mask in the scene example reveals some of the attitudes towards the mask during the 20th century: masks are used in a supernatural sense; they create an unhuman atmosphere; and the masks aren't characters but more spirit-like, or cyphers, for the audience to project their unease upon.[97] Although Bailey does ingeniously create a scene that turns the masked spirits into a backing chorus for what is ostensibly a show tune, there is still, it can be argued, in his use of a generic "African mask", a sense of "othering".

In the second instance, there is a director, Lara Bye, who trained at the world-renowned *École Internationale de Théâtre Jacques Lecoq*,[98] working with a classically-trained actor, Susan Danford, in half-mask. The Lecoq school is one of the few (though growing in number) institutions that place the mask front and centre in their pedagogy, and half-mask, based on the historical form of *commedia dell'arte*, is a very important departure point. The masks of *commedia* and their resultant characters (such as Arlecchino, Pantalone, il Dottore, and the like) have become globally recognisable, and are taught in most secondary and tertiary institutions as part of theatre (or drama) history.[99] Although these masks are characters, what is interesting in the case of *I, Claudia* is what the characters are based on. Kristen Thomson says of her work:

> [In *Commedia* there are] 26 masks designed to be used by actors in training programs to develop skills in characterization. It's a non-psychological approach to characterization and improvisation. We were instructed at the National Theatre School to use these masks ... [For *I, Claudia*] I improvised with the masks and transcribed my improvisations, then read my transcriptions until a story emerged.[100]

What is further interesting about these two examples is that both rely on what can be termed a familiarity with the kind of work which a mask is meant to do. On the part of a South African audience, they might understand a mask as being the ubiquitous, ritualistic African mask. On the other hand the Canadian (i.e. "Western") audience would be more familiar with the *Commedia* mask.

For the former, think of the proliferation of African masks on the walls of suburban South African houses or at curio shops and markets. Interesting too, is that Bailey details a non-specific "African mask" in his script. However, what many people may not be aware of is that South Africa does not have a mask tradition. (Talk to any vendor at a market and they will detail the various areas,

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[97] My memory shouts at me that Bailey used an African mask for the Figure of the Hurricane Spirit in his next work, *iMumbo Jumbo* also (originally premiered in 1997). I saw the 2003 version at the Baxter Theatre, Cape Town); but the play text refers to this Figure as only painted black. Memory is a strange thing.

[98] A school of physical theatre in Paris, founded in 1956.

[99] This is not to say that the masks are taught practically – in fact, in South Africa, one would be hard-pressed to find a school or university drama department with a set of *commedia* masks; yet the age of this form is still taught as history.

[100] In interview with Joanne Huffa, 29 March 2001: http://eye.net/eye/issue/issue_03.29.01/arts/iclaudia.html

cultures, or countries they originate from. None are South African.) Yet, everyone knows an African mask when they see one.

Even if one hasn't studied theatre, most audience members will be familiar with the classic image of the comic and tragic masks – from theatre foyer decoration, logos, theatre programmes, and the like. The almost universal symbol for theatre itself is comprised of two masks loosely derived from the Greek comic (happy) and tragic (sad) masks. (See Figure 19.)

Figure 14: Examples of usage of the comic and tragic masks in South African theatre.

For both examples, then, one last similarity can be gleaned: although both repurpose ancient mask forms for contemporary performance, they both form part of a *historical* lineage.

The epigram by Campbell, "He does not merely represent the god; he is the god", in many ways also encapsulates much of my belief and drive in working in mask, as much as it points to the specific duality of the form. He singles out this particular duality when he writes:

> For, indeed, in the primitive world, where most of the clues to the origin of mythology must be sought, the gods and demons are not conceived in the way of hard and fast, positive realities. A god can be simultaneously in two or more places – like a melody, or like the form of a traditional mask. And wherever he comes, the impact of his presence is the same: it is not reduced through multiplication (Campbell, 1960: 21).

At first glance, this statement presents a number of challenges. Primarily, it reads as if Campbell clings to a Modernist notion that there is a form of purity, or "truth" – one that lies in a mythological realm. However, it was written at an interesting time, in 1960; – a time where some disciplines in the humanities were about to embrace, with some resistance, a more Postmodernist worldview. In a nutshell, this saw the disintegration of a single author, or "truth", and any narrative splinter into an array of pastiche, playfulness, irony, and impurity. Moreover, Campbell points at the ability of the mask to straddle these two fields: "the gods and demons are not conceived in the way of hard and fast, positive realities. A god can be simultaneously in two or more places – like a melody, or like the form of a traditional mask" (Campbell, 1960: 21). In essence, one can posit that a mask can then be said to be both Modern *and* Postmodern at once.

This idea goes a long way to reflect on the mask's position as a "performing object" as discussed in a previous chapter, and sees within it a hybridity and a refusal to be pinned down or defined too closely. For as Wilsher (2007) argues, the mask has moved away from being a mere *sacred* object of anthropological or religious fascination, to a *secular* object that is both performance-driven and, an "author" of the performative narrative. This is true across many of the different forms of the masks, but especially so the focus of this research: the full-face character mask; the silent mask.

Given the above, I have become fascinated by the potential that the mask has in actor training and audience development in contemporary times where we are arguably living in what is becoming considered to be more of a Metamodernist[101] world – in short, maintaining the pastiche, playfulness, irony, and suspicion of grand narratives as espoused in Postmodernism, but combining it with a return to a belief in some form of narrative. As Vermeulen and Van den Akker (2010: 2) write:

> The ecosystem is severely disrupted, the financial system is increasingly uncontrollable, and the geopolitical structure has recently begun to appear as unstable as it has always been uneven. CEOs and politicians express their "desire for change" at every interview and voice a heartfelt "yes we can" at each photo-op. Planners and architects increasingly replace their blueprints for environments with environmental "greenprints". And new generations of artists increasingly abandon the aesthetic precepts of deconstruction, parataxis, and pastiche in favor of aesthethical notions of reconstruction, myth, and metaxis. These trends and tendencies can no longer be explained in terms of the postmodern. They express a (often guarded) hopefulness and (at times feigned) sincerity that hint at another structure of feeling, intimating another discourse. History, it seems, is moving rapidly beyond its all too hastily proclaimed end.

For Mask Theatre, I find the abandoning of a colder deconstruction for a warmer "reconstruction, myth, and metaxis" delicious. As this thesis hopefully also shows, there is a "hopefulness" and "sincerity" about Mask Theatre that "hint[s] at another structure of feeling, intimating another discourse". I want to stress again that this research is not aiming to create an exhaustive history and evolution of the mask through time, since this has already been done better by many others – including Wilsher (2007), Harris (1984), and Eldredge (1996). While it does touch upon an historical context, it is focused more on the sociological and philosophical shift towards the emergence of the full-faced, silent, character mask that bears a genetic make-up to the anthropological mask, and doubtlessly refers to it, but sails off on its own secular journey.

In order to do this, I need to make a slight detour and reflect more on the "artist's eye".

5.4. The Artists' Eye – Seeking a Stain

À la Beckett, I would posit that any artist wants to leave some form of "stain" on the world, to enter into history's silence as having accomplished something worthwhile, and hopefully eloquent. Much of this is driven by ego in the opening acts of one's career as an artist – striving for fame and fortune, prestige and respect: look at me, I'm beautiful and talented. It could also be a striving for importance – wanting "meaning": look at me; I have something to say about the world.[102]

[101] Although they did not coin this phrase, I am indebted for these ideas to the article on Metamodernism by R. van den Akker, A. Gibbons, and T. Vermeulen (Eds.) 2017.
[102] I wonder how much this relates to a PhD also…

During his banquet speech upon winning the 2003 Nobel Prize for literature J.M. Coetzee reflected on the fact that his parents were not present for his moment of glory:

> My mother would have been bursting with pride. *My son the Nobel Prize winner*. And for whom, anyway, do we do the things that lead to Nobel Prizes if not for our mothers? *"Mommy, Mommy, I won a prize!" "That's wonderful, my dear. Now eat your carrots before they get cold*".[103]

Leaving aside, for now, the need to impress one's parents and this drive that spurs humans on, in a less cynical vein, every artist surely also wishes to leave the world a little richer than it was before; a little different; irrevocably changed.

That is a bold statement to make and a bolder, nigh impossible, task for anyone to take on. Nevertheless, I have always been drawn to that idea – the mythology of the artist. Interestingly (and perhaps unsurprisingly), I realise too that I was always drawn to the loner artist; the starving artist. The romanticist loner outsider has always held some appeal – an artist continuously striving to eke out some of the thoughts, philosophies, or insights that they may have gained through observation and introspection.

This is simultaneously a quaint and sometimes necessary notion (particularly on a spiritual quest). And yet, when I consider some of the big ideas that have driven, and continue to drive, me – I return again and again to this idea. I embraced Artaud's notion that theatre should furnish the spectator with the "truthful precipitate of dreams", and I have strived to leave my own "stain on the silence".[104] Artaud and Beckett – two wonderful examples of the loner outsider artist.

And yet, as I've reflected on this, I've discovered that over time what has transpired through experience is that my desire to make art (*poesis*) has not only been about the whims of a solo artist (myself) wishing to stain the silence, or solely create a dramaturgy that creates a true precipitate of *personal* dreams. Although this is implicit, or becomes tangible, it has become increasingly clear to me that the magic only occurs through a true alchemy of collaboration.[105] I know that I would be nowhere near where I am today were it not for the experience of working with other people as collaborators – especially my long-time friend and co-Artistic Director, Liezl de Kock. In the same breath, I have needed many times of being alone to reflect, think, and process my experiences. Ideally, one seeks to achieve a balance of both.

5.6. The Imprinting of Process; or, How It Is Not About "Me"

What is intriguing for me is the imprinting of the particular process onto what narrative emerges. Therefore, each process (even if ways of working do start solidifying), and consequently each narrative, is unique and therefore each is ostensibly different due to its particular human alchemy. Although it is a creative – and thus aesthetic – alchemy (in that the discoveries are eventually developed into a theatrical 'product'), there is no doubt that each venture is also intrinsically pedagogical: it involves a philosophical methodology of how it is discovered. It is educational –

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[103] Coetzee, J.M. (2003) – Banquet speech. NobelPrize.org. Nobel Media AB 2019. https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/2003/coetzee/25254-j-m-coetzee-banquet-speech-2003/ [Accessed Sun. 22 Dec 2019. <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/2003/coetzee/25254-j-m-coetzee-banquet-speech-2003/>

[104] Ironically, this has manifested itself in literally working in silence.

[105] It would also be remiss of me to not mention one of the challenges of writing this thesis about collaboration is that it becomes a stunningly solo and lonely endeavour.

not in terms of a transferral of knowledge from one person to another, but in being an exchange of very personal phenomenology between the members of the research company. By its very nature, this approach toward creating work is always grounded in search and research – led by practice. Instead of a hierarchical "top-down" construction, it plunges the participants into a state of *rhizomatic learning*

5.7. A Reluctant Auto-ethno-biographer (reprise)

Above I have written about the imprinting of process to the extent that the importance of "me as the director" disappears. I've preferred to focus on the idea of a group, which I am part of. And yet, what I am focusing on within this thesis, calls for an excavation of myself. I am uneasy that the very focus of this research demands a thorough study and focus on myself; but this is unavoidable, particularly because the works in question have been directed and often produced by myself. Grappling with this, it has become clear that in many ways, this research becomes a manifesto of my own technique or pedagogy. And this is complicated and puts me in a position where I must become perhaps more vulnerable than I would care to admit.

It becomes problematic when one has devoted one's professional life to a core concept of collaboration, or shared authority, or collective creation. Why does the "I" become more important than any other collaborator? Why does one of several collaborators become the authority on the work? Is it just because nobody else has written on it? So is this a case of the "first-I", in many ways then the "first audience" that a dramaturg must be in the process of creation?

These are a number of blunt questions that possibly do not have their place in a thesis – however, I have included them as the questions are ones I ask myself all the time and I would like the reader to get a sense of how my processes go.

When, in my MA thesis, I bemoaned the fact that there were "hardly any groups, or permanent companies that sustain training and creating work beyond a project-to-project basis" (Murray, 2001: 70), this could be seen as a demonstration of the bemoaning situation of the time, and also the naïve optimism of a younger man setting off to attain his dream and change the theatrical landscape, and thus fulfil the need for more permanent companies. And there *was* optimism in the air, particularly with my inclusion into Remix Theatre Company (a multi-disabled and non-disabled development from Remix Dance Project Trust that led to the formation of FTH:K), and the soon to be formed Ubom! Eastern Cape Drama Company, , among others.

But now, more than 20 years on, the landscape looks even bleaker than it did then, and one can possibly count the permanent companies (in theatre and dance/physical theatre) on one hand: Magnet Theatre,[106] Sibikwa,[107] Jungle Theatre Company,[108] Lunchbox Theatre Company,[109] Unmute[110]and Kwasha.[111] Along the way lie the remnants of other permanent ensembles, such as, for example, First Physical Theatre Company, Remix Dance Project, Handspring Puppet

[106] Headed by Jennie Reznek and Mark Fleishman in Cape Town.
[107] Perhaps one of South Africa's longest-running companies, founded by the indomitable Phyllis Klotz.
[108] Found by Vinny Jones in 1995.
[109] Founded by Stuart Palmer in 2008.
[110] A multi-disabled and non-disabled integrated dance company that rose from Remix's ashes in Cape Town in 2013.
[111] A Market Theatre Laboratory project initiated in 2018 featuring Market Laboratory graduates.

Company, Ubom!, and FTH:K itself – which ironically disbanded as a full-time permanent company in late 2012 after winning the Fleur du Cap Award for Innovation in Theatre.[112]

An economics of scale is at play here, since it is exceptionally difficult to keep a full-time group of performers and managers together in the South African theatrical industry. Sustained state funding has become a nigh impossible task (not helped by recent allegations of state capture); theatres have by and large become receiving houses and not commissioning institutions; and audience numbers have dwindled as the live arts continually become more and more perceived as a luxury item, rather than a necessity. And yet, it's difficult to justify getting too up in arms about the lack of support for cultural products when a disproportionately high percentage of the population struggle to find employment, and many do not have access to basic human amenities. South Africa still suffers a combination of historical disempowerment and current political disinterest.

To be fair, besides state sponsored institutions, such as The Market Theatre, the State Theatre, the Durban Playhouse, and Artscape, there are still a number of independent registered companies at play in the cultural economy. For example fulltime, independent theatres include: Contagious Theatre, ZikkaZimba, Fortune Cookie Company, Theatreduo, KiriPinkNob, The Movement RSA, Oy!Theatre, and from time to time Theatre for Africa (and this is by no means an exhaustive list).

However, if one looks at their make-up, it can be argued that these companies exist mainly around the whim and will of individuals. They might collaborate with others, but ultimately, they are not permanent ensembles devoted to searching and researching within a group collective. This is by no means to say that they never devise work; and nor does it for a second imply that they are inferior in any way in terms of their artistic process or product to other companies. It is merely to reflect that a large number of companies active in the South African theatre industry are geared toward a specific individual's world view.

Take, for example, Contagious Theatre (one of the few companies to also create mask work). In essence, the company exists of director/designer Jenine Collocott, with the husband-and-wife team of James Cairns and Taryn Bennett as performers, with shows produced by Simon and Helen Cooper. The company evolved from Collocott's solo company, Hello Elephant Theatre Company (2007–2012), and evolved when she worked for the Coopers' Kalk Bay Theatre Productions[113] (2013–2016), before becoming Contagious (since 2017). Creatively, the output of the company veers from mask and physical theatre productions such as *The Snow Goose* (2013) and *The Old Man and the Sea* (2015) which see Cairns and Bennett as an ensemble, to solo ventures for Cairns such as *Dirt* (2010) and *The Devil and Billy Markram* (2017), as well as solo ventures for Bennett such as *Silkworm* (2018). They also create ensemble pieces, again featuring both Cairns and Bennett, for young audiences such as *The Boy Who Cried Ninja* (2018). What glues these diverse productions together is Collocott's dramaturgy, honed through her training at Giovanni Fusetti's Helikos International School of Theatre Creation. In essence, she drives Contagious Theatre. The same holds true for many of the other companies I mentioned – Sylvaine Strike *is* Fortune Cookie Theatre Company; Theatreduo *is* Billy Edward and Mahlatsi Mokgonyana; and KiriPinkNob *is* Standard Bank Young Artist of the Year for 2020 Jefferson Tshabalala (AKA J. Bobs).

[112] See https://www.mediaupdate.co.za/media/45725/fthk-celebrates-fleur-du-cap-win
[113] Simon and Helen Cooper used to own and manage Kalk Bay Theatre in Cape Town.

Similarly, I have to consider my own role as Artistic Director of FTH:K (2004–2011) and whether the company served my artistic needs or whether it really was a model of collaboration and inclusive, integrated training, as I had wanted it to be. As Artistic Director, I need to guard against a grandiose tendency and to talk about myself in the same breath as some of the historical greats, such as Peter Brook, or Jerzy Grotowski. If one is tempted to do that, it brings back to mind the question of what approach the said companies take to creating work, and how that approach is constituted, pedagogically and authoritatively. This brings me back to the point of challenging the singling out of one individual from a collective or an ensemble. It all comes back to devising.

I wrote earlier that as a director, I dislike opening nights – all the attention of people wanting one's time and a focus that swings too much, in my opinion, to myself. I am happy to speak about the work, what the actors are doing, and the effect the show has on the audience; anything but me. But what does one do, then – disappear? Negate the process of writing *about* the processes? Leave it all for one's memoirs and a hefty coffee table book? In reverse-egotistical mode (which I'm sure many will claim as being egotistic in its own right), I could simply *not* write about the work?

Eugenio Barba writes: "Hell would be to feel at home in my time" (2010: 211), which points to another core ambiguity at play in theatrical pedagogy, dramaturgy, and shared creation, for isn't one of the fundamental drives about creativity the very fact that one is searching for a home, an identity, a voice? Doesn't the act of autoethnography (following Moyo, 2009) call for the central figure's presence and therefore excavation, as a principal and original site of theatrical research? Doesn't the act of performative writing, or reflexive writing), or even *retroflective* writing (I could go on), position the maker, the originator, the progenitor, the dramaturge, right at the centre of the debate, haul them out from behind the scenes, blinking and shivering in the sudden light, uncertain of what to say, and stuttering into his or her collar?

Those are a lot of questions and a bit of poetic extrapolation, and I would love to say I have the answers to them all, And I don't – even after many years of being in this business. I think the important thing is that these questions keep being asked.

Part of my journey into this new world is the discovery and the articulation of some of these paradoxes, as well as the embodied act of walking these ambiguous questions.

Part of my journey (and this took me a long time to see), is also to allow myself to be vulnerable and take a good look at myself and my work over the years. This is another learning moment that masks are offering me.

5.8. My Introduction to Masks

I wrote earlier about the creation of *Through Blue* in 2000 and how that production kick-started a methodology and approach to making devised, non-verbal work. I had also initially planned to include a much greater exploration of the use of mask and puppet, but in the end veered away from that to more of a contemporary clown approach.

Bar a few workshops here and there, I have never trained in mask work, nor been instructed as part of any curriculum I studied. Instead, it has been a long, gradual evolution of trial and error. This calls to mind another (often misquoted) passage from Beckett: "Try again. Fail again. Better

again. Or better worse. Fail worse again. Still worse again. Till sick for good. Throw up for good. Go for good. Where neither for good. Good and all".[114]

Details are hazy and lost in time, but I do recall a certain practical class I did at undergraduate level at the then University of Natal, Pietermaritzburg.[115] In this class, the facilitator placed a few masks on the floor, and students were encouraged to put one on and try to move in the spirit of the mask. It was only later that I connected this to Keith Johnstone's writing about the mask and how one was to be infected by it as if in a "trance".

In 1999, completing my Honours Degree at Rhodes University, I participated in a workshop with Professor Juanita Finestone that looked at the body's defences. During the workshop, she had students take turns standing in front of the class wearing a blank mask, not unlike those that can be bought at party shops, while the rest of the class then studied the wearer's body and analysed it for tension and one's habitual stance or mannerisms that one has to deflect attention. Although this was never called "mask work" per se, it was my first unconscious encounter with the Neutral mask.

Then, in 2003, during a residency with Ellis Pearson on "The Shaman and the Warrior", I experienced my first direct interaction with the Neutral Mask. The sessions with the mask were very brief, but during the sessions some participants got to try out some of what are now considered "classic" Lecoq Neutral Mask exercises, such as "Waking up for the first time" and "Throwing a stone". This experience started to alter my approach to theatre and the way I taught it. Later in 2003, I incorporated some of what I had experienced into the curriculum for the first Community Arts Project (CAP) Professional Development Programme that I initiated and would lead to the first official FTH:K work, *Touch Wood*.

The following year, in 2004, I was employed as Physical Performance Champion (their term) at AFDA Cape Town, and I introduced the Neutral Mask through using a pillowcase over the performer's head to study the performers' body language and their connection with space. This was very much in line with what Jacques Copeau did in the early 20th century by covering the performers' head with cloth in what was known as the "noble mask" (Hodge, 2010: 71) and which Lecoq's use of the Neutral Mask stems from.[116] Although training did not develop into mask training per se, it is interesting for me to track my growing fascination with using masks in my performance training. Perhaps I was not ready for them just then.

[114] Beckett, S. (1983). *Worstward Ho*. New York: Grove Press.
[115] This must have been around 1992 and I think was led by renowned educator and researcher Professor Hazel Barnes.
[116] It was only in 2010, through ordering and receiving my first set of Neutral masks from America that my students and I actually got to work with the real leather entity.

Figure 15: Liezl de Kock in early Neutral Mask improvisation (2006).

This fascination continued into 2005 and 2006, though not at an even pace, where FTH:K was set up as a full-time organisation. As the company dived deeper into experimenting with ways of telling stories through a specific non-verbal approach, in between performance projects Liezl de Kock and I (sometimes with Lysander Barends, FTH:K's premier Deaf performer) started playing with other ways to achieve this. As De Kock had been a graduate student at AFDA in 2004, it was no surprise that we gravitated back towards the Neutral Mask. We experimented with making our own primitive versions of what in retrospect were anything but "neutral".

Scratching the mask's surface, and thereby scratching some of our own itches, we decided to go all in and create a full mask show. To do so, we realised we would need some help and a greater input, so accordingly, through FTH:K, organised a workshop for its Deaf and hearing actors with renowned puppeteer and theatre-maker Jaqueline Dommisse.[117] During the session, she introduced the participants to the "Four Humours" or "Temperaments" – four full masks painted a single colour (red, blue, green, and yellow). These are not strictly character masks, but ones that are used to explore various attitudes or emotions – for example greed, anger, or sadness. Their use stems from the ancient Greek concept of the humours, where the four chief fluids of the body are related to the four elements, said to determine people's physical and mental qualities in the following way:[118]

Table 1: The Masks of the Four Greek Humours

Mask				
Temperament	Melancholic	Phlegmatic	Choleric	Sanguine
Humour/Fluid	Black bile	Phlegm	Yellow bile	Blood
Quality	Cold and dry	Cold and wet	Hot and dry	Hot and wet
Colour	Blue	Green	Red	Yellow

[117] Based in Cape Town, Jaqueline Dommisse was a prominent co-creator of The Puppet People 1992–2000, before starting Hearts and Eyes Theatre Collective with the sadly late Peter Hayes in 1992. Hearts and Eyes and FTH:K would go on to form the founding companies of Cape Town Edge in 2007. I met her when we both worked with Remix Dance Project Trust 2002-2003, and we were then colleagues at Community Arts Project (CAP) in 2002 and then that organisation's merger with Mediaworks to become Arts and Media Access Centre (AMAC) in 2003 where she ran the Foundation Course for Performing Arts and I ran the Professional Development Programme (PDP) – a precursor to FTH:k's own Integrated Professional Development Programme (IPDP) from 2004-2011. Dommisse has also been very actively involved with the South African branch of Union Internationale de la Marionette (UNIMA) and ASSITEJ SA, where she was Festival Director for the International Cradle of Creativity Festival in 2016. She currently also facilitates learning for the Magnet Theatre Educational Trust's Full Time Training and Job Creation Programme.

[118] For their description and use, I am indebted to the workshop handout from 2007.

Element	Earth	Water	Fire	Air
Body system	Bones/Skeleton	Stomach/Digestion	Muscles/Nerves	Heart/Circulation
Emotion/Attitude	Sadness Depression Grief	Slow Self-satisfied Inert	Irascible Angry Short-tempered	Sunny Positive Happy

The provocation to jolt these masks to life stems from the performer entering into a state where she imagines, and embodies, how, for example, "Blue" or "Water" might move: how heavy is the colour and element? Where does it sit in the body? And how might it react to another element in space? As an example, by instructing "water" and "fire" to interact, there is going to be a shift in the normal state of water; in short, it is going to heat up and will move differently than when it is colder. Similarly, water's influence on fire is going to douse fire's passion, whereas air and fire are going to cause fire to burn stronger. (See Figures 22, 23 and 24.)

The above experience, as I would come to learn later, is not dissimilar to Lecoq's explorations into "Colours" and "Elements" – although he and his school's subsequent pedagogues would not necessarily link it with working in mask.

The above few instances map out my entire exposure to masks up to that point. I had also read Wilsher's newly published *The Mask Handbook* (2007), and a thorough study and experimentation with exercises therein would come to give the company its groundwork. The rest would rely on gut instinct, improvisation, the actors' relationship with the masks, and trial and error; trial and error. Those were heady days.

Figure 16: A rare picture of the author, wearing the Phlegmatic mask during the workshop (2007).

Figure 17: Liezl de Kock in the Melancholic mask during the workshop. (2007).

Figure 18: Deaf performers Lysander Barends (L) in the Sanguine mask and Marlon Snyders (R) in the Choleric mask during the workshop (2007).

In 2007/2008, we prepared for the debut of *Pictures of You*, the first foray into full mask work by A Conspiracy of Clowns in association with FTH:K. It was due to premiere at National Arts Festival (NAF) in Grahamstown as part of the Cape Town Edge banner that we had established in 2007 as a partnership between FTH:K and Hearts and Eyes Collective.[119] Cape Town Edge (CTE) saw a number of companies and performances band together in one venue during NAF,

[119] Headed up by the sadly departed Peter Hayes and the irrepressible Jaqueline Dommisse.

with the aim of improving audiences' experience before and after shows, streamlining costs, and enabling joint marketing for the venture.[120]

At marketing planning sessions, our colleagues urged us not to use the word "mask". They said: "You are going to put off the audience;" "They will never come;" "Just leave it out of your media releases;" "You are going to alienate your and everyone's (potential) audiences".

We blithely ignored this advice. Masks were central to the idea of *Pictures of You*, so why shouldn't we mention them? In fact, we felt like we wanted to shout about them up and down all the corridors of media so that audiences might actually read about what we're doing. Surely, they (the actual masks, the form, the idea) were central to our developing impetus of how to make non-verbal, accessible theatre? Our colleagues continued: "The idea of the 'mask' is trite;" "It's infantile and estranging;" "It will never catch on".

However, from the years 2008 to 2011, FTH:K, and A Conspiracy of Clowns, ushered in a series of mask works that changed the way people thought about theatre, charged the landscape, and possibly ignited the local performance scene to consider (or re-consider) the use of mask in training and performance: *Pictures of You* (2008–2013), *QUACK!* (2009–2010*), Womb Tide (*2010*)*,[121] and *Benchmarks* (2011). Initial exploration was done (via *Pictures of You* and later *Benchmarks* 2011) with the breakaway "collective" called A Conspiracy of Clowns.

5.9. Masks in South African Theatre from the 1990s

Nationally, although there are no companies that focus specifically, and only, on Mask Theatre, one can see a particular few years where Mask Theatre works suddenly lurched into the public arena, quickly gaining interest, curiosity, and, to some extent, critical and commercial attention: *Pictures of You* (A Conspiracy of Clowns, 2008–2013), *QUACK!* (FTH:K, 2009–2010), *The Butcher Brothers* (Dark Laugh, 2010–2011), *Benchmarks* (A Conspiracy of Clowns in association with FTH:K, 2011), and *Lake* (Dark Laugh, 2013). There has also been a developing interest in masks from more student or trainee-based work, with *Short Cuts* (FTH:K trainee piece, 2011), Tristan Jacob's *Hambre del Alma* (Rhodes University, 2012–2013) and *Hanamichi* (Rhodes University, 2012–2013), *Waterline* (Uyabona Ke?, 2015), *Falling Off the Horn* (Uyabona Ke?, 2016), Iman Isaacs' *Beyond The Wall* (UCT, 2018), and *Phitlho* [*The Hidden*] (AFDA Johannesburg, 2019).

If one expands the field of mask work to productions that collude with verbal text, (i.e. not only the silent mask), then one sees half and three-quarter masks at play and a lot more examples in South African theatre. If the full mask covers the whole face and does not allow for characters to speak verbally, then half masks (many based on the stock *commedia dell'arte* examples) free up an actor's mouth to allow characters to engage in dialogue on stage. Examples of this work actually predate the full mask in South Africa, and can be seen in work by Ellis Pearson (*Black Out*, 1997) and Aldo Brincat (*Arnie's Outrageous Rise*) through the 1990s and beyond. Half mask seems to disappear in South Africa and then reappear to feature on the Main Programme of the National

[120] Cape Town Edge was taken over by Tara Notcutt and Jon Keevy in 2011 and is still one of the premier venues/collective ventures at NAF. It is now rebranded The Edge and is run by Wynne Bredekamp. For more details, look at: https://edgenaf.wixsite.com/theedgenaf

[121] *Womb Tide* wasn't specifically a mask show but rather built on mask and puppet work.

Arts Festival in 2008 and then storm the mainstream gates with Susan Danford's production of *I, Claudia* (2008–2010, directed by Lara Bye). Half masks were also seen in Cosmos Productions' *Paraphrenalia* (2008–2009), and Sjaka Septembir's *Ouma* (later translated into English as *Red*, 2011).

The three-quarter mask is an extension of the half mask with the character's upper lip line sitting on that of the actor's, allowing the actor to utilise her voice. Examples of this kind of work include Jayne Batzofin's *PrutTel* (2013), *Wrakstukke* (2013), Jenine Collocott's *The Snow Goose*[122] (2013–2019), and Daniel Buckland's *Lake* (2013). Other works that have also emerged in half and three-quarter masks include Contagious Theatre's *Hamlet* (2014), *Making Mandela* (2015–2016), and their adaptation of Ernest Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea* (2015–2019).

Put in table format, the years look like this:

Table 2: Masks in South African theatre, 1995–2017

Year	Production	Type of mask	Production company
1995	*Arnie's Outrageous Rise*	half	Aldo Brincat
1997	*Black Out*	half	Ellis Pearson
2008	*I, Claudia*	half	Susan Danford
	Pictures of You	full	A Conspiracy of Clowns
	Paraphrenalia	half	Cosmos Productions
2009	*QUACK!*	full	FTH:K
2010	*The Butcher Brothers*	full	Dark Laugh
2011	*Benchmarks*	full	A Conspiracy of Clowns and FTH:K
	Ouma/Red	half	Sjaka Septembir
	Short Cuts	full	FTH:K
2012	*Hambre del Alma*	full	Tristan Jacobs/Masimdlala
	Hanamichi	full	Tristan Jacobs/Masimdlala
2013	*PrutTel*	three-quarter	Jayne Batzofin
	The Snow Goose	three-quarter	Kalk Bay Theatre (KBT) Productions
	Lake	full	Dark Laugh
	Wrakstukke/Flotsam	half	Roekeloos
2014	*Hamlet!*	half	Hello Elephant Theatre Productions
2015	*Making Mandela*	three-quarter	Hello Elephant Theatre Company
	The Old Man and the Sea	three-quarter	KBT Productions
	Waterline	full	Uyabona Ke with A Conspiracy of Clowns
2016	*Falling Off the Horn*	full	Uyabona Ke
	Creature	larval	Man in the Moon Productions
2017	*The Rabble*	three-quarter	Iman Isaacs
2018	*Beyond the Wall*	full	Iman Isaacs
2019	*Phitlho [The Hidden]*	full	AFDA Johannesburg in association with A Conspiracy of Clowns
	Tusk	half	Oy!Theatre

With this growth evident, is there a movement developing here? A genre? Or is this just a fad, some passing phase? One of the most searing, yet somehow illuminating reviews of *Pictures of You*, came from Robert Greig a renowned critic whose reviews dominated the National Arts Festival for decades. In a spectacular diatribe against the form, he lambasts the masks as oversized "buffalo

[122] Now under the Contagious Theatre banner, this show, along with *The Old Man and the Sea*, was originally produced by Kalk Bay Theatre (KBT) Productions.

heads" or an "implosion paused", the movement quality of the characters as "arthritic robots", and finally ends with "More deployment of typicality, stock situation and allusion: they overwhelmingly suggest a director who doesn't observe people and uses style to not get real" (Greig, 2010: 7).

While the company first responded to this review with incredulity, this quickly turned to amusement, and we used it prominently in marketing – it was, after all, three-quarters of a full page in the *Cape Times*, with a big picture of the masks.[123] The review came out during the return season of *Pictures of You* at the Baxter Sanlam Studio Theatre in 2010 – after it had turned from a sleeper hit in 2008 to a runaway commercial success all over the country in 2009. Greig was no doubt responding and reacting against the popularity it had achieved,[124] and there were rumours that he was unhappy with the show winning two Fleur du Cap Theatre Awards (for Mask Design and Lighting) in 2010. Greig was more of a text-based theatre critic, and his reaction clearly shows the dichotomy that Mask Theatre reveals. What I find interesting is that masks themselves, while disguising and revealing the actor, have a similar effect on an audience – they reveal aspects of the individual's personality and beliefs. In 2011, when we premiered *Benchmarks* at the National Arts Festival, we received a lot of criticism for our handling of xenophobia – but here again; the opinions provoked revealed more about the individuals who raised them.

Criticism aside, there is enough evidence in the table above to suggest that there has indeed been a burgeoning of Mask Theatre in South Africa. However, there are also some discernible features that need attention. Firstly, with the exception of work done by *Uyabona Ke* and their two productions, *Waterline* (2015) and *Falling off the Horn* (2016), where the casts were 100% Black African performers, and AFDA Johannesburg's *Phitlho [The Hidden]* (2019) where the cast was 90% Black African, most of the mask work done over the last two decades was largely directed by White performers. Iman Isaacs, in her work done for her MA at University of Cape Town, is a Coloured performer, and the FTH:K production, *QUACK!* (2009–2010), featured a cast of approximately 60% Deaf Coloured performers; but for the most part, the latter statement holds true. Secondly, with the exception again of Isaacs, all the major directors mentioned above are White. Ellis Pearson, Aldo Brincat, Sylvaine Strike (*The Butcher Brothers*), Jenine Collocott (*The Snow Goose, Making Mandela, Hamlet!,* and *The Old Man and the Sea*), Lara Bye (*I, Claudia*), Jayne Batzofin, Sam Pennington (*Falling off the Horn*), and myself – all White theatre-makers.

And thirdly, as has already been mentioned a few times, there is the massive influence of Lecoq on the output of mask work in South Africa. Pearson, Brincat, Strike, Bye, and Batzofin all trained (to varying degrees of immersion) at *L'École Internationale de Théâtre Jacques Lecoq*. Collocott trained at the Helikos International School of Theatre Creation in Italy with Giovanni Fusetti. Isaacs trained at the University of Cape Town (UCT) and has worked extensively with Jennie Reznek (herself a Lecoq graduate). And, although receiving no formal training, I modelled a lot of my work on what I have gleaned from Lecoq, Wilsher, Wright, and Fusetti himself over the years.

Consequently, while one can argue that there are signs of a movement within mask work in South Africa, it remains problematic that it still appears to be something of an imported, and possibly

[123] You just can't buy that kind of publicity!
[124] In South African, the theatre community had an expression: "you've been Greiged!", and chose to wear it as a badge of honour.

exclusive, clique. Why is this? Why hasn't the last decade seen the development of a more indigenous approach to a primarily non-verbal form of theatre – one that is accessible and, with the silent full mask, really can transcend language barriers throughout the country?

What is that power of the mask, of the visual, of the silence that a full character mask performs in? And by extension, seeing as it also occupies a similar field of 3D object being brought to life before the seer-audience – the power of the puppet? And is it possible, in interrogating that power, to see the seeds for a more explicit conceptualisation of what Visual Theatre is?

These are more blunt questions, as I referred to earlier. I again don't have the answers for them, and just want to highlight them as ones I think of a lot.

Since 2008 to the present day, there has been at least one mask work (of differing form) created per year by a South African-based company. We like to think that we did contribute in our own way towards the discovery and reinvigoration of the form. Many productions premiered at the NAF, but many have gone on to more mainstream theatres, and a slew of awards. As Lynn Gardner wrote in 2016, "To be honest, I feel about mask theatre the way I feel about smoked mackerel: I'd never choose it from a menu, but when it's served I often think I should have it more often."

In the following section, I'd like to interrogate further the emergence of the full character mask in South Africa in the 21st century, and thereafter investigate pedagogical processes and creative explorations in what, borrowing from Sherman, is a "pedagogy of risk" (J.F. Sherman, 2010).

5.10. The Mask in the Twentieth and Twenty-first Centuries

Historically, one can trace Western theatre's fascination with, and appropriation of, masks as performance training tools back to Jacques Copeau. Through his work with his troupe, one can discern the mask turning away from its primitive roots and entering the canon of pedagogical application, though of course, masks would continue to be used by *avant garde* practitioners to stir up feelings of alarm and other-worldliness. In Africa (particularly central and northern Africa), the mask would continue along its community-based religious and social function (Ebong, 1984: 1-3). It is interesting to note that there is very little spoken about any manifestation of a mask or puppetry tradition within southern Africa.[125]

Such a doubling of consciousness, remains at the heart of contemporary mask work today, with an important departure which splits the manner in which masks have been approached. On the one hand, there is reverence to the 'spirit' of the mask, with practitioners led to the belief of entering into a trance in order to play the character, as can been seen via Keith Johnstone:

> It is true that an actor can wear a mask casually, and just pretend to be another person, but Gaskill and myself were absolutely clear that we were trying to induce *trance* states. The reason why one automatically talks and writes of Masks with a capital 'M' is that one feels that the genuine Mask actor is inhabited by a spirit. Nonsense perhaps, but that's what the experience is like, and always

[125] In conversation and then research, I discovered that this is not entirely true. There is a tradition of masks used in Venda rituals that the mask is used to disguise the initiate leader.

> has been like. To understand the Mask it's also necessary to understand the nature of trance itself. (Johnstone. 1981: 143-144)

5.11. Masks in the 1980s and 1990s: The Rise of the Full Silent Mask

One of the main features of contemporary visual theatre mask work, is the coming to the fore of the *full* mask. This is a character mask, full-faced, mouthless, silent. There is much research into the anthropological roots and heritage of the mask (Emigh, 1996; Massanari, 2000; Ebong, 1994; Kirby, 1972; and many others), but of the full mask very little. As Toby Wilsher writes: "The full mask has for centuries been a carnival tool, or an aid to ritual. As a silent expressive medium in itself it is relatively new" (Wilsher 2007: 26).

Masks offer us a direct link with alternative, atemporal, mythic realities. In a world typified by psychologism and individualism, the mask provides an antidote. It is my contention that, with a greater understanding of the power of the mask – an object that has been with us since the dawn of civilisation – we may begin to explore the possibilities of a masked theatre that extends beyond novelty and pure entertainment and begins to speak to that aspect of human nature that transcends the psychological. The conclusions reached by Meyerhold and Copeau would seem to offer exciting possibilities, and yet nearly a century later, much of their potential is still unrealised. Practitioners such as Peter Hall, John Wright, Keith Johnstone and Michael Chase have continued to explore the possibilities of masked theatre with comparatively limited success. The mask, it would seem, has yet to find its true theatrical form. As Cawson (2012: 244) writes:

> In the relatively closed and esoteric space of the rehearsal room, the essential theatrical mask born to this age of individualism is the neutral mask – a compensatory archetype of non-individuality, the selflessness of the potential hero seeking individuation (which is philosophically incompatible with the isolationism and persona-centred falsity of individualism). The use of the neutral mask by Jacques Lecoq paved the way for new and exciting developments in the theatre, ones that continue to blossom and evolve today. Perhaps this is the mask's biggest immediate influence on contemporary theatre – its place in actor training. However, it is my contention that the mask still has an important part to play on the stage as well in the rehearsal room. Only we have yet to find its form.

Cawson suggests that masks like Lecoq's neutral archetype have strongly impacted contemporary performance, and I would tend to agree with this. This is via performer pedagogy and technique, despite, as I have written earlier, that pedagogues like Jenni Reznek find them, and the pedagogy, "racist". However, I am of the opinion that there is no one way to play them (ala the "Lecoq police"), and they open a fascinating area of disruption that can be used for both stage and screen acting. Thus, masks also retain untapped potential as part of the spectacle and language of theatre beyond just warmups. Their ultimate theatrical form awaits invention and experimentation.

This leaves us not with answers but with questions:

> If traditional masking is derived from a particular cultural cosmology, is it any wonder that the mask of the current, technological age is the neutral mask? A mask of complete emptiness, with all the swirling demons of our own isolation hidden behind it; a void with no mythology to impress upon its features. The mask remains for society at large an alien object, a curiosity or objet d'art, an empty face with nothing to share, nothing to express, and nothing to say.

> Or does it, as I suggest, present us with a gateway, an escape, a portal to a mythical land of archetypes and ancestors, of gods and monsters, of the collective unconscious and a shared humanity? Does its first tentative steps from a sea of pre-existence signal the potential for a new, fundamental and heroic journey ahead of us? And will we heed the call? Does its silence prepare the way for meaning, heal the wounds opened by the ambiguity of language that brought about the first tragic rupture in the unity of western consciousness? Does it herald a new dawn, creating the necessary silence before "the explosion of man's face in laughter, and the return of masks?" (Cawson, 2012: 245).

Here we see several open questions that I have fallen into at times in this thesis. Such questions are challenging to answer, as they are inexplicably tied into the ongoing research. Let us rather return to the subject at hand.

In the 1980s, the full character mask eventually began to come into its own – primarily in the United Kingdom through the work of Trestle Theatre Company, who were in turn inspired by the "first company from Lecoq school", Adventures in Moving Pictures (Wilsher, 2007). Co-founders of Trestle Theatre, Toby Wilsher and Sally Cook, met at Middelsex University in the mid-1980s, where, under the guidance of their lecturer, John Wright, made initial forays into mask work.[126]

Trestle is one of the few companies who participate in a Masters (MA) programme for mask – in association with Middelsex University, Trestle does the practical work with students, while Middelsex University takes care of the academic side. This is quite an interesting model to consider for South Africa, where a company works together with an academic institution.

With the shift of Trestle's focus going to areas beyond just mask, many critics and the public assumed that mask work simmered down and was phased out. However, full masks were set to make something of a revival during the 2000s. Internationally, as I have written earlier, there are a growing number of companies that use masks as their primary approach to making theatre: Familie Flöz (Germany), Vamos Theatre (UK), Wonderheads (USA/Canada), Theatre Kulunka (Spain), Theatre Fragile (Germany), and many other emerging companies.

