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Interview with Matteo Destro
Master of masks, director, and pedagogue,
director of the Atelier Mask Movement Theatre in San Miniato (Pisa),
International Center for theatrical teaching, creation, and research.

Creator and user of masks for the theater, Matteo Destro trained at the Jacques Lecoq School and further developed the possibilities of masks in theater. Matteo Destro's masks dictate, through their architectural lines, not only the quality and extension of the surrounding space and the actor's movement, but also the dramaturgical line of action and the very structure of dramatic writing.

I meet him at the exhibition: Matteo Destro, Theater, Masks, and Craftsmanship in San Miniato.

Origins
Matteo Destro graduated in psychopedagogy in Padua. He worked in cultural animation centers in the Padua area, where he met theater operators who introduced him to clowning and gestural expressivity—a passion that would lead him to the École Internationale de Théâtre Jacques Lecoq in Paris.

What led you to attend the Lecoq school?
"I had met trainers who had studied with Lecoq and had seen performances by people who had attended the school. There, I discovered a way of doing theater that I didn't know. Those performances stirred something in me that I now understand: play, the 'play,' which I had never perceived before, because the theater I knew had a language and theatrical literature that felt distant. I didn't have the tools to recognize it—I come from a working-class family that never took me to

the theater—and at that time, my own cultural formation was still in progress.

In Lecoq's theater, I didn't need to know anything but life, my own existence, which I recognized through play.

At 27, I listened to my passion. To go to Paris, I had to wait two years, work intensively, sell my car, rely only on myself… the school is expensive, being private; living in Paris—I won't even describe it; living in an attic without a bathroom…"

What was your encounter with the Master like?
At the school, from 1998 to 2000, I met the Master in his final phase. Lecoq died the following year, in January 1999. It was a time when the school had a solid structure. Lecoq had the ability to create structure and movement: he allowed himself to be provoked by new things and, at the same time, knew how to structure them.

Lecoq structured a pedagogy that had not existed before, with the vision of creating a path, with phases, preparatory parts, visions, broader and more practical concepts, with subjects sometimes created by him, sometimes already existing: the study of mime-dynamics, body dynamics, with contributions from the Eastern school and the French school regarding mime, the decomposition of movement taken from Copeau and Décroux…

His greatness lay in having an organic vision, entirely at the service of the stage as spatial dynamics. In the first year, there were many of us, a hundred or one hundred ten; in the second year, there was strong selection, thirty or thirty-two students. I was chosen and was able to complete the entire path.

How did you arrive at masks?
Being from theVeneto region, I knew the masks of Commedia dell'Arte and had seen performances. In my imagination, that was a traditional mask, very stylistically characterized and very defined. Upon arriving at the School, I saw that, beyond decomposition and the analysis of movement through the observation of everyday life, the mask had become the primary language through which an entire theatrical language could be codified.

Thus, a clear, precise, and highly guiding tool, through which one could learn, compare, lose oneself, and find oneself again. There was no theater based on vague feeling, sentiment, or personal crises. There were clear learning tools, which were not superficial and were directly in contact with a shared poetic ground that I felt very strongly.

Lecoq was a poet of pedagogy: through the mask, he created a territory of study and discovery in which each person could experiment with something that was not only personal but, precisely for that reason, became universal.

Indeed, those two years were *deux voyages*, as he himself called them. Two journeys of deconstruction, erasing vices and creating a blank page of oneself, and reconstruction, creating the ability to write dramas through one's body, sensitivity, and vision.

The first year worked on removing personal preconceptions through the use of neutral masks, movement analysis, and certain theatrical styles: thus a journey from the neutral to the expressive. The second year involved excursions into what he called *les terroirs dramatiques*: tragedy, comedy theater, cabaret, clown, the absurd, buffoonery, the grotesque, satire, and masks with *comédie humaine*, observing social types and, through laughter and comic imbalance, addressing strong social themes.

Beneath every exploration of the second year was also the author, a precise vision, because one had to also create works as an author. Work was done in groups; there was no specialization division between directing, writing, or acting: everyone did everything. Every week, there was a *commande* to present a student work to the professors, who gave feedback. The number of students varied depending on the project.

In tragedy, for the male and female chorus, there were fifteen or twenty; for comedy, we worked in groups of five. Tragedy was one of the first projects in the second year, to create verticality and a sense of the tragic, to see what unites us and also to create the collective mask.

For this reason, the work did not focus on tragedy itself but on the tragic chorus: the chorus of Sophocles, or directly from *Antigone*. I worked a lot on *Ajax*, moving it, observing how the chorus could deliver the text while creating spatial geometries—not only with voice but with large movements, with broad openings. One examined the choral text observing physical forces: what pushes, what pulls, what opens, what elevates, what drags down; and in saying it, it became a choral gesture, the whole chorus pushing, a living organism representing a text in unison.

To do this, one must go to the classics, because the classics have this force. Then we worked on modern authors, some Brecht. After this, we moved on to melodrama, where the lines of force change: from the verticality of tragedy, where the choragus presents the hero, to the oblique, the pull of melodrama, where everything is undefined, another type of intensity. We felt it physically: through movement, the text became spatial architecture.