5.12. Listen with your eyes: The FTH:K Ethos

Masks, like puppets, play the essential game of theatre – the equivocal game of "what if", a game where, as Wilsher claims, the audience returns to a state of childlike belief, eyes wide, mouths open, as they are pulled into a game of belief where the players are clearly not of this world, and therefore intrinsically theatrical (Wilsher, 2007: 7). Furthermore, masks disrupt the entire way that one reads, or, in other words, *sees* movement, sees emotion, views character, and therefore makes sense of communication.

Wilsher (2007: 31-32), following Lecoq, explains it best: the eye reads facial expression through a system of continual movement – it is only able to focus briefly on a small area at a time, and needs to continually flick around a space, recording micro-movements in a face, which allows it to make sense of facial expressions, which in turn allows for a sense of understanding to emerge in confluence with what the performer is saying. Freeze that expression with an unmoving mask or puppet, and the eyes panic, having no movement to focus on. The eyes move from the face to the

[126] https://www.trestle.org.uk/top-storey

body, and analyse the different movement dynamics between the still face and the potential body movement. In doing this, the eyes, and by extension the brain, have to relearn how to make sense.

Consequently, the whole meaning-making system of performance, becomes relocated and disrupted. The eye turns to the body that supports the mask or puppet, and it is via a complex system of movement, tension, breath, and thereby rhythm, that it is able to read what is going on. In a nutshell, the face of the mask/puppet becomes the eye, the body the face, and the space around the mask/puppet the body. And these hold a great authority, particularly as there are no words to fill in the space, the gap. A further system of *horror vacui* is activated, and the seer-audience rushes in, imaginatively and emotionally, and literally *hears* what is not being said, due to the specific way that the mask relates to another. This is also true in puppetry and suggests again a vital role that the audience plays within this triple helix. This is how Basil Jones of Handspring Puppet puts it, drawing on his work for *War Horse*:

> Whatever the horse puppeteers do ... the audience hungers to interpret. The audience thus experiences a strong feeling of empowerment. They feel themselves to be in a new interpretive territory concerning the meaning ... within a theatrical event. There are no rules for such forms of interpretation and thus the puppeteers give to the audience an *interpretive authority* that is not often imparted in more conventional forms of theatre. And so, as generators of meaning, it could be argued, the audience take up an auxiliary authorial role (Jones, quoted in Taylor, 2009: 261).

And, crucially, each person, in their phenomenological and culturally specific way, hears that "conversation" slightly differently. It does not concern needing to understand a specific language, a code, or a movement vocabulary, to understand what is going on. One only has to let go of how one usually might understand the transmission of communication, allowing oneself (giving oneself permission, in a sense) to be open to the experience. Neurologically, one might even see this as allowing oneself to be rewired, as it were, leading, hopefully, to a deeply personal, intimate experience in the theatre. In FTH:K parlance, all one has to do is embrace a core ambiguity at play in Visual Theatre, and "listen with your eyes".[127]

One is tempted to cheekily call this kind of work "quantum theatre", or "Shrödinger's Theatre" – it is alive and dead, ancient and new, it exists and it doesn't, it is real and illusion, all at the same time. Thus, one is caught up in an investigation of the presence of ambiguity, or the ambiguity of presence. This rings a bell somewhere – a bell of recognition, of empathy. There is something about the mask, the object, the puppet, and their struggle to live, which resonates in humankind's similar clinging to the materiality of life:

> In an age far removed from the belief in miracles and transformation, masks allow us to enter into a mind state where we witness performers creating an otherness, a complete world that is somehow not of this world and yet that is recognisable and believable. Masks offer us a spiritual experience when we least expect one – not in a religious sense, but certainly a feeling of being taken outside

[127] This tagline of FTH:K's, adopted in 2007, is taken, with permission, from a title of one of Andrew Buckland's works, "Listen closely with your eyes." This was a piece he created and performed as a musical/mime exploration with the band Tananas. In "The Water Juggler" (1997/98), Buckland takes us, the audience, to spy on a story told by an unnamed man about the myth of a creature living in a dark chthonic well, exhorting us to "Listen…with your eyes". He goes on to narrate, through whistles and mimed action, the genesis of what was to become the story of Flo De'Luge in "The Well Being" (1999).

> of ourselves, a chance to lose oneself in the world of our imagination, much like listening to a great piece of transcendental music (Wilsher: 2007: 7).

And here one sees the two facets of the mask (the sacred and secular) closing in on each other and creating a harmonious *yin* and *yang*. The two are embedded and entwined with each other to the point that, even if one lives in the most cynical and secular of times, there is always a *frisson* of, for want of a better word, "magic" when a simple object made of paper and glue comes alive on the body of the performer. This is what Campbell is referring to when he writes:

> In other words, there has been a shift of view from the logic of the normal secular sphere, where things are understood to be distinct from one another, to a theatrical or play sphere, where they are accepted for what they are *experienced* as being and the logic is that of "make believe" – "as if." We all know the convention, surely! It is a primary, spontaneous device of childhood, a magical device, by which the world can be transformed from banality to magic in a trice. And its inevitability in childhood is one of those universal characteristics of man that unite us in one family. It is a primary datum, consequently, of the science of myth, which is concerned precisely with the phenomenon of self-induced belief (Campbell, 1960: 21).

This interrogation, then, and all my research and experience, sets out to unpack some of these recognitions and ambiguities, following this fissure in how we perceive the world, and perceive theatre, finding on its journey the burgeoning conceptualisation of visual theatre largely as a fault line of ambiguities.[128]

As Familie Flöz claim:

> Disguising the living face with a rigid form in order to create a living character is the fundamental paradox of masks. It is also what ultimately challenges and appeals to the performer. A mask suddenly grins, turns angry, is amazed or blushes in shame. This notion however occurs in the spectators' imagination, not on stage. It is then that the rigidity of the mask dissolves and becomes a living force.[129]

And there we have the trialogue. Everything becomes fluid and flexible. It is a crazy, seductive, and ultimately life-changing force. The possibilities are endless.

I have said this before, and I keep returning to this. And this is similar to the teaching pedagogy – often it is just reminding students /performers of what we have stumbled over: it's similar to that thing we stumbled over a week or so ago, although now in greater context. This is the strange beauty of discovery. And shared astonishment.

[128] Gerhard Marx, likens the purpose of the puppet-object to that of embracing a "functional malfunction" (in Taylor, 2009: 225-249), and this is one that also holds a lot of promise for this study.
[129] http://www.floez.net/floez/index.php?id=54, accessed 19 Sep 2013.

Chapter 6. A Conspiracy of Analyses: Key Works 2008–2011

In this chapter, I take a direct look at the analysis of the four highlighted works that epitomise the appearance and development of non-verbal mask work, where the masks as performing objects played a key role in the training, creation, and performance of their narratives. These works are *Pictures of You* (2008–2013), *QUACK!* (2009–2010), *Womb Tide* (2010), and *Benchmarks* (2011). To some extent, the analyses of these will be augmented by a reflection of two other works in Chapter 8: *Waterline* (2014–2015), and *Phitlho [The Hidden]* (2019).

For the most part, all the above-mentioned works are original stories, devised by the company of performers, designers, and the director. *Womb Tide* is a little different, as the narrative was driven by a text devised and written by Lara Foot, Leila Henriques, Brian Webber, and Joss Levine, in 1995. However, even in this case, the company reworking the play in 2010 went through its own devising process, breaking into the text and creating its own non-verbal response to it. In this it creates an interesting counterpoint to the other works analysed, and becomes a reflection of the developed processes under the guidance of a script outline.

Synopses of the works below are recreated through technical cue sheets, re-watching recorded versions of the works in question, as well as notes and visual narrative boards that we utilised in the rehearsal room to piece them all together.

The inclusion of the last two, more recent works also acts as a counterpoint, as they were created and performed after the research for this doctorate began, and thus provide a reflective moment to see how, if at all, processes were imprinted by this doctoral research.

The following table provides a summary of the productions dealt with in this, and the following, chapter.

Table 3: Major Works created between 2008 and 2019.

Production	*Pictures of You*	*QUACK!*	*Womb Tide*	*Benchmarks*	*Waterline*	*Phitlho [The Hidden]*
Years Active (premiere to final performance)	2008–2013	2009–2010	2010	2011	2014–2016	2019
Producer	A Conspiracy of Clowns in association with FTH:K	FTH:K	FTH:K	A Conspiracy of Clowns in association with FTH:K and NAF	*Uyabone Ke?* in association with A Conspiracy of Clowns and NAF	AFDA Johannesburg
Geographical Reach	Grahamstown (NAF Fringe x 3 years, 2008–2010) Cape Town (Out the Box Festival, 2008) Cape Town (2 x Baxter Theatre seasons, 2009–2010) Johannesburg (Joburg Theatre, Festival of Fame, 2009) KwaZulu-Natal (Hilton Arts Festival, 2009; St Anne's Theatre season, 2013) Oudtshoorn (as part of the Klein Karoo Nationale Kunsfees (KKNK) under the title of *Drome Van Jou*, 2011)[130]	Grahamstown (NAF x 2 years, 2009–2010) Cape Town (Intimate Theatre season, 2009) Cape Town (Out the Box Festival, 2010) Johannesburg (Market Theatre season, 2010)	Grahamstown (NAF Arena Programme, 2010) Johannesburg (Market Theatre season, 2010) Cape Town (Baxter Theatre season, 2010)	Grahamstown (Makana Drama Development Festival – MDDF, 2014) Grahamstown (NAF Fringe and National Schools' Festival, 2015–2016) Cape Town (Cape Town Fringe Festival, 2015)	Grahamstown (Makana Drama Development Festival – MDDF, 2014) Grahamstown (NAF Fringe and National Schools' Festival, 2015–2016) Cape Town (Cape Town Fringe Festival, 2015)	Johannesburg (AFDA Experimental Festival, 2019) Grahamstown (NAF Fringe, 2019)

[130] Afrikaans for "dreams of you".

Production	*Pictures of You*	*QUACK!*	*Womb Tide*	*Benchmarks*	*Waterline*	*Phitlho [The Hidden]*
Nominations /Awards Received	2010 Fleur du Cap Theatre Award for Mask and Puppet Design (Janni Younge) 2010 Fleur du Cap Theatre Award for Lighting (Rob Murray) 2010 Standard Bank Ovation Award	2010 Nominated for Fleur du Cap Theatre Award for Mask Design (Janni Younge) 2010 Nominated for Best Visual Theatre Production at Out the Box Festival 2011 Nominated for Naledi Theatre Award for Best Cutting-Edge Production 2011 Nominated for Naledi Theatre Award for Best Costume Design	2011 Nominated for Naledi Theatre Award for Best Cutting-Edge Production 2011 Nominated for Naledi Theatre Award for Best Lighting Design 2011 Nominated for Naledi Theatre Award for Best Set Design 2011 Nominated for Fleur du Cap Theatre Award for Best Actress (Liezl de Kock) 2011 Nominated for Fleur du Cap Theatre Award for Best Props	2011 Handspring Puppet Company Award for Best Puppet[131] Manipulation 2011 Nominated for Handspring Puppet Company Award for Best Visual Theatre Production 2011 Nominated for Handspring Puppet Company Award for Best Puppet Design (Cristina Salvoldi)	2014 MDDF Best Production Award 2014 Best Performer Award at Makana Drama Development Festival (Nombasa Ngoqo) 2015 Standard Bank Ovation Award (NAF)	2019 Standard Bank Ovation Award for Best Ensemble 2019 AFDA Award for Best Live Performance Production

6.1. *Pictures of You* (2008–2013)

The show was devised from an original story by myself and Liezl de Kock. On the floor, it was devised by the performers, Liezl de Kock (Janet) and Dorian Burstein (Frank), under the direction of yours truly. Masks and puppet were designed by Janni Younge, sound by James Webb. I created the lighting with set, properties, and costumes designed by the performers and director, with guidance by Jacob Kirchner. Tom Schwarer produced the iconic graphic designs; and the original production was produced by A Conspiracy of Clowns in association with FTH:K, with seed funding from the National Arts Council of South Africa (NAC).

The genesis of *Pictures of You* comes from a dream I had in 2007 – FTH:K was touring their break-through Deaf and hearing show, *GUMBO*, all over the country and also touring Germany. When one is on tour in a mini-bus in an endless succession of different provinces, cities, bed-and-breakfasts, the lines between dreamy, hazy experiences and real, half-awake life become quite liquid.[132] I had been reading up on male identity, midlife crises, self-actualisation, and the like for another project I was developing. I was also a few months away from getting married, so there

[131] All the "puppet" nominations for this production were for the masks – Handspring Puppet Company seeing masks and puppets as belonging to the same family of performing objects.

[132] This is a recurring theme in genesis of some of the work I have done – in 2012, on tour with Ubom! Eastern Cape Drama Company, and endless driving through small peri-urban towns led to the idea for another highly successful show, *Crazy in Love*, produced by A Conspiracy of Clowns 2013–2015.

was a lot on my mind. Into this febrile, dreamy, territory came a memory of a scene from *The Battle of the Sexes* (directed by Charles Crichton, 1959. See Figure 19).

Figure 19: Film poster for *The Battle of the Sexes*, with Peter Sellers (1959).

In this, Peter Sellers is quite creepy as Mr Martin – a mild mannered Scottish clerk who, taking umbrage at the hostilities of a brash American woman (Constance Cummings) hired to investigate inefficiency at the firm, decides to murder her. The scene in question has Sellers at his comic best, playing out half-hearted attempts to kill her, and always just being foiled. This all takes place in a kitchen and involves, amongst other things, ice scrapers, carving knives, and a whisk.

It's not the best Sellers film, but this scene in particular is really funny and fairly dark. The extremity of this action (trying to kill one's spouse) began to percolate in my head and stuck. Not for a second am I condoning domestic violence (or murder, for that matter), but what intrigued me was the question of what would drive a seemingly mild-mannered man to this point. What extreme crisis of character or identity would lead him to such lengths?

With all this turning in my head, I dreamt about such a situation, where a husband encountered a shadowy character (most likely a noir *femme fatale*) that planted the idea of murder and gave him a knife to complete the deed. From this came this seed of a story: a husband and wife's marriage is perfect on the surface, but underneath is a broiling mess of unfulfilled desires and dreams. He starts dreaming wildly, and in his dreams he meets a Dream Creature. She entices him more and more to visit her, and he is seduced by her and eventually hooked. Addicted. He can't get enough of her. So, he cooks up a plan (or is coerced) to swap his wife for the creature, by killing her, thus opening the portal for an exchange between dream and reality. While there were some very sketchy quantum physics at play, with more than a nod to Jeff Noon's *Vurt* (1993), Guillermo del Toro's *Pan's Labyrinth* (2006), and quite a lot of David Lynch, thus began a battle for their souls, and a clash between the real and dreaming worlds.

Figure 20: A poster mockup for *Of Quiet Desperation*, the initial title for *Dreams of You*.

There was even an earlier title, *Of Quiet Desperation* – from a quote from Henry David Thoreau: "The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation",[133] a line also made famous by Pink Floyd.

All of this was somewhat esoteric, fairly obscure, and more than a little abstract. We knew that it would not be to many people's taste, but decided to do it anyway, and crucially, in mask.

The abstraction of the space we were in when conceptualising the work presented us with the

[133] Interestingly, this early poster mockup shows I was initially going to be performing in the show, something I had forgotten.

challenge of how to make it accessible to an audience. What would glue this narrative space together? In short – what was the story? As poet Robert Bly writes in *Iron John: A Book About Men* (1990: 34): "If we have no story, we cannot take hold of the wound." A key into this was also reading Wilsher (2007) who makes the salient point that masks are really bad at abstract thought, but are made for relationships. This would have to become our focus.

Synopsis

Figure 21: Frank (Dorian Burstein) and Janet (Liezl de Kock). Pic by Toast Coetzer, 2008.

On the surface, Frank and Janet live a picture-perfect marriage. Everything is in its place, and everything is neat and ordered. Photos of their past life adorn the walls. A central picture depicts a woman sitting on the beach staring out at the sea in a calm and reflective portrait; however, underneath simmers a sense of unease – the two old people seem to keep missing each other, and their habits and rituals (the daily mail-drop, tea, cleaning, and bedtime) suggest their wordless union is fraying at its seam. Janet has become a tightly-wound neurotic woman who jumps at the mailman knocking on the door or, in fact, at any sign of life outside their home. Frank is obsessed with security – checking and rechecking the lock on the door, demanding everything is done just so. (See Figure 27.)

Figure 22: Frank and Janet at night in bed. Pic by Toast Coetzer, 2009.

At night he battles to sleep, tossing and turning to unknown thoughts and desires. Both characters seem to want to reach out to each other, to connect, but something is stopping them. The whole setup is one of a tension that will slowly, inexorably, be wound up to a breaking point. (See Figure 21.)

One day, an advertising brochure arrives with the mail. Frank throws it away, as he does all junk mail, but there is something about this one that intrigues Janet. (See Figure 22.)

That night, Frank stalks the living room unable to sleep. As he nurses a medicinal whisky, and seems to be dozing off, the picture on the wall comes slowly to life, revealing a presence behind it. The picture opens, and the Dream Lady peeks out at him and the interior of the house. She is a vivacious, sensual woman – the direct opposite of what we have seen so far about Janet.

Figure 23: Frank with the brochure. Pic by Toast Coetzer, 2009.

The next day, after much hesitation, Janet salvages the brochure from the rubbish bin. Opening it, she finds an advertisement for a holiday (or honeymoon) in Paris, France. As her memory stirs, a small aeroplane rises from the rubbish bin and flies across the stage, pulling Janet into a recollection. (See Figure 24.) She rushes off to retrieve an old, battered, and very dusty suitcase. Opening it, she reverently pulls objects from it – an old red scarf, a small box, a string of paper people hand in hand. As old, buried memories resurface, Young Frank enters, and we are pulled into their shared past.

In a flashback, we see the awkward, fumbling meeting of Young Frank and Young Janet. In this, Young Frank is a gangly, nerdy, passive young man, while Young Janet is impulsive, full of life, and highly passionate. They are drawn together, and we see love blossom between them. In a montage sequence, we see scenes of their courtship: romantic dates, arguments where he berates her for being impulsive and she him for being close-minded. He asks for her hand, they get married, they go on a honeymoon to distant lands.

Figure 24: The aeroplane flies us back into the past. Pic by Toast Coetzer, 2009.

This reverie is suddenly interrupted by a loud banging on the front door, and we are immediately back in the present with the aged Janet surrounded by her memories. Guiltily, she gathers them together and scurries off.

That night, Frank cannot sleep again, and returns to the late-night living room to sit and brood. The picture comes to life again, and the Dream Lady, wearing a red scarf, appears once more. This time, he sees her, and is startled. She beckons him closer, but he cannot accept this vision and sends her away. She slips back behind the picture, back into the other, dreamlike world. As he ponders what he has seen, she suddenly appears, now fully in his world. She tries to seduce him, and he responds, equally thrilled and repulsed, since he is trespassing into an illicit world of forbidden attraction. She gives him a box and trails off once more into the dream. He is left unsure of what has happened – scarcely able to believe it. Did he imagine it? Was it just a dream? He has been left with a physical object – the box; however, it's locked, and try as he might, he cannot prise it open. He throws it into the rubbish bin in disgust and guilt.

The next morning, the two remain in their own worlds, though both have been shaken by their encounters with their unconscious minds. Things start falling apart. Janet watches Frank go through his daily rituals – but now everything goes wrong. The mail is not carefully lined up on the table as it should be. His cup of tea is not ready at hand. In fact, he hardly seems to notice her standing there at all. (See Figure 25.) Despairingly, she fetches the suitcase and tries to make

Figure 25: The gap between Janet and Frank widens. Pic by Toast Coetzer, 2009.

connection. She shakes it, and each sound seems to unpeel another layer of sanity from him. He is deeply spooked and nervous. She, exhausted from her efforts to connect, gives up and exits.

That night, as they lie in bed, Frank still cannot sleep. He's haunted by sounds of the Dream Lady calling to him. The bed starts rumbling and shaking. It slides apart. The Dream Lady enters between Frank and Janet, and in their marital bed, he commits adultery with this creature from another world.

The following day, a desperate Janet enters with the suitcase, not even bothering with any of her usual chores or rituals. She wants to return to the past, and we are plunged into another nostalgic, sepia-toned montage. Now married, Young Frank and Young Janet go house hunting. (See Figure 32.) They find their dream home and move in, setting up the scene with which we've by now become familiar. Intercut with this memory of the past, we see Frank's growing obsession with the Dream Lady in the present, as they embark upon an affair together. In the past, it would seem Young Janet is possibly pregnant. She gets Young Frank ready for work and sends him off, full of confidence and promise. There is a loud knocking on the door. Young Janet goes to open it. The door bursts open. The house is invaded by a shadowy figure. Janet recoils in terror. The figure raises his hand to strike her. We never see the consequence of this action, as the lights black out; however, from the darkness, the lights flicker on the rubbish bin and the central picture.

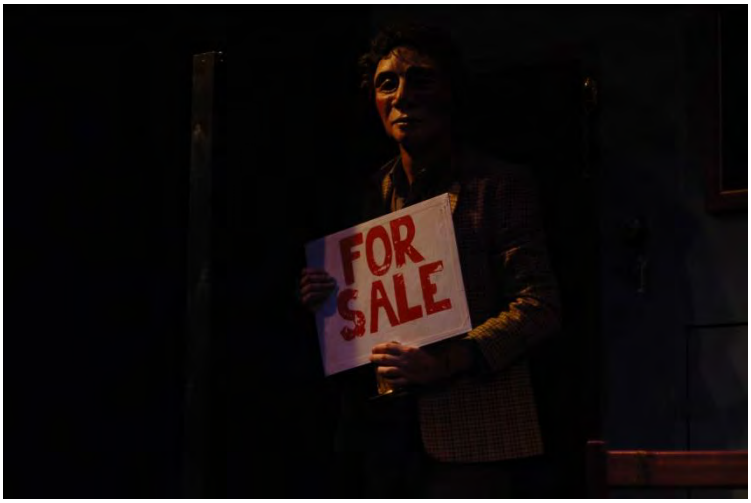

Figure 26: Frank, house hunting. Pic by Toast Coetzer, 2009.

Back in the present, at night again, Frank waits impatiently for the Dream Lady. She eventually arrives, but seems distracted, as if she wants to speak with him rather than be sexual. His impatience building, Frank becomes quite aggressive with her, roughly trying to disrobe her. In the scuffle, her dress tears open and her face and hair come off, revealing a face beneath a mask –

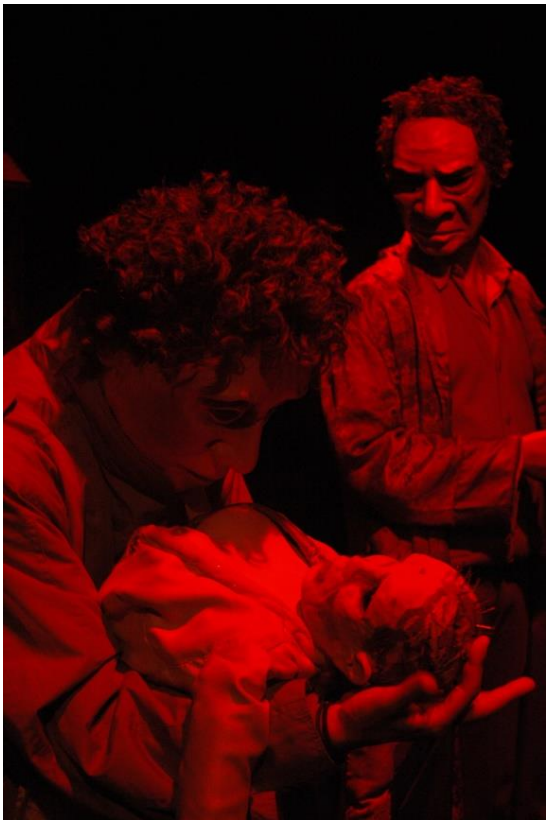

Figure 27: A moment across time – Frank relives the past. Pic by Toast Coetzer, 2009.

lined with pain, ugly and twisted by unknown traumas. The disfigured Dream Lady convulses on the floor trying to put her dress back in place. Bare, broken ribs are seen. Frank watches in abject horror. She reaches into her guts and pulls out a key hidden deep inside her. Giving the key to Frank, she slowly phases back into the dream.

Left with the mysterious key, Frank puts some of the pieces together and retrieves the box from where he threw it away. With a trembling hand, he unlocks the box. He opens it.

We are plunged into darkness, then a stuttering, violent red light and the same sonic assault experienced right at the beginning of the piece. Having unlocked his repressed memory, it is revealed to Frank. He sees the Dream Lady tied to a chair in the same way as his wife was when he found her in the opening image of the piece. He watches himself now, across time, seeing himself as a young man entering to discover the dead body of his wife. He watches himself pick her up and carry her away. (See Figure 27.)

We return to the present time. Frank is left shaken and horrified in the aftermath of the revelation of his repressed memory. Janet enters with her suitcase. She wants to leave and implores him to unlock the front door to let her out. He's reeling with the revelation and needs to work it all out – is Janet real? Or has she been dead all this time? He pleads with her to stay. She's adamant that she must now leave. The altercation accelerates and they struggle – eventually he pushes her violently down to the ground. But in doing so he now realises he has lost her forever. He cannot let her go and collapses in his grief, broken and hopeless. With the last of her dignity, summoning up her remaining energy, she pulls him up, and embraces him one final time. She forgives him.

He unlocks the door for her, and her spirit is finally free. She leaves the suitcase for him and steps out into the unknown – an afterlife.

Figure 28: Last look – Young Janet to Old Frank. Pic by Toast Coetzer, 2009.

Alone on stage, Frank recovers the suitcase and takes it to the table. He slowly packs away the remaining onstage memories into the suitcase, as well as considering the ones already in it, recalled in earlier scenes. As true grieving (and thus healing) begins, the picture above him comes to life one final time. (See Figure 34.) The lady in the picture stands up, and walks out of the picture, leaving Frank, and the audience, with all the beautiful sadness of memories and some small hope for the future.

6.2. Key themes

I have written in as much detail as possible about the narrative of *Pictures of You* for a few salient reasons. Firstly, it was our[134] first mask production, and had one of the longest germination periods of the works in question. The production went through a few iterations also – the original premiere (NAF – 2008) was developed over approximately 18 months of thinking and playing; it was then developed further after that for Out the Box Festival (September 2008), and finally went through another intensive pick-up rehearsal process before its first Baxter Theatre season (January 2009). Consequently, the narrative that emerged forms one of the densest of the ones I'll be writing about. Secondly, it was presented as a mystery, a dream, a puzzle that the audience had to unlock and piece together, aided by a scattering of clues and metaphorical flagpoles throughout the fractured narrative that moved between reality and dream, as well as backwards and forwards in time.

In doing this, it owes a huge debt and pays homage to much of the work of iconic film director David Lynch – most particularly the mind-boggling *Mulholland Drive* (2001).[135] Lastly, following on from the above, it dealt with alternative realities, and this opened up the work to countless interpretations on the part of the audience and critics alike. While this was always part of the initial impulse, what the creative team had to find was the emotional narrative, and to some extent an overarching narrative, that we could play to make sense of it for ourselves and to anchor it in a workable form. The synopsis above, then, represents the clearest form of the show and is the one we settled on. Personal reflection on the work is based on this form, then, and is countered, interwoven, and compared with other interpretations from critics and audiences.

I want to emphasise here that the narrative outline is not a full or authoritative exegesis of *Pictures of You*. Productions featuring masks, as Ian Pringle, Artistic Director of FaceUpTheatre,[136] writes are often "devised by the company and, particularly with full mask, there is no written dialogue only a synopsis of the plot and technical/staging notes" (2017).

Meaning is created, as has been established throughout this thesis, by the shared authoring between object, performer, and audience. This is the trialogue working here. While we had an inkling of this, this production really brought this home. Some audiences desperately needed some form of closure, a final interpretation, and this dissonance, while not intended, caused some to be dissatisfied with the production. David Lynch wrote: "Mystery is good, confusion is bad, and there's a big difference between the two" (Rodley, 1996) and this was always the major intention

[134] This is my key creative partner,Liezl de Kock, and myself. We remain co-Artistic Directors of A Conspiracy of Clowns.

[135] Although I have always been aware of Lynch's influence in my work, and of *Mulholland Drive* on *Pictures of You*, exactly how much contaminated it was recently brought home when I watched an analysis of the film and saw within it so many reflections and heard so many echoes.

[136] FaceUpTheatre, based in the United Kingdom, using various Visual Theatre approaches, engages its audiences in personal, social and environmental change. See www.faceuptheatre.co.uk

behind the creation of the production. It was created as a *mystery*, for the audience; it required their active imaginations, as well as their faculties of reason and deduction to work out the play's meaning.

The influence of David Lynch on this work cannot be understated – in many ways it enters into what philosopher Slavoj Žižek (2006[137]) calls the "Lynchian universe". In his documentary, Žižek asserts that "darkness is really dark … light is unbearable bright blinding light … fire really hurts – it is really hot". It is this form of what Žižek calls "sensory overload" that permeates *Pictures of You* – the experience of it live caught many people off-guard in 2008, and this contributed to its immediate, and highly effective, word of mouth reputation. In writing of Lynch's film work, Žižek proposes: "it is as if events on screen itself threaten to overflow the screen itself ... again it is as if the fantasy space – the fictional, narrative space, gets too intense; it reaches out towards us, the spectators, so that we lose our safe distance" (Žižek. 2006). In the same way, *Pictures of You* was designed and created to reach out beyond the "safe distance" that audiences feel and attack the senses – a sensory experience aided by the lack of words.

To this, the major theme of the show is that of dreams and dreaming – and how dreams collide and wrestle with real life. This is evident in narrative threads, which involve the liminal, porous boundaries between dreams and the waking life dissolving and a very surreal manifestation of the dreams that Frank and Janet have had enters their waking life. It is also evident in the use of the medium to present itself as an overall dream – in much the same way as Lynch sees film as a literal and figurative dream state. This is not to say that the production can be written off disappointingly by the convenient "it was only a dream" trope so despised in creative work on stage or screen. Nor does it attempt to construct a dreamscape within its universe (such as the Preacher does in *QUACK!*, or when the Kid dreams in a scene in *Womb Tide*, or Maureen's dreams of her dead husband, which turn quickly into nightmares in *Benchmarks*) – it quite literally is a dream in and of itself. As Artaud writes, and I have referenced many times: "The theatre will never find itself again – i.e., constitute a means of true illusion – except by furnishing the spectator with the truthful precipitates of dreams" (1993: 92). The entirety of the production aims to "constitute" that true illusion, within a specifically chosen theatrical setting; and, as written about earlier, the opening visual and sonic attack, is designed to shock the audience out of their comfort zone and to pay attention to open themselves to a different way of witnessing the work.

In the dream world of David Lynch, returning briefly to Žižek writing about *Blue Velvet*:

> The logic here is strictly Freudian – we escape into dream to avoid a deadlock in our real life, but then what we encounter in the dream is even more horrible so that at the end we literally escape from the dream back into reality ... it starts with "dreams are for those who cannot endure who are not strong enough for reality"; it ends with "reality is for those who are not strong enough to endure, to confront, their dreams". (Žižek. 2006)

This adequately describes Frank's withdrawal from the reality that he cannot deal with – which is, the death of his wife. He creates an alternative world that traps his wife's spirit with him, as if she were still alive. Furthermore, he then slips into another liminal state of dreaming where the manifestation of his wife as the Dream Lady visits him, late at night, and then spills over into his

[137] Žižek, S. 2006. *The Pervert's Guide to Cinema*. Documentary directed and produced by Sophie Fiennes.

fabricated reality. Neither can ultimately hold, and the dreams break down, forcing him to confront his buried and suppressed memories. It is only at this point that he can truly move on and begin to heal.

One of the key themes, as well as a clue to completing the puzzle of the production, comes from the titular referencing of the 1989 song, "Pictures of You" by English alternative band The Cure.[138] The song lyrics reveal the narrator picking through photos of his beloved and diving into nostalgia:

> I've been looking so long at these pictures of you
> That I almost believe that they're real
> I've been living so long with my pictures of you
> That I almost believe that the pictures
> Are all I can feel[139]

The song is drenched in gothic romantic imagery – running through the snow, skin kissed by light and "snow white", the sky falling around the lovers, drowning, angels – and this reflects the band's then shifting from their original punk/post-punk/gothic sound to a lusher, more pop-orientated sensibility. The sound is dense and almost orchestral, though infused with melancholy, for there has been a parting, or an escape:

> You were bigger and brighter and wider than snow
> And screamed at the make-believe
> Screamed at the sky
> And you finally found all your courage
> To let it all go (Smith. 2006).

The narrator has not dealt well with this and is consumed with guilt – blaming himself for their parting, and this leads to an impotent act of violence to find some sort of release:

> If only I'd thought of the right words
> I could have held on to your heart
> If only I'd thought of the right words
> I wouldn't be breaking apart
> All my pictures of you (Smith. 2006)

Sitting then amidst the ruins of nostalgia and memory, the narrator, and by extension the listener, is finally able to reconcile the memory of his lost love:

> There was nothing in the world
> That I ever wanted more
> Than to feel you deep in my heart
> There was nothing in the world
> That I ever wanted more
> Than to never feel the breaking apart
> All my pictures of you (Smith. 2006)

---

[138] "Pictures of You" is written by Robert James Smith, Simon Gallup, Roger O'Donnell, Porl Thompson, Laurence Andrew Tolhurst, and Boris Williams. It was the fourth single off The Cure's *Disintegration* album, produced by Fiction Records.

[139] "Pictures of You" lyrics copyright by Universal Music Publishing Group.

At face value, one could argue that this sums up the narrative outline for *Pictures of You* fairly well – consumed by grief, Frank represses the memory of his trauma and loss and tries to plaster it over with memories that are literally represented by pictures on his living-room wall, as well as trapping the ghost of his wife in a form of limbo. It is only when he is able to tear apart the pictures he has of her in his mind and warped sense of reality, that there is a release, for both him and the abstraction of his pain that has taken human form in that of Old Janet for the shared reality of the performance. Amidst the ruins of his pictures, and the deep sadness this invokes, there is a tiny sliver of hope: by accepting the reality of the situation, true grief and proper healing will be able to commence.

The reference to The Cure song is mainly an added bonus or "easter egg" for anyone knowing the song, and does not appear on the soundtrack of the production. The title does point towards a visual styling of the production – Janet and Frank's masks as well as the mask of The Dream Lady are finished to look like oil paintings. The older versions of the masks are slightly blurred, cracked, and pitted from age and the trauma of experience.

Furthermore, old photographs adorn the walls, some just off-kilter to suggest something is amiss. There are also faded gaps in the paint on the living-room wall suggesting some pictures, or memories, are missing.

6.3. Process

Liezl and I, the core collaborators of the show, knew so little about masks when we began, that the process taught us a great deal and needed refining over a year or more as we constantly tweaked and finessed technique, design, performance beats, and also the very way we spoke about the production. It's become almost a mythical story now, but the original version was beset by delays as much as by our naivety. We performed a work-in-progress showing in a tiny room before the company's slightly sceptical management team; then Dorian Burstein (Frank) had to leave to attend the funeral of his grandfather, while the rest of us had a massive fight about intellectual property … and this ended up with all of us in a minibus, driving to NAF, which would be our world premiere, and Liezl and Dorian sitting there mapping out the journey of props, masks, puppets, and so on. This chart was pasted backstage at the Princess Alice Hall to steer them through; but then the technical rehearsal fell apart, and we only managed to plot the first half of the show.

None of us remember the first show. I had a double-CD player in the tech "booth", where I was mixing the sound I had recently received from James Webb, as well as the incomplete lighting plot but sort of knowing where the show was going. We hadn't had a chance to look at our bookings; but it was time to open the doors to let whatever audience in (I think maybe 20? 30 people?). Taking a deep breath, I said to Liezl and Dorian: *You got this; I will find you with lights and sound.*

And … it somehow worked.

Admittedly, there was the biggest mess backstage (that hilariously once got revealed with a turning of the set) and I have never sweated as much in a tech booth nor busked lighting states (which, as I have written about, are so central to the show), but … it worked.

The best response from its premiere? Jaqueline Dommisse (a fantastic director and pedagogue that I had been working with for years and a central figure in South African puppetry and working with

our company as a Stage Manager for *GUMBO*) turned to me at the end, tears in her eyes, and said: "*I think you should turn all the sound up*".

NAF 2008 was a riot. We were all on a bit of a detox diet to just survive, had two shows at the festival and were trying to establish the Cape Town Edge initiative. We were out on a limb, stretched to the limit, and yet it somehow it all worked, and stamped our vision on audiences and theatre-makers.

Pictures of You did not attract huge audiences initially; but it had word of mouth (ironic). One of the best things I witnessed that year was Dorian (in mask as Frank) and Lysander (Deaf actor from *GUMBO*) working together to publicise both shows at Cape Town Edge. They were at a stop street, and a car pulled up for directions to some venue. In full mask, Dorian couldn't speak; and Lysander couldn't hear. There was this beautiful pause where nothing happened, as each person in the stand-off considered the somewhat absurd situation.[140]

The other thing that helped us enormously was working with Jaqueline as a Stage Manager for the other show. We were staying with her, and every night we could grab her for an hour or so to work with the puppets, and masks. It was a short, steep learning curve, and I will forever be grateful for that experience, and what she taught us.

Yes, it helps that people in the industry connected with the material; but I do want to say here that we would be nowhere without the support of these people. Janni, Aja, Jaqueline, Craig, Handspring, James, Brydon, Leila, Jayne, Jessie, Cristina, and most importantly Liezl. As I wrote about in an earlier chapter – us performing object people are weird freaks, misfits … but we see each other and help out as best we can. A very underrated clown film, *Funny Bones* (directed by Peter Chelsom, 1995), captures this through one of the central characters, played by the amazing George Carl:

> Jack. Our suffering is special. The pain we feel is worse than anyone else. But the sunrise we see is more beautiful than anyone else. [It's] like the moon. … There's one side forever dark. Invisible. As it should be. But remember, the dark moon draws the tides also. Our time has come.[141]

Even today, some 14 years after the premiere of *Pictures of You*, this thought and feeling holds; we are all still in the same community.

With a lot of anxiety and not knowing exactly where we were going, there were a few key moments that kept us pushing forward. I think it was late November/December 2007. We didn't have funding yet but had been playing around with s few ideas. Liezl and I had made some *papier mâché* masks as a provocation. Janni took one look at them, and said something like: "You gonna use *these?!*"

Liezl had also introduced me to James Webb, an incredible sound artist, who shared my David Lynch fandom. I hadn't met him yet, but had experienced his work via the sound design for James

[140] We worked with the brilliant Christine Skinner as our publicist and she laughed and laughed and, as usual said: "That's one for the coffee-table book!"

[141] I know I have spoken at length about Beckett and Artaud, and their various ideas impacting on my work. This quote is probably the one that ties up the trialogue and best describes me with the others.

Cairns and Rob van Vuuren's *Brother Number* (directed by Jaco Bouwer**,** 2007). He played the first sonic textures for the show on this day in late 2007, as Janni talked about the masks and puppets, and Liezl and I *knew* we had a winner. We didn't even have a Frank yet; but suddenly the vision for the show clicked together.

I think this was one of the big lessons we learnt – narrative would come from following designs – both visual and sonic. This certainly followed us into *QUACK!, Womb Tide,* and *Benchmarks*. And this is where the "trialogue" really forms – as much as one can plan and construct and envision, one cannot really do this until one has the final designs.

This is something that has stuck with me the last ten years or so. In 2019, I had the opportunity to direct the SA premiere of *Let the Right In* – I do not think we would have pulled off the developmental run without the fact we had the opportunity to work with over 200 students in design who pitched their visions (in groups), for this huge show.

6.4. Critical Reception

As mentioned, when it first played at NAF 2008, *Pictures of You* was not a runaway success. Its initial season on the Fringe was not seen by many people, but, crucially, was seen by a few prominent critics, including Adrienne Sichel (2008), who mentioned it in a piece on the Fringe as "a riveting mask play". The daily newspaper of the NAF, *CUE* (2008), also chimed in: "Without using any facial expressions or verbal language, a subtle picture is painted of a failing marriage. Ingenious use of body language and masks provide for an emotionally intense experience. Must-see, gripping theatre." And veteran critic Mariana Malan also wrote about it:

> …[Die spelers] se jeugdigheid is amper 'n skok wanneer hulle aan die einde hul maskers afhaal. Al die patos wat hulle uitgespeel en boonop so uitstekend verstaan het, het jou veel ouer akteurs laat verwag. Die kleinste besonderhede het aandag gekry. In die gees van 'n kunstefees is daar geëksperimenteer met klank, visuele ontwerp, die slim gebruik van 'n marionet en beligting. Dis een van die produksies wat verdien om meer as net 'n feeslewe te hê.
>
> [The actors' youth is almost a shock when at the end they take their masks off. All the pathos that they played and above all understood, made one expect much older actors. The smallest details were paid attention to. In the spirit of an arts festival, there was experimentation with sound, visual design, the clever use of a puppet, and lighting. This is a production that deserves more life than just an arts festival. (Malan, *Beeld*, 6 July 2008, my translation).

These initial reviews emboldened us to take further experiments and developments of the work. We entered it into Out the Box Festival in 2008 (the second iteration of the show) and were granted two performances at the Intimate Theatre, UCT. These quickly sold out and created a lot of interest within the Visual Theatre community. One of these performances occurred after a vicious thunderstorm in Cape Town – the lighting board was affected by the storm and was malfunctioning, the flickering of lights aiding to the show's aesthetic of uneasiness going on within a picture-perfect marriage.

At around the same time, FTH:K had caught its first break – *GUMBO* (a Deaf/hearing clown show that we had been touring around the country in 2007, as well as a Germany tour, and later a tour to Buenos Aries in Argentina) had been granted a season at the Baxter Studio. For many

reasons, the show died at the box office – despite excellent reviews, the show just didn't land with audiences.

Fortunately, Mannie Manim, at the time, gave us a second chance – to stage *Pictures of You* at the Baxter in early 2009. The show was meant to play in 2008 in the Kalk Bay Theatre, but we quickly realized it didn't fit the stage, and the set turnaround would be impossible. There was a lot of pressure on the show to do well after the failure of *GUMBO*; luckily, this time the show caught, and suddenly became a smash hit – playing to over 80% capacity over its initial season.

2009 was the year of *Pictures*, and it was a strange but gratifying thing to see the show shift to mainstream success.

Throughout the year, the show kept getting excellent reviews, including Christina Kennedy, who wrote: "…this slow-burning charmer has been stealing the hearts of audiences around the country. Currently, it is captivating Festival patrons for the second year in a row…whimsical …*Pictures of You* is a dainty delicacy, to be cradled, adored and treasured." – Christina Kennedy, *CUE*, 8 July 2009.

She followed this up with another mention a few days later:

> Another peach of a show, also employing a strong visual idiom and non-verbal musings, was Rob Murray's *Pictures of You*; this meditation on relationship torpor was a tonic. In making quality theatre accessible to deaf audiences, the From the Hip: Khulumakahle theatre company deserves the highest (mimed) applause. – Christina Kennedy, "Opening theatre's treasure chest", *CUE,* 11 July 2009

Then, in 2009, an amazing thing happened for Visual Theatre in South Africa: Janni Younge was awarded the 2010 Standard Bank Young Artist of the Year Award for Theatre. This was enormous, as suddenly puppets, masks, and performing objects were really thrust into the limelight in South Africa.

In an interview with Marianne Thamm, she very graciously mentioned us:

> I love working with Rob Murray from FTH:K … Rob will come to me with a whole lot of pictures of people. And I have done it for him for two shows, *Pictures of You* and *Quack!*
>
> What he always does is he comes and he speaks about generally the mood he is looking for, the kind of actions he is looking for. He throws a bunch of material at me and he waits to see what is going to come out. So, I love his combination of a lot of input but then he gives a lot of space as well.
>
> So, I could, with the *Pictures of You* characters, feel them out. He said to me I think it is important that there is conflicting emotion in their faces. I could feel out these characters, what is the pain and what is the joy in these characters? And then see how they brought it to life. (Thamm, 2009)

Returning to the Fringe at NAF took the show into the stratosphere when our show was named: "The biggest grossing theatre production" (Hemphill, 2009) of the festival! This was the first of two times I have achieved this – the other was in 2014 with *Crazy in Love* (with Andrew Buckland and Liezl de Kock). What made this particular one special is that it was achieved through silent

masks and a puppet. In 2009, it seemed that a special time had arrived for Visual Theatre in South Africa.

And indeed, it was – *Pictures of You* toured the country, playing at the Festival of Fame at the Joburg Theatre, as well as selling out at the Hilton Arts Festival in 2009. It was renewed for a a second season at the Baxter in 2010, where again it sold very well, and attracted good reviews:

> …it is a lovely production – innovative physical theatre with an original take on storytelling.
>
> Don't expect a solid plotline – this story is a shimming, elusive thread of image, repetition and sound that no two people will leave the theatre space with the same impression of.
>
> If you're looking for simplicity, this isn't the show for you.
>
> If you're looking for a magical visual experience that flirts just at the edge of reason, you're in for a treat. Ready … engage right brain hemisphere … go! (Lever, 2010).

In the midst of all the praise and good reviews, we then got "Greig'd", as I have said before. In a mostly full-page takedown, we got absolutely slammed. After pillorising FTH:K's attempts to reach out and include audiences of Deaf and hearing, he then embarked on a remarkable smack-down. He writes: "The deaf, the ultimate purpose of this all, had been left in the dust like rural beggars at the roadside: the moment was as subtle and painful as a paper cut that makes a blood bead" (Greig, 2010: 7).

In a study of gross over-extension, Greig described the masks:

> the husband has a head of buffalo dimension and mouth set in a grimace of pain and strain. The woman's head is an implosion paused. These masks arrest attention: restrict characterisation in an image of freakiness; their scale and compact compete with and win against the eloquence of gesture. (Greig, 2010: 7).

I *love* this, and have been putting out pieces of it as press releases ever since we got it. Clearly Mask Theatre is not for everyone, and I get that. What I think it does, as for the performer, is disguise and reveal what we like or don't like. And I don't think that's a bad thing.

Greig finishes up his take-down (not the last FTH:K would endure) with the following, and I repeat again:

> We also have a scene, depicting "happier times" indicated by merriment at the fairground. More deployment of typicality, stock situations and allusion: they overwhelmingly suggest a director who doesn't observe people and uses style to not get real. (Greig, 2010: 7).

I do not mind the criticism. And will happily take it, as I have said. Mask Theatre does invoke, or call on, typicality. The audience knows exactly where they are, and what's going on. This was a montage, which is typically understood as a trope. Mask Theatre can't do abstract thought – it relies on relationships between characters, and that was what we were aiming at. Is it real? No – it's theatrical. That's the whole point.

6.5. *QUACK!* (2009–2010)

6.6. Introduction

Like *Pictures of You*, there were several iterations of *QUACK!* This was not only due to a shifting cast list, but also feedback we received and a major design rethink that I will address in due course.

The synopsis I will discuss and the one that is linked here[142] is the second working of the show that was played for a season at the Intimate Theatre in November 2009. Subsequent versions were closely based on this, even though the narrative was slightly tweaked and there were different cast members.

QUACK! was the first full mask show with FTH:K's Deaf and hearing actors. It was created and performed by Liezl de Kock, Lysander Barends, Jori Snell, Marlon Snyders, Jayne Batzofin, Tarryn Bennett, Tomri Steyn, and Christopher Beukes. Of all our Visual Theatre shows, this was the most representative, with it being a clear 50-50 split between Deaf and hearing actors, as well as a 50-50 split between male and female, as well as between people of Colour and White actors. I directed the show and did the lighting design. Set and props were designed by Jesse Kramer, costumes by Leila Anderson, masks by Janni Younge, with sound design by James Webb and Brydon Bolton. As can be seen, there were a number of key collaborators coming through from the experience of working on *Pictures of You*; in fact the show was something of a compromise – with Conspiracy of Clowns taking the mantle of *Pictures of You*, the payoff was to bring the full mask approach to FTH:K.

The show was conceptualised as a fantasy and heavily inspired by Katherine Dunn's novel, *Geek Love* (1989). I read this book as an undergraduate and the narrative stuck with me. The story deals with a struggling travelling freak show, run by a ringmaster Aloysius "Al" Binewski, his wife "Crystal" Lil, and their children. In order to drum up support for their show, the couple experiment with drugs and breed freaks – for example their son, Arty, has fins and can breathe underwater; and Orly, the narrator, is a hunchbacked albino dwarf. As the narrative unfolds, Arty goes on a rampage of power, starting up his own cult and encouraging his followers to amputate various parts of their bodies to fit in, while Orly battles for the salvation of her daughter, Miranda, who was spawned by telekinetic incest.[143]

The core of this narrative spin appealed to me as a means to address the fact that many people saw our company as a collection of "freaks." Combining Deaf and hearing performers seemed an appropriate way to tackle many of the misconceptions and stereotypes we still faced as a company.

[142] For the full-length recording of the work, go to: https://youtu.be/sedZzf-HM0k
[143] I am not joking.

Billed as an "Afro-Gothic thriller", the show was boosted by two other things happening at the time.

The first was a pedagogical approach. In the 1960s, and particularly 1968, with student riots throughout Europe, Jacques Lecoq responded to his students' need to be more in control of their training and set up what he called *auto-cors* (literally, "self-teaching"). In this weekly task, students were given a theme and subsequently free reign to create a short piece of theatre without any staff involvement. These pieces were presented every week in front of the whole school, with immediate feedback from their fellow students and staff.

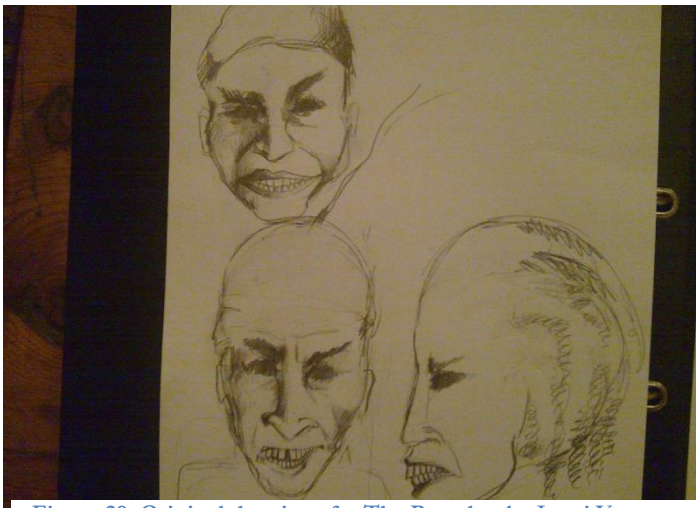

Figure 29: Original drawings for The Preacher by Janni Younge, 2009.

We adopted this format as a company, tasking our actors to respond to a visual stimulus each week, to present a kernel of a character, or dramatic situation, which we would all respond to. In FTH:K parlance this became known as firstly "self-teach", and then later as simply "12:30 Friday".[144]

In one of these sessions, Lysander Barends, one of our first Deaf performers, brought to the floor his interpretation of a charismatic religious leader he had encountered on the train to work. If anyone has ridden the Metrorail somewhere in Cape Town, then one will immediately recognise this fire and brimstone character, and their bible-bashing proclivities.[145]

Immediately, at this session, there was a character that was interesting, and he became one of the main entrance points to the Preacher in *QUACK!* (See Figure 35.)

The other major thing that was happening at the time in 2009 was that a certain Jacob Zuma was on the election trail in South Africa, and the rhetoric and behaviour at his political rallies proved too irresistible to let go.[146] What a lot of people do not know is that *QUACK!* was a political allegory about the corruption and abuse of power.

6.7. Synopsis

The audience encounters a hospital scenario where a body is covered with a cloth. Behind it, masked, is a very industrial-looking construction. This is a tower – about three metres high, with a higher and lower level. Above is the Preacher's laboratory, complete with his vials of potions.

[144] These sessions presented many ideas we are still working through. Apart from *QUACK!*, one of the scenarios led directly to Lysander Barends creating his work *Ek Roep Vir Jou Vanaand* (directed by Liezl de Kock) in2009.
[145] If you watch this clip on FTH:K's actors, you can see an example of a "preacher" railing on about listening to the word of the lord while the Deaf actor has no idea what he is on about: https://youtu.be/QzButOQh_58
[146] Jacob Gedleyihlekisa Zuma was the fourth democratic South African president from 2009 to 2018. A divisive, if populist leader, his presidency was tainted by many claims of fraud, corruption, a rape accusation, and his allegiance with the Gupta brothers saw South Africa descend into an era of state-owned enterprises being captured and plundered for billions of rands. At present, he remains under clouds of suspicion with numerous court cases pending.

Below is a curtained off space. But all this will be revealed later as the play shifts between worlds. As the audience settles, the audio playlist keys them into a dark and menacing headspace – as with most of my work, the play-in music is of enormous importance, and in this case it's Tom Waits with *Green Grass*:

> Lay your head where my heart used to be
> Hold the earth above me
> Lay down on the green grass
> Remember when you loved me[147]

As a side note, the play-in song is never chosen arbitrarily in my work – it is indicated as a key insight into the work just about part of the performance. For *Pictures of You,* it was "Don't Fence Me In"*;* for *Womb Tide*, "Bueno Sera"; for *Waterline, "*Many Rivers to Cross"*,* and so on. As much as the song is an indication for the audience, it also a moment for the hearing actors to stand by.

Figure 30: Doctors and patient. Pic by Toast Coetzer, 2009.

[147] Written by Waits, Thomas A and Brennan, Kathleen, from the 2004 album *Real Gone*, produced by Epitaph Records.

In the darkness, a heart rate monitor is heard and then then seen via a flashing heart icon. Lights rise on a gaggle of doctors, in scrubs and medical masks, and they move forward towards the body on the bed. This is the Patient, who is revealed to be wearing a hideous twisted mask of power and pain. The mouth is twisted into something between a grimace and a sneer, the face is marked with primal, almost tribal scarring, and he sports a shock of blue dreadlocks.

Figure 31: Liezl de Kock as The Assistant, announcing The Preacher. Pic by Clare-Louise Thomas, 2009.

(See Figure 31.)

It is clear that he is in some kind of medical emergency, and the doctors fizz around him – taking vital signs and bickering among each other.[148] (See Figure 36.) They also consult and fight over a large book, trying to find the answer to his illness. As this builds into a stylised fight between the medical officials, the Patient slips into a fevered dream.

He dreams of, and visualises, a small model of the construct behind him. This appears on stage as a double-storied tower; it glides towards him, he picks it up to consider it, and as he slips into his dream, the set turns to reveal a life-size version of this. We enter a parallel world.

It also reveals his Assistant in his parallel universe – as a middle-aged woman, who is devoted to him, and makes arrangements for what will be a sermon of sorts. Her mask is one of suffering and hope – her features are still humanoid but give the impression that they are slipping; or melting.

[148] When we performed the work in Johannesburg in 2010, at the time there was a hospital strike going on – something that we worked into the narrative.

We become aware of other figures entering the stage. These are the Acolytes, and they are fairly sinister, faceless creatures, dressed in rags. We are unsure of their real function or goal, though they seem to be stock characters – there is the Thug, low-browed and dangerous, who has eyes but no mouth; the Heart Acolyte (See Figure 38.) who is softer and romantic, with only one eye and a sad mouth; the Elder who can hardly see and whose features have almost completely melted away; and the Newcomer, new to the scene, whose features are still intact. Together with the Assistant, they perform a chain dance, and then reveal the Preacher (the form of the Patient in this mythical land)[149] – he has been reimagined as a figure of power: a preacher, a snake-oil salesman, a ringmaster, a guru.

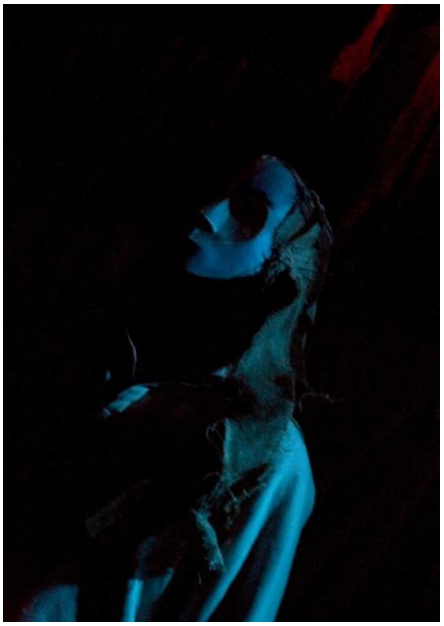

Figure 32: Marlon Snyders as the Heart Acolyte. Pic by Toast Coetzer, 2009.

Figure 33: Lysander Barends as The Preacher, in full sermon mode. Tarryn Bennet as the Thug Acolyte behind him. Pic by Clare-Louise Thomas, 2009.

A sermon commences. The Preacher is a cross between a fire and brimstone preacher, a salesman, and a motivational speaker. (See Figure 40.) He whips the crowd into a frenzy, building up their hopes for the future by reflecting on power, and the individual capacity to throw off one's shackles and become a self-made person. At the apex of the sermon, he chooses the Newcomer as a baptism example. She offers up a vintage locket as a totem for acceptance into the cult. This is placed inside a collection plate, and the Thug winches it up to the Preacher's laboratory by means of a wicker basket.

Exhausted and drained, the Preacher climbs to his laboratory, his secret room, at the top of the tower. The Assistant tries to climb to help him, but the Thug Acolyte bars her way. The Preacher commences his ritual of recording the Newcomer's offering in a big book (the same book as the doctors had in the prologue). He then adds it to a large vat he has in his lab. This boils and bubbles with something immensely sinister as he distils the essence of the Newcomer's locket – her hopes and dreams; her secrets.

[149] These names became the way we referred to characters as they developed, for ease of reference.

He siphons up the mixture in a vile-looking syringe, injects it into a vial, and drinks it expectantly. But nothing happens. He is bitterly disappointed and is racked by a fit of coughing – it is clear he is not too well. He summons the Assistant by ringing a bell, and winches the leftovers, the husk of the locket, down to her. She takes them and scurries away. In desperation, the Preacher looks down on his acolytes and makes a decision. He descends and preys on the Elder – sucking out her life force with the syringe and ingesting it. This gives him a small boost but it is obviously not enough. The dead body of the Elder is dragged off. Thus is the narrative premise set up – there is something seriously shady going on where the Preacher has been feeding on his acolytes to cure a mysterious disease, and his followers are slowly losing their personalities, and humanity, as he preys on them. Yet they are bound to him because of his charisma and promise of power and success.

Figure 34: The Heart Acolyte – what's he building in there? Pic by Toast Coetzer, 2009.

Meanwhile, the Heart acolyte is up to something mysterious – he's building something secret in a suitcase. (See Figure 41.) He manages to keep it away from the Thug, through a comic dance of evasion; but this captures the attention of the Newcomer who is trying to figure out how this world works, as much as the audience is too.

Figure 35: The Assistant – deep in the woods. Pic by Clare-Louise Thmas, 2009.

We catch up with the Assistant who is in a dark and spooky forest, with a shovel and a lantern, as well as a jar holding the remains of the sacrificial offering. (See Figure 42.) She digs into the ground and buries the remains – which are now just dust, much like the residue in a cremation urn. She is also not feeling great – her hair is starting to fall out in clumps, and this panics her. The woods are dark and contain secrets, and she is also beginning to piece together the Preacher's effect on her. But she is committed to him and looks longingly up to the tower and sighs. She slips into a reverie, a memory of meeting the Preacher – where she gave up her broken heart for a promise by him of togetherness and belonging.

In this memory, he is delivering his sermon again, this time with a slight variation on a theme – this time that of love. Using the acolytes, he illustrates the story of a man with no will power or confidence to woo a woman, builds him up, and finally succeeds. He whips his audience up into a frenzy of expectation.

The Preacher descends his tower to be with the Assistant in her memory. The collection plate is produced, and the only thing the Assistant can offer is her broken heart, that the Preacher's promises have healed. It is a gift of love, sacrifice, and servitude. (See Figure 43.)

The same process is followed – the collection plate is winched up to the laboratory. The Preacher records it in the book, inspects what he has and mixes it all together to distil its essence. The expectation is that nothing will happen again, but then things really start bubbling and boiling over. Labour is imminent! Even the Preacher is unsure what will happen. From the vat, in a cloud of smoke and alchemical mystery, the Innocent is born, awkwardly and hesitantly. She is a frail character – thin and malnourished with an open, curious mask, and a shock of white hair. They size each other up – he takes her measurements and records them, while she shows a natural inclination to play, like a small child. Eventually, he spikes her, and draws out a syringe full of her blood. This he drinks, with a fair amount of apprehension. But … inexplicably, it works! He has found his elixir. The secret to eternal life? Maybe. He realises how valuable she really is, and binds her in his laboratory to keep safe. He winches down the detritus of his experiment to the Assistant.

Figure 36: The Assistant offers her heart, literally on a platter. Pic by Toast Coetzer, 2009.

The Assistant buries more scraps in the woods again. She feels the effects of what she has done – a sharp pain to the heart. Her hair is starting to fall out more and more and her features are falling.

The Assistant embarks on her daily cleaning ritual. She is interrupted by a knocking sound – the Innocent thumping on the walls to be let out. The Assistant realises that the tower is unguarded, and after a brief wrestle with her conscience, climbs up into the forbidden area.

Figure 37: The Innocent is born. Pic by Clare-Louise Thomas, 2009.

It is her first time in the Preacher's lab, and she is cautious and more than a little scared. She inspects the instruments and the book, and becomes aware that things are not as they seem. It appears that he indeed has some nefarious purpose that he has never disclosed.

A knocking freaks her out, but she finds the trapdoor and opens it, pulling the Innocent out. (See Figure 44.) She embraces the Assistant, identifying her as some mother figure. But this spooks the Assistant, and she repels her and gets the hell out of there.

Meanwhile, the subplot develops – the Newcomer confronts the Heart acolyte, and they have a moment of connection. He reveals to her that he has been building a model of a home in his suitcase – it is a house in the woods somewhere, where all seems warm and cosy; smoke rises from the chimney, and the two are united in a dream of escape from the situation they are in: a shared dream of happiness.

The set rotates to reveal backstage.[150] We see the Assistant with all the props that the Preacher needs for his sermons. The Innocent watches from the tower, then comes down to join her, to hopefully play. But the play interrupts her strict routine, as the Innocent messes with the strict presentation of props for the sermon, as we have seen, and things go hopelessly wrong. The Preacher is furious, and violently curses the Assistant. He takes the Innocent off with him and drains more of her life force.

The Assistant is now hell-bent on regaining her good standing with the Preacher. He announces a great feast, possibly a wedding feast, and she mistakenly thinks this is for her and that it will fulfil her greatest desires. She goes all in to make it the best feast ever, using the Heart and Newcomer

[150] A nod and a wink to Michael Frayn's *Noises Off*, which I performed in in 1995. After the first act which sets up the play within a play, in the second act, the set rotates and we watch everything from backstage as things go very wrong.

to set up for it. Her hopes are dashed when it comes down to the feast, as the Preacher brushes her aside for his child bride – the Innocent. In a blatant display of power, the Preacher drains more of the Innocent at the feast – further spurning the Assistant.

We slip into a montage of events – a series of short scenes depicted in a time-lapse.

The Preacher drains more and more of the Innocent's life force. She becomes more compliant and wanner. The Assistant studies his book and becomes more aware of what he is doing. She enlists the help of the Thug. A plan is hatched. The Heart and the Newcomer plan their escape.

We catch up with the Preacher at his next sermon. Things have changed – he has become addicted to the Innocent's blood. He is like an addict – unfocussed, shambolic, nervous, and instead of gently persuading the audience, he is now abusive and repugnant. Things are starting to break down – like a junkie, his sermon has become erratic, and he needs more and more hits from the Innocent to just maintain his health and energy. In the meantime, things are breaking down between the two worlds – suddenly the doctors from the prologue begin to reappear, running in and out of scenes, as the heart monitor sound and image appear and reappear. Amazingly, the Assistant starts to notice this disjunction.

The Assistant in the woods again. Things have gotten a lot worse. She removes her cap to reveal her thinning hair. Clumps of hair come off in her hand. She is wasting away. With murder on her mind, she ascends the steps to the laboratory again and encounters the Innocent.

Things are falling apart. The Heart and the Newcomer run away and presumably have a happy ending elsewhere. The Preacher is a shadow of himself, and can't process the glitches between the two worlds anymore. He challenges the Assistant, who stands up to him with the Thug. She then parts the curtains of the tower to reveal … the Innocent, hanging and dead. Was it suicide or murder?

The Preacher collapses with a massive heart attack, and we are transported back to the hospital scene in the beginning. The doctors gather around him as he dies. The flat-line is heard, he is dead. The time of his death is recorded in the big book.

Jobs done, the doctors disperse … except for two. They take off their surgical masks to reveal … the Assistant and the Thug. They bring out the Preacher's syringe, and extract the last life force out of the model of his tower. As the sound builds up to a horrifying last drone, they become aware of the audience. They turn to the audience in a nod and a wink of complicity. The Assistant puts her finger to her lips – "shhhhh" and the sound explodes as we cut immediately to black.

6.8. Reflection on Process

It is late June, 2009. You are in the Intimate Theatre at University of Cape Town (UCT), and onstage is FTH:K walking through blocking and trying on costumes. We are setting up for our special members-only preview of *QUACK!* about a week before the show travels down to NAF for its official world premiere. Tension, tiredness, nerves, and sign language fly around the space.

I am sitting in the auditorium. My head is in my hands to stop the shaking. There is a dull, hollow feeling in the pit of my stomach as I watch the onstage business. I am meant to be focusing lights and readying the cast for our preview, but I am distraught – the masks don't work.

The masks don't work!

This was meant to be the pay-off for FTH:K – we broke away in 2008 to create A Conspiracy of Clowns and *Pictures of You*, to bring mask work back to the integrated Deaf and hearing company. This was meant to be the next step in the evolution of Visual Theatre for our company, but here we are, and the goddamn masks don't work!

I am later reminded of what John Wright wrote about his first encounter with masks at Trestle Theatre and the similar panic he experienced. He wrote:

> It's a disaster! The masks the company have made are like huge crash helmets. They're far too big. They cover the entire head and face. They go down to the back of the neck at the back, and to a point way below the chin at the front. It's impossible for the actors to even look at the floor. They're very difficult to put on as well. You have to squeeze your head into them, and the rim of the mask scratches your ears. But once inside, it's even worse: your eyes are never aligned with the eye holes of the mask, so the best you can do to see anything is to squint down a nostril or through a group of tiny pinpricks puncturing the cheek. But then, because your ears are covered, not only is your hearing muffled, but your balance is affected as well! You end up tottering about like a patient recovering from an operation. In order to see an object, and to pick it up, you have to be completely still. If you're stupid enough to move too quickly, and have to breathe in – you get two jets of icecold air blasting into your eyes leaving you temporarily blinded, with tears running down your cheeks. *We've spent all our money on these masks! It's too late to abandon them now.* (2006: 99).

Take all of the above and just, for a minute, think about what that means to force upon a Deaf actor. Go ahead – I'll wait.

It is June 2009 and I have just learnt an important lesson about masks by omission – you can't make a mask work without the masks at hand.

Let's back this up a bit…

In creating *QUACK!*, we followed what we had experienced with *Pictures of You* – namely, we created the look and feel of the masks from a collage of characteristics. We also knew how they would look and had actually played with the basic designs for a while. Mostly, though, we had to push forward.

QUACK! was never going to be as psychologically intense as *Pictures* – we knew we didn't have the time or the calibre of performers to do so. It was always envisaged as more of a graphic novel than a novel – relying on images and a comic-book mind-set to get its narrative across.

However, crucially, we didn't have the finished masks themselves. (See Figure 45.) When they arrived, finally, on that night in 2009, they immediately exposed a gap between what we were working with, on the floor, and their design.

This fault was entirely mine as director – Janni Younge, our mask designer and maker (as she had been on *Pictures*) produced beautiful masks inspired by puppets and masks from Mali – they just didn't fit into how and what I had been working on with the cast.

Figure 38: The original masks. Pic by Clare-Louise Thomas, 2009.

As outlined earlier, the narrative of *QUACK!* was fairly straightforward – although, if one missed crucial beats, it became alienating and … well, scary. *QUACK!* saw the biggest number of walk-outs I have experienced in a show – especially from middle-aged white female audience members.

The original masks, once delivered, were incredibly striking – the lines were bold and beautiful as art-works, but not particularly useful to the narrative that we had been working on. Again I take this on my chin as director as there had been a miscommunication between myself and Janni.

For me, it jumped the difference between African masks and those that can be used for Mask Theatre – similar to how Wilsher (2007) writes about sacred and secular masks; African masks are indeed bold and striking and demand a certain energy and raw power to lurch them into life. Mostly they are more symmetrical in design, and, following Keith Johnstone *et al*, demand the user to go into a form of "trance" to kick them into life. As mentioned in a previous chapter, this is the same kind of energy in a mask that requires a kind of divination and provocation, such as in masks used by Brett Bailey. In my opinion, these are the "sacred" masks that Wilsher talks of – spirits of wind, fire, or water. The "secular" masks, that interest me more, demand a different kind of complexity.

(As an interesting sidenote, and I don't remember where or when I heard this, but I was told that asymmetrical African mask designs were regarded as masks of people with mental disabilities or afflictions. The fact that these appear more in the 21st-century character masks, where the sides are very different to each other, says a lot about our contemporary *milieu*.)

2009, then, at NAF, was a huge learning curve. We tried making the *QUACK!* masks work as much as possible, but the production was still a curiosity, and noticed mostly for its atmosphere and soundtrack. The two shows played literally around the corner from each other at the National Arts Festival in Makhanda. *QUACK!* played at the Masonic Hall, while *Pictures of You* was at Princess Alice Hall (about 300m from each other.) In that year, *Pictures of You* became the best-selling theatre show, jumping from fringe darling to mainstream success. On the other hand, *QUACK!* clearly

needed a reboot, and that's what we did leading up to its season at the Intimate Theatre in November 2009.

If you haven't noticed a trend here yet, then let me highlight it: works were seen as always being in development. As a company, we never had the access to resources that companies like Philippe Genty have, or Derevo, where one can spend months, or even years, perfecting a show before performing it. We had to stage our works in progress in front of audiences. We made mistakes, and then we tried to correct ourselves.

With the masks not working a hundred percent, we sanded them down to take away much of their bold striking features to allow for more complexity. Costumes, too, were broken down to allow for more room to play. We also added new characters – namely, the Elder Acolyte whom we could kill off, as well as the Newcomer, who allowed us a way into the strange world by learning about it through her eyes. (See Figure 46.)

Figure 39: The revised masks and costumes, November 2009, with extra characters.

6.9. Critical Reception

QUACK! Was a difficult show to sell, as it was one of our more obscure creations. The initial iteration of the show, at NAF Fringe 2009, as discussed, was flawed, and even though saw some positive reviews, overall the production did not translate into healthy box office business.

CUE (2009) called it:

> A new offering from Khulumakahle – and another success. Join the talented performers in an afro-noir story that requires no words, and start to listen with your eyes as the physical vocabulary and soundscape capture your imagination. This is fresh, exciting theatre – different from anything you've seen before.

Zane Henry, from *Cape Argus*, chimed in:

> Last year FTH:K scored with the surreal gem Pictures of You. Its offering this year is Quack, an even more ambitious project set in a fantasy world. It's still rough, but brims with potential and will benefit from more tweaking. – Zane Henry, *Cape Argus* 7 July 2009

And *Artsblog* (2009) added:

> If you stepped through the looking glass into one of those little handbills you see on lamp-posts telling you that Dr Muba Ngorhahangee (or whoever) can heal of you of anything from cancer to a broken heart – and can give you muti to win your court case and an abortion on the side, you might find it looks a lot like the surreal Afro-magical world evoked in *Quack!*
>
> "Visually compelling" is the description my fellow theatre-goer came up with. And it fits perfectly.
>
> … and a good dose of New Orleans Voodoo thrown in for good measure. The use of amazingly expressive and evocative masks is a trait they use very effectively, and director Rob Murray appears to love conjuring up theatrical tricks that offer rewarding surprises … Keep an eye on this play. It'll soon be another feather in the cap for this award-winning company. Oh! And the soundtrack, as is usual for James Webb, is amazing, and if you simply go to see this show for its visuals and its sounds, you won't be disappointed.

While the above quotes are flattering, we couldn't quite get beyond the fact that the show didn't work as a whole – the fact that someone could "simply see this show for its visuals and sound" wasn't quite good enough. There was something missing from the emotional, visceral impact of the production.

Subsequent to this, we worked further on the show for its September Intimate Theatre season in Cape Town, with trying to find a way to promote the show:

> It's a visceral and visual bombardment of the senses," explains Murray, "We're asking the audience to experience theatre in a way they might not have before, and thus consider the whole transaction, and its creators, in a different light. It's totally non-verbal – the story unfolds with full character masks, a vivid scenic and sonic design, and above all space. Not only physical space, and the patterning thereof; but a silent space where the audience completes the action on stage in their own imaginations and emotions." (FTH:K, 2009. *QUACK!* Press release.)

The show had tightened, and definitely improved with an addition of extra cats and characters:

> I first saw Quack! In one of its very early performances, in Grahamstown earlier this year in the antiseptic confines of the Masonic Hall. I remember being puzzled, intrigued, rapt and stimulated.
>
> After reading that the story has been tightened and clarified for the current run at the Intimate Theatre, I'm pleased to write that after watching Quack! For the second time I'm still not sure what's going on all the time.
>
> It's reassuring because what theatre group FTH:k (From the Hip: khulumakahle) is proving so good at is exploring that mine between dreams and reality using their trademark non-verbal performance. The story isn't the most important thing. The medium is the message, to use Marshall McLuhan's overly quoted phrase.

> The combination of Janni Younge's surreal masks, James Webb's nightmarish soundscape and director Rob Murray's overarching vision makes for an intense, unique theatrical experience.
>
> Audience members are encouraged to meet the play halfway and fill in the spaces between the story's components. Because nothing is certain, anything is impossible.
>
> The story has been scrubbed up and tightened appreciably. Some tedious repetition has been cut and turning points are clarified. …
>
> The performers are gifted actors who use their bodies well to tell the story. A romance subplot has been added. This doesn't really serve the main story, but it does sweeten an otherwise rather grim tale.
>
> It's impossible to review *Quack!* without mentioning *Pictures of You*, FTH:k's earlier non-verbal hit.
>
> That production told a small story in a big way. *Quack!* Tells a much bigger story in a big way. Its ambition still slightly exceeds its grasp, but this is a good thing. Theatre should sometimes be a little dangerous, especially when in the hands of a dynamic, talented young company.
>
> This fever dream of a production is a credit to FTH:k and well worth your time. Just prepare to have the *dinges* freaked out of you. (Henry, 2009).

Personally, I didn't mind ambiguous reviews (or, more accurately, re-reviews) as the one above by Zane Henry. As a theatre maker I've often been inspired by blurred lines and multi-faceted storylines, and if this sometimes results in uncertainty on the part of an audience, then this is also okay. I particularly appreciate Henry's line encouraging audiences to "meet the play halfway and fill in the spaces between the story's components" as I find this kind of participation from an audience's imagination particularly rewarding. Also, I'm glad that we didn't simply stay with the masks we had and that we re-engaged with the design process, since the redesigned masks went on to be nominated for a Fleur du Cap Award in 2010.

6.10. *Womb Tide* (2010)

As with our other productions, *Womb Tide* had a number of iterations before it settled in the version that is captured here.

The kernel for the show happened in 2009 when Baxter Theatre CEO, Lara Foot, watched a performance of *Pictures of You*. The tea-making ceremony in the show reminded her of a scene in her own *Womb Tide* (1995),[151] and she engaged us in a conversation to take on her script and stage a production of it in 2010. This was important for a number of reasons. Firstly, 2010 was probably the high tide of Visual Theatre in South Africa – Janni Younge had been announced as the Standard Bank Young Artist of the Year at NAF and was about to unleash *Oroborus* as her flagship production. *Pictures of You* had won Best Lighting Design and Best Mask Design at the Fleur du Cap Theatre Awards (where *QUACK!* was also nominated). *Pictures* had also been the top-selling show at NAF in 2009 and had a bona fide mainstream success at the Baxter Theatre in 2009 and 2010. The 2010 iteration of NAF also saw the inaugural launch of the Arena Platform – between

[151] It also has a curious resonance to Sylvaine Strike's *Pregnant Pause*, which I only saw in 2010 at the Hilton Arts Festival.

the Fringe and the Main Programme, which saw up and coming Fringe artists afforded more support to stage their work. *Womb Tide* was one of the first to be given this privilege.

While all the above was excellent, there were a few other reasons that made *Womb Tide* so special: I had been nominated, as one of 25 international candidates, for the prestigious Rolex Mentor and Protégé Arts Initiative, and had the pleasure of being mentored by Lara Foot for the year. But perhaps more importantly, for the first (and what was also to be the only time), FTH:K had a text to play with.

I never saw the original *Womb Tide*, although we had shared an NAF Fringe space in 1995. At that time, I still remember that we would move in with our show to find the technicians still trying to dry the stage (there was a rain scene in the original), and the Gymnasium venue hot from having crammed so many people in for the show. Leila Henriques, who starred in the original, and myself still chuckle about the stressful situation we were in back then.

In 2010, we found ourselves with a script in our hands, about to commit the worst crime a dramatic writer could imagine – remake the show without any of the dialogue.

Figure 40: Lysander Barends (as Kid) in the background and Liezl de Kock (as Ma) in an early publicity shot. Pic by Sam Reindeers, 2010.

This was something of a blessing and a curse – for once, we knew where we were going, but the already having a complete story would also be an impediment for our usual process of devising a show. Initially, the show was not going to be a work of Visual Theatre at all. We considered a more "straight" drama with Liezl de Kock and Daniel Buckland confirmed as Mom and Dad, and with Lysander Barends as the (deaf) Kid. (See Figure 47.)

However, our relationship with Barends was breaking down, and about to implode. The long and short of it was our designer, Craig Leo, suggesting we put a puppet in place of Barends as the Kid. This was a brilliant, bold, and completely crazy insane idea.

I still blame Craig.

But what a great idea!

The whole show turned on this idea – as the Kid, now a puppet, was only introduced mid-way through the play. Everything changed. In its initial outing, the first part of the show was largely praised as a terrific Visual Theatre offering, while the second half lagged, once The Kid had been introduced. As director, I take on board all the criticism for the second half of the show. And to be fair, it wasn't awful – it's just that puppetry was so new to us, that during the first iteration of the show, we made many mistakes that skewed the production in a way we could not properly control. However, we did work on it, and by the time it came for the Johannesburg season at the Market Theatre in September 2010, and then the Cape Town season at the Baxter Theatre in November 2010, we had managed to iron a lot of the bugs out. Much like the masks in *Pictures of You* and *QUACK!*, we learnt as we went forward, gradually adapting to the medium and discovering how it worked. Nevertheless, the show won Liezl a Best Performers' Nomination at that year's Fleur du Cap Theatre Awards, and also a *Sunday Times* Best Actress nomination in 2010.

6.11. Synopsis

The audience enters to find what is ostensibly the deconstruction of a suburban house. There is a wall built out of cardboard boxes with some wooden kitchen cupboards. A doorway is suggested, as well as a second-story window right at the top. There are a table and two chairs on stage, a wooden box stage right, and everything is styled in a 1970s sort of gauche – oranges and browns. Some of the cardboard boxes are covered in a tacky wallpaper that is echoed in the furniture, some of them are covered in pictures of eyes and faces. There is also a wooden swing, suspended from the ceiling to stage left. Two figures in overalls brandish clipboards, making an inventory of the space. These are recognised as "movers", but will also act as stage managers, and puppet manipulators, unseen by the cast, but present for the audience. Once the audience settles, and just before sliding into a blackout to signal the beginning of the show, the energy rises on stage – the movers overturn a table to reveal a mirror underneath it. A plastic duck is placed on this – and this will become the duck pond.

Figure 41: The Kid, with young mask on, at the window.

From the blackout, the first beats of the play smash into the upstairs window – the Kid (puppet) is revealed right away, and he is in an agitated state. (See Figure 48.) To the sound of a teeth-jarring drone, he flings open the window and looks around. While no context is yet given to his agitation, we see him pull a coin from his pocket and flipping it down onto the stage (manipulated by one of the movers).

Lights rise on the stage and we meet Ma at the duck pond – a place based on Emmarentia Dam in Johannesburg. Ma is dressed like a deranged Audrey Hepburn – somewhere between pyjamas and what she may call classy. She smokes a fag and discovers the coin on the ground – a lucky coin! She kisses it and pockets it for luck. She is here to feed the ducks.

Enter Da – in tie, jacket, and glasses, on his bicycle. He is also here for the ducks but is immediately smitten by this curious beautiful creature that is Ma. Awkward introductions are made.

The action then repeats itself with a few more meetings at the duck pond, interspersed by the Kid in the window – we are slowly being introduced to the story of Ma and Da meeting, through the eyes of the Kid, who each time is a bit more relaxed.

Theirs is an awkward and sometimes cringe-worthy romance. Ma now has the coin on a string around her neck. Da wears brighter and better ties each day. They feed the ducks. They skim rocks across the pond – Ma is much better at this than Da; but slowly they are falling in love.

Eventually a move is made, and she invites him for tea. As she hurriedly tidies up her house – stuffing bras and clothing into drawers, he circles the space on his bike, clinging on desperately to a bunch of flowers for her. It is the most awful, awkward date in the history of dating, and everything goes wrong – there is clowning business with jackets and flowers, spilt tea, rogue utensils, and the like, (still without a word being spoken). Ma despairs that she has ruined the date, but Da saves the day by pretending that a broken radio is working – they swap snippets of songs between channels, and eventually, *eventually*, cross the threshold into consummating their relationship. This happens with a very tender and passionate connection on the swing (Figure 49) – this earned us the notable pleasure of staging the "best *pomp* ever seen in theatre".[152]

Figure 42: Liezl de Kock as Ma and Daniel Buckland as Da, 2010. Unofficial winners of "best stage *pomp*" award.

Montage time! Ma and Da get engaged, get married, (the movers provide confetti), move in together, and begin their dance through life – they light each other's cigarettes, prepare for work, care for each other, and quite literally dance through the space; the box that has been lurking onstage splits open to reveal itself as green grass to lie on and cloud-gaze, a white picket fence, and so on; there is also a small model of a house with lights inside it that Ma brings out.

At the height of this, Ma starts feeling sick. She heaves and heaves and vomits up a balloon. Da comes back from work, and, tenderly, they both blow up the balloon, and insert it under Ma's dress to show that she is pregnant.

[152] *Pomp* is Afrikaans for the act of sex. I'm sure this is clear.

Things start to change – Da gets all protective and stops her smoking, while Ma, as a free spirit, revels in her newfound position. But something is not right – although the soundtrack is putting forward Judy Garland's "Get Happy", things are breaking down. Ma is not feeling great, and eventually pulls the balloon out from under her dress. Her and Da try desperately to keep it inflated, but it loses air, and eventually ends up a useless piece of rubber. The movers take it away from her and wrap it in a box, sealing it with masking tape – the ripping sound of the tape cuts through Ma, Da, and the audience.

In desperation, they try again. On the swing, also in the kitchen where Da tries to mix eggs to no avail.[153] Eggs are spilt onto the stage. The swing is a sterile object. Ma becomes depressed and distant.

Figure 43: Jayne Batzofin and Kim Kerfoot as the movers/ manipulators, and the Kid.

And this is where the show started to go sideways initially. The next beats of the show were that Da went to an orphanage and stole a kid – we gave him an ET bike ride in front of the moon and brought him back to save Ma's depression. This introduced the puppet on stage (Figure 50), and even though this took the play sideways into a new form, initially it didn't really work.

Why was this? I think my initial mistake was to cling too literally to the script, and so then tried to force the puppet Kid into all the narrative beats. He had to go to the drive-inn, he had to ask about babies, there was a complication about school. But despite this being important character development material, it just didn't *work* with a puppet. We spent so much time trying to get the Kid to ask things that a non-verbal creature just can't. Lara's script cut to the chase, but in a non-verbal situation it wasn't as simple. And basically, we had to devise a new way to get to a similar part of the show. This led to a very interesting conversation with Lara Foot where I was accused of (I'm paraphrasing) "pissing on her words"… I guess I was. But you can't *force* a performing object (mask or puppet) into an idea. You have to let it find its way into it.

But back to the narrative. With the Kid now on stage (as well as the two manipulators), the whole rhythm changed. Part of this was that in the original script the Kid as another actor is able to bring a burst of energy that thrusts Ma and Da's story forward; with the *puppet*, it did the same thing, but suddenly everything became a lot more … precious. Because we only had two manipulators, most of the second half of the show had to happen without the puppet's legs. This was due to the Japanese *bunraku* tradition the design and control of the puppet was following – usually, a company would have at least three people on the puppet – one on head and an arm, another on torso and arm, and the third on legs. We had to cut corners, because of the budget, and the complexity of – at such a late notice – designing and constructing a puppet with three manipulators. The design of

[153] Jayne, one of the mover manipulators, was a vegan at the time, and had to deal with raw eggs every night. I don't think she has ever forgiven me for this.

the Kid therefore included a way to detach his legs. The resulting image played its part in setting the second half of the show away from the first – not only did it affect the design elements to force us to create "playboards" or surfaces for the legless Kid to play on, but the times where he seemed to float though the air (which was inevitable), it created a dissonance in audiences' minds as to whether he was actually real or not; perhaps a figment of Ma and Da's overactive imagination? This gave an unexpected other meaning to the production. The Kid was always *meant* to be real, as per the original script; but taking the route we were forced to take, it further disrupted the narrative and possibly caused some of the ire at my having dismissed the dialogue.

Figure 44: Original Kid drawing by Craig Leo, 2010.

The original Kid was also quite … scary. Because the text dictates he has to age, we had to go with his older face from the beginning.

As you can see from Figure 45, the original Kid had so much experience and life in his design. This disrupted some of his initial scenes where he was meant to be a young boy of about six or seven. In the second iteration, we actually had to *mask* him with a younger face, as seen in Figure 48 above and Figure 51. His "real" face was then only revealed at the end when he returned to Ma and Da.

Due to the lateness of the decision to work with the Kid as a puppet, it also presented a challenge for the company as it would take more than a few weeks to design and build. But we had to rehearse! Fortunately, Basil Jones and Adrian Kohler of Handspring Puppet Company came to our rescue, and it turned out there was a puppet that had been "retired" from *War Horse* that we could use. This was Emily. (See Figure 46.) I believe she was originally too scary for *War Horse*, so had been cut from the show. So, we made *Womb Tide* with her instead of the Kid, and Craig Leo and Cristina Salvoldi based all the Kid's controls, weight, and feel on her so we could swap her out when necessary.

Figure 45: The original Kid with Da and Ma.

Without Emily, we would never have been able to make *Womb Tide* in time for its premiere at NAF 2010. As we had discovered numerous times by now, one just simply cannot imagine what the mask or puppet is going to do, or how it will respond to situations if one does not have it to rehearse with. Although Emily wasn't the Kid, she was close enough, and allowed our manipulators the chance to work with the controls. I think the original Kid's face also took a lot of inspiration from Emily, which no doubt also led to him feeling a bit scary.

Following the events of the text, however, the family goes through a session of memories of the Kid – his birthday, flying a kite, going to the drive-in (Figure 54 – where Ma and Da hide him to get in cheaper), first days at school (where Ma is an embarrassing presence), interactions with neighbours, him asking about his "adoption" and where he came from, and so on. This is where we had to break away from the script – originally, we tried to follow it as mentioned above; however, performing objects (puppets or masks) don't listen very well to direction – they need their own way to figure out action and emotion. (See Figures 54 and 55.) Consequently, the first version of *Womb Tide* was quite literally tied to the text, as we attempted to force the Kid to respond to narrative situations. Reworking it, we allowed the puppet to respond to external influences and actions, which led to much more of a re-devising of the show. (Which probably got me into more trouble with the writer.)

Figure 46: Emily in *War Horse*, the National Theatre, London, 2008. She is here with (left to right) Alice Barclay and Mervyn Millar.

Figure 47: The family at the drive-in.

Figure 48: Return to the duck pond.

As the Kid grows up and experiences more and more of life, he also starts to notice that Ma is not "physically" sick … but wound up very tightly. And Da is always trying to defuse situations and calm her down. As mentioned earlier, the original version of *Womb Tide* (and FTH: K's) was seeing life through the child's eyes; in 2018, Lara Foot introduced the production *The Inconvenience of Wings* to the public. When I watched this play about a woman suffering from bipolar disorder, at the Baxter Theatre, I couldn't help but comment: "but this is *Womb Tide*!" And yes – the 2018 version is seen more through adult eyes and addresses a mental illness that the child (in *Womb Tide*) wouldn't be aware of.

So, Da gets more and more stressed out about Ma deteriorating and losing her shit with neighbours and people she encounters in life. There is also the matter of the "big lie", and though Da is a superhero in the eyes of the Kid and Ma, it cannot keep going forever. Then, of course, the law catches up with Ma and Da. The Kid is forcibly removed from them and thrust into a holding cell where we first encountered him at the beginning of the show. While in there he contemplates his parents.

This is where the fragility of the puppet played into our hands. There had already been the sense of things on the brink of malfunction. Gerhard Marx, (in Taylor, 2007: 240), writes eloquently about the malfunction of the object as a puppet directive.:

> The puppet is a tool, but it functions as a dysfunctional tool. The puppet is sculpted, and yet it is not only a sculptural object. It is a strange conglomerate of the physical, sculptural, object-world and its more fluid and ethereal counterpart of performance and ever-changing gesture. The puppet is initially formed through sculptural techniques, but once it enters into performance it is constantly re-formed by its changing semiotic and gestural context, and so its form arguably never actually settles. Whereas the gestural, expressively carved lines and the sometimes splintered and worn edges (also the evocative marks of reparation; the constant, productive threat of dysfunction in this tool) on their puppets act as visible evidence of the fact that the puppet is a visual, sculptural construction with an implied biography, the mechanisms within Handspring's puppets are also not hidden. Often the skin of the puppet is transparent, even torn or ruptured to reveal the puppet's interior mechanism, to show how the illusion functions, providing a poignant reminder of the puppet's 'contructedness'. A common-sense assumption is that the puppet-makers would do all in their ability to hide the construction of the puppet in order to give the puppet the illusion of independence of movement and thus to sustain the illusion of the puppet having come to life. But Handspring reminds us in every aspect of the puppet's making, that the puppet is constructed and, by implication, that the puppet as an autonomous being is a fictional construct.

This has many implications and detractions. Handspring puppets have uniquely fused sculptural craft with exposed artifice - the visual evidence of their manual assembly subverts illusions of independent vitality, presenting the puppet as a self-declared artificial construct, its functionality precarious and perpetually reinvented through performance. And yet, through their relationship with the performer, they create a dissonance that disrupts the audience. And this again pushes the audience into their role as the third part of the trialogue – they make the meaning. As with the mask, this is so important.

This was pushed to the maximum extent because as we were building the puppet, we worked with "Emily" from the *War Horse* original production to create the Kid, before we had him. And then, the structure of the show became the Kid having no legs initially. He "floated" around, and only found his legs later, at the end of the show. Which matched the narrative.

Without the Kid, Ma and Da's relationship starts deteriorating. Their rituals start missing each other. They age (each actor rubbing powder through the other's hair to indicate the passing of time[154]). They sit on the swing, but what was previously a potent symbol of sexuality and fertility is now barren and cold.

[154] A version of which we reused in 2013's *Crazy in Love*.

Da eventually has had enough; he packs his suitcase and prepares to leave. But as he attempts to do so, the Kid returns as a grown man. He enters the house, literally on his own legs (they have been attached and manipulated). He's wearing grown-up clothing, and brings Ma and Da together for a final embrace. Their togetherness is symbolised by a balloon he has brought with him – he releases it and it floats up to the ceiling as the audience celebrates their intimacy. (Figure 56.) And we fade to black with Sha Nana's "Good Night, Sweetheart".

Figure 49: Ending of *Womb Tide*, 2010.

All of this would have been suffused with enough emotion already (and just writing this is already reminding me of the personal affect this show had on me); however, the mechanics and manipulation of the puppet, as well as the lighting, sound, and pacing, heightened everything. This was another unexpected gift – although this is what the script dictated, what we worked out with the performing objects really elevated the show to an emotional level we hadn't considered possible.

Although they didn't use puppets, no wonder the Gymnasium stage in 1995 had been so wet and warm.

6.12. Critical Reception

For the final version of the show, the press were effusive in their praise: Daphne Cooper wrote:

> It is remarkable how moving a play can be when there is no dialogue. *Womb Tide* touches in deep places because the various elements of the play are so considered and work together so well. Lara

Foot wrote the script – a simple story of loss and redemption. The simplicity of script (stripped of all dialogue) is beautifully handled by Daniel Buckland and Liezl de Kock – such an expressive range of feelings from the very funny first fumblings of their relationship to heartbreaking and tender scenes. Of course, no FTHK production would be without a puppet: the *Womb Tide* puppet is made by Cristina Salvoldi, brought to life by Emilie Starke and Kim Kerfoot, becoming an integral part of the action. The set, by Craig Leo, cleverly evokes the era of "sunny skies and Chevrolet" by using piled-up cardboard boxes and the swing is used to fabulous and varied effect. (The mobile in the Baxter foyer is wonderful and is especially meaningful after the show, when we recognised the various props.)

The sound, by James Webb and Brydon Bolton, is evocative and effective – in some places a metronomic tick tock makes us all too aware of time passing; the radio springing to life in a happy song underlining the contrasting feelings of the action – without words, one is far more aware of sound.

Rob Murray directs and brings the various elements of this show into a deeply moving production. (Cooper, 2010).

Chris Thurman adds:

The company has a three-fold mission: communicate, educate, fascinate. *Khuluma kahle* is is iZulu for "speak well" – and FTH:K's aim is to facilitate communication, both between and within deaf and hearing participants. They do this by fascinating their audiences, not just through visual pageantry but by telling enthralling stories involving enigmatic characters. The educational imperative is manifested in various projects. Tell-Tale Signs, a programme piloted at the Dominican School for the Deaf in Cape Town, has since been introduced elsewhere in the Western Cape province, notably at Noluthando School for the Deaf in the Cape Flats township of Khayelitsha and within the deaf community of Worcester, and further across the country. Current company members such as Marlon Snyders, Tomri Steyn and Christo Beukes gained their first theatre experience through the Tell-Tale Signs course. In addition to promoting literacy, theatre making and project management skills amongst deaf learners, FTH:K has also teamed up with sign language education and development organisation SLED. All hearing company members learn South African sign language. Amongst avid theatre-goers in Cape Town and at the annual National Arts Festival in Grahamstown, FTH:K has become known for its careful stage-craft and polished physical performance, paying acute attention to the nuances of gesture, mime and other forms of non-verbal communication, along with the inventive use of puppetry, masks and props. The company's work to date has exhibited a range of narrative material, genre and tone, from endearing comedy to disturbing gothic visions. *Pictures of You* is a meditation on marriage, probing beneath the mundane surface of a quiet domestic life to expose the repressed jealousies, deceits and dreams that accumulate over the course of a life spent together. *Gumbo* is a love story of a different kind, one in which a young couple are brought together under unlikely and unhappy circumstances and make a daring escape. *Quack!* Explores the dark heart of human ambition and the ways in which charismatic individuals can exploit their dominance over others – showing that modern-day doctors, scientists and politicians can also potentially fill the archetypal roles of quack healer, despot and alchemist. FTH:K's latest production *Womb Tide* differs from these earlier shows as it is based on an existing script by playwright Lara Foot. When Womb Tide was first performed in 1996, it told the tale of an unconventional romance and a complicated family in a dysfunctional society set in South Africa in the mid- to late-twentieth century, through measured dialogue. The play has retained its memorable characters and setting but is now a predominantly visual piece of theatre starring Liezl de Kock – who appeared in *Pictures of You*, *Gumbo* and *Quack*! – and Daniel Buckland,

> fresh from a stint with Cirque du Soleil in Las Vegas. Buckland is the son of local theatre veteran Andrew Buckland. Although advised to "listen with your eyes", hearing audience members are able to enjoy a rich and evocative soundtrack designed by James Webb, who has produced haunting soundscapes for previous FTH:K works. The company has established numerous partnerships with South African artists such as Janni Younge, winner of the 2010 Standard Bank Young Artist Award for theatre, who produced masks and puppets for *Quack!* And *Pictures of You*. (Thurman, 2010)

The mention of the soundtrack is especially a great nod – all of our shows featured a stellar soundtrack – for these featured works, James Webb and Brydon Bolton were front and foremost with this. I know this belies the fact that the Deaf maybe can't "hear" the soundtrack, but that is inaccurate, as I have said before. If our shows were "silent" in terms of no dialogue, the same cannot be said for the sound designs which were carefully calibrated.

Denill (2010) writes about the Johannesburg season:

> The result – though probably hugely stressful for the actors – was a treat for Deaf and hearing theatre fans. As an interesting aside, the former far outnumbered the latter, which made for an oddly quiet, though full, Market Theatre lobby.
>
> Both productions are physical theatre pieces, where the expressiveness of the performers' bodies and faces stand in, much of the time, for dialogue.
>
> In this regard, *Quack*! Is the more challenging of the two, as the entire thing is performed with the cast wearing masks. Watching the show becomes a unique experience for each individual audience member. Each will interpret the action in a different way, and each will later summarise the plot in a different way. What is clear is that a dying man (there's a lovely, cheeky reference to the hospital strike early on) is having visions in which he operates as a sort of shaman, followed by a number of dubious acolytes. He is ill in the visions, too, though, and uses his powers of persuasion and the fear he instils in others to harvest from them their strength. Eventually, his experiments in this regard lead to the creation of a little being he then uses as a resource for the strength he lacks. And ultimately, none of this is enough. It's dark, edgy stuff, and given that interpretation plays a large role for audiences, it can be anything from a fable warning of the abuse of power to a murder thriller. And more than one viewer mentioned afterwards that they thought they'd seen the masks – wonderful creations by Janni Younge and Jayne Batzofin – move. Eek!
>
> *Womb Tide* is more conventional in its approach, being the variously hilarious and cripplingly sad tale of a couple who meet, marry, lose a child, gain a child, and muddle through everything in between. Daniel Buckland and Liezl de Kock are superb in lead roles, while the child is played by a puppet. The humans make occasional sounds, but only to emphasise movements, and the whirlwind of energy that blows through the show and the performances not only lifts and carries the audience, but leaves the stage looking like an accident scene. You will laugh – sex scene on a swing, anyone? – and you might cry. And when you leave, you'll realise that nobody said anything, and yet you are deeply moved.

And Peter Tromp adds:

> 'Womb Tide' is like a glass of wonderfully matured, 12-year-old whiskey: rich and complex, yet featuring a zesty, iridescent undertone to balance out the heavier elements. All of its components are almost perfectly integrated, resulting in one of this year's best productions.

> As a theatre company that is greater than the sum of its parts, FTH:K (From The Hip: Khulumakhale) has delivered a real team effort of a play that must have featured the hand of almost every one of its members, yet it is also a great accomplishment for director Rob Murray. It is a totally immersive and sensory enveloping triumph, the company's best ever work and it fulfils the promise that FTH:K has hinted at so far but not quite fulfilled. (Trump, 2010).

I *love* this kind of comment. It really interacts with what I am playing with on stage, and starts a dialogue with that. What I deal with performers is always a conversation, or discussion, with what is suggested – scripted or not. I am more adept at dealing with this all on a devised level, but if I am working with a text, then that also takes its place.

6.13. *Benchmarks* (2011)

In 2011, I was in the middle of divorce proceedings. My arm was also in a sling as I had broken my collarbone a few weeks earlier. We were devising and rehearsing *Benchmarks* at Theatre in the District (a venue in District Six then run by Tara's parents – Brian and Trish Notcutt[155]).

As with our other shows, there were two iterations of *Benchmarks* – one which premiered at NAF in July, and then a slightly different version where we had to recast one of the characters due to a very unfortunate car accident and played at Out the Box Festival in September. *Benchmarks* was FTH:K/Conspiracy of Clowns' biggest smallest show. Smallest because it was based on such a simple idea – three strangers meeting up in Cape Town – and biggest because it was our debut on the Main Programme at NAF. In a few years, we had progressed from being a "sleeper hit" on the NAF Fringe (2008), to top-selling show on the Fringe (2009), to the Arena Programme (2010), and now we were going to be on the Main Festival.[156]

Benchmarks was born from a visual that stuck with me from a few years previously. In 2008, South Africa experienced one of its worst waves of xenophobic violence in history, and a particular photograph from that era stayed with me. It became known as "The Burning Man" and depicted a man set on fire, captured by a 360-degree series of pictures. The pictures caused a sensation not only in documenting the horror of the incident[157] but also because they showed that nobody tried to help the poor man. This image stuck with me, and I didn't know what to do with it for a number of years.

Then, in late 2010, there was a ring at my gate in Observatory, Cape Town. There was Gideon, a Zimbabwean immigrant, whose shack had been burnt down recently in Khayelitsha,.[158] He was selling carved sticks he's made, looking for any sort of work to make money to restart his family's life. Being a Zimbabwean myself, we got talking, and I gave him as much work as I could over the next few years. His humility and astonishment broke me – here he was, an immigrant who had been subject to huge violence and trauma, being helped out by a fellow countryman, now a South African. As a white, privileged, South African, Gideon's story still had a profound effect on my

[155] This was the original space for Community Arts Project (CAP), where I had taught at in my first year in Cape Town, before it merged with Mediaworks and moved to the Sachs Futeron building in Harrington Street – later the venue that became the Fugard Theatre.
[156] This initiativeby the NAF, was an excellent one – the year-on-year growth meant we never got ahead of ourselves, and were prepared for the exposure that being commissioned for the Main Festival afforded us. It also ensured that we built an audience for ourselves, Visual and Mask Theatre, and the NAF itself.
[157] It reminded me pf Kevin Carter's picture, during his days with "The Bang-Bang Club".
[158] A township just outside Cape Town.

life even though I no longer live in Cape Town. His story stuck in my mind and I wanted desperately to say something about it.

So, the image of the Burning Man, and Gideon's story, were uppermost in my head as the genesis of *Benchmarks* was starting to coalesce. I had also become obsessed with literal benches in Cape Town – on the sea-front promenade, or on one of the hills looking down over the city. These benches had also been so prominent in the apartheid era, labelled as being for "Whites Only/Blankes Alleen". Looking at these benches around Cape Town, I became fascinated with the way that the wooden slats on concrete supports of the South African design had been shaped and worn down by people sitting on them for decades.

In 2006, I made a student work with CitiVarsity, called *dumbshow (a teacup in a storm)*, that looked at a building in Cape Town where the inhabitants slowly found out about each other. One of the central scenes developed into a black woman and white man connecting and breaking down their racial stereotypes about each other on a bench. This narrative impulse returned and became one of the key moments in *Benchmarks*, where two characters fight for possession of a bench in Cape Town.

6.14. Synopsis

The show tells the story of three strangers finding their way together in Cape Town. As the audience files in, they are confronted with the image of two wardrobes, around three metres tall – one a fairly drab, grey-painted one, the other a much more ornate wooden one. These are set stage left and right of each other. In the centre of the stage, there is a floor-cloth that suggests an island of sorts, and right in the middle is a park bench. The opening soundscape is a deceptively peaceful one – there are park sounds of birds chirping and the like.[159] Hidden in this is a mix of Simon and Garfunkel's "Old Friends" and "Bookends":

> Old friends, old friends
> Sat on their park bench like bookends
> A newspaper blown through the grass
> Falls on the round toes
> Of the high shoes of the old friends
>
> Time it was
> And what a time it was, it was
> A time of innocence
> A time of confidences
>
> Long ago it must be
> I have a photograph

[159] James Webb, or Jacques Toil as he chose his *nom de plume* for this show's credits, is known for recording bird sounds from foreign countries and then playing them in local situations. For example, he had previously recorded Japanese bird sounds, and played them in speakers hidden in trees in Joubert Park, close to the Johannesburg Art Gallery (JAG), or around Makhanda at the NAF.

Preserve your memories
They're all that's left you.[160]

Figure 50: The *tsotsis* in rehearsal, 2011.

When the lights rise, the audience is given the shadow image of Table Mountain on the backdrop cyclorama, very clearly placing us in Cape Town. Two *tsotsi* characters appear in the murkiness. These are faceless characters, dressed in hoodies, with long insect-like fingers; however, although faceless, they exude menace and danger. (See Figure 57.) Given the full range of the stage, they check out the wardrobes and bench, until finally are encountered by, and chased off, by a cartoonesque police officer.

The drab wardrobe door creaks open, to reveal Rodney. Rodney is a mild-mannered clerk who works in Home Affairs and is tortured by fantasies of the secretaries he works with. The wardrobe is both his home and office. (See Figure 58.)

Figure 51: Rodney, in his office. Pic by Amber Stodel, 2011.

Figure 52: Maureen, alone in her house, with many ghosts. Pic by Amber Stodel ,2011.

He is an amateur photographer and is infatuated with Maureen, a faded (and jaded) ex-film star who lives nearby, housed in a more ornate wardrobe. (See Figure 59.) She is something of an alcoholic, surviving on gin and memories of a better time, which included her now deceased husband, a former heartthrob whom she dances with in an alcoholic fog.

[160] Both songs written by Paul Simon, from the *Bookends* album, 1968, released by Columbia Records. They were initially placed, and morphed into each other, on the B-side of the "Mrs. Robinson" single, issued on April 5, 1968, by Columbia Records.

Rodney and Maureen are destined never to meet, were it not for Hope, a young Zimbabwean refugee, who has recently moved to the country in search of a better life. We follow parts of her life in the journey down to South Africa – the hopeful bus trip, her interaction with border guards who, wearing the same masks as the South African police, are cartoonesque and corrupt. (See Figure 60.)

Figure 53: Hope is accosted by the border guards at the Zimbabwe/South Africa crossing at Beit Bridge. Pic by Amber Stodel, 2011.

Through her interaction with Rodney in the need for a work visa, she disrupts his life – his is a life of order and complacency; every day he has his packed lunch on a park bench where he observes the birds and dreams. On this one particular day, Hope, at a loss for what to do, sits on the same bench. (See Figure 61.) This incites a bench war that, although it is initially confrontational, breaks the silence between them. They become friends. She learns of his infatuation with Maureen and initiates a meeting between the two of them.

The three become friends and explore the city together. (See Figure 62.) Through montages, they take the cable car up Table Mountain and engage with various other Cape Town scenarios. At the same time, Rodney and Maureen are helping Hope as she slowly puts a life together – eventually builds a house for herself.

Figure 54: Hope occupies Rodney's bench. Pic by Amber Stodel, 2011.

However. Against the backdrop of all this, there has been the persistent presence of a number of *tsotsis*[161] and authority figures who try to control them. So, at the highpoint of the play, Rodney and Maureen are overjoyed to have helped Hope build her house. She closes the curtains, a light illuminates a model of the house and a happy pastoral scene fades to black.

Figure 55: Getting to know you – Hope, Maureen, and Rodney explore Cape Town. Pic by Amber Stodel, 2011.

And then the *tsotsis* sneak up on the Hope's house. They douse it in petrol and set it alight, trapping her inside.

Things go sideways in a hurry. Maureen can't deal with the events that have happened – she is traumatised by the violence, has a heart attack, and dies. Rodney careens into her hospital room but is too late.

Figure 56: Rodney comforts the disfigured Hope at the end of *Benchmarks*. Pic by Amber Stodel, 2011.

The play ends with the last time Rodney and Hope meet. She is scarred and disfigured by the fire, and he is a broken man. She is leaving South Africa – returning to Zimbabwe, rejected by the locals. He doesn't know what to do. In desperation, he has withdrawn as much money as he can from an ATM, and he gives it to her. It is cold comfort.

However, as they sit on the bench the last time, they experience a final moment of togetherness and friendship. As the lights fade, and the music swells, the audience is left with a tiny moment of hope for the future. (See Figure 63.)

6.15. Critical Reception

As I said, this was the smallest and largest story we have told to date. Previous works dealt with decades of a relationship and guilt, or parallel universes and abuse of power, or the theft of a child to solve a childless marriage: this was simply three people coming together, and then a violence they couldn't control pulling them apart.

If, with *Pictures of You*, we didn't really know what we were doing and so threw everything at the theatrical wall to see what stuck, *Benchmarks* was a deeply considered and more sophisticated work. I suppose it was ironic that it was a much simpler story. Unusually, , there was a much more heated and divided response to it.

Steve Kretzman writes:

[161] SA slang for "gangster" or "trouble-maker"; or: kak-stirrer".

Despite FTH:K's track record, Murray is adamant that the company's name is not something to trade on. "We (the creators) should disappear and the show stands or falls on its own merit." (Kretzman, 2011).

Rob Murray, who is artistic director and founding member of FTH:K, is not in the habit of making things easy for himself.

Theatre is, in essence, about telling a story. But FTH:K's raison d'être is to –"integrate the deaf into the performing arts world in South Africa".

Despite the challenges*, Pictures of You* won the 2010 Standard Bank – ovation award and the Afro-Gothic *Quack*! and *Wombtide* have also received critical acclaim.

The five-year-old company's hard work has paid off. Having showcased their work at the Festival's gruelling Fringe since 2005, they are on the Main – programme this year and will debut with *Benchmarks*.

Although *Benchmarks* currently exists only as a page on the festival's – programme, it is a page to be bookmarked.

"*Benchmarks* is so new it hasn't been made yet," says Murray calmly, four weeks before the premiere.

But that doesn't mean he is – frantically cobbling together a play. On the contrary, all is going according to plan.

Murray's approach is "organic", with the crew and the cast – Liezl de Kock, Daniel Robinson and Thumeka Mzayiya – all providing critical input – assimilated and directed by Murray.

"It's not just my vision, although it becomes more so as the show – crystallises. But we keep it as open as possible for as long as possible, creating new ideas as we develop."

Murray's inspiration is the nameless, – faceless crowd, the alienation and dehumanisation.

The show continues Murray's desire to master masked theatre, especially in light of FTH:K's focus on non-verbal dialogue.

It is a demanding task. Rather than being something the performers can hide behind, they paradoxically make them more vulnerable by placing an – exacting reliance on the body, and the space around it, to tell the story.

There is no text to mask a lapse in concentration.

Christina Kennedy adds:

Much as it pains a Joburger to admit it, it's clear that the most interesting and cutting- edge theatre work is coming out of Cape Town if the shows at the National Arts Festival were anything to go by. Sure, the country's other centres had some exceptional works on offer – Durbanite Neil Coppen's *Abnormal Load*, for example, showed exactly why this visionary young talent was awarded the Standard Bank Young Artist Award for drama; and fellow Last Outposters Clare Mortimer and Darren King were also on top form. And there were flashes of brilliance from Joburgers Sylvaine Strike (*The Table*) and Alan Swerdlow (*The History Boys*), as well as James Cairns and Taryn Bennett (Cairns won a silver Ovation Award for his original play *Sie Weiss Alles*) and others. But it is the Capetonians that are really taking the theatre baton and racing away with it .

> The place to be was the Princess Alice Hall, where the Cape Town Edge set up residence with a varied basket of shows. Usually used as a girl guides' meeting place, during the festival the hall is transformed into a cosy hub where theatrical magic is made — and tons of brownie points are scored for the future of theatre.
>
> Previously, this Fringe venue has hosted Capetonian clowning and visual theatre company From the Hip: Khulumakhale (FTH:K), which this year graduated onto the Main and Arena programmes with its inventive shows *Benchmarks* and *Kardiãvale*. Furthermore, Peter Hayes, Jaqueline Dommisse and their Hearts & Eyes Theatre Collective moved on to the Main programme and reinvented children's theatre with the exquisitely moving puppetry production, *Sadako*.

This is some high praise from Kennedy, as what we had been working towards with Cape Town Edge over the past five years or so, with Dommisse and Hayes' company, was establishing a Cape Town presence at NAF.

But back to *Benchmarks*, which at the time was winning over new critics and audiences due to its feature on the Main Festival at the NAF. Bruce Dennill (2011) writes:

> The new Conspiracy Of Clowns (in association with FTHK) piece, *Benchmarks*, utilises masks to both hide and reveal minutia in the characters represented.
>
> The endless changes of expression generated by the average human face are replaced by one single look, but the excellent actors, by using subtle changes in posture in collaboration with a driving, nuanced soundtrack, make that one fixed perspective say a myriad different things.
>
> The three central characters here are all lonely outsiders.
>
> One is a shy Home Affairs clerk, whose only escape from his grey cubicle is via his imagination (booty-shaking dancing girls – hilarious) and clippings of a celebrity he loves from afar.
>
> Another is a widow, confined to her musty room – both this and the office are brilliantly conceived and constructed fold-out sets by Craig Leo – and dreaming of her long-lost husband.
>
> The third is a young Zimbabwean refugee – a wonderful performance by Thumeka Mzaylya – whose arrival is a breath of fresh air into the lives of the other two characters, as well as reason for considerable concern as the plot unfolds.
>
> There are moments of sparkling levity – they have the same sort of audience impact as those unfeasibly cheerful set pieces in screen musicals – but, as in most productions in which Murray is involved, there is also plenty of room for darkness, from the macabre to the just plain scary.
>
> That the latter is effectively tied to news headlines – refugees remain persona non grata in many countries around the world – really shoves the play's themes under your skin, where they're likely to lie and fester for a while.
>
> The four actors involved – costume designer/stage manager dives in where extra manpower is needed – get an enormous amount done in the 70-odd minutes that the play lasts, changing costumes to play tsotsis, policemen, nurses and licentious office staff between driving the main plot forward.
>
> *Benchmarks* maintains the quality level for which the companies involved have become known, setting standards in terms of matching imagination and a capacity to inspire thoughtfulness in audiences.

This first public performance of the show received a standing ovation. It won't be the last.

But then came the backlash. Percy Zvomuya (2011) writes:

> The theatre crowd at the National Arts Festival in Grahamstown is rather demanding, usually reluctant to stand up to applaud actors off the stage. I was, therefore, surprised when more than half of those in the audience stood up to "big up" the actors in Rob Murray's production called *Benchmarks*.
>
> It's not that the play had bad acting, in fact the masked actors in the production (Liezl de Kock , Daniel Robinson and Thumeka Mzaziya) were amazing. It's the way the theme of xenophobia is tackled –- an unsophisticated and paternalistic approach to this scourge.
>
> The fact is xenophobia will continue to afflict us until poor black people learn to live together. A kind white person will help (indeed many white people have reached out to immigrants), but as the black person has to return to the township, the informal settlement, an ending of the play that doesn't factor in this dynamic will always present problems.
>
> **Tension and alienation**
>
> The central prop of *Benchmarks*, a play in which not one word passes through the lips of the masked characters, is a bench, placed right in the middle of the stage. On this bench all kinds of people meet: an aging bureaucrat, tsotsi types and cops. There is a suggestion of danger and tension, suggested by the distorted soundscapes and creepy figures with black spider tentacles.
>
> The old official from Home Affairs (his mask suggests he is white) wants the bench all to himself. He initially attempts to keep the woman (a black Zimbabwean widow) from the bench, but over time the two realise that they are all humans.
>
> A subplot to this bench drama is an aging woman housed in a small, claustrophobic space, who spends her days soaked in an alcoholic reverie.
>
> There is a lot to like about this play, the superb acting, the masks, created by Cristina Savoldi, that accentuated rather diminished the humanity of the characters; the bizarre, maddening soundscapes conjured by Brydon Bolton and Jacques Toile.
>
> **Transformative spectacle**
>
> This brings me back to the question I posed at the beginning of this review: why the standing ovation? Perhaps it was because, despite its flaws, *Benchmarks* is interesting for its innovative approach to issues, its bewitching brew of silence and noise, its portrayal of humanity that shines through the masks and the transformative spectacle of seeing human beings reaching out to their neighbors.
>
> It reminds me of the question: "who is my neighbor?" posed by the law expert when he met Jesus Christ in the gospel of Luke. In attempting to answer the question, Jesus told them of the parable of the Good Samaritan, an eternal tale about human beings recognising that nationality is a rather convenient, political creation; that a different passport, race and sex can never mask the fact that everybody is my neighbor.

Following on this, he wrote a few days later:

> **Refusing to accept responsibility**

> I am sure some elements in Zanu-PF think of Britain's role in Zimbabwe as that of the parent who refuses to accept responsibility. If we follow this thinking to its logical end, the millions of Zimbabwean exiles strewn across the globe (including in unlikely places such as Afghanistan) are the bastards of this union. Rob Murray's *Benchmarks* (and *Is It Because I'm Jack?*, a comedy written by Mike van Graan) dealt with the figure of the Zimbabwean.
>
> *Benchmarks*, which is set on a bench, features three actors in masks (Liezl de Kock, Daniel Robinson and Thumeka Mzaziya). Each initially remains secluded in his or her own ghetto, but by the end of the play they are reaching out to their neighbours. Welded into this human drama is the theme of xenophobia. Mzaziya, playing the character of a Zimbabwean widow, is set on fire by marauding mobs and is then befriended by a kind government bureaucrat (whose mask suggests he is white).
>
> In a longer review I wrote about the production I quibbled about the way the play dealt with xenophobia. I argued that the scourge of xenophobia will continue to haunt us until poor black folk learn to live together. A kind white person may give help (indeed many white people have reached out to immigrants), but the black person has to return to the township and the informal settlement. A conclusion that doesn't consider this, I think, presents problems. (Zvomuya, 2011b).

Niren Tolsi (Tosli, 2011) chimes in:

> Earlier in the day Rob Murray's *Benchmarks* at Graeme College was a simple, beautifully human story about relationships –- that of a young Zimbabwean women and the shy home affairs clerk and reclusive widow she brings together.
>
> The piece is set around the time of the xenophobic riots in South Africa two years ago and it is also where the treatment suffers its biggest flaw.
>
> As pointed out by fellow *M&G* reviewer Percy Zvumoya, the "white paternalism" inherent in the piece – when the Zimbabwean is helped by two white South Africans after the attacks was inherently problematic.
>
> This is especially true since the piece did not acknowledge the fact that not all poor black South Africans are necessarily xenophobic –- a prime example being the good work social movements such as the Western Cape Anti-Eviction Campaign did around the time of the attacks to educate people against hatred of the perceived other –- and at times –- mobilising communities to defend Somalis in Cape Town.
>
> It is a flaw. But, *Benchmarks* remains a wonderfully simple story. The actors all use expressively on-point masks made by Cristina Salvoldi and the acting is first rate.

This is what I love about feedback to a non-verbal work. It allows the audience to have very mixed feelings about what is presented, and to respond in their very unique context. If audience members, or critics, have a personal connection to issues like xenophobia, then this will come out.

Yes, the action of Rodney offering Hope money at the end is definitely paternal and what a white man might do in the circumstance. This is also emblematic of what I did with Gideon and others in my life – what else can we do? I don't believe drama, non-verbal or any way, has to *solve* issues like this. Sometimes it is enough to just stage them.

Some of this response was to be expected. As a company, we had risen up the ranks to the Main Programme, which attracts a bigger critical reception. That being as it may, we were a bit taken

aback by the reaction to the work. Yes, xenophobia is one of those touchstone/hot potato issues in South Africa that one has to be careful (or really considerate) about representing.

This is how we did it: *Benchmarks* had set up the narrative construct, and Hope had finally built her "home" on the park bench; this included the literal building of a model of a shack on the bench, including curtains she closed. When the *tsotsis* attack her, they destroy this model, use a jerry-can to suggest pouring petrol over it all, then light a piece of "flash"-paper.[162] Immediately after this, a police official enters and sprays a carbon dioxide fire extinguisher everywhere. The effect on stage creates a cloud of "smoke", conveniently covering the need for actors to scramble off and change marks or costumes. The officer then connects with the audience, as if to say: "why didn't you do anything? You just *watched*??"

What plays out next, in a number of fast-paced scenes, reveal the characters' response to the events. Hope returns on stage in a version of her mask that has been burned and totally disfigured. Maureen, as a representative of an older generation in South Africa, cannot deal with this, and eventually has a heart attack that kills her. Rodney arrives with flowers too late at her hospital bed. Her wardrobe is closed with the ceremony of a funeral – signifying a need for an older mindset or generation to be set aside as the country looks for a way to deal with the situation. Hope decides to leave South Africa and return to Zimbabwe. Rodney, in grief and at a loss as what to do, can only think to give her some money. And then they have the smallest connection on the bench as they recognise each other's humanity.

Admittedly, we were originally too *on the nose* when it came to the staging of the issue – at NAF, we had the *tsotsis* throw a sheet over Hope with *amakwerekwere*[163] scrawled on it in blood-red paint; this we removed for our season at Out the Box Festival later in the year as it seemed too literal. But it caused a stir.

As much as it caused a critical backlash, it also revealed a very interesting lesson to be learnt from Mask Theatre, or non-verbal Visual Theatre in general. In earlier works like *GUMBO* (2006–2009), or *Nuff Sed* (2007) we had shown an abuse towards the Deaf in a slapstick/dark comedy/ironical way; now we were staging xenophobia and it seemed to rub certain critics and commentators the wrong way.

Our major criticism was that it showed a very one-sided, white male response. Other criticism was that we didn't properly unpack the very real issues of xenophobia and violence. And yes – I agree with that. It is an issue that I feel at a deep level in my bones, having been a foreigner most of my life. And yet, that was also not what we had set out to do.

The great thing we had been learning since *Pictures of You* in 2008 is that Mask Theatre reveals probably more about the *audience member* than it does about the creators or actors. Because it can't deal with abstract issues, like a deep discussion of home invasions (*Pictures of You*), or corruption of power (*QUACK!*), or the intricacies of adoption (*Womb Tide*) or xenophobia (*Benchmarks*),

[162] Used by magicians – this is a piece of paper that, once lit, burns up and disappears in a flash.

[163] This is a highly contested word that has made its way into the South African lexicon over the last two decades or so; basically, it is a derogatory word for "foreigner", be they white or from Zimbabwe, Nigeria, or somewhere else. It is a word tightly bound to the xenophobic violence that keeps erupting in our country. The word is meant to imitate foreign African languages which are not locally understood, in the same way that the word " barbarian" mocked non-Greek speakers by trying to comically imitate the "nonsense" they were speaking – bar. bar. bar.

because it is essentially non-verbal, and will never be able to stage abstract thought, it shifts the paradigm. That is to say, we were not contributing anything *verbally*, but in choosing image and silence, opened the door for discussion by the audience on these matters. Without dialogue, one experiences images and actions in real time and can "hear" what is happening on various parts of the stage simultaneously and with, I believe, a more direct accessing of one's own life experience. This is the trialogue – maker and actor have spent time and done their best to create something worthwhile of being watched. Now, as audience, one is forced to make a call – how do *I*, within my specific intellectual and cultural *milieu*, think about this?

It's an interesting question.

My specific historical, cultural, and intellectual upbringing has an impact on how I read a work of art, or life itself. In my view, theatre should not tell you *what* to think, or *how* to think. It shouldn't be propaganda. *Agit-prop* is fine, as that is asking the audience to question the world. *Protest Theatre* is fine, as that is asking the audience to question a system.

I think what I love most about Visual Theatre and all its bastard offspring like Mask Theatre, puppetry, object-theatre, and the like, is that it forces and asks us, as theatre-makers and audience, to play a part in re-imagining the world. A solitary person can pick up an inanimate object, start to move and animate it, and a parallel world is created. One can rethink the world. One can redream it.

Chapter 7: A Conspiracy of Pedagogies

7.1. Background to the *Uyabona Ke* Project

I have been facilitating performance training programmes of some form or other since I was a student in 1995 training for my Postgraduate Diploma in Play Production at the University of Kwazulu-Natal (the University of Natal Pietermaritzburg when I was registered). Initially a tutor, I was assigned Physical Theatre classes following a prescribed curricula from UKZN and later RU Drama Departments (when I registered as an Honours student in 1999 and then an MA student 2000–2001). However, as already stated, I have always been drawn to more fringe, or alternative processes, with a deep interest and curiosity in developing my own curriculum, in line with global developments in Physical Theatre, and latterly Visual and Mask Theatre. As mentioned earlier, visiting doctoral student, Than Vlachos, described me as holding a "liminal position" (Vlachos, 2017) in the RU Drama Department, and this I think adequately sums up my position regarding a standpoint in terms of official curricula and actor training.

In 2002, I was employed by Community Arts Project (CAP[164]) in Cape Town to teach on the Performer Training Course. The following year saw the dissolution of the legendary CAP and its assimilation with another NGO, Mediaworks, into an umbrella organisation called AMAC (Arts and Media Access Centre[165]). Here, from 2003 to 2004, Jaqueline Dommisse and I were mandated to develop actor training into a 2-tier course: The Foundation Course (facilitated by Dommisse), and what came to be called the Professional Development Course (PDP) which I devised, facilitated, and supervised. By the end of 2003, the PDP presented its first full-length semi-professional work, *Touch Wood*, under the aegis of the fledgling company, from the hip: *khulumakahle* (FTH:K).

The PDP was my first attempt at devising and implementing a curriculum based on alternative forms of theatre-making. I began with my experience at the time, as well as my MA research, and the course included training in Physical Theatre (mime, clown, and movement based) as well as basic Arts Leadership and Management.

In 2004, FTH:K took on its first trainees handpicked from the PDP[166] and developed *Touch Wood* into a professional work, and created a further professional work, *Water Pockets*.[167] The aims of the

[164] Based in an old church hall and precinct in Woodstock, Cape Town, CAP saw many illustrious future theatre-makers and activists pass through its doors, including Mike van Graan, Basil Apollis, and many others. The precinct would come to be taken over by Brian and Trish Notcutt as a performance and training venue; their daughter, Tara Notcutt, would emerge as one of the top young directors in the Cape Town and national theatre scenes. Unsurprisingly, our paths came to intersect, and Notcutt was employed as Production Manager for FTH:K's Johannesburg and Cape Town seasons of *Womb Tide* and *QUACK!* in 2010.

[165] The venue for the first few, and only, years of AMAC's existence was the old Sachs Futeron building in Harrington Street, Cape Town. This venue would later be bought and refurbished into the iconic Fugard Theatre under the auspices of Eric Abraham. Dommisse and I were quite struck when, on attending the premiere performance at the newly-opened theatre, we realised we were sitting in the gallery where previously our acting and movement studios had been.

[166] Qaqambile Feliti and Lungelo Sitimela.

[167] This production would come to be the first big break-through for FTH:K, with it being picked up by the Hilton Arts Festival, and FTH:K's premiere Cape Town season at the Artscape Arena Theatre in 2004.

PDP extended into facilitation training, and this culminated in the AMAC student work, *Imbew'embi: The Bad Seed*.[168]

From this, FTH:K took the next step of achieving independent status as an NGO. In 2005, with the company now formally registered with the Department of Social Development, and attracting funding from the National Lotteries Distribution Trust Fund (NLDTF), the 2004 trainees were incorporated as full-time professionals, with two further students of the PDP[169] becoming its new intake as trainees. At this time, FTH:K inherited a Deaf training programme from Remix Dance Project Trust, based at Dominican School for Deaf Children in Wittebome, Cape Town. This saw the training undertaken during the company's internal work focus not only still on Physical Theatre, Arts Leadership, but also working with Deaf learners. Teaching two classes a week at the school saw FTH:K fulfil Dominican School's Arts and Culture curriculum that had previously been too much of a stretch for the school's teachers. This started to be known as the *Tell-Tale Signs* project, and was further augmented by FTH:K trainees and professional members working with a smaller select group of Dominican learners[170] as an extra-curricular activity at their headquarters in Woodstock, Cape Town.

At the end of 2005, FTH:K was commissioned to create a short work for the Mental Health and Deafness Conference in Worcester. In order to facilitate this, the company utilised its full-time hearing members as well as the extra-curricular Deaf group in the devising and rehearsing of *Leap of Faith* – this was its first integrated production and set the bar for future work.

On the back of the success of this endeavour, FTH:K took the decisive step of refocussing its aims to that of truly integrating Deaf and hearing theatre-makers and arts leaders, and in 2006, took on its first Deaf trainees.[171] This revolutionised all of FTH:K's projects and processes, and as such the company shifted its focus to that of training Deaf and hearing performers together in an internal integrated programme called the IPDP (Integrated Professional Development Programme) which became one of the company's mainstay programmes. The *Tell-Tale Signs* project remained, and grew to include Arts and Culture classes not only at Dominican School, but also at Noluthando School for the Deaf in Khayelitsha, as well as residencies at De La Bat School for the Deaf in Worcester.[172]

Crucially, the shift to integration was a pivotal moment in my development as a theatre-maker and educator. I have told this story so many times over the years that it has entered its own mythological status that at times I have wondered if it may be apocryphal; but it is not.

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[168] First performed at the Intimate Theatre, University of Cape Town, November 2004. Incidentally, this work saw the first intersection with Janni Younge who had recently completed her studies at the École Nationale Supérieure des Arts de la Marionnette in Charleville-Mézières and had returned to South Africa to jump Puppet and Visual Theatre forward, not least with the establishment and development of the Out The Box Festival in Cape Town, 2005-2011.

[169] Monique September, Khaya Sityo, and Nhlanhla Gobhozi.

[170] Among these learners were Lysander Barends and Marlon Snyders who were to become FTH:K's first Deaf trainees and later professional performers.

[171] Lysander Barends as a performance trainee, and Michelle Kruger as management and education trainee.

[172] Worcester, in the Western Cape, is seen by many of the Deaf as some kind of spiritual home in the Western Cape. Through the De La Bat School, it is one of the few places one can learn a trade and find meaningful employment.

7.2. The "Stuck in the Middle with You" moment

It is late 2005. We are rehearsing *Leap of Faith* in Woodstock in preparation for performance in Worcester. The show has found its form in an apocalyptic scenario where a group of hearing people is fleeing the burning cities of civilisation in search of a home. Somewhere in the hinterland, they encounter a group of Deaf people doing exactly the same. There is much suspicion and distrust between the groups, and this allows us to explore some of the prejudices both Deaf and hearing communities have for each other in physical comedy form. Eventually, the situation will boil down to one Deaf and one hearing person left alone to guard their meagre belongings. A fight develops, but from this also ultimately a shared moment of hilarity at the ridiculousness of their situation. This in turn leads to an intimate moment of learning to speak the other's language – particularly the hearing person understanding some of the sign language used. A bond is forged.[173] When their respective groups return, the two convince them that only by travelling and working together can they all expect to survive. A reluctant truce is drawn up and agreed to, and they set off again together. This new-found energy is dashed, however, when they encounter the edge of the world – a cliff that stretches down into the maw of the world. They are stuck – they can't go back, and they can no longer go forward. Our two new friends smile at each other and indicate of course they can go on – if they just believe they can, they can fly away. They collectively take the "leap of faith", and at first the vehicle plummets through the air to everyone's certain death. But then, the vehicle finds its magic, and rights itself; it takes to the air. The full-size image on stage transforms into a micro-image of the vehicle, and its inhabitants, as a performing object; a puppet. It flies away into the future over the audience.

That is the narrative outline of the work – but it is not the story I want to tell. In this one particular rehearsal, I, as director, had the idea of idea of a scene where a song would play, and it would be interpreted by various individuals in the cast in different languages. For example, one group could work out a mimed version of the words, one could translate it into isiXhosa, another into Afrikaans, and the Deaf group could translate it into South African Sign Language (SASL). This would become a hilarious visual and sonic chaotic scene of "wild translations", touching on the difficulties of communication in South Africa with her many languages, as well as specifically that between the Deaf and hearing. The chosen song was Stealers Wheel's *Stuck in the Middle with You*, which contains the lines:

> Well I don't know why I came here tonight.
> I've got the feeling that something ain't right.
> I'm so scared in case I fall off my chair,
> And I'm wondering how I'll get down the stairs.
>
> Clowns to the left of me!
> Jokers to the right!
> Here I am stuck in the middle with you.[174]

Thinking I had theatrical gold on my hands, I printed out copies of the lyrics and set each group off on their task. Immediately the hearing threw themselves at the text, working out movements

[173] This scene, incidentally, became the entire impetus for what was to become *GUMBO* in 2006.
[174] Stealers Wheel's "Stuck in the Middle with You", written by Joe Egan and Gerry Rafferty, from the 1972 album *Stealers Wheel*, produced by Universal Records.

to pantomime it, or translate it into various languages, and the Deaf started to sign to each other about it. I left the groups to work, and returned about 15 minutes later. The pantomime group was thick into choreography, languages were coming on … except, the Deaf members were looking perplexed and frustrated, arguing amongst themselves. I tried to engage with them in my (then) very basic SASL, and after a while of to-and-fro, it finally became clear to me that they could not read and understand the words of the song. I had unwittingly crashed into one of the major brick walls of working with and teaching the Deaf community – the literacy rate is historically very low. Not only that, but if the teacher/facilitator cannot communicate in SASL[175] then the only other option is to teach in the Deaf children's language and for learners to attempt to lip-read. Seeing as I was working with a group of Deaf learners from a predominately Afrikaans area, even the English words on a piece of paper was skewing the push to communicate, and, in many senses, disabling them further.

Although it may read as an obvious realisation (a "doh" moment), the results of this moment of clarity were monumental for the company and changed not only the way it would communicate internally as well as to the world, but completely altered my approach to teaching.

How did it do this? There are many points to consider here:

- Absolute priority needed to be given to democratise the teaching and rehearsal space. If I was to be serious as a facilitator working with other cultures and communities, I had to let go of spoken language and find a way to highlight the non-verbal and visual as teaching methodologies and creative strategies going forward. Any notion of the "script" as sacrosanct had to be thrown out and henceforth everything would need to be channelled to devising work from absolute scratch.

- Following on from this, and further emphasising the democratisation of the learning and rehearsal floor, would be a levelling of the space – where the Deaf and hearing, or any culture coming together, would occupy the same hierarchical space. As Adam Benjamin writes:

> The litmus test is whether those with the most experience are having to lower their standards, or whether they are being pushed to extend their range in meetings with different bodies and different ways of perceiving. To put it very simply *integration implies an approach that demands the best from everyone* [emphasis his]**,** not just the disabled members (2002: 74).

- If the above became all important, no less important was the realisation that the same should apply for the facilitator – no longer could it be a top-down approach to facilitation and learning, with the facilitator being some form of expert that just arrives and imparts knowledge; rather, it has to be in the form of true collaboration and experimentation, where all parties arrive on the floor with a curiosity to discover something together. As Jon Foley-Sherman states: it is a journey of shared discovery, and an astonishment at what one finds.

- The issue of language, and the choice of language that work is presented in, becomes endemic in purporting *power* – as a group of theatre-makers, you are saying: this language is the one the group has chosen to create meaning, or to close off the authorative system holding the work together. In South Africa, more than ever, with its 11 official languages (and SASL not yet fully realised as an official language), this takes on even bigger proportions.

[175] Scarily, according to DeafSA, the rate is still high at about 90% of teachers falling into this statistic.

- Emphasis on the *visual production value* of work.

Adopting these and investing deeply into utilising them saw the development of professional Visual Theatre works that I have written about or mentioned in earlier chapters such as *GUMBO, 'Nuff Sed, Pictures of You, QUACK!, Womb Tide, Benchmarks,* and *officeBLOCK* as well as trainee works *Lost Teeth* (2006)*, Ek roep vir jou vanaand* (2009)*, Tales from the Trash* (2010)*,* and *ShortCuts* (2011), many of which criss-crossed the country playing at festivals, mainstream theatres, and community venues.

Leaving the company at the end of 2011, I moved to Grahamstown to work with Ubom! Eastern Cape Drama Company, where I was resident director and began working with a company of Rhodes University graduates and local community performers. In 2013 I began reading for this PhD in Visual Theatre at Rhodes, where I initiated South Africa's first Visual Theatre elective at an academy. In 2014, that elective was developed and deepened and I launched the next phase of this research with this, the *Uyabona Ke?* Project, with a group of young local performers in a barter of professional skills-development for experiential qualitative data for my doctorate.

Further on from here, I write about a practice-led research project that I have undertaken that acts as a counterpoint and reflection of work that has been undertaken in my evolution as a theatre practitioner. In doing so, it also allows me to:

- Outline my personal teaching philosophy that draws on an intricate web of influencers, mentors, experiences, and practice-led research

- Analyse and reflect on an ever-evolving personal pedagogy of teaching Mask Theatre within various contexts

- Further expand on interrogating how the mask works – both in training and in performance, and

- Triangulate results, findings, and ongoing thoughts with the literature review and analyses undertaken in the previous few chapters.

7.3. Introduction – A Spasm of Anxiety

It is May 2015. I am awoken from a dream and try to catch it in my journal:

> I dream about *Waterline*. It's an arranged showing in 3 parts…It's not just the community research group, it's a mix of the current group with FTH:K members (Lysander is there[176]) the group is noisy and chaotic – there's excitement in the air but also rebellion. I battle to keep their focus, especially when it comes to prepping for the showing. My signing is also very rusty and I'm having to do the "speak-sign" thing we were all forced to do at some point working with the Deaf and those unable to sign. Exasperated, I confront one of the rabble-rouses: why must you always disrespect me? A threat of violence. Why are you doing this? Answer is not to be a performer per se, but more to challenge the self in a group of professionals.

[176] Lysander Barends, a Deaf performer, was for many years instrumental within the development of FTH:K.

> I awake and am flooded with questions of *QUACK!* Did I disrespect the Deaf? Force them into "disability" by limiting their vision by placing them behind masks? In a complicated show/narrative they would never fully comprehend? And why? What for? My own pretentious ego? What was I chasing? Why the form, so impenetrable? The particular make-up of the group? Was it always just a hiding to nothing? (Murray, 2015. Unpublished Work Journal).

Clearly, I was feeling anxious about the work – this is understandable; and I always have these kinds of production dreams close to a premiere. However, it does also reveal to me that I was having mixed feelings and anxiety about the form of Mask Theatre and wondering if I was doing the group a disservice by having forced them to work in it. In May 2015, the group of community artists I was working with, under the chosen banner of *Uyabona Ke?*, was a few weeks away from premiering their debut professional work, *Waterline*, at the NAF Fringe in Grahamstown.[177] It was then seen to be the culmination of an unofficial training project that I led under the aegis of the Rhodes University Drama Department. The group had by and large been working together, with some comings and goings of members since 2014 when I initiated the project, and were now down to the business end of the final push towards the production's premiere.

Consequently, *Waterline* was then under tremendous stress due to the deadline of the festival a few weeks away, as well as various external and internal factors. The personnel of the group had recently altered slightly, with one performer having to withdraw due to other rehearsal commitments and a brand-new member joining within the last month. This skewed the make-up of the group by shifting some power relationships within it, as well as stretched out the range of experience in working with masks.

Externally there were also demands made by the funding the project attracted. What were the effects of professional demands on what was initially a shared practical research endeavour? How much was I implicit within this? From the outset I had been talking up the potential of the project – where it could grow to and what it could achieve. We applied for participation at the Cape Town Fringe,[178] there was a possibility of the show going to a Market Theatre festival, and an opportunity to link up with Clowns without Borders for their work in King William's Town.[179] But what effect did this have on the research itself? Had this shifted the research inquiry to such an extent that it overrode the research aims, and thus destabilised and potentially destroyed it?

These pressures and challenges can be seen in the reflection and capturing of my dream, as well as the subsequent spasms of anxiety that I was feeling as a director, and also as a director-researcher. To this day, I still have mixed feelings about what we undertook and how it materialised, as well as the aftermath of the project. While much was very positive in a surprisingly open-ended and reciprocal way, the fact that my dreaming-self made the connection to the *QUACK!* process with FTH:K, and worried over it I find very interesting and central to much of my inner and outer debate and conversation over the use of masks in South African theatre. These I shall try my best to explicate and analyse as I move forward.

[177] Now re-named Makhanda.
[178] This application was successful, with the company touring there in September 2015.
[179] These unfortunately never materialised.

7.4. Description of *Uyabona Ke?* Project

The *Uyabona Ke?* Project was a Professional Development Programme in Visual and Physical Theatre in Grahamstown, South Africa, April 2014 – July 2015.[180] It was initiated by my interaction with a number of local Grahamstown artists who desperately wanted access and experience of further performance training from the Rhodes University Drama Department. Originally, it was also seen as a "barter" of sorts, with me seeing in the setting up of the project an opportunity to make training accessible to the group, as well as a chance for me to experiment with the new directions my thoughts around Mask and Visual Theatre were taking due to my beginning to read for my doctorate at RU.

In this way, I was not "forcing" Mask and Visual Theatre on any of the participants – as per the anxiety I mentioned earlier. The terms were clearly laid out from the beginning; and were initially for just 2014, culminating in some form of performance at RU and Ubom's Makana Drama Development Festival (MDDF). That the project, and the work made, mushroomed and took on a much longer life is testament to the participants' vision and passion.

The title of the project, *Uyabona Ke?*, directly translates from the isiXhosa phrase as "you see, now...", but can also have the injunctive force "you see now!" Sometimes this is shortened in speech to just "Yabona?", and was chosen by the group and myself as a name we could identify with.

Another option that was flouted was also an isiXhosa phrase – "Nantso ke". The translation of this phrase carries the softer meaning of "well, here it is", or "here we are/ here we go" and also can have the more forceful, sub-textual meaning of "well, there we go" (as in "I knew this would happen, etc.").

However, the group preferred the former phrase, and, playing off the English phrase "see what I mean", together we used it to indicate the following dual meaning:

- *See* what I mean (literally, in the case of Visual Theatre, see what I mean as a mask, puppet, or other performing object); as well as

- See what I *mean* (as a person, a performer, a group, a local resident of Grahamstown, a South African).

In essence, then, the *Uyabona Ke?* Project was a performer-centered theatre training programme introducing new skills and a performance approach that would impact on the local performance scene in Grahamstown. It was very much inspired by Richard Antrobus's project, Phezulu, where he worked with local performers to learn stilt walking on the back of his show, *Stilted* (2009).

The focus was on developing the technical, creative, interpretative, and performance skills of the performer within an ensemble that focussed on physical and visual performance; material and object manipulation; an introduction to puppetry; and mask work.

[180] For visual references of the work and process, please go to:
https://youtube.com/playlist?list=PLJmhNgVM2VqK6mxE91hFGBaHTnvbFgFWd

This was along the lines of an elective Liezl de Kock and I had been teaching at RU Drama in 2013 and 2014 – Visual Theatre. Or, as it became known, Visual Physical Theatre, nicknamed Viz Phys.

Uyabona Ke however, was a separate project and course, offered free of charge to local artists.

A holistic approach to training was encouraged which examined relationships between the technical and expressive aspects of performance as well as building the *complicité* of a working ensemble. The core pedagogy was built on the pillars of silence, space, image, play, and society.

7.5. Participants of the *Uyabona Ke?* Project

As will become apparent, over the 15 or so months of the initial project, the personnel of the group would be quite flexible, with an ever-changing roster of participants as performers had to withdraw due to other work, personal, or professional commitments, as well as further participants being drawn to it as it gained momentum.

The initial group consisted of the following participants (Figure 57):

Figure 57: Original Uyabona Ke members, 2014.

Of this initial group, the backbone of the initiative emerged in the form of Ayanda Nondlwana (now sadly deceased), Khaya Kondile, Xolela Tsili, and, to a lesser extent, Mandisi Heshu. The group always, unfortunately, had more males than females, with the exception of the formidable Nombasa Ngoqo who would later come to play a pivotal role.

On the other hand, the above line-up includes three female theatre-makers I had originally planned to integrate into the training and facilitation of the group – Liezl de Kock, Megan Grace Wright, and Hannah Lax. This did not materialise, unfortunately, as we could never align our schedule with that of their own personal postgraduate studies at RU.

The line-up also cites Nathaniel Vlachos, whom I've already mentioned on a few occasions, a visiting anthropology doctoral candidate from Rice University. Although his experience and witnessing of the project were limited, he did document many of the initial classes and these reflections will be referenced in this chapter, both his initial field notes (2015) as well as his completed doctoral thesis (2017).

Based on my experiences from over a decade of working with community performers in various theatrical forms, *Uyabona Ke?* was the evolution of a performer-centred training programme and one that could have a concerted impact on the local performance scene in Grahamstown.

7.6. Aims and objectives of the *Uyabona Ke?* Project

Originally, the objectives were very clear:

1. Develop a core group of participants as both performers and facilitators in Visual, Mask, and Physical Theatre.
2. Devise and create work to be first performed at the MDDF (Makana Drama Development Festival) in November 2014.
3. Further develop this work and tour it to the Zabalaza Festival at the Baxter Theatre in March/April 2015.
4. Present this work as a professional production at the National Arts Festival Fringe in June/July 2015.
5. Initiate the beginnings of a permanent ensemble that could be available for further festival performances, corporate and/or industrial theatre events, or other future endeavours.
6. Foster the development of further training and facilitation initiatives within the Makana District in the Eastern Cape.

As well as generally:

1. To encourage and contribute to the development of new South African work by providing a platform for artists wanting to venture into theatre making, as well as arts leadership.
2. To provide an ongoing skills programme in areas of theatre-making to upcoming artists.
3. To identify potential leaders and prodigious talents in community theatre groups and expose them to theatre of a professional standard.
4. To promote and build a culture of attending theatre among new audiences.
5. To provide mentorship/internships to deserving individuals (writers, directors, stage managers, actors, etc.) who would like to take up theatre as a career.

6. To provide guidance and information where necessary to upcoming artists, especially previously disadvantaged artists.

Where this intersected with my research was that I had experienced working with Deaf and hearing (white and coloured) performers in Cape Town; I had run workshops and residencies with (mainly) white schools; university electives (mainly white students). I was interested to discover how it would work with a black township group and subsequent audiences. Could silent Mask Theatre truly transcend all linguistic and cultural boundaries?

As became clear with the *Uyabona Ke?* Project and *Waterline* (2015), its follow-up work, *Falling Off The Horn* (2016), and work with my students, *Phitlho [The Hidden]* (2019) – the answer was a resounding "yes"!

It is 2019 and I am sitting in the Glennie Hall at that year's NAF. We (AFDA Johannesburg Honours) are presenting *Phitlho [The Hidden]* at the Fringe Festival – a mask work we developed that looked at the stereotypes of Down Syndrome within the family. (See Figure 65.) It was a story of family members confronting themselves over many years of dysfunction involving the titular Phitlho living hidden inside a rubbish bin for most of his life. For some reason, a large group of African women (an organisation of some sort, getting a group deal for the festival) chose to watch our show.

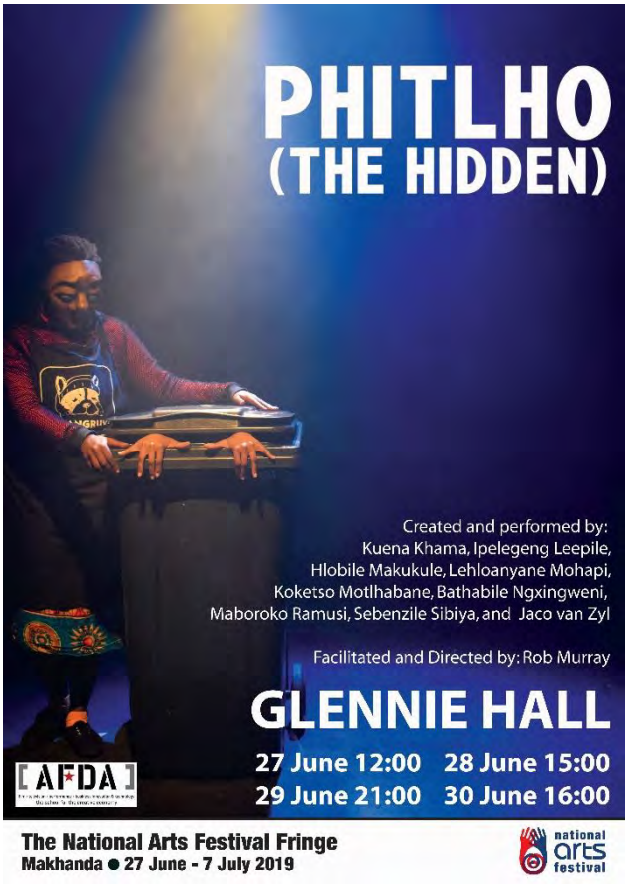

Figure 58: Phitlho poster, 2019.

I have *never* experienced the sort of reaction we had that day. Every beat of the non-verbal show was met with gasps, fevered debate, shock, horror, laughter – they were with the masks every single step of the show. If ever I needed proof that Mask and Visual Theatre can work across all linguistic or cultural groups in South Africa, I got it that day.

I suppose I shouldn't have been surprised, as I had experienced events close to this before. In 2010, *QUACK!* played at the National Schools' Festival where it found its audience: hundreds of learners losing their minds to the strange narrative and form presented. *Pictures of You* had been serving up a similar kind of hype for the last few years. And in 2015, *Waterline* played to hundreds of learners at the National Schools' Festival, and the audience flooded the stage afterwards; the local township performers becoming instant rock gods.

I mention these to share a realisation I had – that Mask and Visual Theatre works across all language and cultural groups. If done well, that is. As Wilsher (2007) notes, Mask Theatre done

badly, or in a terrible performance, can be one of the worst things one can experience. And along the way, I have experienced many different kinds of performance…

7.7. Waterline 2014

The initial 15-minute draft of *Waterline* was presented at the annual Makana Drama Development Festival (MDDF) in November 2014. This was the project's debut airing on a public platform, and, even though it was rough, (not much more than a series of structured improvisations), the piece caught the audience's attention with its thematic relevance and stylistic innovation.

I was reminded of what Xolela (a member of the group) had told me about a presentation he and Khaya had done in Hamburg before a group of community theatre practitioners. What they presented had come from a showing they had done as part of our weekly Independent Creations that intersected with the work Liezl de Kock and I were doing with third year Visual Theatre students at RU Drama Department. At the time, in April 2014, we had been investigating paper as a material and how we could possibly animate it and use it as a theatrical provocation. The scene Xolela and Khaya had come up with involved Xolela underneath a large piece of brown paper, animating it as if it were a dog, while Khaya, the human "dog trainer" tried to contain it. After their presentation, the Hamburg practitioners were exuberant, demanding that both performers give workshops on this to local artists and learners, claiming this was work "usually done by whites only". Similarly, the award-winning performance[181] at the MDDF came as something of a revelation, then, for performers and audience alike, who had never encountered this form of theatre before.

The narrative drive concerned a water tap that has been erected by the officials in the fictitious "Aikona Municipality".[182] Desperate for water, the townsfolk start lining up with empty bottles and vessels. Rivalries arise and jockeying for prime position ensues. The characters bicker and argue, and in a ridiculous escalation, move the tap to various parts of the stage, initiating a frantic scramble for the precious commodity. This escalates until someone steals the tap, and thus water, and exits stage, furiously pursued by the mob.

The feel was deliberately kept comic and light, but all the games and interactions pointed to something deeper and darker within the scene – namely: how far one would go to secure water for oneself and one's family.

Makhanda has a long history with water shortages and outages which extends right back to its formation as a British garrison in the early Frontier Wars. Mor recently it's been besetby drought, and a crumbling infrastructure, with deep official corruption and political backlash.[183]

While we were training, I was looking for a narrative vehicle to use as a provocation. Just outside Makhanda, on the Port Alfred road, there is a natural spring that is the source of water for many residents of the city and its townships. A few years prior to 2014, one could take a 20-litre container

[181] The show won the Best Production award at the festival.
[182] A nod and a wink to the very real Makana Municipality.
[183] Things were bad in 2015 when we made the show – they have gotten even worse since then. At the time of writing, municipal water is available only every second day and the pumps which were to have been fixed in 2016 have still not been replaced.

and possibly wait for one other person to fill their containers before one could get one's own supply of clear, clean water; perhaps there were two cars in the parking lot. In 2014, as things started sliding towards the dire, that parking lot was suddenly full, and one had to wait an hour or more in the queue to fill containers.

Looking at this, I had a vivid recollection of the voting queues of 1994 snaking for kilometres, and the fact that people had to queue for water 20 years after democracy seemed ludicrous.

And so I brought this to the group and the name *Waterline* was born. (See Figures 66 and 67.)

Figure 59: Waterline 2014 – the queue begins. Waterline at the MDDF, November 2014. (Masks are training masks, courtesy Conspiracy of Clowns).

Waterline went on to win the Best Production Award at the MDDF. When this was announced, the group went berserk, flooding the stage and repeatedly yelling out "It's still on!"

This was in reference to a game we had developed in class – a mixture of tennis, squash, volleyball, and a number of other complicated rules, involving a ball, a "net" of sorts (usually chairs, a bench, objects that created a barrier), and a demarcated court. This game stems from FTH:K days – back then it was known as the "ball game". Under Ubom! in 2012, it was known as "The Emotional Game" as it usually lead to fights over interpreting the minutiae of the rules. Within the *Uyabona Ke* group, it came to be called "Still On" from a situation where the ball sits on a piece of furniture or is caught in a curtain and the team has one chance to continue playing it – hence the point is "still on" and not decided yet. The game is physical, messy, emotional, and a great one for learning complicite, teamwork, and the ability to recover from things going wrong. It is deeply competitive and ultimately a lot of fun – all these elements leading to an experience of what Lecoq calls *le jeu* [joy] which he sees as crucial to performance.

The amount of pride and joy expressed at winning the award revealed how deeply felt the project had become, and also the potential for it to continue and develop further. This was later confirmed by a MDDF judge, who wrote about the performance:

> I thought the work had a lot of integrity. It took you from raucous laughter to the reality of the situation: people are living like this. After that politician leaves and the water runs dry – people are living like this.
>
> It made me wonder 'why do we laugh?' and then also we would cry forever if we started now.

Figure 67: Waterline: Best Production at MDDF 2014.

I think it's a compelling, intense, incisive and really evocative stab at an issue that cuts to the heart of how our society treats the poor and those in need of state resources to survive. (Mohoto, L., personal communication, February 18, 2015).

Figure 60: Members of Uyabona Ke (in mask) walk through the township to gather an audience before a performance at the Recreation Centre, November 2014.

Figure 61: Children try the training masks on for size and interact with the cast of Waterline at Tantyi Hall, November 2014.

The performance at the MDDF was initially seen as the end of the project. This however was quickly, and gratifyingly, interrupted by the project gaining attention and funding from Creative Cities Grahamstown. More importantly, it was taken on further by the performers themselves, who demanded we continue working on the piece and the process. Not only that, but the group organised a local "tour", and the short work went on to perform at the BB Zondani Hall, the Recreation Centre, Tantyi Hall, and Extension 9 Hall in November 2014. (See Figures 68 and 69.)

This attracted the attention of the PUKU Festival[184] for 2015, and the show was booked to perform four times for an audience of Grahamstown and Eastern Cape schools. (See Figure 70.) *Waterline* would go on to perform for over 800 learners at this festival. It also provided the first income opportunity of the project, with members being paid for their performances.

The group also developed a "trailer" of sorts for the show, and this was presented at the Rhodes University Drama First Year Orientation event in 2015 for over 1000 students. This "trailer" was later repeated at the Eastern Cape Schools' Festival for approximately 400 learners from schools around the Eastern Cape.[185] This "trailer" was part of the *Waterline* publicity package and was presented at the National Arts Festival (NAF) during a Sundowners concert in July 2015.

The show was also booked for the National Schools' Festival in Grahamstown, July 2015. There was also interest from the Cape Town Fringe (September 2015), as well as the Market Theatre Laboratory (Johannesburg) and linking up with Clowns Without Borders South Africa (King William's Town) for performances.

All this potential for future work was gratifying, and exciting, for the group as a whole.

What was perhaps even more gratifying for me as a facilitator/practitioner-researcher was the extent that the group was integrated within the Rhodes Drama Department set-up. Not only were they now regulars within the department[186], but students were starting to realise the extent of the project and accepting the group as part of their drama experience.[187]

Figure 62 Cast members from Waterline engage in a post-performance discussion with learners at the PUKU Festival, February 2015.

[184] See http://www.grahamstown.co.za/event/3rd_annual_puku_story_festival
[185] *Waterline* was actually booked for this festival, but funding delays that impacted on rehearsals and the development of the work into a full-length piece worked against this.
[186] The group was adamant to rehearse at Rhodes…although we had classes at Dakawa and other community places, the group was fervent that they wanted to be at the institution of Rhodes.
[187] Barring of course the reaction of one staff member who complained about "these people" who have infiltrated the department, and how she doesn't feel safe and how do they possibly have access?

7.8. Waterline 2015

Regathering in 2015, the group and I started finding our way to create a full-length narrative from what we had. With a complete mask redesign from Casha Jacot-Guillarmod, based on the original characters we created in 2014, the work took on a new impetus. (See Figure 71.)

Figure 63: Casha Jacot-Guillarmod leading the Uyabona Ke crew in mask-making, early 2015.

This gave the project another string to its bow – learning how to actually make masks. Although Casha was the primary designer (and sculptor) of the designs, the cast had hands-on experience of actually making their masks.

The narrative also developed considerably. We talked a lot about the water crisis in Makhanda, and all its effects on society. We were also talking about crime and how it was a common concern; and, in one epic rehearsal, Khaya Kondile uttered the infamous words: "can you imagine if people start breaking in to others' houses to steal *water*?"

And there it was – our key into the narrative.

Through devising and improvising, we soon had the skeleton of the story. We set up that the world of the story lives in a time of great water scarcity. We introduce our hero, just about to propose to his lady love…only, he has no water to offer as a form of twisted *lobolo*. A suitor, with water, challenges him, and sets him off on his quest – to find water and win back his love.

An encounter with the town drunk sends him off to the Aikona Municipality where there are rumours that the officials will offer a solution.

In this town, there are different characters – the Gentleman, the Mother, the Kid, the Artist, and so on, who have an intricate interwoven relationship. The Government Minister arrives, with much pomp and ceremony, with his Assistant and some Guards. They set up a "water tap" as a fix for the water problems in the area and then depart. (See Figure 72.) A massive fight breaks out over the ownership and priority to this tap in the city, with the Hero (a foreigner in this circumstance) getting the better of all, and effectively "stealing" all the water.

The corrupt Minister gets wind of this and partners with the Hero, further stockpiling all the water supplies in a central region. The Hero falls into corruption and control, relishing the feeling of power. (See Figure 72.)

Figure 64: Waterline 2015. The Minister opens a new water tap.

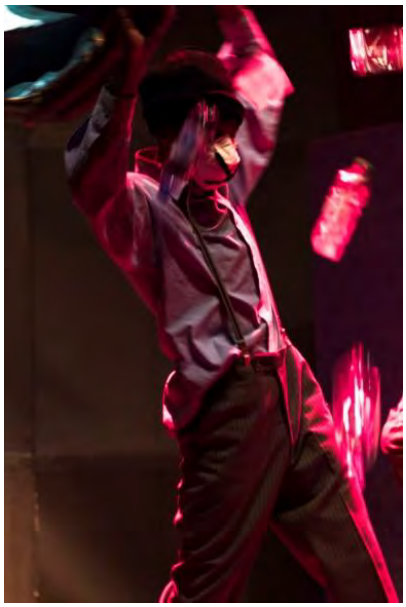
Figure 65: Waterline 2015. The townsfolk attack the stockpile of water.

As tensions rise, the Kid sneaks into the water compound, and tragically slips and falls into the stockpiled water. He cannot swim and so drowns in the illegal stockpile.

The townsfolk, grieving and angry, rise against the minister and Hero. They march on the stockpile and tear it apart, exacting vengeance but also destroying the lifeforce they need. (See Figure 73.)

In the debris post-riot, our Hero realises his complicity and greed, and brings the last barrel of water out. This he starts sharing fairly with the community in an act of remorse and rehabilitation.

As can be seen, this was a very simple narrative that we could play, but one that had enormous echoes to the very real political and social issues that were playing out around us at the time.

7.9. Some Notes on the Process

As I have written about earlier, within certain funding limitations, the time I spent with FTH:K was largely one of trial and error as the company felt its way to many training and performance discoveries. There was a feeling of freedom and experimentation to this time, as FTH:K was working in a way that no one else in the country was, and very few companies internationally were. The tag of "misfits", or "mavericks", suited the company, and it used such tags to style itself and

market its work. Working on the *Uyabona Ke* project was the next group of misfits and mavericks I discovered.

Returning to an academic environment, I found myself reflected almost verbatim by Nelson, and it is worth quoting again:

> Advanced students engaging in PaR bring with them to the praxis a baggage of prior educational experience and, typically, specialist training. Most hold a first degree and masters-level qualification and many have significant professional experience. Accordingly, they know how to engage in their practice…They all have 'know-how' which manifests in Schön's seminal idea of 'knowledge in action' which supposes that praxis involves an intrinsically intelligent 'dialogue with the situation'. (2013: 42)

Developing these thoughts into what he calls 'embodied knowledge', he highlights two key practical implications for a PaR context: firstly, embodied knowledge is often taken for granted by practitioners, and secondly, the articulation thereof is almost impossible. A challenge for a practitioner-researcher is therefore to "make the tacit more explicit" (Nelson, 2013:43).

It is in the light of the above and developing thoughts about my own research that led to the initiating of the *Uyabona Ke* project. The initial aim was to set up a small research group as a counterpoint to work done in the past to test ideas of curriculum, as well as teaching methodology, in the development of a personal pedagogy that I could write up and reflect on. Qualitatively, I would also then have various 'sets' of data and experiences which I could reflect on, compare, and contrast: the Deaf/hearing integration of FTH:K, work with learners and students within schools and the university, and a community theatre orientated ensemble. There was also implicit within the starting of the group a strong social and cultural need on my part, one that has developed over the course of my career, to do something meaningful for the local community, to assist in some way with local performance development.

Thus was born *Uyabona Ke*, its title combining two meanings to serve as its pathfinder:

The project attracted funding from the Creative Cities initiative in Grahamstown, in partnership with the NAF and EU, and the scope of the project suddenly expanded: from a small research group, the ensemble could now grow to produce work that could be presented on professional stages.

Consequently, while the beginning of the project in 2014 saw me shift from practitioner to practitioner-researcher, in 2015 with the advent of the National Arts Festival a few weeks away, I became aware of the necessity of shifting somewhat back towards being a practitioner. This raised a number of salient questions within me around the nature and implementation of my research, and what effects this second shift might produce. Furthermore, it caused me to relook at practice with FTH:K and re-evaluate and reflect my role, responsibilities, and, crucially, where my naivety might have had led to unintended but detrimental results. And was I repeating any of my past naivety?

In short, where did I actually stand, as a facilitator, a practitioner, a researcher, and also human being?

During my time with FTH:K, the company experienced similar concerns – Deaf and hearing alike were employed as "trainees", with the idea being that everyone "earned while they learnt". This organisation of employees didn't always sit well with some of our hearing members – some of whom had higher degrees and some professional experience, and they battled to fit themselves in with a "level playing field" approach. Furthermore, in reality, the trainees played a dual role: they carried the burden of training concurrently with the expectations of being able to pull off performance at a professional theatre level. The shifting of research driven by what Sherman, reflecting on Lecoq's pedagogy, calls a shared delight of discovery towards product is an area that intrigues and baffles me.

In April 2015, Robyn Sassen wrote an article deploring the current lack of "directors who are dictators with vision" in that they are able to passionately and remorselessly push their students and apprentices to better and bigger things.[188]I think within the field of performance studies, that approach has however come a long way – particularly within physical and devised theatre, and definitely within mask theatre. There is no grand "knowledge" that the facilitator holds and imparts or disseminates through a process of hand-outs; her job is to discover a way of leading participants to discover for themselves, and in doing so surprise themselves as well as the facilitator with mutual discovery.

This is especially prevalent when training and working in masks – a matter of small discoveries, a gradual unveiling of character, and then how the character responds to given stimuli or situation. This gives the mask its "authority", and it is the performers' work to uncover that authority and then make it live in each moment that it is on stage. This, after all, is my driving research question.

However, I began to question my own processes as I felt the shift back towards being a practitioner in preparing the cast for performance. More and more, I was having to push the characters/scenes in a certain direction for the sake of the narrative structure that we had jointly devised.

In this relaxing of shared discovery and a greater tendency to shape certain scenes, was I in some way sabotaging myself as a practitioner-researcher and becoming more of a "director with vision"? Mask work is difficult – on a purely physical level it's suffocating: one can only see out of tiny little holes: and hearing, balance, and spatial awareness are all affected. It makes performance uncomfortable, and awkward; requiring a sacrifice of the performer. They need to suppress their desire for physical comfort for the sake of the image. This was never as vivid as the early days of *Pictures of You* (2008), where the performers would remove their masks for the curtain call. Although they would receive rapturous applause, and wonder at being so young playing these older characters, one could clearly see the exertion the masks had placed on them. Not only were both dripping with sweat and flushed red, but one could see the indents of the foam or elastic of the mask on their skin. Not particularly glamourous.

In this regard, we learnt a handy trick from Famile Flöz in 2011 – at the end of their shows, they generally have a short "cooling off" scene, where the masked characters perform a short, usually comic, routine. For *Hotel Parasio* that I watched, it was a short bell-ringing routine; but I have also seen online a session with a radio and its aerial for *Infinita*. What this does is allow both audience and performers to take a breather from the exertion they have collectively been involved in. It also

[188] https://robynsassenmyview.com/2015/04/06/in-praise-of-dictators-with-vision/

lifts the mood – creating an upbeat from all the drama and emotions experienced. The characters, still in mask, then take a bow. The lights fade. And only *then* do the actors remove their masks. Lights rise and the unmasked ensemble take their bow.

It's a very good tactic, and we started to adopt it in more recent works. (It is also cheeky because it guarantees you at least two curtain calls!)

Another interesting tactic is to play with masked *and* unmasked actors. This Wilsher (2007) talks about in relation to his work with Trestle Theatre and we have experimented with it in more recent works like *Waterline* (2015) and *Phitlho* (2019). Not only does it cause a curious disruption within the audience, but scenes also give performers (particularly young performers) a chance to breathe. In *Waterline*, for example (and I write about this more later), we had by chance worked out some "work songs" as we were building the masks. Some of these found their way into the show as they were just too good not to be used, and sang by a chorus of unmasked actors while the audience focussed on the main (masked) character of the scene. In *Phitlho*, we developed the convention of *masking*. The play opened with no one in mask, and the setup was done openly, with dialogue. Once it had been setup, we go through a time-lapse of some years, and in that time, the characters enact a ritual of putting on their masks and assuming the physical characters they will play for the rest of the show. Some scenes in the middle, the performers appear unmasked, usually in *tableaux* or chorus, and then disappear again. At the end of the show, the convention is reversed: all the characters face the audience and remove their masks in full view before the lights fade.

I think little experiments like this need to be developed further, as they play with the artifice or suspension of disbelief with the audience. They also start to challenge the way Mask Theatre is portrayed globally, and possibly point to a more natural South African version; this may just irritate the "Lecoq police", but I think it is one of the things we have done as a country best.

For, as previously mentioned, Mask Theatre is mainly foreign within a South African context – particularly with regards to full silent masks. How much of a personal bias does my research into it reveal? How fair is it of me to impose that on another group? If masks are said to simultaneously disguise and reveal, do they in some way disable? Do they impose a cultural othering on participants?

It would appear that I carry a sense of guilt with regards to my past involvement with FTH:K – not only of pushing the Deaf participants in particular, but also my role in the implosion of the company once I left at the end of 2011. To what degree is the practitioner-researcher responsible for the continued life of a group? Or is it fair to shut everything down once the research is done? What impact does this have on a group, particularly when there is a history in the country and within Grahamstown of this pattern endlessly repeating itself across cultural lines, usually involving a white practitioner at some point moving on?

Within Deaf culture, FTH:K repeatedly bumped up against a similar issue: historically the Deaf are "adopted" for a certain time by well-meaning hearing people who may try to integrate socially and culturally, even learning their language, but eventually abandon them when things either got too difficult, funding dried up, or their attention span/interest waned. There is a lot of distrust that one has to work through, and I wonder how much is driven by history – both of the savage inequalities within the country, and one's, in this case mine, position of privilege as researcher.

How privileged, actually, is research, and the acquisition of 'new knowledge'? How much of this question should the researcher take on? When does the burden of thinking in such a way become too much? And how much does it adversely colour the nature of the research?

These questions revolve around issues of sustainability and maybe don't have a place within academic research. I am deeply concerned about the issue of succession, however. Whether that is adversely influenced by my experiences with FTH:K and also Ubom! coming to some form of unfortunate and unnecessary end is something I am currently grappling with. A further dip into my 2015 journal reveals me reflecting:

> With *Uyabona Ke* set to slow down in the second half of 2015 as I slowly disassociate from the project and extricate myself from Grahamstown in general, what will happen to the group, the product, the approach to theatre itself? How much of that is my responsibility?

There also seems to be a real struggle for authority within me – a need to be seen or heard as some form of expert. Whether this has developed from having too much leeway and being allowed to be a maverick in the past, or whether it is a reflection of my uncertainty within an academic environment, or some combination of the two, remains unclear at this point. What is the line of personal ego/self-fulfilment that a practitioner-researcher must keep in sight? Can research really be for the greater good – of both society and performance studies as a whole?

Another entry from my journal in mid-2014 reveals a growing frustration within me regarding attendance and punctuality of the group. I gloomily ponder the failing of the project in some way – that the content and/or teaching isn't gripping enough. I go on to morosely question what this means about me – how personally do I take it. Practitioner-researchers can be moody, self-involved gits.

It would sound like the process was a torturous one, but that's not quite the case. There were been a number of significant occurrences that demonstrated the benefits of the whole process.

The best of these allowed me to concretise my pedagogical process into four major pillars: space, silence, image, and play.

Visually, it looks like the following (Figure 74):

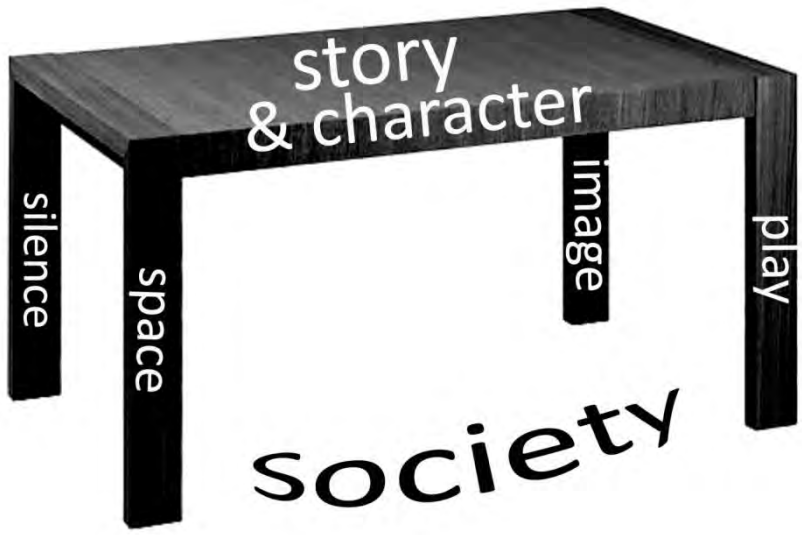

Figure 66: Rather crude visualisation of the author's process.

This has come from my experiences working in Visual and Mask Theatre, as outlined earlier in this thesis, and I shall attempt to break them all down. As I have said before, I never trained in any of these processes – they are things that I have learnt and pieced together over the course of many years. Hence, I do not and will never think of it as a "system"…every project I work on, creative or pedagogical, is a process. A lot of it is Lecoq, and thus European, based, but I never think of my process with Mask Theatre as a system – the "Lecoq police" I wrote about earlier do not exist for me, because I've never been drilled in any of his exercises directly. So for me there is no way, for example, to do Neutral or Character Mask or puppetry "correctly" – I've had input from various amazing pedagogues (Ellis Pearson, Jaqueline Dommisse, Jennie Reznek, Craig Leo, Giovanni Fusetti, Gaetan Schmid, Lara Bye, Andrew Buckland, James Cuningham, Helen Iskander, and many others) that I have been able to develop my own way through it all. I am so not a Lecoq-purist, although I think there is much value in how he taught.

As I have written about frequently, it all comes down to a trialogue that happens between the actor-performer, the mask itself, and the provocateur/audience.

This allows for a few important things. Firstly, one completely democratises the rehearsal-learning process. I think this is so important for the South African, particularly my position as a middle-aged white educator/maker, and this bears repeating:

This is also where silence comes in – cutting though language and cultural divides. Stating it upfront that although the main medium of instruction will be English (as it is in my case), but the manner of the process will be silence suggests that language will not dictate a dominant position. The non-verbal, or even pre-verbal, situation silences a lot of arguments we tend to have as a country.

If one has done this, then it's a lot easier to take the next step:

As I mentioned earlier, this was my *Stuck In The Middle With You* moment.

If one equalises everyone on the training or performance floor, then one immediately breaks down the unwanted and colonial "I know more than you – shut up and listen" hierarchy. Working with masks, for me, jumps this straight to the quick – we are in this together, and we will fail and succeed in similar measures together.

This brings to mind a pleasant Dutch phrase I have learned:

This literally means "paws (or feet) in the mud". Which, for me, means the provocateur/director/educator is in the thick moment of discovery with the student/actor – there's no division here at all. One just needs to be very present, and masks, more than anything, have taught me that.

Let us return to the four pillars, before I become too evangelical.

7.10. Space

John Wright (2017: 51-54) suggests that mask work is a "proprioceptive" skill. In essence, this refers to the body's innate and neuro-physical ability to determine where it is in space, and how it conducts presence, movement, and actions – according to the Oxford Dictionary, it is a physiological adjective "relating to stimuli that are produced and perceived within an organism, especially those connected with the position and movement of the body". The word "proprioception" itself, stems from the Latin word *proprius*, meaning "one's own" or "individual", and *capio* or *capere*, meaning "to take or grasp". Literally, then, it is "to take one's own" – in this instance, one's own space, presence, and movement. Sometimes referred to as "kinesthesia" (where the idea makes more sense to me from a performative perspective), this extends to such basic awareness and movements as being able to touch one's nose with one's finger when one's eyes are closed, or to distinguish between hard surfaces (such as tar) or soft ones (such as grass) when one is running or walking, regardless of whether one is wearing shoes or not.

In the realm of competitive sports, proprioception, highlights the difference between a proficient professional, and one that might be called "genius" or "instinctive" through a number of jaw-dropping feats. In the sport of cricket, one of the most iconic and stand-out moments of fielding ever was during the One Day International World Cup (March 1992). Playing against Pakistan, ace South African fielder Jonty Rhodes received the ball at backward point as the players set off for a run. In a split second, rather than attempt a shy at the stumps, he picked the ball up in one hand, sprinted to the wickets and launched himself through the air, flattening all three wickets and running out Inzamum Ul-Haq. That instinct, that awareness, and the split-second decision making and execution marked him forever as a "once in a generation" player. A batsman (to extend the cricketing analogy) like South African A.B. de Villiers and his "uncanny" ability to strike the ball at will from any point in the crease has earned him the nickname of "Mr 360°" – also a once-in-a-lifetime player. Those instincts, that awareness of self in space, that uncanniness, that hand-eye coordination – that is proprioception.[189]

What, then, does Wright mean by suggesting that mask work is a proprioceptive skill? And what might this suggest about the ability of masks to contribute to actor training and audience perception?

Wright (2017: 51) reflects on two key areas that one has innately as a human being in terms of proprioception; firstly, one's "body schema", which refers to "ongoing adjustments to balance, spatial orientation and physical alignment that tend to happen unconsciously". In essence, the

[189] Building up to the 2007 International Rugby Board World Cup, winning South African coach Jake White spoke often with great enthusiasm and respect for the ground-breaking work done by Dr Sherylle Calder in conditioning his players in hand-eye coordination. I do not want to go on too much about this as it is not my field, but I do find it all very fascinating. Particularly also due to the role it plays in child development, the role of proprioception in aiding autism, ADHD, and Asperger's Syndrome – but all of that is another life's work.

performer's presence and alignment in space is shifting and changing unconsciously and as such is subject to tiny little changes in one's environment depending on external and internal stimuli. A minute shift in sound (be it music, the ambient soundscape of life, or a sudden clashing sound) affects the body without one necessarily being aware of it – one is suddenly more relaxed and easy in space, or one's alarm system (fight or flight) is triggered, and one suddenly feels tenser and one's whole body alignment makes a change to deal with the situation accordingly.[190] Secondly, a human being has an innate sense of "body image" – the manner in which one feels about one's body and which "inspires us to make conscious adjustments to posture" (Wright, 2017: 51). This, reflects Wright, is similar to one trying on new clothing in a department store, and the instinctive way in which we turn and pose, and critique ourselves, in front of changing-room mirrors.

Both "body schema" and "body image" fall under proprioception, and this combination of instinct and conscious choices becomes extremely important and interesting when one is confronted – as a performer – by the mask.

7.11. The Telling Body and the Doing Body

Wright states that he prefers using the more practical terms "telling self" and "doing self" (*op cit*: 52-54) to the physiological term "proprioception". This is similar to other practitioners of visual theatre and mask work (for example, Lecoq, Fusetti, Wilsher, et al) in their wish to communicate in a more accessible and practical way If I were to walk into class and announce to my students: "Right, today we are going to be examining proprioception" – cue eye-rolling, yawning, and the worst failure of class and instruction. As Wright states about his use of telling/doing self: "I know such terms are simplistic, but complexity doesn't help you play masks" (Wright, 2017: 52). This is true. As I have said already, masks are terrible at conveying abstract thought or concepts; words are definitely needed to do this. One of the major strengths of playing masks is in establishing relationships, and seeing them play out over the course of a narrative; even if that narrative is not necessarily presented in a linear temporal form. In order to create these relationships, dichotomies, or polarities, or binaries, become very useful tools indeed. And, if the mask is designed well for the potential for movement and *contra-masque*, and the performer is adept at playing and jolting the mask to life, then simplicity is one's best friend. Complexity gets in the way; and an audience will immediately sense if the masks are trying to "be too clever".

This is, in essence, at the heart of what Wright is leaning towards when discussing the telling and doing self. In my work, I prefer to think of it more as the telling or doing *body*, but basically it all means the same thing. This ties in with an age-old debate over what "good acting" might be. How does one actor "shine", while another, equally as proficient, tends to disappear into the shadows? In the same way, this relates back to the earlier sporting analogy of the "once in a generation" cricketers mentioned. In the film *Funny Bones* (1995, directed by Peter Chelsom), a bittersweet look

[190] During the recent lockdown in the ongoing Coronavirus crisis, one of the most interesting papers I read about depression/anxiety – a condition that is shared globally – reframed the way that society tends to see depression. Rather than it being an "illness" or "affliction" that results in inertia and drowsiness, the writer reflects that the body, in shutting down, is actually trying to save itself. It involves a step beyond "fight or flight" tension readiness, and is similar to a smaller animal, in the jaws of a predator, realising it can't fight anymore and shugtins down, going limp, or even "playing dead", waiting for the moment when the predator relaxes its grip and the animal can attempt escape; or, to shut down and take away as much stress and pain of being eaten. In the same way, the low energy state of depression is the body shutting down in order to survive the present crisis. It's not a weakness, or an affliction – it is a defence mechanism; a hope for survival.

at the difference between commercialised American stand-up comedy routines and British comic performers who have comedy "in their bones" like DNA, the failed comic Tommy Fawkes (played by Oliver Pratt) travels to Blackpool to buy acts that he can exploit back home:

> I'm looking for another way. Jokes I've paid for. It doesn't work. No jokes. Funny people. Physical comedy. Original ideas…I'm looking for something. I don't know what. It's something special. I'm gonna find it here. Whoever brings it might not even know its worth. Whatever it is, it will be something I don't have.

Crude as this may be as an example, for me it sums up the distinction between *telling* and *doing*. In the film, American humour *tells* jokes; British humour *does* them.

This inevitably links directly into my positioning of myself within the classroom or on the rehearsal floor – I am not there to tell students or actors what to do, but rather to observe, witness, and respond to what the students or actors uncover, and provoke them further. That is to say, that in many respects my position is equally proprioceptive in that I too need to know where I am, innately, within the space, literally and figuratively, and be confident in that position and be able to respond to actors in the same way that actors respond to provocations and suggestions from myself, the facilitator-director, or their fellow actors.

In other words, I am there to engage myself as a *doing* body and self, inasmuch as I am steering the student or actor towards discovering or uncovering that which they already know. It becomes a delicate and reciprocal dance of listening and responding, within the moment – a *doing* activity, and not a mental one.

Be that as it may, the actual splitting of telling and doing is a false binary. The ideal situation is a balance between the two so that it operates not as a binary but as a continuum. The experience and knowledge that I have built up over the last few decades is directly part of my *telling* self or body, and anchors me in the space. I know where I am, and I know what I do and can do, and I have faith and confidence in that to allow the *doing* self and body to be present, to receive, and to respond accordingly. This continuum has a two-way interaction also, as I am engaging with a student or an actor's similar continuum – it is not a closed system. If it were closed, then I would be residing squarely within the *telling* self or body, running on some form of automation, and that has no real living pedagogic value to myself or people I am engaging with.

Expounding on this, the problems start emerging, as Wright (2017: 52) says:

> …when the *telling* self tries to do the work of the *doing* self. When someone seems to be speaking that little bit too loud, or when you find yourself becoming self-conscious and uncomfortable on stage, and you feel that everything you do looks as if you've been told to do it, it's always the *telling* self interfering in something that the *doing* self does so much better.

Add to this another area where the *telling* self or body interferes: where the student or actor is trying to "do it right" – either to not look like a fool, or to please the facilitator. This is where the dance between the facilitator-director and the student-actor becomes very fragile and delicate, and one needs endless patience to work through that block and continue encouraging a shared journey of

discovery. The proprioceptive experience is everything at this stage – the body knows and will reveal itself if one is prepared to just be stiller and quieter; it doesn't need to be told. In fact, it will probably resist discovery or assimilation of the experience if it is told to do something.

In mask work in particular, performances are both simplified and amplified. Accordingly, as Wright suggests, mask work is indeed a highly proprioceptive skill.

Consider the following exercise. I learnt it from acclaimed actor David Alcock many years ago and have adapted it to work with Deaf and hearing participants, acting for Physical Theatre and mask students, as well as acting for screen students. I use it in class, but have also drawn on it during "Listen With Your Eyes" lecture-demonstrations before hundreds of scholars at the South African Schools' Festivals circuit.

7.12. The Safe Space Game

The game is for two people (A & B) or, within class, two rows of people (1 row A, and the other B). A & B stand at opposite sides of the space (10 metres or so, but it can also be played in a smaller space). They make eye contact. Without losing eye contact, A starts walking slowly towards B. When they get to the space that they feel is the optimal "safe" distance (where either they feel to go any further would be violate space or they get the feeling that B is becoming uncomfortable), they stop. At the safe space, they maintain eye contact; after a bit, without losing eye contact, A walks backwards to their starting spot.

B then repeats the exercise to A.

A short discussion ensues – what does one notice or experience as A or B? If there is an audience – what do they feel?

The game goes a step further. A repeats the same first part of advancing on B keeping eye contact and stopping at the safe space. After a pause, A then makes the conscious decision to break the space and get as close as they can to B – right up in their face without touching them in any way. Still maintaining eye contact, they walk backwards to the beginning point.

B then repeats the exercise to A.

A short discussion ensues – what does one notice or experience as A or B? If there is an audience – what do they feel?

The game goes a step further yet. A repeats the same first part of advancing on B keeping eye contact and stopping at the safe space. After a pause, A then makes the conscious decision to break the space and get as close as they can to B –but rather than pausing, walks around B and stands as close as they can to B with touching them. After a bit they walk round and regain eye contact. They start walking backwards, but then break eye contact by turning around and walking back to the beginning point, their backs to B.

B then repeats the exercise to A.

> Allow A & B to reconcile by thanking each other, high-fiving, or hugging to relieve the tension. A longer discussion ensues – what can we say about this? What does one notice or experience as A or B? If there is an audience – what do they feel?

This is ostensibly a game of the observation of space and the minute changes of tension that occur as space contracts or expands according to bodies within it. It is highly revealing and is immediately accessible because bodies do not lie. The exercise works best with total strangers, but is surprisingly effective also in classrooms where students may be great friends or have worked together for a few years.

The way it works is by foregrounding the *doing* body and self absolutely – words are not forbidden, but usually participants remain quiet unless they are forced to speak as a defence mechanism to their space being invaded. This tension breaking the silence in the form of nervous words becomes a valuable discussion point.

In the first step, participants generally remark on space suddenly becoming solid. As they are in eye contact, even the most laid-back participant, or one "playing cool", feels the constriction of space. The first stop at a safe space comes either from the protagonist feeling insecure and suddenly tense, or reading a slight shift in tension from their partner – shoulders rise, fingers fiddle, eyes widen, breath stops, feet shuffle. Even those who claim they "feel no unsafety" and march right up to their partner from the outset can quickly be debunked – generally they psyche themselves up into a high state of tension by clenching their fists, or jutting their jaw or chest forwards.

During the second step, the results are even clearer and more amplified. Some can feel quite triggered by the invasion of space, so as facilitator one has to keep a close eye on proceedings. The sense of tension shoots up – women tend to cross their arms over their chest, men will look to protect their groin. If there is a height difference between partners, one witnesses a lot of tension looking up or down at their partners and it becomes a real challenge of power. This can either be held and stretched out as long as it holds; or, invariably, someone will look down or away in submission. The sense of victory is palpable in the other as they return to their starting position with a certain swagger. There is also a large amount of laughter at this stage – anything to break the sudden ramped-up tension.

The third and final step is a lesson in intimidation – the one standing behind the other has all the power, with the final look and walk away a dismissal of their partner as a threat or importance. Scholars respond very well to this as they all know the disparity of power as a teacher stalks around the classroom as one sits at one's desk, and they loom over one and one tends to feel guilty even though having done nothing wrong! This is especially true during written exams, but participants are made aware of how to manipulate space in even the most subtle way. Usually, I will tend to start with male advancing on female, and then flip it to show women they can take control of a situation by use of space and also reading tension and understanding how it works. It is perhaps a stereotypical situation, but I encourage them to watch social interactions to see the above situations at play – for example, at a bar or club, males assert their dominance by advancing on females and forcing them into a space they can't escape from (a wall, or perhaps boxed in by people or the corner of the bar), at which point there is a submission as the females look away and males are in

control of the situation. So, having now witnessed how the body instinctively reacts, or seeing various reactions, one doesn't have to be victim to such a circumstance, but utilise both the *telling* and *doing* self and body to turn the situation on its head.

This all sounds incredibly simplistic, and make no mistake – it is. However, it is a vital observation and situation to experience because so often one is unaware of what effect one's positioning in space has on another body or person, and how, in witnessing such an interaction, the witness, or audience, without a word having been said, starts to see the beginning of a narrative unfold. As Wrights says, and it bears repeating: "complexity doesn't help you play masks".[191]

Where the game is also revealing is witnessing an audience's response to it – even if the participants are not completely aware of the shifts in tension yet, or perhaps cannot articulate it, the *audience* definitely feels it. When done in front of hundreds of people, those watching cannot help but respond to the action – as A gets closer to B, there is a growing sense of anticipation and tension; hissed in-breaths, laughs, and "oooohs" abound. When A breaks the space in the second step, this is escalated – very often there is a communal "yho" as they feel the conscious decision to step closer. If the participants playing the game are aware of the audience, this usually feeds into their sense of tension, or power or lack thereof, which in turn fuels the audience further. And so on the loop continues, resulting in a very heightened and shared encounter. Here one sees the effect of an audience immediately on a situation, and how they tend to rush in to fill the available blank space. No, not blank – the space is highly charged, but the context is unknown at the moment, or the sense of not knowing what is going to happen, so the audience's imagination rushes into that space and fills it according to each audience's specific imagination. Each member relates to the situation according to their own experience of such a situation and one can create a satisfying and very personal experience. This is key to understanding how audiences react and respond to full-faced silent masks. This also closes the trialogue between mask, actor, and audience, providing a very unique and personal experience of theatre.

Toby Wilsher (2007) details a similar exercise where he has two masks approach each other slowly from opposite sides of the room, as if moving towards each other to dance together at a school dance or in a club. Actors take as long as they want or can, seeing how far they can stretch the moment of approaching each other. The goal of the exercise is never to actually touch – as they reach closer proximity, they can then slowly circle each other, still never touching or starting to dance, and then slowly back away. It is an excruciatingly intimate and raw experience to witness this, as the watcher's imagination is working overtime to fill in the context, the hopes, the fears, and the desires; the possibilities. It can also go on for too long and the whole situation crumbles, or veers off into sentimentality, but even in doing so, it becomes a useful learning opportunity to see how long one can stretch a moment for and at which point does that moment overstay its welcome.

As stated, I use this exercise very often right at the beginning of a learning or creative process as it jumps the participants and observers into remembering or experiencing the power of space on

[191] While the Safe Space Game here is detailed for unmasked participants, it is an essential building block for mask training and can easily be played again later with mask.

stage, as well as to activate the *doing* self or body and ramp up one's proprioceptive skill. Lecoq said it, and I often add:

> "…'Bodies don't lie. Over 70% of communication is through body language.' [Rob Murray] paraphrases Lecoq: "'Just be quiet. Listen. Play. And Theatre will happen.'" (Middeke and Schnierer, 2015: 90).

This is also where FTH:K's tagline came from: "Listen with your eyes."'

I was recently reminded of this proprioceptive game by an unscripted mini-drama I was plunged into when I was out grocery shopping during the Covid-19 lockdown. Here's the situation: I am standing in the queue at the Pick n Pay, it is the festive season of 2020, and I am waiting for my turn to pay for groceries in my trolley. It's holiday time, so I am in no hurry (although the queues are long and the whole shop fairly busy). Everyone is, mercifully, wearing masks and doing their best to maintain all protocols. In front of me in the queue is a slightly anxious white lady finishing her transaction. The cashier sprays down the counter. My turn had come. I shift forward slightly to start putting my things down. The previous lady comes back to the till because she forgot to draw cash-back. I pause before unloading and stand there patiently, minding my own business, not in any hurry. But she has sensed movement.

In an impressive shift from nowhere to full-blast, she starts screaming at me: "What are you *doing*?! Move back, move *back*!!" This dumbfounds me and I hesitate, trying to work out what is going on. She continues screaming at me that I am too close, that she is in the age group that is at risk and, above all, that I must move back. I don't like her tone of voice and rather than move, I insist that she not use that tone with me but rather be a bit more civil. Behind me I aware of other shoppers queuing for their turn; a little *frisson* runs through them as they sense, as all crowds sense, a confrontation coming. She is now flushed red and all but foaming under her mask as she continues her barrage at me. I probably shouldn't have sworn, but exasperated I say something like "Fucken hell, what's the problem …"; this emboldens her: "I said fucking MOVE BACK!!!"

I check my feet – as I thought, I'm standing on the next red line on the floor. She is, by observation, actually inching forward towards me and breaking the social distance. I decide against pointing this out so back up to the socially accepted distance again. With trembling hands and passive aggressive phrases like "some people don't care" or "some people have no sense of space" and other things I don't catch, she completes her second transaction. I catch the eye of the cashier and we share an eye-roll and I sigh. My partner has me by the arm, urging me to let it go; but I plant myself and just stare at her. I'm not going to do anything, but I am not going to back away from this situation and give her an excuse for bad behaviour.

However, she is not done – she has been building up to one last furious salvo (here in caps for effect of her full impressive volume): "YOU KNOW – YOU'RE A BIG MAN!!" (This is true) "A BIG SCARY MAN!!" (Well, now; no – I'm just not going to take your nonsense) "YOU REMIND ME OF A BULLY." (Say what now?) "THAT'S WHAT YOU ARE – YOU'RE A BULLY! A *BULLY*!!!"

And with that she's off in a cloud of indignance and rage, leaving behind one bemused shopper, a perplexed cashier, some incredulous shoppers in the queue, and a clean-up on aisle four.

I don't mean to belittle her – I have no idea who she is and what has happened in her life to be so fearful of people; I also understand perfectly that the pandemic and its ensuing lockdown and need for safety has been extremely stressful and traumatic; for *all* of us. However, it did reveal a perfect example of space interplay, status, negotiation, power, and became a perfect short scene that can be replayed or developed into a longer narrative.

Let me break down the scene to its "motor" and major beats to make this clearer:

7.13. The Lady in the Supermarket Scene (Version 1 – a baseline)

1. The lady (A) is taking focus. A is involved with an activity (packing her groceries and paying for them).
2. I (B) step up to the cashier's till and stop. B waits and sends focus to A.
3. A finishes her activity and starts moving off.
4. This creates a vacuum. B takes focus and makes to move forward.
5. A stops abruptly, takes focus by her movement, and turns back sharply.
6. B hesitates and arrests his movement. B goes back to waiting, sending focus to A.
7. A feels the movement and stops. A grabs B's focus and angrily gestures to him to retreat (establishing a rhythm).
8. B hesitates, unsure of what is going on. B looks around briefly, then back at A to gesture "what?".
9. A gets angrier and repeats the gesture to move back (developing the rhythm).
10. B looks around again, registers annoyance and tries to placate A with a gesture – "calm down".
11. A gestures one final time (rule of threes – breaking the rhythm).
12. B looks down at the floor. B shrugs and shifts backward slightly.
13. A, in a state of high agitation and therefore tension, completes her second activity.
14. B stands very still in space, now sending a ferocious focus towards A.
15. Once complete, A, feeling the stare, thinks and builds herself up for one last attack. She moves forward in space aggressively.
16. B stands his ground and does not move, not breaking eye contact.
17. A falters, has lost power, and has no recourse but to do her best to admonish B with an impotent incoherent series of gestures – full of sound and fury, but amounting to nothing.
18. B weathers this without moving or breaking contact.
19. A storms off.
20. B turns to audience and comments with a shrug – what just happened? Did you see that?

Version 1, then, boils down the interaction to its essence, with a bit of embellishment, finding body, space, tension, and gesture to replace the highly charged verbal barrage that occurred in reality. Finding the motor, as indicated above, creates a map to recreate the scene, and the above encapsulates a very satisfying non-verbal interaction that can easily be played in mask.

Taking this a step further, one can then add in more detail and a greater cast of characters:

7.14. The Lady in the Supermarket Scene (Version 2 – a development)

1. A cashier (C) waits at her till. C sprays the surface and wipes it. C sanitisers her hands (establishes rhythm/business).

2. A enters with her trolley, grabbing focus. A unpacks trolley, C starts scanning each item. A packs them back into her trolley.
3. B enters with his trolley and stops on the line on the floor. His partner (D) is checking her phone or some other activity in minor focus. B waits and sends focus to A.
4. Other shoppers (E) join the queue and wait. E will act as some form of chorus to the interaction about to happen. Right now, E waits in minor focus, helping send focus to A.
5. A finishes her activity and pays with her card. C sprays down the counter and sanitisers her hands as before (development of rhythm/business).
6. A starts moving off.
7. This creates a vacuum. C looks to B and B takes focus and makes to move forward. D makes to support the movement, and this ripples down the line of E.
8. A stops abruptly, takes focus by her movement. C and B look at A.
9. B hesitates and arrests his movement. D looks up from her phone and arrests her movement. The arresting of movement ripples down the line of E and they withdraw.
10. A turns back sharply.
11. B goes back to waiting, sending focus to A.
12. A feels the movement and stops. A grabs B's focus and angrily gestures to him to retreat (establishing a rhythm).
13. B hesitates, unsure of what is going on. B looks around briefly to D, who shrugs. E pretends not to notice anything, but they are sending focus to this all.
14. B connects with audience to show his confusion, then looks back at A to gesture "what?".
15. A gets angrier and repeats the gesture to move back (developing the rhythm).
16. The focus of E has become more intense on the situation unfolding.
17. B looks around again at D, and registers annoyance. D tries to get B to shrug it off.
18. B sighs.
19. B turns back to A and tries to placate A with a gesture – "calm down".
20. A gestures one final time (rule of threes – breaking the rhythm).
21. E withdraws sharply in shock. Slowly, E and D turn their focus back to B.
22. B takes their focus looks down at the floor. He considers his options.
23. E now can shadow his options – is he on the line, or in front of it? Are the others observing the same distance? Small interactions occur as the line sorts itself out.
24. E attention goes back to B.
25. B shrugs and shifts backward slightly.
26. E is hugely relieved and relaxes, then sends focus back to A.
27. A, in a state of high agitation and therefore tension, completes her second activity.
28. B stands very still in space, now sending a ferocious focus towards A.
29. D tries to take B's arm and pull him back, but he stands firm.
30. C feels the focus, makes eye contact with B, and they share a moment of exasperation.
31. B continues staring at A.
32. Once complete, A, feeling the stare, thinks and builds herself up for one last attack. She moves forward in space aggressively.
33. E takes a communal in-breath and prepares for war.
34. D steps forward, siding with B.
35. B stands his ground and does not move, not breaking eye contact.

36. A falters, has lost power, and has no recourse but to do her best to admonish B with an impotent incoherent series of gestures – full of sound and fury, but amounting to nothing.
37. B weathers this without moving or breaking contact.
38. E echoes A by siding with either A or B. Small arguments/fights break out, ignited by A's attack.
39. The attack ends. B remains unmoved.
40. A storms off.
41. B turns to D to comment, feels the tension of E.
42. B and D turn their focus to E, who now look anywhere except at B and D.
43. B and D turn to the audience and comment with a shrug – what just happened? Did you see that?
44. B and D have their one item scanned by C, they pay and exit.
45. Efficiently, C sprays down the counter, sanitisers her hands (breaking the rhythm), and sends focus belligerently to E – who's next?
46. E freezes and looks at the audience – unsure of whether they wish to fill the vacuum.

There you have it – the fleshed-out bones of what could be a very satisfying, and comic, scene that could take all of ten minutes to play out in mask. It can be developed further – even taken to absurd proportions. For example, the "chorus" of E could take sides between A and B and "arm" themselves with various objects they have in their trolleys or baskets – a baguette can become a spear, a colander a face mask, and so on, and the scene could escalate into the absolute chaos of a food/object fight. This could in turn mirror something like the pie fight that happens at the end of Stanley Kubrick's *Dr Strangelove – Or, How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb* (1964) where the world leaders, having started nuclear war, end up fighting like children in the War Room. Audiences may start reading into this the absurdities of imaginary border lines, or the clashes between Republican supporters and just about everyone else in the previous US election and the Capitol Riots of 2021.

However, this is not a conceptual scene – it is based on observation, and a spatial one at that. That is the motor, or engine that drives it; it is devastatingly simple, yet very effective. All one really has to do is be quiet, listen, and theatre will happen.

Again, I wish to state that I am not belittling the lady I had the scene with in reality – this is not a laugh at her expense. I shall continue on to discuss how the mask does not judge – it just presents characters as they are, warts and all. In fact, I would like to acknowledge and thank the lady in the supermarket for giving me a very clear recent example to write about, and imagine a scene that could be recreated out of it. I think I may yet come to make the scene as a sketch. Possibly, I could even turn it into a training game. Who said art isn't therapeutic?

However, it now appears that I have jumped the gun and gone straight to the detailing of a script/scene outline that would come only much later in the process of training and then devising a work. For example, the queue for water scene in *Waterline* (2015) which stands at the heart of that work, was created through a long process of observation, improvisation, playing, and gradually refining until such time as we were able to play the beats as I have suggested in the two versions above. Unfortunately, I don't think we ever wrote the beats down, which would have been useful to compare the above scenario to – the cast relied on muscle memory and repetition.

Furthermore, by doing what I have done above, I have not taken into consideration the most important aspect of all – what are the masks at play in the queue? Who are they? How do they move? I have, in effect, by imagining how the scene may go, imposed very much the idea of the *telling* self or body on the masks – A has to do this, B that, and so on. This is anathema to dealing with masks as I have discussed already and will continue to elucidate.

By this, I mean that the above scenes point to a form of choreography, rather than allowing the masks to determine the action. In order to do that, the actors playing the masks have to engage with the masks to bring the characters to life, so that the reactions and actions seem natural and fresh with each performance. To this end, I always instruct the actors, as part of their warm-up, to spend some time going back to the basics – check the angles of the mask, animate it, then spend some time in the mask feeling the character again as if for the first time. This helps to ground them and mitigates some of the potential pitfalls that arise if the actors just rely on the memory of the previous performance and just "go through the motions". There is nothing that exposes artifice in mask quicker than this.

While there is nothing intrinsically wrong with choreography to clean action up, particularly when it involves a number of characters on stage and it becomes difficult to follow the action clearly, it should never, recalling Wright, see the *telling* self or body take over from the *doing* one.

Wright (2017: 52) expands on this idea when he writes:

> Learned movements become instinctive over a period of time, and in music and sport instinctive reactions are greatly valued. Choreography can also become instinctive. Stanislavsky's notion of 'the conscious road leading to the gates of the unconscious' is often justified with the idea that, if you practise something long enough, it becomes instinctive. Yes, it's an impulse, and yes, the *doing self* is taking over; but good acting isn't choreography. To quote Big-Boy Stan again, acting is 'alive', and being 'alive' is a very conscious experience, and conscious experiences are firmly in the territory of the *telling self*. But some level of spontaneity is also essential if what you're playing is to be 'alive', and spontaneity is in the domain of the *doing self*. If you feel no spontaneity in what you're playing, there's something wrong.

For me, this unpacks how performance demands both conscious control and unconscious impulse, intellect and instinct seamlessly meshed yet from distinct parts of the psyche. Mastering this integration allows for work feeling simultaneously alive, in-the-moment yet grounded in psychological truth. Lacking either conscious control or subconscious spontaneity creates an imbalance undermining the "aliveness". The manipulation and understanding of this is perhaps what marks out a "great" performer from a more mediocre one. I don't know. I can't answer that question. It is so subjective and based on experience and experimentation.

I wrote earlier about the actors that "shine" and that seems redundant – again, surely that is a commonly held belief? Yet I think it is something that gets overlooked far too often and is where I believe a heightened sense of proprioception benefits any actor and that masks, by thrusting the actor into the very space to deal with that at a basic but highly complex level, have played and will continue to play a very instrumental role in actor training.

If I digress slightly and consider some of the actors who exhibit some of what Wright outlines above, then I have to think of the Familie Flöz crew who mesmerised me in *Hotel Paradiso* (seen at HIFA, the Harare International Festival of the Arts in 2011). While it may seem that I have a biased leaning towards John Wright, I have only ever seen one of his works – *On the Verge of Exploding* (at NAF, 1996); however, that experience I hold onto to this day, so must include Haley Carmichael and Paul Hunter in this digression.[192]

Similarly, Anton Adassinki and Tanya Khabarova from the Derevo ensemble are formidable. In South Africa, two of the finest actors I have worked with that exhibit similar greatness in this regard are Andrew Buckland and Liezl de Kock – they have the combination of the *telling* and *doing* self and body in spades. Similarly, James Cuningham and Helen Iskander (both studied at Lecoq) are two actors whom one could watch all day doing the most menial tasks and be completely entertained. Daniel Buckland has that too – as early as 2000, he was starting to be compared to his father and was described as a cynosure for the eyes. Mncedisi Shabangu and Lionel Newton have a similar ability, and to a somewhat different degree, the inspired partnership of Ellis Pearson and Bheki Mkhwane also.

The abovementioned (and it is by no means a complete list) represent some of the actors that I admire and long to work with through their innate ability to surf on a very thin line between order and chaos. Their performances seem almost dangerous at times, one has the feeling that they could collapse at any moment; but in reality, they are in complete control of what they are doing.

7.15. Silence (a reprise)

On 21 January 2014, Thozamile (Rocky) Mngcongo was murdered in Makhanda. He was the youngest member of the Phezulu stiltwalkers project with Richard Antrobus prior to that, and also Via Kasi (Phanstsula) Movers with Ayanda Nondlwana. He was an irrepressible force of nature, fiercely skilled, and a beautiful human being. He could easily have become a member of *Uyabona Ke* and would have been warmly welcomed.

Why I bring him up is in connection with a singular experience that I was party to with respect to the particular smash of silence and sound that we dived into with the *Uyabona Ke* project. Ayanda had organised a tribute to Rocky, to be performed at BB Zondani Hall in Rini, and called on the *Waterline* crew to help out. Of course, we were all there to support him and to celebrate the memory of Rocky.

The isiXhosa are a proud nation, and a highly verbal one, from my experiences. Everyone (though this tends predominantly to be the males) has the right to speak, even though they have to wait for their turn. There is a code and a hierarchy, but eventually one's turn will come. On the day of Rocky's memorial there was a heavy-set pastor who spoke first, and it was a fascinating display of verbiage and power. He rocked backward and forward on his feet, delivering a sermon of vim and vigour; I couldn't understand all the words, but I got the gist of things. Incredibly, the *Uyabona Ke* crew followed this up with a scene from *Waterline*. Totally non-verbal and silent, I watched the

[192] Carmichael, in a still from *On the Verge of Exploding*, graces the cover of Wright's first book, *Why is That so Funny?* (2005).

effect of this spread through the audience, including the pastor, who shook with laughter and bellowed out throughout the scene.

If ever I needed a reminder that Visual and Mask Theatre could work in and with all cultures in South Africa, this was it. I have written quite extensively about silence at the beginning of this thesis and do not have too much to add to that.

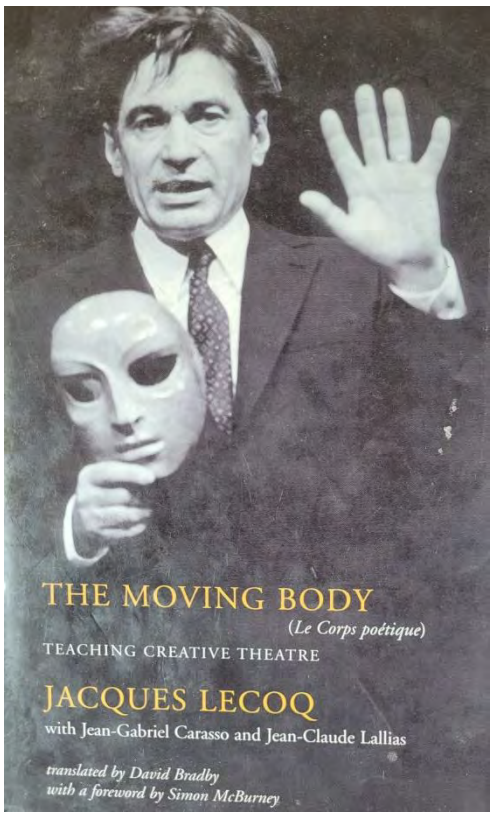

Figure 67: The cover of Jacques Lecoq's book, featuring a picture of him and a Neutral Mask.

What I do want to add is that, like many who have brushed against Lecoq, I too start with the Neutral Mask – what Lecoq calls "a reference point, a basic mask, a fulcrum mask for all the other masks." (Lecoq, 2000: 36). While I am not, as stated previously, a full-on Lecoq disciple, I do understand this need for a "reference point" underpinning the journey into masks. The Neutral Mask is one of the most difficult masks to animate as it forces the actor or student into a direct confrontation with their own habits, conscious or unconscious; it is uncompromising in its ability to expose these habits and becomes a source of frustration as participants battle to achieve the impossible notion of "neutrality". However, as Lecoq writes: "When a student has experienced this neutral starting point his body will be freed, like a blank page on which drama can be inscribed." (Lecoq, 2000: 36. See Figure 75).

In the light of this, I also understand why the use of Neutral Mask has become so sacrosanct to Lecoq students, and why it has built up an ethos of the right or wrong way to animate them. There is a set development of exercises that accompany Lecoq's use of this mask, as mentioned earlier – from "Waking Up for the First Time", through "Throwing a Stone" to "The Fundamental Journey". All of these exercises are useful and do indeed reveal habits and tics within the participant. The mask, though, and its use, has come in for some criticism – as mentioned previously, Wright (2017) is very dismissive of the "Lecoq police". And in South Africa, Jennie Reznek, artistic director and main performer at Magnet Theatre warns against its possible links to a colonialism and even racism: "The prevalent racism is what allowed me to keep for example the theory of the neutral body but reject the way that it was taught at Lecoq through the use of the neutral mask" (Reznek, 2012: 58).

In Cape Town, Iman Isaacs has designed and now sells, a set of Afrocentric Neutral Masks that she uses for teaching at University of Cape Town (UCT). (See Figure 76.)

Figure 168: Afrocentric Neutral Masks hand made by Iman Isaacs.

While, as I have said, I understand these reservations and the arguments that swirl around them, for my part I prefer to use the Neutral Mask as it is meant – to expose habits and learn about where the participants are going in terms of Mask Theatre. The Neutral Masks I teach with are not the classic Lecoq ones, which were first designed by Amleto Sartori, made in leather, had an Asian feel to them, and were designated "male" or "female".

It was in a residency with Giovanni Fusetti in 2008 that I learnt the two most important things about the Neutral Mask and quest for neutrality. The first occurred before even putting the Neutral Mask on. Fusetti instructed half the class to take up positions, unmasked, of a "neutral sleep" – what we thought was the perfect embodiment (the "sleep of sleeps") of being at rest. He then led the rest of the group through an observation of our positions – an arm under the head suggested sentimentality, a foot twisted under another suggested romanticism, flat on the back suggested exhaustion. In short – nothing was neutral, the body was telling a story, no matter how neutral we thought we were being.

The second was going through the exercises with the mask on – every "mistake" we made, whether by pausing too long, and thereby commenting on a moment, was not wasted; in fact, it was a moment to be "banked" for use in character mask. The Neutral Mask is an adventurer, very much like Joseph Campbell's Hero – it has no past and can only move forward, and encounter what is before it. Essentially, it is a blank slate and has no character. Character masks, on the other hand, are riddled with human doubt, history, hesitation, comment, and consideration. By striving for neutrality, we were learning a valuable lesson on how character masks work – in this way, I encountered, and now promote, work with the Neutral Mask as a form of Grotowski's *via negative*; in this instance, not so much an eradication of blocks, but understanding, or beginning to understand, how the body works in silence to say so much.

Lecoq himself spells this out eloquently:

> Whatever its dramatic style, all theatre profits from the experience an actor gains through masked performance. This is an example of teaching which does not operate directly, but through a ricochet effect, as in training for particular sports. Training to be a good shot-putter requires running; for a judo champion it requires body-building. Just a sideways approach is also needed in the field of theatre. The whole school works indirectly: we never proceed in a straight line towards our students' desired goal. If someone says to me, 'I want to be a clown,' I advise him to work on the neutral mask and the chorus. If he is a clown, it will come through (Lecoq, 2000: 53).

The above quote points directly to what I have learned to be something of a living embodiment of Grotowski's *via negative* -not so much an eradication of blocks to the actor but coming at something from a different angle. The "ricochet effect" that Lecoq speaks about is all important here. As I have written earlier, I have never had training directly in mask theatre, or even in directing, but I have come to these things by means of a "sideways approach" of choreography, mime, and physical theatre.

This is an area that I see frustrates my students so much, but in that there are important lessons being learnt together. I usually receive my students from Undergraduate studies, where lessons are a lot more regimented and broken down into skills blocks. Encountering the Neutral Mask, they are all at sea with the freedom presented them, and often battle with that, wanting to get things "right", and often asking for a demonstration of how to do things correctly. I never do that, trusting more in the process of discovering things together. I also make sure that the watching students comment first on a participant's attempts at neutrality – watching and observing is as important in training in Mask Theatre as is doing. I do not believe in the sovereignty of the facilitator or director in the process – my job is to watch and listen with my eyes, and then clean up any ambiguity or messiness; there is no such thing as "correct" or only one way of doing things.

The other thing I want to comment on in terms of silence is with regards to gesture. Students, and actors, working in silence, panic, and tend to over-compensate in gestural work. For example, all too often, I see an actor, new to the mask, gesture too much to another mask: you (pointing at another mask), come (gesture of being welcomed), here (pointing to the space they occupy). If the situation is under duress, this usually doubles down and becomes: you you come come here. This is too "noisy" and baffles the audience, or pulls them out of the cosy disbelief they had been sitting in. This would be a sign of the actor mistrusting the non-verbal mode they are operating in, and using gesture to replace verbal language in a way that does not work.

What mask (and also our working with the Deaf) teaches is that one can simplify this by using *one* gesture: come here. Wilsher (2007: 49-50) has a set of exercises that play with gesture lines. In this, he explores different heights of gestures aligned to the body – for example, gestures that happen below the waistline are often offhand, unless they are strong where they become sexual and animalistic; gestures from the stomach are truthful; and gestures above the eyes or head are crazy, wild –jubilant or tragic.

Understanding, and manipulating this, along with tension, space, and image, allows the actor to manipulate the mask further in terms of generating meaning.

7.16. Image

Let us consider a mask – in this case, one of my favourite ones: Old Janet, from *Pictures of You* (designed by Janni Younge. Figure 77).

Figure 69: Old Janet from *Pictures of You.*

She is an extraordinary character, and very complex to play. She has the ability to play sadness and pathos to an alarming extent, especially when played by the equally extraordinary Liezl de Kock. She also has in her the younger, more effervescent Janet as we see when we go back in time in the play.

How is this possible?

The design of the mask, the image that it creates, is paramount in Mask Theatre. A well-designed mask gives one all the tools one needs in creating a well-rounded, fully psychological character.

Let's take a closer look (Figures 78a and 78b):

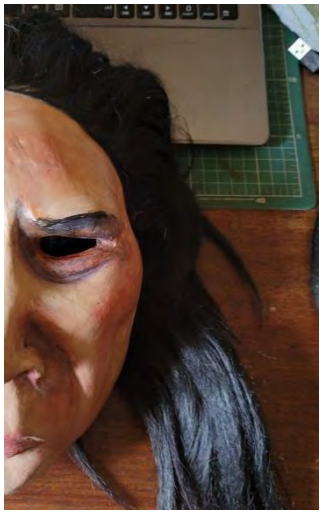

Figure 70a: Right side of Janet.

Figures 70b: Left side of Janet.

As can be seen, the two halves are very different. The right side is a lot softer, almost whimsical, with a slight smile, and a hopeful upward scoop of the eyebrow and eyeline. The left side is a lot more severe, the mouth line set in grim determination, the eyebrow almost grimacing, the nostril slightly flaring.

This immediately suggests a mask that has much potential for movement and expression – within its design sits a mask and *contramasque* ("counter-mask"), and the actor, aware of these differences, has many options to play. A slight tilt of the head reveals a different expression, light hitting the mask at a certain angle emphasises one expression over the other; it is no wonder that one of the frequent comments after a mask show is: "how did the masks *move*?"

This is very much mask as a performing object – the same principles apply here as they do for the puppet; or any other material for that matter.

This is also very *human*. I remember in the early days of the internet, there was a site where you could upload a picture of yourself, and then see how you would look if both halves of your face were similar – either left or right in a mirror image. And it just looked wrong. Horribly wrong. Uncanny Valley wrong – humanesque, but something weird about it.

Incidentally, and I have mentioned this before, African masks are by nature more symmetrical, and thus need a greater energy to push them into life. This is usually because they are carvings to invoke spirits – the spirit of animals, or forces of nature. The only time I have seen asymmetrical African masks was in a book where they included masks of people with mental diseases or ailments – here suddenly there were depictions of left and right sides of the faces being wildly different.

I guess it says much about our contemporary situation that these are faces we take for granted around us.

Here the design and designer, are key. Sally Cook (ex-Trestle Theatre performer and mask designer) writes:

> A key word that all these practitioners use is 'alive'. A good mask has 'life' and it is the designer who has the difficult task of giving the mask this gift. So how does a designer create life in a mask? It is very important that during the making process the designer is aware of how the light plays on the curves and contours being crafted because it is this which allows the subtle changes in emotion and character that are necessary in a good mask. (Cook, 2004) (See Figure 79).

Figure 71: Liezl de Kock assessing the potential of the mask of Janet to move, 2008.

The actors and director play an equal part in this as well, I believe – knowing roughly the narrative

ground we want to explore, we developed a system of researching different faces and presenting to our designers a collage of angles and expression that could be useful – an arch of an eyebrow here, a wrinkle there, and the like. Of course, this doesn't always work – as written about earlier, Janni and I had a bit of a miscommunication with the masks for the first iteration of *QUACK!*, and we had to amend the masks and work really hard to get the range of expressions needed.

Jacques Lecoq writes: "A good expressive mask must be able to transform, to be sad, happy, excited, without ultimately becoming fixed in the expression of a single moment. This is one of the main difficulties in its construction." (2000: 56). This is something that John Rudlin agrees with too: "a badly made mask … is not a mask at all and might as well be thrown away, or hung on a wall (if it has any decorative value)". (2000: 40)

This is something that occurs across the spectrum of Mask Theatre – Rudlin (2000) writes about the necessity of this for *Commedia* masks, and John Wright (2006 and 2017) is full of praise for Balinese mask-makers and actors (one of the oldest forms of mask still alive). John Emigh writes: "When a Balinese actor holds a new mask in his hand, gazing upon it, turning it this way and that, making it move to a silent music, he is assessing the potential life of the mask" (Emigh, 1996: 275).

I am very fortunate to have worked with Janni, Cristina, and Casha as mask designers in my career – all of them understand the above innately and have designed some excellent masks over the years.

7.17. Play

Back to the point, though, how does one begin using proprioceptive experiences and skills in such a way that they keep the *doing* self and body in play without sitting back on the *telling* self or body to see one through?

This is where I jumped the gun earlier. Having experienced the Safe Space Game, and considering the Lady in the Supermarket scene, the next step would be how to extract a further essence from both to set a structure on stage that allows the *doing* body to do what it needs to do and be?

One of the most effective ways, for both mask and physical performer, is to construct action in a series of games. These are then played hard and fast, according to their rules, in such a way that the game is undeclared and acts just as a driving force underpinning the narrative; however, what the audience sees and experiences, is something else altogether – stimulated imaginatively and emotionally, and investing strongly and personally in the action, audiences fill in the blanks and bring a rich and detailed closure to the narrative. As Ellis Pearson said at a residency I participated in during 2003: "The stories we tell are just *organised activities* [emphasis mine]".

I think this is a wonderful way to look at how Visual and Mask Theatre works – in essence, we (the creators) are playing a game with you (the audience); we are wearing inanimate objects that are obviously not real, but we are going to animate them in such a way that they become "alive". Furthermore, if the "motor" of a scene is actually a game the actors are playing on stage, and they play the stakes hard, the audience reads the stakes and rush in to provide meaning – threat, danger, seduction, or the like.

In a non-verbal work I made with FTH:K in 2011, *Office Block*, our major set piece was a water cooler and hundreds of paper cups. In one scene, two male office clerks, gossiping and being laddish at the cooler, begin a spitting contest: they take turns at taking a mouthful of water, then see how far they can spit it on stage. It's ridiculous and infantile, but the game reveals a lot of toxic masculinity and rivalry. A third male enters, and they transfer their aggression onto him – deriding him when he isn't very good at the game. This ramps the tension and situation up. It starts entering real danger when a female clerk enters, and the two bullies and their victim turn their attention on her, and the game escalates to where they are competing spitting water all over her. After the climax, the males withdraw – the two bullies exuberant, the bullied male with an uneasy look back at the female, and the female left dripping with water in a humiliating puddle, all alone.

It was a harrowing scene, and one very uncomfortable to watch night after night, as it caught a cycle of violence and bullying that pushes men to conduct a violent act against women. The nature of that "attack" was read in different ways by the audience – some saw a rape, some harassment. But at essence it was just a game, played in space and silence; it was just an "organised activity".

We found a similar kind of game in *Waterline* (2015), where the townsfolk, at their breaking point, rebel against the corrupt politician and the foreigner who have stockpiled all the available water. We had set the convention that water was symbolised by small 500ml plastic bottles – these were gathered in a plastic pool (a "firepool", if you will – with many references to Zuma's ridiculous explanations of expensive renovations to his homestead of Nkandla); in the climactic scene, the townsfolk, now wearing PPE masks with a black "X" over the mouth area, enter with bottles of their own, tapping and beating out a militant rhythm on the floor, and advance threateningly on the stockpile. Then, in an orgy of "violence", they rip the pool apart and smash and kick and throw plastic bottles everywhere. As they do this, the maniacal giggling of Zuma is heard over the soundtrack. As the violence abates, worn out, the masked characters return to witness the devastation on stage and pick their way through the debris.

But here again, nothing has happened that has been realistically "violent" – it has all been suggestion, image, and metaphor; it has all been an "organised activity".

This is where all the pillars weave together – this is image played in silence with an observation of space, and it reveals character development within the context of society. And in doing so, comments and reflects on society, I feel, perhaps more eloquently than using words. It gives the viewer a very intimate and personal experience of something quite brutal; or beautiful, if we consider the swing sex scene in *Womb Tide*.

More than this, I also believe it offers the performer a layer of protection from the depths of emotion that one has to play night after night. For want of a better expression, it offers them a mask against what could be quite psychologically dangerous to play repeatedly. I find this especially true with younger performers and students. It pains me to see my students "lose themselves" in a role and think that the only way to play a dangerous or intimate situation is to connect with it personally, and they have no recourse to "de-role" or get out of the febrile state of self/character crossover. Time and again I suggest they need to find a "mask to play" – that it's not them, and they need to keep a space between themselves and the characters they play; that they need to find a way to be able to take that mask off and return safely to themselves.

Consider this next game – it is actually a John Wright game, which I first played it with James Cuningham and Helen Iskander during a residency in 2006. Many versions of this game occur – Complicite, for example, play it with cane sticks, and I've experienced it with Magnet Theatre and many other practitioners. This can be played both masked and unmasked.

7.18. The Fixed Space Game

A game for 2 players – A and B. The rules are very simple – both stand about a metre apart from each other and start from stillness. A's goal is to close the gap between her and B in any manner possible. B's goal is to maintain the distance. After a few minutes, the roles reverse.

And that is it. It's taking the Safe Space concept and pushing it into action. When participants start the game at first, they can tend to fall into a "mirroring" game – for example, A takes a step forward, B takes a step back; A moves left, B moves right. That, however, is a different exercise. This is about precision and acute listening – the slightest move can have the biggest impact. What can also happen, particularly if the participants are younger, is a great mess of energy and movement – A barrels through space to get to B who is in freefall trying to get away. This can become dangerous as B has no way of knowing where they are going and can easily collide with a wall or another participant in the group. It is also unsustainable, and, quite frankly, boring to play at that form of gross energy and movement. The aim is to encourage guile, wit, strategy; and above all – *stillness*. How long can A wait before making a move on B? What happens to B's apprehension and tension? The game, again simplistic, is a great teacher of economy and precision – qualities that the mask needs over and above all else.

A development of the game, or taking it a step further, occurs after both A and B have had a turn at advancing. Now, one changes the rule slightly and encourages a more free interplay of *changing* between who advances. This is done silently, with no signalling or anything like that, but participants must learn to read sudden or subtle changes of intent – A might be bullying B into a corner, and B suddenly stands up to A by taking the initiative and moves forward and suddenly A has to back off. If A doesn't, and there is a clash of wills, then all that is left to play is conflict – there will be a confrontation; there has to be. More interesting is to see how long the pair can eke out the interactions *before* a confrontation – this is the delicious silence and space for an audience to enter and close the circuit of narrative with their own expectations, experiences, and imaginations.

If I return briefly to the Lady in the Supermarket – when she advanced on me, yelling, thinking she was in control of the situation, I am sure she expected me to move back and submit to her. The fact that I didn't, and held my space, unsettled her, and threw her confidence. All that was left to do was to profile and project onto me something she actually herself was exhibiting: that she was trying to bully me cloaked by indignation and very much playing the victim. By standing firm, I flipped the situation – not, as I am at pain again to state, to belittle her, but because there was no recourse to reason with her verbally, so to make a stand I played space and stillness.

A similar experience occurs in that interaction most can relate to walking down a street and encountering another pedestrian. There is an awkward moment where you both realise you are going to collide; so you stop. And then both move left or right at the same time. Both stop again, and move in the opposite direction. And then awkwardly, negotiate who goes left or right. And

then you both move on, slightly flushed and heart beating wildly, though also bemused at the absurdity of it all and that it will probably happen again at some point.

The Fixed Space Game is then a very useful tool to develop the proprioceptive skill needed for mask work – masks work best at a distance anyway, and consequently by adding rules to how they move in space, and keep or try to close distance, this opens up a world of possibility.

As an afterthought, I wonder if the pandemic and the conditions we all live in now – masks, social distancing, and the like – are in the end going to develop everyone's sense of proprioception? Or will it somehow lessen it, by reducing us to online avatars with very little space to interact in? Much food for thought.

Lastly, for a project researching the potential of silent masks, ironically one of the more theatrically satisfying scenes of *Waterline* involves an integration of what traditionally can be seen as "community theatre" with mask work in an integration of silence and sound, within the ethos of playing with conventions.

Our Hero has been refused his proposal of marriage to his girlfriend because he doesn't have any water, and she chooses another beau. Defeated, he slumps down next to a drunken old man (in this instance, our Mentor archetype) who shows him a place he can get water and possibly win her back. So, he sets off on a journey.

A journal entry from June 2015 reveals:

> A curious thing is happening through the process of creating and rehearsing *Waterline* – it started as barter, a trade: a research group for my PhD for a production that the group can thereafter own and play anywhere they can for the next few years. Coming into it, I thought (naively) that I was some form of conduit for the group, a point to allow them all to move through as they gather skills and a performance. What's happening is not dissimilar to what happened with working with the Deaf with FTH:K – and it blows me away again. It's the amount of imprinting that the group has on the facilitator, and how the lines between the two get so deliciously blurred.
>
> *Waterline* was initially planned as a silent mask piece in order to test the curriculum in place and a developing training methodology. What I didn't foresee were the elastic and very fluid boundaries between codes, and how my experience with the group would imprint upon my and the group's evolution.
>
> A case in point: a Saturday morning, and me and a number of the group are sitting in our basement workspace, *papier mâché*-ing masks … Ayanda starts up a song (the beginning of the "Uyabona Ke" song), the others pitch in, and within the course of the next hour, they have worked out the rough melody and subsequent harmonies, for a working song. As I listen, it strikes me how this could work on stage – we've plotted a journey for our Hero, a physicalised trip through wind and storm, which always looked lame, but suddenly, as they sing, and I am up to my elbows in paper and glue, I can't help but think: this is it! I can see it on stage already: the chorus (unmasked) sings as the Hero (masked) plays out a convention of walking and travelling. I am excited by the prospects of this.
>
> When we put it on the floor, the potential it has is manifest. The masks haven't led us here – bizarrely, the sound after silence has. The mix, or the fusion, is infectious. I start to realise

that all I believe, and all I hold as sacrosanct, matters little in the eye of opportunities and mistakes such as this. We are all still learning. I think that's a good thing.

This discovery excites me, and hopefully us … so, where else can we use this? [193]

Figure 72: Our Hero on his journey as other (unmasked) actors sing the "Uyabona Ke" song.

On stage, the action unfolds thus: as our Hero (the masked character) sets out on his journey, the other six members, unmasked, drift onto stage to pick up on a walking motif and sing the "Uyabona Ke" song. (See Figure 80.) We jump form into a stylised walking convention as the song develops. We jump form again as we shift from life-sized action to miniaturised action, where the hero becomes a set of fingers walking across the landscape suggested by the changing plane of a bench. He wanders this way and that, urged on by the singing of the chorus. He is pursued by a pack of dogs, makes his way over many physical obstructions created by the chorus, and the journey is long and hard. Finally, struggling up a hill, we jump back into live action as he sees the village that may contain his salvation – the mystical place where water will become available. He climbs up onto the bench (now a hill or mountain), to get a better view. The chorus splits and drifts off stage, leaving us with the resolve of the central character to enter the village and seek his destiny.

Within this short scene, there are a number of elements at play that for me highlight how the integration of masks and physical performance can work:

1. A combination of masked and unmasked performers, and thus an integration of what can be seen as a more Western tradition with a local community tradition of performance;
2. The mask itself and *le contramasque* [counter-mask] – we see the masked character undergo several changes of emotion, from hope, to determination, to frustrated, to disappointment, to being forlorn, and then back to hope;
3. A fusion and interplay between silence (the masked character) and sound (the chorus);
4. Jumping form – a technique espoused by Wilsher (2007) as one of the fundamental aspects in creating work with masks;
5. A contraction of time and space – the journey which in real time would encompass several months is simplified into a few minutes. Similarly, the space which in reality would consist of different landscapes, countries, and vastly different terrains, is theatrically amplified within a 1 x 0.5m area on stage.

[193] Murray, R. (2015). Practice Journal: Field Notes. Unpublished.

Later in the story, the Hero is corrupted by the Minister and is driven to steal and subsequently stockpile all the water in the community. With our discovery of the silence/sound convention of telling the story of the journey, we reach out once again. The scene of abusing his power, we construct a song that is sung by unmasked characters offstage as onstage we see the action play itself out: a dignified old man (masked) is confronted by a thug (masked) and his meagre collection of water is stolen. A drunk tries to find solace with a park bench … the thug (this time the Hero) beats him up and steals his water. A boy prepares for sleep, and two thugs break into the house and steal his bedtime water.

This montage happens as the cast (dropping in and out of mask) sing the "*Amanz' iwhetu*" [there is no water] song. It's a clever and concise scene of characters moving in and out of mask, as time compresses again, and we witness the Hero abusing his power and becoming the epitome of everything he hates.

7.19. Legacy of the *Uyabona Ke* Project

Most of the contributors to the original project regrouped in 2016, to create a further mask work, *Falling Off The Horn*, directed by RU Drama Department Masters director student Sam Pennington. This they presented at the 2016 NAF Fringe Festival and won themselves a second Standard Bank Ovation Award, along with a repeat appearance (with some new members) of *Waterline*.

Falling Off The Horn, a story of local xenophobia that resonated with the 2015 riots in Makhanda and indeed the country, further cemented local performers creating Visual and Mask Theatre that spoke to societal issues in a non-verbal way, as much as it highlighted local talent and potential. Watching it in 2016 with colleagues from the Brighton Fringe Festival and Amsterdam Fringe Festival, they turned to me and said: "you've really started something here." As much as I would like to take ownership of this, it really wasn't up to me, but rather a group of artists taking the most of their opportunities.

Falling Off The Horn would go on to tour to Cape Town Fringe and also Hilton Arts Festival of that year, and I had the highest hopes it would set a lasting stain on the silence of Makhanda.

This was unfortunately not to be, as the group dispersed and disbanded shortly thereafter. The core members of the group were drawn into further public acclaim and prominence with their involvement with the South African premiere of *The Gruffalo*, directed by Tara Notcutt (2016-2018). This was an incredible achievement and platform for the development of local artists, and if any actions we had as *Uyabona Ke* pushed this further, then I am very happy.

7.20. Where Are They Now?

I have lost touch with some of the original *Uyabona Ke* members over the years, but this is what I know of them.

Anele Heshu – I think still currently resident in Makhanda and doing his thing acting and collaborating with his brothers in theatrical projects.

Mandisi Heshu – Mandisi "Ninja" was cast in *The Gruffalo*, and after that relocated to Durban with his partner to chase an artistic career. He recently moved to Cape Town hoping to further his studies in Animation.

Mziwanele Jodwana – last seen in Makhanda working as a chef in a restaurant to support his family.

Khaya Kondile – Khaya moved to Gqeberha (Port Elizabeth) to study and start his own businesses. This young man will be unstoppable.

Nombasa Ngoqo – was cast in *The Gruffalo* and toured the country. She moved to Cape Town to attempt a real go at the industry. The pandemic and shrinking of work forced her back to Makhanda where her daughter has just entered High School.

Ayanda Nondlwana – was cast in *The Gruffalo* and toured everywhere winning plaudits for his performance. Ayanda, or "Firestarter", was also finally integrated into the RU Drama Department teaching division, crossing over from "community" performer to official "teacher". He was tragically murdered in Makhanda in 2019, very close to where his partner in his successful *Pantsula* group, Rocky, was also murdered.

Zwelenzima Somyali – Zweli I haven't seen for a few years, as the pandemic has kept me from NAF since 2019. I hope and trust that he is still active and prominent in the local scene – a mainstay of hope and inspiration, as he has always been, particularly with young learners.

Xolela Tsili – now lives in Cape Town and does some amazing work with ASSITEJ and young audiences. Xolela has kept a very active interest in puppetry also.

7.21. Changing Pedagogies

It is really interesting, writing this, to realise I have actually constructed my own pedagogy based on the pillars of space, silence, image, and play, with all these grounded in the society we live in. This thesis has plunged me backward and forward in time, and what I remember from early teaching days was, as we all do initially, I think, we teach what we know and have learnt, and we teach *how* we were taught. In my first forays into teaching, I was a lot more into technique and I taught it at a manic pace – trying to outdo my students in energy and stamina. It was exhausting.

Nowadays, I take a much more playful and leisurely pace in classes. Yes, I am much older these days and am unable to maintain the bouncy, athleticism of youth. But I also think that my experiences, and reflections on them, have quietened me down, slowed me down. I have less to prove these days, I suppose, than I did back then; now I can afford to be a lot more present with my students and watch and listen to what they are doing, before offering up any observation or thoughts.

Working with the Deaf certainly taught me a lot about the above, and so too did working with masks. Just as an actor or student slowly learns about controlling the space with the silent mask, and trusts in the mask's design to hold attention, I too have learnt this as a facilitator. By saying this, I am not putting one approach above another – technique is still very important and necessary, and should go hand in hand with a more playful, open, approach where there isn't a set outcome, but more an open-ended discovery between facilitator and participant.

Chapter 8: Conclusion

Almost ten years have passed since the events and productions analysed in this thesis. Theatre in South Africa, remains largely unchanged and still panders to a text-based model, now so outdated globally. I know that is a controversial statement and does not take into account the great strides that Physical Theatre, Live Art, and Performance Art have made over recent years. However, theatre is still dominated by the idea of a scriptwriter creating scenes and dialogue for actors. There still seems to be a wariness of performing objects (masks, puppets, and the like) being the guiding principle and therefore "text". This is not only true for South Africa, but also worldwide. In 2022, I read an article by Lyn Gardner, which still talks about the esteemed London International Mime Festival (LIMF), a bastion of physical and visual theatre, as searching for a "drive for legitimacy and wanting to be taken seriously" (Gardner, 2022).

True, this is from a very global North perspective, and has a lot to do with a certain pandemic that has plagued (cough) the world since 2020. As the industry sputters back to life, we see here in the South a dependence on well-known classics, particularly those from the canon of protest theatre times. The irony of teaching about works such as *Woza Albert* (1983), which started off life as a devised production but is now studied largely as a script is not lost on me.

Over the last few years, one can see the alarming closure of more independent venues – the Intimate Theatre which ripped a hole in the theatre scene in Cape Town; the Alexander Bar, also in Cape Town; and POPArt in Johannesburg. Even commercial theatres, such as The Fugard, closed their doors in the last few years. There are very few places that give a platform for independent theatre creation such as those which we enjoyed back in the 1990s and 2000s.

And yet, it is not all doom and gloom. The Baxter Theatre presented in Cape Town and Dusseldorf *The Life and Times of Michael K*, directed by Lara Foot, which featured a combination of actors and puppets. Handspring Puppet Company has been involved with *A Walk with Amal* (2021) which saw a 3-metre puppet of Amal walk the refugee routes of Europe. Janni Younge has been developing a version of *Hamlet* with brown paper puppets and is very active internationally . UNIMA remains very active in Cape Town and Durban, and hopefully we will look to revive it in Johannesburg in 2022.

What has happened to Mask Theatre in the last 12 years? As mentioned earlier, despite the fact that new works appeared every year since 2008, it has not taken root in public consciousness nor, crucially, learning institutions. The influential Out the Box Festival disbanded after their 2011 iteration and is sorely missed to this day. FTH:K dissolved from being a full-time company in 2012 to working more as a project-based entity – still non-verbal and visually based, but no longer in mask. Liezl de Kock and I led Visual and Mask Theatre electives at Rhodes University from 2013 to 2014, but since we left that has not continued. *Uyabona Ke*, the ensemble I started in 2014, made two Mask Theatre works in 2015 and 2016 that both won Standard Bank Ovation Awards at NAF, but the core group has since dissolved and dispersed across the country..

However, there are pockets of activity. At UCT, as mentioned a few times already, Iman Isaacs work with her students in Afrocentric neutral masks, and is starting to produce them for the general public. Mask theatre is also taught at the University of Pretira (UP), and a module was

recently started at WITS. In Johannesburg, I teach Mask Theatre at AFDA as a way into performance for my postgraduate students; in 2019 we created *Phitlho [The Hidden]* which played very well on our campus and at NAF where we won the Standard Bank Ovation Award for Best Ensemble. Being based at a Motion Picture and Live Performance school, I am intrigued about the possibilities between Mask Theatre and film performance, as there is much crossover between acting in mask and acting for screen.

As a case in point, a student of mine, Koketso Motlebane, in 2019 went from her experience in *Phitlho* to win best actress for her role in the Honours Graduation film *Lefa* (directed by Mpolokeng Chabane in 2019). Her performance was nuanced and largely non-verbal, and she spoke to me after the film's premiere about how working in mask had impacted her screen performance. The film has gone on to garner high praise and plaudits at festivals around the world.

There is also, in Johannesburg, the emergence of the recently formed Johannesburg School of Mask and Movement Theatre, headed by Roberto Pombo, Daniel Buckland, Kyla Davis, and Mlindeli Zondi. This is an initiative I will keep a close eye on and hopefully collaborate with.

Mask Theatre burst upon the South African scene in the mid to late 2000s, and tapped into the burgeoning movement of Visual Theatre, where performing objects started to find their rightful place in the country's theatre. By this, I mean explicitly that performing objects (including masks and puppets) shook off their mantle of "childish play" and became central bearers of adult entertainment and artistic endeavour.

This has happened despite the fact that South Africa does not have an indigenous puppet or mask tradition. Consequently, one has to see both of these as imported traditions, which can be seen as problematic. However, there are a number of reasons that this is transcended, namely:

1. Performing objects are democratic in that they determine the nature of the production – in short, they are primary authors and meaning-making signifiers of any narrative, as much as any performer or collaborator.

2. The above occurs in a particular non-verbal, or pre-verbal state. This cuts through any issues of the power of language or the "authority" of language in South African works.

3. I have proved that silent masks work as well in a hearing and speaking paradigm for performers and audience members, as much as they do within a Deaf community. This has now been followed up with exploration within different racial demographics.

4. Silence is a powerful and still unexplored medium of expression in South Africa – we are known for a highly physical and loud expression, and while there has historically been a need for this, I think that we are growing up. 30 years into democracy there is room for silence and reflection.

5. I too have grown up and aged and my more recent attempts at theatre have become more measured.

As this thesis has shown, the pedagogic use of Mask Theatre and silence, works across the board. In my experience, it works as well in integrated Deaf and hearing theatre as it does in conventional

theatre, as it does in community theatre. Although maybe still seen as "fringe" or outsider theatre, I have experienced it as having the potential to be successful, both commercially and critically. .

My goal, and one that my explorations through masks and silence has led me to, remains the same: all I've wanted to do was leave a "stain on the silence", ala Beckett. All I've strived to do is "constitute the audience with the true precipitate of dreams" ala Artaud.

I'm looking forward now, as Rumi exhorts, to bring my "talky business" to an end….

8.1. Oh, Wait! – Then a Pandemic Hit

2020–2021 crashed into the world like the proverbial tsunami ...

In its early manifestation, I thought that my work was over. How could I teach and work with swapping masks/props, etc. with the way the pandemic was first presented? Masks (made of leather or *papier mâché*) would draw in and thus spread the virus, as would the handling of objects – so necessary for Mask Theatre. I thought the form would not recover.

And then it slowly dawned on me (and as the science caught up to initial fears) that mask work could actually be the safest form of theatre going. (See Figure 81.)

This is for a few reasons:

- A performer can wear a mask underneath a fabricated mask – i.e., double protection.
- There is very little risk of infection person-to-person on stage – obviously, of course, as long as masks aren't shared.
- Mask Theatre works best with a particular distance from the audience – even if done outdoors, there is the same double protection from infection.
- Mask Theatre works on screen, with the distance and space needed between characters to "talk with each other" suiting the necessary angles and shots of the camera.

Figure 73: Publicity material for *Dead Good*, Vamos Theatre 2022.

Obviously, this all needs to play within the mask paradigm, because as Wilsher (2007) writes, what masks do particularly well is to reveal relationships between people; and this is one of the key things that have led me on my journey. How do people react physically and phemenologically to each other? What do we do as human animals in interaction with another? We all strive for connection, smell, touch, and ultimately closeness. The space between us, and how it is negotiated, has led me on my personal theatrical journey of more than 20 years.

Where things get more complicated, where we start debating abstract issues of life and death, in an intellectual space, well – that space is more for dialogue of words and ideas, which the full mask cannot hold.

One is not better or worse than the other. And each needs its place.

I am also haunted by the figure of the "plague doctor" and wonder if a new mask work won't push its way to prominence at some point. (See Figure 82.)

Figure 74: The Plague Doctor mask, research for a 2024 work?

As we continue to explore mask's creative potential, along with its historical and cultural roots, there remains the ability to distill everything down to a life-or-death instant every moment on stage. Like the puppet, the mask has to breathe and be alive every second on stage – it inhales the primary struggle of life vs death, and exhales the potential of magic, transformative magic. Where a piece of cardboard or *papier mâché* or leather becomes a god.

Our lives can literally become the true precipitate of our dreams.

And by living them we can stain the awful silence of existence.

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(These are made available for examiners – after this thesis is evaluated, I will kill these links due to IP reasons.)

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APPENDIX: MORE PERSONAL NARRATIVE AND DRAMATURGY

A Family of Misfits

I do not come from a theatrical family. In fact, I am, the only member of my extended family to have entered into a lifetime in the arts. My mother started as a Fine Art high school teacher before becoming a librarian. My father is an agricultural economist and all-round dreamer. My elder sister is a scientist and lecturer, and my younger sister a journalist and magazine, book, and media editor. A generation earlier, on my mother's side, my grandmother was a nurse who never learnt to drive and my grandfather I *think* was in the civil service (I never met him as he died just after I was born). Although he was Afrikaans, he never advanced as he refused to join the *Broederbond*. On my father's side, my grandfather was a sort of accountant and quartermaster who drove army trucks through the Northern African desert in World War II, and my grandmother was a housewife. Scattered across the rest of my family are teachers, plumbers, lawyers, businessmen, and the like. Further back, perhaps the most exotic member of our family was my great-great-grandfather who was an Egyptologist.

The Scatterling Years

I was born in 1973 in Rhodesia – a country that was burning and falling, seven years before it ceased to exist and became Zimbabwe. In the year I was born, Ian Smith declared a Unilateral Declaration of Independence and thereby isolated himself and the country from the global community. Seeing no real hope for a future there, my parents fled. My homeland no longer exists in name. However, my ID book still bears the name of its former incarnation as the site of my birth. When I show my ID or passport, I sometimes feel embarrassed that it bears the cursed name of Rhodesia, and I want to apologise and explain that its presence is not by my design but rather a clerical error at Home Affairs. My identity, my very place of being, does not exist. I was born in a ghost country.

In 1975, we moved to a country that was also starting to burn. Only in recent years did I learn of the despair my father felt at having abandoned his country and homeland to start again, only to wind up in the suburb of Pinelands in Cape Town from which we could hear the shots and riots from the nearby Langa township. June 16, 1976, was a fresh wound in the country. Only recently have I learnt that my father still longs for a return to his spiritual home. What if we had stayed on in Zimbabwe? What if we had a place we could truly call "home"?

We moved to a country looking for a home and kept moving, kept looking. For my parents' fiftieth wedding anniversary in December 2019, we made them a video plotting their many moves throughout Southern Africa: Harare to Johannesburg; Johannesburg to Cape Town; Cape Town to Elgin; Elgin to Hilton, KwaZulu-Natal; abortive miss-moves to Gabarone, Botswana, and Bath, UK, and oddly, to Argentina; Hilton back to Johannesburg; Johannesburg to Mafikeng; Mafikeng to Franschhoek; Franschhoek to Stanford.[194] Looking at it, I had cause to reflect on what my map might look like since I left home. For I have gone on many similar detours, highways, and byways. In many ways I have inherited my father's ache for a home; and his eternal search for one. Is that

[194] And this was not counting many moves within a town or city.

just *wanderlust*? Am I a refugee – running from geographical wounds? Or am I a settler – running to discover new ground? Who will find their home first – my father or myself?

Tussen Twee Pale[195]

Our family was never well-off; not exactly poor, but I wasn't really aware of it at the time. What really is "poor" for a child? We had food, we had a house. We had life. However, unknown to the child was a clutter of failed jobs, deep unhappiness, and an over-arching adult fear of being branded "poor white" on the part of my parents and grandparents. We were interstitial, foreigners, anomalies in the bigger pictures – even though we were part of a system that favoured our racial demographic. However, we never felt we truly belonged anywhere, and so kept moving around the country. I learnt to speak a second language early on, trying to integrate with the local community. My Afrikaans was at one point better than my English, my home language. It did not stay this way – in KwaZulu-Natal we moved into a predominantly English area in the small village of Hilton,[196] where Afrikaans was actively looked down on. I spent a lot of time observing and witnessing the cruel games that young white schoolkids played on each other. We would have daily fights on the bus to and from school with the true Afrikaners. I was caught between two languages – trusting neither. Then in high school, I gave up on Afrikaans. To my shame, I stopped learning it and just coasted through with what I already knew. Today one of my best friends is Afrikaans and we communicate in a curious *melange* of the two languages. I am also trying to learn Dutch and communicate with people in The Netherlands in a curious *melange* of bits of Dutch, English, and broken Afrikaans. Life is never short of *karma*. Life is never short on irony.

I remember imagination. I remember my grandmother reading us countless stories. I have always loved stories. I remember being too impatient to wait for the following night's continuation and I accelerated my learning to read so that I could secretly read ahead during the day and then feign surprise at the events that unfolded. I was always impatient. I tried to grow my own crops, and murdered my plants because I lacked the patience and the understanding that crops flattened by a storm would eventually pick themselves up. On a farm, I got locked in a freezer room with the smell of apples and have developed a particular fear of being trapped anywhere. I learnt some hard lessons as a foreigner. Life is never short of metaphor and learning.

The Power of Myth and Narrative

But stories – I loved stories. I remember making things up, lost in my own narrative world where I could cast myself as hero or villain. Usually playing on my own, sometimes with friends, we didn't have a lot of "things". Friends did, and playdates were an adventure into all that was available but maddeningly out of reach. But that hardly mattered as one could replicate what was lacking with

[195] Afrikaans expression meaning, literally, "between two poles".

[196] Hilton, once a farm, is a small village on a hill about 15 kilometres from Pietermaritzburg. We lived there when it really could be classified a "village" – it had one small shopping centre, a general store, a tea café, a petrol station, a small post office, a building society, a tiny public library, a tennis club, one (Anglican) church, one pre- and primary school, and one high school within the village – St Anne's Diocesan School for Girls. Further out from the village lies one of the country's most expensive boys' high schools – Hilton College. Nowadays, the village is unrecognisable, with its growth (including more schools, a hospital, malls, restaurants, and the like) turning it more into a town or small city. It has transformed from a misty village straight from the pages of a Victorian novel on the hill, to a fairly affluent centre that is part of the Midlands Meander tourist route in KwaZulu-Natal.

the help of one's imagination, or, interestingly, in objects that would morph into other things, something which was going to become very important to my evolution as a theatre-maker. My (second-hand) bike was everything. On the farm, I remember irrigation pipes and steel bridges you could ramp over that became freeways and congested docks teeming with thugs and gangs. I remember dirt roads, acres of farmland that became the canvas of stories I enacted by myself. It took forever for my family to get a television, but my grandparents, who for a time lived on the same farm, had one. Worlds started opening up. A length of wire attached to the rear wheel-nut of my bicycle gave me an aerial to match *CHiP*'s;[197] a particular fork and convenient branch in a tree became the helicopter joystick for *240-Robert*;[198] an empty Omo box with string tied to it for a handheld blaster became Boba Fett's backpack weapon, hunting down the rebels;[199] a stick became a light-sabre.[200] Stories were everywhere and I feasted on them. At our small village primary school in Hilton, there were extra-curricular "clubs" one could sign up for – chess, cooking, sewing, woodwork. I signed up for "Mythology" and would sit for hours with a small group of learners listening to our headmaster, Mr Swithan Stride,[201] read us stories from some of the global myths. He was a fantastic storyteller. From the Greeks to African mythology, I sat enthralled as his melodious, nicotine-tinged voice transported us into faraway worlds and times. I liked them all, but have to say that my favourite ones were Norse myths. Looking back, it is easy to see why I was so engrossed by their fatalistic heroic feats – shuffling towards Ragnarok and the end of the world but doing so with grim humour and determined to live their lives to the fullest, and to die with honour.[202]

I have always been big boned and un-athletic. I never excelled at sports, but I had decent hand-eye co-ordination and could hold my own at various sports at a young age. I was shy and retiring, always in a book or another world, hardly very present. Breaks would find me sitting by myself, devouring Tolkien's epic fantasy series, *Lord of the Rings* (1954), or Stephen Donaldson's more contemporary and radical *The Chronicles of Thomas Covenant the Unbeliever* (1977–2013).[203] My peers were never sure exactly what to make of this. They called me "wide boy" after the then Nik Kershaw hit pop song.[204] School work was easy at first, then boring; and I would only ever apply myself to what interested me. But *then* it became obsessive. I was competitive – at school, after a story-writing exercise I heard a rival read her written story and it galvanised me to rewrite mine that night, turning a dreary tale into an absolute epic. I rated success by the effect it had on an

[197] *Californian Highway Patrol* – a 1980s police procedural TV show about two protagonists, Ponch and Jon who rode impressive-looking (and sounding) motorcycles.
[198] A 1980s adventure TV series that featured the escapades of a crack rescue team and a helicopter whose callsign was "240-Robert".
[199] Boba Fett is a bounty hunter in the *Star Wars* universe.
[200] The light-sabre is the Jedi Knight's weapon of choice in *Star Wars*.
[201] Great name!
[202] It is interesting how Norse mythology has come back into my life at a later time – particularly through Neil Gaiman who sprinkles it liberally through his *Sandman* epic graphic novel series, and then right to the fore with *American Gods* (2001) and its subsequent television series (2017–present), as well as his retelling of *Norse Mythology* (2017).
[203] In these series, the protagonist, Thomas Covenant, is afflicted by leprosy in the physical world and abandoned by his wife and shunned by society. However, he is chosen by the "Creator" as a messianic Figure to bring peace to a parallel universe, "The Land" and fight against Lord Foul. Transported to The Land, Covenant discovers his leprosy starts healing, and that his white gold wedding ring is an instrument of potent power – not unlike the similar way The Preacher transports himself from his hospital death bed to a parallel world where he has great power in FTH:K's *QUACK!* (2009–2010).
[204] The joke was on them, though, when I learnt that "wide boy" is actually UK slang for someone who survives on his wits – a wise guy. Wish I had known it back then.

audience; an audience whom I, paradoxically, disliked, as I never had a natural affinity for standing before a crowd. The story, or the work, the thing itself, always had more importance than me, even though I yearned for the confidence to be a great performer and carry it off with style to spare. Yes, I craved the very thing that I couldn't stand. I was caught in paradoxes and ambiguities from a young age.

However, it is in writing that I can glimpse the first stirrings of the boy I would grow up to become. Unsurprisingly, it connected theatre, mythology, and writing. When I was in Standard 3 (today's Grade 5 – this was around 1983), a theatre company came to our school to set up and perform in the main quadrangle. I cannot remember where the company came from – I would guess either NAPAC (the then Natal Performing Arts Council, based in Durban), or the University of Natal, Pietermaritzburg (where I would later enrol for my undergraduate degree). However, I do remember traces of the style, which was very much what one would call Physical Theatre nowadays, with a clowning or physical comedy bias.[205] What they presented was a slapstick, whirlwind romp through some of the better-known Greek myths. More importantly, the play, which was touring all through the province, brought alongside it a competition for all schools to see which learner could write the best new myth. This is important for two reasons – firstly, I can see now it was a really good marketing ploy for independent theatre that linked the experience with a follow-up one, thus significantly enhancing the experience and sowing in my mind an idea that theatre should not only be about the product; and secondly, I won that competition by writing "The Thirteenth Labour of Heracles" – my first accolade ever, and one that left a deep impression on me.[206]

The Betwixt and Between Years

I do not wish to dwell too long on high school, as the experience of it was generally dismal; however, there are a few themes and strands that emerged in my life that bear examining.

Firstly, due to my having been held back in pre-school for a year, and given the fact that my birthday fell just before the year age-group cut-off, for the first five years I had to compete and engage with the year group above me. This led, I believe, to an ongoing feeling of inferiority, of not fitting in, and being caught between two worlds. This feeling has many times manifested itself in my work with masks. At high school, this was especially so in sport, which was compulsory at the time. I attended a large unisex government school, Maritzburg College, that prided itself on its sporting prowess. Ironically, sport, particularly rugby, became a pressure-release valve. I was never very good at it, but I was tall and could catch the ball and moreover it gave me a weekly outlet to vent frustrations, rage, and the normal range of adolescent angst.

Secondly, it introduced me properly to theatre as a subject. I was in the top class in Grade 8 (Standard 6), but was bored and frustrated. Drama was offered from Grade 9, but in order to take

[205] It would not surprise me at all if Ellis Pearson or Nicholas Ellenbogen were involved in it, but he has not been able to corroborate this, so it remains an anecdote.
[206] The original prize was a sea cruise to the Greek islands for myself and my teacher. When the tour collapsed, the prize became monetary instead. This was my first taste of what would become my professional career, as well as my first real taste of independent money – a revelation!

it, I had to restream into one of the lowest academic classes[207]. This brought me into a class of misfits and rebels, the chronic underachievers, and I'm sure this also brought much dread to my parents. A watershed moment occurred when I was offered a full scholarship to a luxurious private school around this time. I wonder what would have happened to my life if I had chosen to shift to a highly privileged elitist learning among the rambling misty hills of KZN; but I do know that I felt I would be completely out of depth amongst the rich learners, and so decided to rather tough it out where I was;[208] and, crucially, stick with theatre. Very quickly, it was the combination of Drama and English that got me through high school – writing and practice; writing and practice. I not only acted in inter-school plays, but also experienced my first foray into directing with Edward Albee's absurdist 15 minute *The Sandbox*.[209]

Thirdly, I was exposed to a lot more theatre. It was around the time that NAPAC's esteemed Loft Company, founded and headed by Nicholas Ellenbogen in 1985, broke away from the (then titled) Natal Playhouse and evolved in 1989 into Theatre For Africa (TFA).[210] As a forerunner of multiracial, environmental theatre, the company toured the country aggressively, performing shows that seemed almost harbingers of a change on the horizon. Respected South African scholar, Veronica Baxter (2006: 48) writes:

> He [Ellenbogen] argues that contemporary African theatre must deal with issues of literacy, the need for portability of performance outdoors, and the physical skills of the actor – all of which are in common with Commedia dell'arte (Rudlin, 1994). These issues are turned to advantage ... allowing for a playful theatrical exploration of African athleticism (Graver, 1999), Ellenbogen's training with Jacques Lecoq and in Commedia dell'arte, and the collaboration of Ellis Pearson.

It is not hard to see in the above traits and approaches that would become instrumental in my evolution as a theatre-maker. What it meant in the early 1990s, is that it allowed us as school-goers to witness the anarchic gem that was the original *Raiders of the Lost Aardvark* (1991, featuring the inimitable Ellis Pearson and, unknown to me at the time, many Lecoq-inspired touches)[211] and its sequel, *Return of the Son of Raiders of the Lost Aardvark, Part 2* (1992), featuring Pearson again alongside a certain Andrew Buckland. Buckland had recently won enormous plaudits for his seminal works, *The Ugly Noo Noo* (1988) and *Between the Teeth* (1992) and signed with TFA for a season that included his work, and saw him perform in a number of other shows – most notably *Kwamanzi* (1991). Watching Buckland alone on stage perform a vicious and hysterical satire on the current political situation using only his body and voice was an inspiring eye-opener.[212]

When not watching theatre with schoolmates, I developed a singular habit, riding my motorcycle down the hill to the University of Natal (Pietermaritzburg) Drama Department productions at the

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[207] The feeling that Drama is a "soft option" is still prevalent in institutional minds, whereas it seems to be a field in which only the most courageous survive.

[208] I could have given Spud a run for his money.

[209] First performed on 15 April 1960 in the Jazz Gallery in New York City.

[210] Strands of Theatre For Africa tie into my story later, as FTH:K was originally founded by myself and long-term stalwart of TFA, Nhlanhla Mavundla (now known as Nhlanhla Mkhwanazi).

[211] *Raiders* is, impressively, still a regular feature at NAF and other theatres, although the approach has been watered down and is a shadow of its former self. It is still hugely popular. Watching the original show was something of a theatrical awakening – I did not know that one could use props and movement to tell a story the way the original cast did.

[212] It was also a dream come true to later not only train under him but also collaborate on a number of very successful shows that have been highlights in my career.

Hexagon Theatre. There I would sit alone in the back row, soaking up student theatre, and gradually having my eyes and mind opened to what was going on in the country. I remember a particular adaptation of *Faust* (featuring a very young James Cunningham) that reimagined the classic story to late 1980s South Africa, where Faust, a young White student, was faced with the choice between "the forces of darkness or the darkness of the forces" – imminent conscription was coming my way. Other work that left a deep impression on me include Lara Foot's direction of Paul Slabolepzy's *The Return of Elvis du Pisanie* and *Braait Laaities* (both in 1991), as well as Mike van Graan's non-verbal satire of contemporary politics, *The Dogs Must be Crazy* (1991).[213] I also watched Mbongeni Ngema's *Township Fever* at the Market Theatre in 1990, which was inspired by the 1987 transport workers' strike that pitted black labourers against their white employers – and also against each other.[214]

It is unsurprising that theatre for me, from a relatively early age, oscillated between riotous entertainment and some very big ideas – particularly the collusion or collision between the personal and the political.

Youthful Awakenings

I benefitted from the last few years of an educational system in South Africa that afforded unjust privilege to me, but which was also tearing itself to pieces. I started to lose faith in systems and entered my rebellious years, kicking against anything I could aim at. As I started becoming more conscious of the world I lived in, I despaired over the injustice and the lack of fair play, but I lacked the volition to do anything like carry a banner, shout slogans, or rebel in anything other than a very personal way. I made up for this by taking it out on myself, courting ideas and concepts that had a strong cause, but ones that didn't necessarily demand too much action. I was a coward and I was a fraud, hiding myself away from the world. I've always stayed hidden from the world.

I think people noticed – my Drama teacher started feeding me more obscure and anti-establishment books, including the very influential Mongane Serote's *To Every Birth Its Blood* (1981). In fact, I was fed all kinds of books – from European influencers like Patrick Süskind and Milan Kundera, to African and South African writers like Chinua Achebe, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Usmane Sembène, André Brink, and Etienne Le Roux.

And I started to pay more attention to South African music – particularly the *boere-punk* movement known as *Voëlvry*[215] that swept through South Africa in the late 1980s/early 1990s. Who could resist the anti-establishment rock 'n roll of Kerkorrel's songs like *Sit Dit Af*?

Ek stap kombuis toe kry 'n bier	I go to the kitchen and get a beer
En skakel oor na TV4	And switch over to TV4[216]
O my god wat het ons hier	Oh my God what have we here
Wat my TV screen ontsier|	That defaces my TV screen

[213] The core idea for which I would return to in 2012 to remake it, with permission, for Ubom! Eastern Cape Drama Company and update it for a new generation.
[214] I was aware that theatrically the show was not very satisfying, but the *agit-prop* message and form of the township musical was very clear and energising.
[215] Afrikaans for "free as a bird".
[216] TV4 was the 4th official channel introduced by the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC) in 1985, carrying sports and entertainment programming.

Is daar nêrens om te vlug	Is there nowhere to flee
Van daai man se mooi gesig	From that man's nice face
Met sy vinger in die lug	With his finger in the air[217]
Gaan hy my lewe net ontstig	He's just ruining my life
En die programme in die lug	And in the programmes in the air
Sien jy net P.W. se gesig	All you see is P.W.'s face
Ek vat jou nou 'n wed	I'll take you a bet
Al die bure het M-Net!	All the neighbours have M-NET![218]
Sit dit af, sit dit af![219]	Turn it off, turn it off!

Or, for that matter, Koos Kombuis's *Boer in Beton*:

Ek's 'n Afrikaner in die stad	I'm an Afrikaner in the city
Ek dra my masker soos 'n kat	I wear my mask like a cat
... Ek rook ingevoerde fags, ek lees engelssprekende mags	... I smoke imported fags, I read English-speaking mags
Ek gaan nooit kerk toe nie, want dis 'n drag	I don't ever go to church, because it's a drag
Ek's 'n boer in beton soos Oom Paul op ou Kerkplein	I'm a boer[220] in concrete, like Uncle Paul in old Church Square[221]
Niemand weet van my pyn, want ek is goed vermom	No one knows of my pain, because I am well disguised
Ek's 'n boer in beton.[222]	I'm a boer in concrete.

One can also tell that, once again, my languages were starting to coalesce. Music became an escape, and a call to arms. Bob Marley sang, "Every man gotta right to decide his own destiny",[223] and these were words to look ahead to the shaping of one's life. I was ready to enter into a "punky reggae party".[224]

If theatre was starting to take shape as a physical and vocal force to unfold ideas before an audience in terms of words and images, music and sound were close behind – a defiant, loud, blast of youthful energy and rebellion.

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[217] A reference to then Prime Minister (and later first State President of South Africa) Pieter Willem Botha's habit of draconian finger-wagging when delivering official decrees, most notably during his infamous "Rubicon Speech" on 15 August 1985. He became known, and lampooned, as P.W., as seen by Pieter-Dirk Uys's impersonation, and in another Kerkorrel song, *Wat 'n Vriend Het Ons in PW* (where the singer satirises a Christian song, *Wat 'n Vriend Het Ons in Jesus*).

[218] M-NET was a subscription-based service launched in 1986 as an alternative to SABC programming. It quickly became a status symbol for middle to upper-class families as it operated outside of governmental restrictions. Here it is used satirically to suggest the neighbours employ the "ostrich bury-head-in-the-sand" tactic of tuning out of what was happening in the country at the time.

[219] Written by Johannes Kerkorrel, from the Johannes Kerkorrel en die Gereformeerde Blues Band album, *Eet Kreef*, published by Shifty Records: 1989.

[220] "Boer" literally means "farmer" in Afrikaans but came to represent Afrikaners.

[221] Uncle Paul references the statue of Paul Kruger, Boer General in the Anglo-Boer war 1899–1902 (now more generally referred to as the South African War). A statue of Paul Kruger used to stand in Church Square in Pretoria – the administrative capital of South Africa.

[222] Written by Andre Letoit, from the Koos Kombuis album, *Vêr Van Die Ou Kalahari*, published by Shifty Records: 1987.

[223] From "Zimbabwe", written by Bob Marley, off the Bob Marley and the Wailers' album, *Survival*, published by Tuff Gong Records: 1979. Marley would go on to stage a concert in Zimbabwe on the occasion of that country's independence from Rhodesia in 1980.

[224] This in reference to another Bob Marley song, "Punky Reggae Party", released originally as a single by Tuff Gong Records in 1979. In it, Marley name-checks who all will attend such a party: "Wailers be there | The Dammed, The Jam, The Clash | Maytals will be there | Doctor Feelgood too, ooh | No boring old farts, no boring old farts, no boring old farts | Will be there".

For my sins, or perhaps because of them, I was chosen to be one who was "conscientised" in the last years of Apartheid from 1990 to 1991, and attended multiracial camps and "think tanks" where we attended lectures and had debates on economics, freedom, justice, and the "coming changes".[225] With everything that was going, it might seem I was primed to become more active in the struggle; to, as Marley sang: "arm in arms, with arms | We'll fight this little struggle | 'Cause that's the only way | We can overcome our little trouble".[226] But did I? Not really. As always, my pattern held – I observed, I listened, I drank it all in; and then I stewed on it for the longest time. I was a teeny-bop who was uptight, "drinking at a stoplight".[227]

Emotionally and psychologically, this time was fraught with another aspect of growing up, and in my case, for a number of years I was thrust hither and thither between being an adolescent, and then having to be the man of the house and look after my mother and sisters when my father repeated a pattern of abandoning the family and returning to it. I do not want to dwell on this too much; but suffice it to say that this flip-flopping of roles engendered within me a fierce need for independence, as well as a deep responsibility for a family group. All the while, I was questioning again what a family was, and as things played out, I grew more distant and stubborn. I became distrustful of what one might consider "normal", as much as I distrusted good-mannered, "well-meaning little therapists".[228]

I learnt how to *erase*. When my childlike innocence and sense of the world was taken from me, as it has to be, I simply hit delete.[229] I developed alternative realities and personas, retreating from the world at the same time as I was plunging into it. I started over. Then I did it again. And with each skin I shed and new one I adopted, I was looking for the one that would stop this shape-shifting. I learnt, from early on, how to hide in the open.

[225] This under the aegis of SAYS – the South African Youth Symposium. I think it did have its heart in the right place, but it really did feed my hatred of what was going on. To this day, I have no real idea who funded SAYS.
[226] Also from the 1979 song, "Zimbabwe", as before.
[227] From "This Is Not A Song, It's An Outburst: Or, The Establishment Blues", written by Sixto Rodriguez. Off the album *Cold Fact*, published by Light in the Attic Records: 1970.
[228] From "God is in the House", off the Nick Cave and the Bad Seeds album, *No More Shall We Part*, published by Mute Records: 2001.
[229] I did not actually hit "delete". We did not have personal computers yet. Perhaps "tippex" is a better word.

Years of Chaos

High school over, I exploded messily into the world of university 1992–1994, erasing my connection to school and eagerly looking for a new home and a fresh group of like-minded misfits. Part of this was fleeing again – I took on an Education Department teaching loan to go to university, and part of this was to escape (twice) my immanent conscription into the army. The other aspect of this was to plunge myself into the only thing I knew I really wanted to do – theatre. I wanted to tell stories that mattered. I wanted to change the world.

Figure 1: Portrait of the author by Ronald Willemölle, 1992.

For a time, a glorious time, I found a home and a tribe with my fellow students of the University of Natal Pietermaritzburg (UNP) Drama Department. From all around the country came crawling a ragtag group of misfits who gravitated towards the Drama Department and towards each other. We even called ourselves The Tribe of Silent Chaos, and we were bent on experience and experimentation. (See Figure 1.) Cue long wild nights of debauchery, pocket philosophy, the best and latest alternative music, earnest conversation, strident manifestos, and some really, really bad poetry. There are many songs that I could quote here, but I shall choose one by Bauhaus:

"All we ever wanted was everything | All we ever got was cold | Get up, eat jelly, sandwich bars and barbed wire | And squash every week into a day".[230]

Figure 2: *Kafe Suid Afrik* poster, 1992. Tickets a hilarious R5!

Some of us were fortunate to be cast (during first year) by Clare Erasmus[231] in an Honours Directing piece that changed our lives as we knew them then. The piece, *Kafe Suid Afrik* (1992), was devised and heavily inspired by Dada, surrealism, Artaud, performance art, and contemporary South African politics. Think Janov's 1970 Primal Scream theory meets Expressionism meets Artaud in a back alley to chat about cruelty, meets anti-laager mentality meets protest against violence on women meets getting naked at the end in a tub of water to symbolise rebirth and you'll start to get the picture. It was large, it was dripping with *avant-garde*, it

[230] "All We Ever Wanted Was Everything" as written by Daniel Gaston Ash, Kevin Haskins, David J. Haskins and Peter John Murphy. Off the 1982 Bauhaus album, *The Sky's Gone Out*, released by Beggars Banquet.

[231] Clare has played an enormous role in my life as provocateur, supporter, collaborator, and long-time friend. She now resides in Portsmouth in the UK with her two children and is an author, educator, and mental health and wellbeing coach.

was chaotic, it was naïve, it was so up its own ass it could not see its own irony; it was delicious. (See Figure 2.)

Figure 3: *Borthar* poster, 1993, with cast pic added. Author on far left.

It was during my second year, 1993, that I first had the opportunity to devise and perform in a puppetry piece – which, incidentally, coincided with my first appearance at the National Arts Festival (NAF) Student Festival. *Borthar* (1993) was based on Ted Hughes's story *The Iron Man* (1968, published in the USA as *The Iron Giant*), before Warner Brothers produced the 1999 animated feature, and featured a family of seagulls who come across the scattered pieces of a large metal robot who has crashed on their sea-shore. Initially suspicious of the anamorphic pieces, and dysfunctional as a unit, the gulls learn to work together to put the robot back together. The production was designed and co-directed by Greg King, who would go on to work for NAPAC's Loft Theatre Company after graduating, followed by a few years as Puppet Master of the Playhouse Puppet Company, before starting the acclaimed KickstArt Theatre Company in 2000, being joined by Executive Director Steven Stead in 2003. While more of a family friendly show, and less abrasive than *Kafe Suid Afrik*, *Borthar* was important as my first taste of learning to manipulate and work with performing objects. I recall the prologue of the story was told in basic shadow puppetry, by means of an overhead projector and many vinyl overlays, the pieces of the giant (hand, foot, eye) were puppets, and at the end, when the giant is reassembled, I wore the torso and head of the robot as a backpack – rising over the masking flats we used. (See Figure 3.)

Those were really fun and adventurous times, but the tension around us with the massive shifts in the country, as well as internal shifts of young adults learning about limits and boundaries, turned in an ever-widening gyre. Unsurprisingly, things fell apart soon thereafter. The Tribe imploded, fractured, and dispersed. But the precedent had been set. Undergraduate years were a riot of rebellion and glorious young hot-headed punky flailing against the system.[232]

In conversation with Clare Erasmus (director of the erstwhile *Kafe Suid Afrik*) many years after the fact, she expressed one big failing she experienced – that of not empowering the cast enough. She felt the cast clung to her too tightly as director, or "mother" of the project. To this day, this comment continues to influence my evolution as a theatre-maker.

Concurrent to theatrical experiments, my other studies led me through another influential portal – cinema; or, more specifically, the *avant-garde* French cinema of Messrs Jean Renoir, Jean Genet, Jean Cocteau, and Jean-Luc Godot. Throw in Marguerite Duras and Simone de Beauvoir, and then other film directors like David Lynch, Wim Wenders, David Cronenburg, Peter Greenaway, and

[232] In *The Wild One*, a 1953 film directed by László Benedek, produced by Stanley Kramer, and starring Marlon Brando as Johnny, Mildred asks him, "What are you rebelling against, Johnny?", and he answers "Whaddaya got?"

Alejandro Jodorowsky, and the recipe was set for a febrile brew of ideas.[233] However, despite my *avant-garde* credentials being well-established, I was still always drawn to the simple story – the notion of telling a narrative that could *mean* something. I just had yet to find the adequate form in which to tell my stories. More accurately, I had yet to work through my influences and find my own "voice" – if such a thing existed. I wanted to believe it existed.

Time to Work

With all these influences swirling around and through me, in my final undergraduate year I decided the time had come to plunge myself into work. What followed saw a drive to continuously create content and test it before audiences – the early evolution of a theatrical identity.

A few major things happened around this time, not least of all the country's lurch into Democracy at last in 1994, and the concomitant celebrations and angst.

Firstly, I aligned with the man I see as my first "mentor" in theatre. Peter Mitchell, who was then Director of the Hexagon Theatre in Pietermaritzburg. He is one of those rare true all-rounders in theatre, equally at home acting as he is directing, designing set and lights for his productions, building sets, while managing and producing work. He is also a wonderful human with a deep and mischievous sense of humour. He exemplified an all-round mastery of the form I longed for – and I suppose I can see in hindsight that part of my admiration for him was a deep need to master all aspects of a production. I started to volunteer for any and every backstage job I could get my hands on, and quickly became something of an apprentice of his.

Secondly, there were new forms seeping into South African theatre. In 1994, I selected Acting and Directing during Third Year electives (which is still the only actual Directing training I have received) but was becoming disenchanted with a very staid and (I believed) boring way of staging and performing work. Enter Physical Theatre. Our movement facilitator, Paul Datlen, had recently returned from doing his Honours at Rhodes University. There he had been part of the original crew of The First Physical Theatre Company, spearheaded in 1993 by Professor Gary Gordon, himself returning from London and bringing with him a deep interest in this kind of work.[234] It was a revelation. It felt like it aligned with a lot of the cinematic and *avant-garde* influences that I had been exposed to, which revitalised the way I was beginning to look at staging work. While a lot of early attempts were undoubtedly more in the vein of what became known as the "Eurocrash" approach to Physical Theatre (fast, aggressive displays of athleticism and physical extremism (see Nadine Meisner 1995 and Mary Brennan 1997 for good entry points[235]), it left a deep impression on me as a way to tell stories. I started devouring books and any visuals I could get my hands on regarding Pina Bausch, Wim vandeKeybus, Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker, and Lloyd Newson and his work with DV8. I also started developing more than a passing interest in the post-World War II Japanese apocalyptic dance theatre of Butoh.

[233] It is almost unbelievable to think these all took place within my first two years at university.
[234] Datlen thus trained and worked with some of the big names in early Physical Theatre in South Africa, including: Juanita Finestone, Lanon Prigge, Samantha Pienaar, Craig Morris, and PJ Sabbagha.
[235] Meisner, N. (1995). Turning Towards New Territory? *Dance Theatre Journal*, 12(2 and Brennan, M. (1997). Eurocrash – the bane of Physical Theatre? *Dance Theatre Journal*, 13(3).

Thirdly, in 1994, I co-founded my first independent company, *Out of Space*, which took two independent works to the NAF Fringe that year. These marked my first entry into the Fringe world. During this year, performance output was fairly constant, and I ended up directing four works – three of them written by myself or devised with the casts. All the influences and inspirations were starting to coalesce, and while the productions did not necessarily go on to any great achievement, they display an evolving sophistication of image and sound; and, interestingly, either a reliance on words, or a pulling back from them.

As an example, I directed a Sam Shepard solo one-hander, *Killer's Head* (1975), which sees a young man bound to an electric chair articulating his final thoughts before being electrocuted. I worked with a local musician in the role of the killer, and had him play on an electric guitar as he wandered through his memories. In the background shadows, I introduced a silent character wearing an academic gown to indicate a judge or the angel of death. All he did was stand there, then unobtrusively turn on a Cadac gas braai and start cooking bacon. By the time the monologue got to the part where the main character was electrocuted, the small experimental theatre space was full of the smell of bacon, and the "shock" itself was delivered by a blinding light into the eyes of the audience accompanied by an agonising shriek of electric guitar feedback. (See Figure 4.)

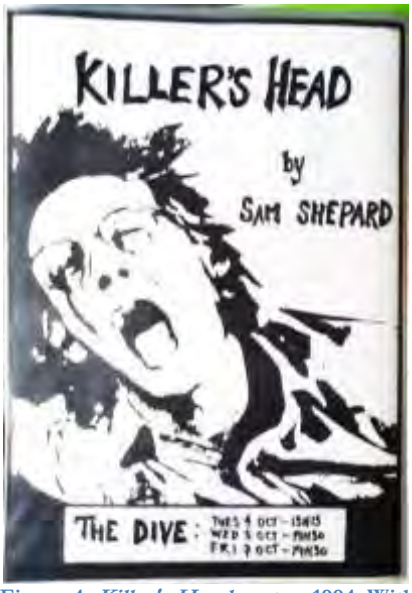

Figure 4: *Killer's Head* poster, 1994. With appropriate punky cowboy mouth.

For me, experiments such as these start charting the desire to create a theatrical experience that went beyond text, wherein I hoped to introduce the audience to a dreamlike state of ambiguity, impression, image, and sound.

Sharpening the Tools

After graduating, I went on to do a further Postgraduate Diploma of Play Production at UNP in 1995 – in this way deepening my knowledge of planning, marketing, and touring work, while at the same time creating new original work. In doing this, I was making the crucial choice of following my theatrical path to its destiny, regardless of the many detractors who did not see this as a viable career path.

During this time, I also, crucially, shifted from Directing to Choreography in terms of making work, since I'd become an adherent of the evolution of Physical Theatre in South Africa. My interest in using words, text as speech, was diminishing, and I was increasingly focusing on physical and visual imagery and the physical manifestations of the subtext between two bodies on stage. That is to say, I was not that interested in the dance side of Physical Theatre, but more on what it could do for the form in which narrative is told, or shown. Prominent critic Ana Sanchez-Colberg (1996: 40) writes that, at a basic level at least, the term "physical theatre" has come to be used to identify:

> an eclectic production commonly understood to be one which focuses on the unfolding of a narrative through physicalized events and which relegates verbal narrative – if at all present – to a subordinate position.

Furthermore, she sees in the term physical theatre, a "hybrid character" – one which is "testimony to its legacy in both avant-garde theatre and dance" (Sanchez-Colberg, 1996: 40).

Within this, I was shifting from directing, which I felt was stuck in its manifestations and behind the times, towards choreography, which allowed me a greater freedom to bring some of the disparate strands of my influencers together.

Key works I saw during this time drove my continuing experimentations. One of the most influential pieces to date remains the late Marlene Blom's *Vêr Innie Wêreld* (1995) which saw a completely non-verbal narrative unfold for a full-length production that combined dance, chorus work, magical realism, and Physical Theatre with comedy and social commentary. I was also fortunate to watch Told By An Idiot's tour to South Africa with *On the Verge of Exploding* (NAF, 1996) – directed by John Wright and featuring an incredible physical acting turn by Hayley Carmichael. I also experienced, for the first time, Handspring Puppet Company with *Faustus in Africa* (NAF, 1995), as well as Gary Gordon and First Physical Theatre Company's first opus, *The Unspeakable Story* (1995).

Crucially also, the following year, 1996, brought me into contact with half-masks for the first time. I was employed by the Hexagon Theatre to co-ordinate and programme the inaugural Maritzburg Spring Arts Festival,[236] and one of the shows I brought to Pietermaritzburg was Aldo Brincat's *Arney's Outrageous Rise* (originally created and performed in the 1995, then reworked in 2002/2003 – see Figure 5), a solo show about a boy's relationship with Arney, who is later revealed to be a cancer survivor. At the time, I was more *au fait* with Andrew Buckland's form of multiple character morph than that of half-masks. In Buckland's work he shifts physical as well as vocal position and attitudes to transform in an instant, sometimes between two words of dialogue. In contrast to this approach, Brincat displayed all the half-masks on stage and would take one off and put on a new one to transform character.[237] Although I initially found this disruptive, it only took a few beats for Brincat to get back into the narrative and emotional flow and I would quickly believe again in the character transformation – particularly the hero's love interest's hysterical rendering of Lionel Richie's "Say You, Say Me" for her Eisteddfod *mondeling*.[238]

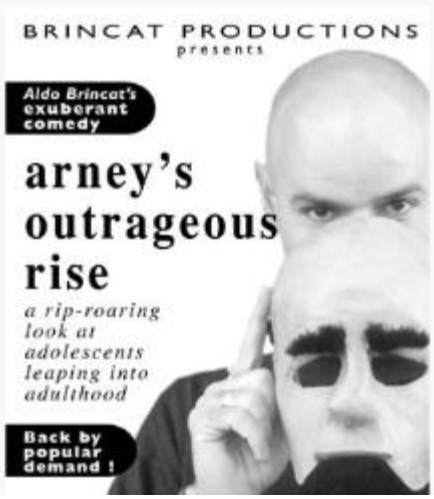

Figure 5: *Arney's Outrageous Rise* poster, circa 2002/3.

[236] Started as a reaction to what was then perceived as the very elitist capturing of arts festivals in KZN by the Hilton Arts Festival.
[237] A convention also used by Ellis Pearson in *Black Out* (2008) and Susan Danford in *I, Claudia* (2007–2008).
[238] "Mondeling" is Afrikaans for an oral presentation.

Brincat and his moving, touching work marked my first real experience of the mask on stage. It would take a few more years, though, before I would circle back to theatrical masks.

The Times They Are A-Changin'

Despite my experimentation with various forms, this certainly did not translate into opportunity to make a living from theatre work. I did not fit into the older model of repertory theatre that was dying out at performing arts councils in the country – I did not have the *nous* nor skill to make it as a classical actor, nor the capacity yet to go it independently. And my approach to making work held very little marketable appeal. Consequently, I was relying on the more technical skills I had developed and was taking any work I could get; this was mostly stage management work with corporate or industrial theatre companies in Johannesburg. And, of course, waiting at tables. I worked at an upmarket French restaurant in Sandown, one of the wealthiest suburbs in Johannesburg. Here I was again completely out of place – this arty, punkish, anti-conformist serving R1,500 bottles of wine to Johannesburg business people.

What this stint did give me was time to observe, think and dream. I was also writing copiously – I would go to service early and sit at a back table and just write and write, longhand. After service, just after midnight, I would liberate any leftover over-expensive wine (it amazed me that people would leave half that R1,500 bottle of wine) and take it home where I would bash away at my old typewriter, writing up the pages of the day, into the small hours. Sleep, wash, rinse, repeat – but in this way, my first novel, *In the Heydays of His Eyes* (an overwritten tome of personal mythology and literary side-quests) was born.

Thus was 1996. Disappointingly, the initial excitement in the country at the coming of democracy and new beginnings had already started to stagnate around this time and give way to some pessimism There was a feeling in the air both that the country was struggling with the changes and the inherent violence brought on by this and that theatre-makers were generally exhausted and short of new ideas. Protest Theatre, which had fuelled much of pre-1994 work, immediately felt outdated; international funding for theatre began dissolving; and everyone seemed to be climbing onto the industrial or corporate bandwagon. Or, theatre-makers were questioning their role in building society. Musician and performer Tony Bentel recalls working with Barney Simon:

> We did "Silent Movie" at the time that Chris Hani was shot [1993] – something that Barney communicated with most of the cast. We felt guilty that we were doing what to all outward appearances was this light-hearted, frothy fairy-tale. We should have been doing strong political theatre. It was a very dangerous time in the history of the country (quoted in Stephanou and Henriques, 2005: 281).

I had the impression that the more avant-garde and increasingly non-verbal work that I was interested in making was out of place and out of time. Despite how ill-informed this impression was at the time, I also wanted to see more of the world; and besides, I had the next big thing in my backpack. Accordingly, with the novel that the new South Africa and the world did not know it was waiting for, I packed up and left for London to seek my fortune.

The *Wanderlust* Squat Years

My sojourn in London 1997–1998 would see an interruption of my practice as theatre-maker, but by no means was it short of theatre nor theatrical influence. Although it took me over a year to find theatrical work (mostly as a stage manager/production assistant), there were other realms or forms that opened themselves up to me. Most notable of these was an introduction to film – not only assisting Clare Erasmus on her film school shorts, but also the first time on a feature film set: *The Wolves of Kromer* (written by Charles Lambert and Matthew Read, and directed by Will Gould. Produced by Discodog, 1998). These experiences further marked my leaning towards sound and vision, and to this day I am still wanting to direct a predominantly non-verbal feature film.

It became very clear early on that not only did I *not* have the next best thing in my backpack, I was also just not going to make it as a foreign writer in the UK. (I still have the mound of rejection letters somewhere to remind me.) What followed was a long, dark, lonely examination of the soul. I really experienced what it was like to be poor, owning just what was in my backpack, and not only relying on friends and connections to crash on floors or couches, but on one inglorious occasion, climbing out of the window of a friend's council flat, skinning up the drainpipe to break into the abandoned flat upstairs, to occupy it as a "squat" for a few months. Not wanting to get caught up in a regular 9-5 job for too long (I had my artistic destiny to fulfil, after all), I took temporary jobs when I absolutely had to, in order to make just enough to survive and keep dreaming. Jobs included anything from data entry, lawyers' office mailroom, summer school daycare, cleaning, barkeeping, naked art modelling, and so forth.

I say "inglorious" above, but I guess in retrospect that there was definitely an element of romanticism to the whole thing. Maybe they were my version of Bukowski's *Factotum* (1975), Orwell's *Down and Out in Paris and London* (1933), Richard E. Grant's *Withnail and I* (1987), Kerouac's bumming about and all the Paul Aster, Henry Miller and Anaïs Nin years. And while it was mostly lonely and at times desperate, I never stopped observing and absorbing – I wrapped loneliness and desperation around me like a tattered black overcoat, and walked a lot, observing people and making copious notes about what I saw and experienced. One of my favourite things to do was to scrape enough money together to buy a Zone 2 Day Pass and then sit at the top of a double-decker bus and ride through the city, watching the waves of people for hours on end.

It also earmarked for me the collective kindness and comfort of misfits – I was mixing with cultural foreigners, outcasts, refugees, pre-op transsexuals, oppressed homosexuals, punks, goths, and the like. While there was a collective spirit that was all-embracing, I longed for my own tribe.

I could have gotten lost to London and all her charms, and assimilated into the British culture in some way or another, were it not for two very important events: an *explosion* and an *epiphany*.

For the former, the explosion, I had been watching as much theatre as I could, and seeing the growing confluence of circus, clown, aerial, Physical Theatre, and what I would later come to know as Visual Theatre, in work – both within the UK and also from Europe. Johannes Odenthal (1994: 3) writes about the movement towards the body becoming almost the site of the 'real theatre':

> The process of civilization is deeply engraved in every single body. ... If theatre accepts the body in its anarchist power, if the body internalises the functions of theatre, then the stage can become a place for a society in change to seek identities. But as long as the body remains only an agent, as

> long as it serves as a vehicle for ideologies, then theatre moves inside a self-contained discourse which only reinforces the given.

Seeing the stage as "a place for a society in change to seek identities" made a big impression on me. The artistic and social inspiration which wants to believe that theatre is something that matters has never left me. On stage, the other evolution that was happening was that bodies were "beginning to leak". In the field of dance, New Zealander Carol Brown (1999: 15) writes:

> Dancing bodies are beginning to leak, to betray the illusion of a chaste, hygienic and contained body. A paradigm shift is occurring away from the model of the classical body as mark and model of a 'fit' body for dance and its concomitant aesthetics of impotence, through the incorporation of the previously disenfranchised body. A theatre for the disenfranchised body is one which exceeds the logics of domination of dance discourses which dictate a 'proper' body for dance. Instances of these pariah bodies are to be found increasingly in what is characterised as mainstream dance through the incorporation of atypical bodies: in the wrinkled skin of septuagenarian Diana Payne-Myers in DV8's *Strange Fish* and *Bound to Please*; in the presence of children, tricksters and hustlers in Alain Platel's Ballet C de la B's, *La Tristeza Complice*, *Benadetje* and *Iets op Bach*; in the bloodied legs of Javier DeFrutos and Jamie Watton in *Grass*.

This made a big impact on me, and remains with me to this day – the misfits seemed to be coming out of the shadows, and boundaries were beginning to blur. Despite the shiny, glossy exterior of late 1990s London, or, in my home country, the nation-building "Rainbow Nation" covering, the underground was announcing itself more explicitly to the world. Little did I know then that this would lead me in a few years to work with disabled and Deaf communities.

However, no matter how aware I was of change happening around me, as well as my own change, nothing could prepare me for a particular night in late January 1998 at the Purcell Room, South Bank Centre, and a performance at the London International Mime Festival of Derevo's *Red Zone*. (See Figure 6.)

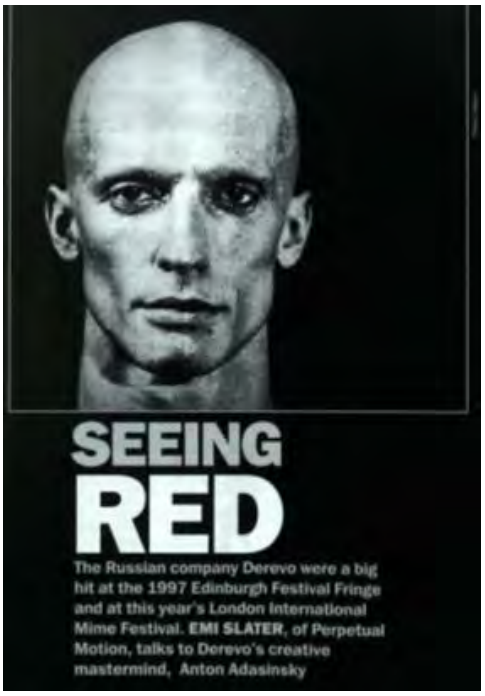

Figure 6: Anton Adassinki interviewed in *Total Theatre Magazine*, 10:1, 1998.

Let me not understate the impact that Derevo had on my evolution as a theatre-maker. Writing about *Red Zone* in my MA thesis (and it bears repeating), I wrote:

> *The Red Zone* is a sensual sledgehammer; it opens with a ragged circus act of bungling clowns: knives and various implements of destruction criss-cross the stage in a frenzied juggling act; they are almost nonchalantly plucked out of the air or dangerously dropped. The smell of extreme violence is all pervading, but balances on a thin line of humour. Just as chaos is about to explode, the performers seamlessly break into a short line-dance, performed like the band playing on as the ship sinks and humanity slowly descends to hell. The stage is plunged into darkness and when illumination returns, it is as if Derevo has unscrewed their collective skull and all Goya's demons come pouring out. Short vignettes and interactions occur – a woman chases a man around the stage until, fed up, he

> kicks her back from whence she came, even right off the stage into the audience. A naked body is suspended upside down while two further bodies pass between them a glowing red orb that seems to float across the space. By the end of the show, the stage is drenched in a gelatinous substance that could be albumen, or afterbirth, or even K-Y jelly. The performers slip and slide as they desperately try to regain control over each other (Murray, 2002: 10).

Who were these clowns – nay, self-styled "anti-clowns"? Derevo hail from Russia and were then just starting to explode across the landscape of international theatre with their "Butoh-styled circus from the end of the world" (*Red Zone* programme notes, 1998). Led by the idiosyncratic Adam Adassinki, who had worked for a while with Slava Polunin of *Slava's Snow Show* (1993 – present day) and Cirque du Soleil (from 1994 where its show, *Alegria* incorporated some of the former) fame, Derevo took a far darker and ascetic journey than the whimsical and romantic world of Polunin. I remember eating up stories as they spoke about the company's training – for example, exposing themselves to extreme snow conditions or severe endurance tests to achieve harmony and ultimate performance focus.[239] The British critics, in particular, fell over themselves trying to capture their essence. Lynn Gardner (1999) writes:

> Many of us who saw *Red Zone* in last year's London International Mime Festival are still in recovery from this 70-minute glimpse into the apocalypse in which shaven-headed, whey-faced maniacs with saggy tights and taped crotches turned inept cartwheels and failed to juggle with lethal objects to an increasingly raucous soundtrack of canned laughter and applause. A million miles from the now over-familiar circus-for-kicks style of Archaos and its imitators, *Red Zone* was a brute, Butoh-inspired meditation on a world in which tiny, clownish figures are locked in an unending struggle with monolithic forces that threatened to crush them.

David Richter (1998) writes:

> Amazing, stunning, beautiful, ugly. The list of adjectives to describe this show could go on. This is theatre at its most innovative. With *Red Zone*, Derevo redefine the medium, using daring, risk, vulnerability, honesty and commitment, both physical and emotional, that is rarely seen ...
>
> With a series of visual poems, they bypass conventional modes of communication, and lead the audience into a world where it is pointless trying to interpret meaning.
>
> This is a purely sensual experience. Derevo create a mood that is both personal and universal: presenting the human body, without judgement, in all its glory, baseness, beauty and ugliness. Each scene takes us to extremes with physical, technical, visual, and emotional perfection.
>
> Call it what you like – dance, movement, clowning, acting – this really is total theatre.

And not to be outdone, Peter Ross (1997) writes:

> If you want to shoot over the edge of theatre, tear down the fourth wall, create a spectacle that is beautiful but repellent, puerile yet profound, you will need to send in the shock-troops of the stage, the anarchists of the auditorium, the violent vaudevillains. Send in the clowns.
>
> Derevo creates an opening sequence of discordant brass and drumming, chaotic cabaret, maniacal, darker and comic violence. The clowns appear both ridiculous and deeply shocking – shaven-headed, heavily made-up, semi-nude or costumed with an anti-style attitude reminiscent of Jeunet

[239] Many of these early articles have now been digitally archived and can be accessed via www.derevo.org/en/articles

> and Caro. The first scene concludes with a defiantly hilarious strip-show and arse-kicking competition.
>
> The mood switches drastically, moving through astonishing scenes of mime, physical theatre, human sculpture, dance and acrobatics, all punctuated by a gripping, trippy soundtrack. Many pieces are achingly beautiful, others hint at dark psychosis with at least one being horribly violent and likely to induce pain in the viewer. Imagine the id live on stage and you might be close.
>
> It is the razor-edged contrast in tone that makes *Red Zone* so extraordinary intelligent but irrational, poised between structure and the void, it is a must-see in the truest sense. Apocalypse wow.

Reading those reviews again, I realise how deeply ingrained that show remains in my psyche – some 23 years later. Amidst all the loneliness and romanticism of my London quest, *Red Zone* did to me what all the above reviews allude to – it both blew apart the fragile, disconnected, edifice of my young thoughts about theatre, and presented a rare vision, and it did so with violence and tenderness, brutality and humour, and light and darkness. In connecting with, and relating to, the need and drive to "create a spectacle that is beautiful but repellent, puerile yet profound, you will need to send in the shock-troops of the stage". Even the name of the collective I am co-Artistic Director of, A Conspiracy of Clowns, was born from the description of the "anarchists of the auditorium, the violent vaudevillians". Above all, though, despite the shock and horror, the rawness and apocalyptic fever, was the core tenet that "Derevo create a mood that is both personal and universal: presenting the human body, without judgement, in all its glory, baseness, beauty and ugliness."

I think I have always been drawn towards wanting to create this sort of theatre – the one that audience members never forget due to a balancing of extreme brutality in terms of situation or visual *mise en scene* and intensely personal humanity. In the mid-1990s, one of my best friends, now sadly departed and sorely missed, came up with the almost perfect distillation of this by stating: "Never leave the stage alive. Never let your set survive. And always pass the parcel."

It dawns on me that watching Derevo, I began a renewed quest to find a personal approach to creating theatre that might hold some of their power. However – how does one connect their spectacle to my own journey through and into silent masks? It is impossible to describe *Red Zone* as silent; in fact, it was a cacophony of hard rock music, snarls, grunts, cries, screams, and unintelligible, garbled, almost nonsense gibberish. But without a doubt, this was theatre at its *non-verbal* powerhouse zenith. Above all, although it embraced such a hard-core athletic and performance aesthetic, it was eminently *playful*. And funny – really funny; though the moment fter you started laughing uproariously, your stomach would invariably end up in your mouth.

Figure 7: *Once* – A love song for the soul.

Barely a few months of recovering and trying to digest *Red Zone,* I saw them again – this time at the 1998 Edinburgh Fringe Festival. By now I was a complete fan and when I saw they had a new show, I sacrificed everything I had to get to Scotland. There, as if barely stopping to take a breath, they presented *Once* – a contemporary love story. (See Figure 7.)

Again it is Gardner (1999) who reaches for the best way to describe the work:

> *Once* is indelibly marked by the company's Italian sojourn and commedia dell'arte. Fantastically simple and yet precise and technically sophisticated, *Once* tells with boundless imagination a 300-year-old story about a tattered old man who falls in love with a beautiful waitress but has a suave rival for her affections. One minute it is like a silent Charlie Chaplin film; the next like a Salvador Dali painting brought to life. There is a stupid, Caravaggio-style Cupid who misdirects all his arrows, shooting stars ridden like Harley Davidsons, bungling Keystone Cops, angels who will break your heart and little puffing steamships negotiating these tempest-tossed seas. To see it is to see the warm sun appearing on a winter's day: it is guaranteed to melt the iciest of hearts.

It was almost inconceivable that this theatre troupe who had presented the apocalyptic vision from hell in *Red Zone* could produce something so beautiful, whimsical, and heart-breaking. I recall absolutely aching from laughter at one moment and the next moment becoming a mess of hot tears.

However, again, there was also a darkness within the show, a counterpoint to the lightness and frivolity. And this too made a huge impact on me. Somehow, Derevo managed to straddle these two poles in both of these shows to inspire in me a vision of the sort of tone, or style, that I would want to explore on stage.

Other than the juxtaposition of darkness and light, what both shows shared and presented was a non-verbal, devised, approach by a troupe of incredibly passionate and dedicated performers. Furthermore, they espoused a "rock 'n roll" spirit, seemingly breaking all the rules while writing altogether new ones, a cacophony of sound and vision, and such a raw immediacy that, as I have said, they have stayed with me for over 20 years. In them I could hear Artaud's words reaching across the century:

> We must apply ourselves to the text, forgetting ourselves, forgetting theatre, and lie in wait for the images that are in us, naked, excessive, and we should go to the end of these images (Antonin Artaud, quoted in Roose-Evans, 1990: 76).

One of my favourite bands, Einstürzende Neubauten,[240] equally famous and infamous for their industrial metal music, sang in "Die Explosion im Festspielhaus":[241]

[240] Translated roughly as "Collapsing New Buildings", whom I also saw in London during this time, and was also a life-changing experience.
[241] From their album, *Ende Neu*, released by Mute Records, 1996.

Urknall Durchbruch Expansion	Big bang, break-through, expansion
der Damm gesprengt	the dam blown up
über die Bühne geflutet	flooded over the stage
trunkene Sterne	drunken stars
ein neuer See	a new lake
der Höhepunkt des Ganzen:	the climax of everything:
Die Explosion im Festspielhaus	The explosion in the festival hall

Derevo were without a doubt my "explosion in the festival hall".

They also confirmed my avatar, or spirit creature – that of the clown; the anti-clown; the existential clown. A figure of poetry, of sadness and happiness, of life and death, of hope and despair, of ambiguity, a misfit, an in-betweener, an outsider. (See Figure 8.) Derevo further exposed my early attempts at theatre, although ideologically from a similar place, as intellectual exercises that, while interesting and "clever", were too densely wrapped in my own personal mythology to actually connect on a deep level with audiences. I had to find some way of drawing the disparate strands of my life together.

Figure 8: Anton Adassinski's clown character.

It became crystal clear to me that I needed to train further – I now knew what I wanted to do, now all I had to figure out was *how* to do it.

My noble poverty quest was coming to an end, and I packed away what had by now become one and a half manuscripts. I needed money and I needed a plan. Most of all, I needed to take myself seriously. I worked at a pub and restaurant while I started preparing for my next change, my next skin-shedding, my next transformation. I really wanted to train further in the UK, or perhaps even, at a stretch, the Lecoq school in Paris. That was going to take some serious saving.

And then came the next big event – the epiphany.

I had been working in a bar in Soho, London. It was 1998 and I was working through the changes happening within me. I lived in a small room above the bar – a bargain in terms of location and access to what was still quite a seedy and exciting part of the city. The bar had a small restaurant also, and as I learnt the trade and rose through the rank and file of temporary bar-help to a more stable part of the business, I was trained in cooking and running the kitchen. Being based in Soho meant I saw a lot of international tourists coming through our doors, and in retrospect I can see I was beginning to think again about the notion of "home", and what it meant for me.

The epiphany happened one night when the restaurant had closed, and I was up to my elbows in greasy washing-up water with plates and plates of tourists to clean. I used to listen to the legendary John Peel (1939–2004) who broadcast on Radio 1 from 1967 until his death. Peel was famous for his backing of young independent, or alternative bands, often helping them break-through with radio play, or even recording famous "John Peel Sessions" albums with them in studio.[242] He also played a lot of world music. On this particular night, elbow-deep in grease and leftovers, he played

[242] Bands included The Smiths, Joy Division, Nick Cave and the Bad Seeds, and the like.

Zimbabwean steel-string guitar music. I do not remember who it was (perhaps Oliver Mtukudzi?), but the sound, and the feel, of the music, was unmistakable. And there I was – sobbing into the lukewarm water ... I knew I had to return to South Africa; I had to go home.

It took a little longer to organise than it takes to write here, but eventually I enrolled at Rhodes University for my Honours in 1999, and stayed on to do my MA, 2000–2001. Starting Honours, some four years older than my classmates, brought its own challenges; however, I now had a mission and a very clear vision of where I wanted to go. Of course, the path was not straightforward; it never is. But the dedication and focus I brought back with me changed everything I knew, as much as it supported and complemented it.

In 1999, I managed to create a number of works – each one going a little deeper into the realm of the dark clown, and deeper into Visual Theatre, and finally coalescing into silent Mask Theatre. In the proceeding chapters, I go into more details about this ongoing journey – including some of the processes of an MA production in 2000 that ignited the rebooting of this journey, and which marked my return to theatre-making in South Africa, as much as it marks my gathering together of a new tribe, and collaborators I still work with to this day.

This biographical detour, though incomplete at this stage, as there was still a lot of life to be lived, and lessons to be learnt, has attempted to lay down some building blocks for the discussions that will follow. Each of the productions I go on to write about is a step forward in my evolution – and each one has marked me and my developing sense of being a theatre-maker, as much as they have to of me being a human. These building blocks have been crucial and informative in my journey, and remain my cairn of stones, as much as they remain my wounds, to reflect back on. In moments of doubt or hesitation, I can look back at them and see where I have come from, even if I am not always sure of where it is I will end up going. They are moments of stillness and silence amid all the noise and turmoil of life where I can pause for a time and reflect on where I am presently.

So, then – a lifetime of ambiguity, fluidity, metaphor, the irrational rationale of the dreamer, starting and restarting, an immersion into image and sound, a struggle between words and silence, and a stubborn anti-authoritarian stance ... so, why masks?

With the advantage of hindsight, it seems that they were always there, ready for me to stumble over them.