What was the transition from Lecoq to Sartori?
After Paris, there was a void.
I am from Padua, so I knew Sartori, and at the Lecoq school, there was much talk about the connection between Lecoq, Strehler, Sartori, and Dario Fo. Sartori created the neutral mask: the whole concept and manifestation of the neutral also came thanks to the Sartoris. Sartori knew there was a student from Padua who had attended the Lecoq School, so there was friendship and potential that could emerge.

After Paris, I reconnected with my local contacts, resuming my work as a pedagogue using theater, doing things in the street: clowning, mime, the skills I had learned. I didn't feel ready to knock on the doors of major theaters. I started in a way, a bit in the void, a bit in exploration, and then, on my own, I began experimenting with the mask. With Lecoq, one didn't understand how a mask worked: he had ideas, but practically didn't explain how to make it… At the school, masks were made, but out of fifty, maybe two would be noticed: "Ah, there's something there," without knowing why regarding planes or projection…

I began to see the human person behind Lecoq, who had fixed certain things that I now saw as limitations, and I tried to open them.
I started working with cans and cardboard. I tried to understand the principle by which a fold, a trauma, or a tension in the structure could create something. I began with with folded forms; I tried to understand where tension arose and why, why it arose there, and if, when there was too much tension, how long I could keep observing; how much tension was needed for someone to continue saying, "Ah"; and whether there was a promise that something would happen, or if what I put into the material said everything and nothing more.

I had a mountain of detergent containers that already had a shape; I cut them, assembled them. My idea was to start from simple things until I realized that one important element was direction. So I told myself: "I'll start with masks that have only one direction: one going forward, one up, another down. This creates a dynamic, but they must be simple, not complex." This was the first phase, which I called mono-directional.

For example, this mask goes entirely forward. What I seek is not a face: I seek direction, and then I must justify the rest of the face according to that direction. So, where will the nose be? How will the mouth be? Everything must serve that direction. For example, this one pulls upwards… This was my first intuition, and it gave the character to all my later work, which became more complex; but behind every mask is this first intuition.
Direction is what drives me when I make a mask. It is the first thing.

What is added to it?
At some point, directions end and become style. A bit like animation, which moves according to the same principle. My partner, Alay Arcelus Macazaga, who also comes from Lecoq, and I tried them in the street; one could see how they worked and understand that, having a strong direction, while I pushed, at a certain point in play and drama, a counter-direction emerged. We realized that pure direction is impossible: somewhere a counter-direction forms, the *counter mask*. It is impossible to create something that only goes down; there must be something going up. It depends on where you place the emphasis.

This led to clean acting and, subsequently, to a pedagogy of the actor's play with the mask. I realized that there had to be planes, lines, and volumes—an architecture—which I initially discovered on my own, but at a certain point I approached the Sartoris. Amleto Sartori was a sculptor, as is his son Donato, who possesses, as a master, a profound knowledge of the techniques of sculptural lines and planes. I did a workshop with Donato during one summer, learning the leather technique, which involves sculpting the mask matrix in wood, a work that truly forces you to find the planes.

How does the mask work?
The mask has no mercy. If the mask requires a movement and the actor adds their 'habit,' the mask does not work. The actor struggles because they are asked to remove and start feeling with a sense of expansion. The mask is a language that creates extension. The sensation of the mask is not internal: it is the same both inside and outside. What I feel has structure, and since it has structure, it creates an extension that reaches the audience.

From the mask to performances
One starts from a book, a narrative, or a theme: the ecological crisis, femicide… One studies the theme, the points to touch, the beginning of dramaturgy, which characters exist, the situation, and then, knowing that one wants to work with masks—and in my case, it is also a formal, stylistic choice—I make several masks, let's say ten, a stylistic series. Sometimes I make them knowing the theme, as in this 2014 performance about a sick girl, for which I wanted masks that treated the theme with lightness and strength, but not pathetically.

Once the mask series is completed, one begins working with the actors: observing how they move, with gestures more amplified, more intimate, more contained, more tense. One starts to find a

bodily language, which already begins to provide writing elements, and scenes begin to emerge. Four actors with ten masks give rise to forty possible characters because everyone tries everything; then casting occurs: “Ah, you with that mask could represent the mother, but the daughter needs a temperament more like this.” Psychological fields are created, combined to create balance in the dramaturgy; one begins to organize scenes and focus, streamlining characters: “Ah, that mask doesn’t work,” and then the mask is changed.

It must also be said that the mask does not dictate a precise psychology: it creates a possible field of psychologies within that direction. Very different characters can be created, but they are internal to the field given by that direction. The actor wearing that mask aligns with something of their own in that direction, revealing a universal side we all have, which is within her and within me. There are more complex masks where an actor can push more in one structure, others in another. The mask adapts greatly to the play we seek. There are actor-mask pairings that do not work, but there are others where the dramatic availability is enormous, and with the mask, we can go in many directions: sadness, joy, anger, containment, openness… It is an alchemical phase done with the group.

So, is writing achieved through interaction between mask and actor?
There are narrative elements and the mask, and there is a space, a laboratory, where one tries to combine them.

The Atelier Mask Movement Theatre
I had the opportunity to teach at some theater schools, and then, in 2016, I founded with my partner Alay Arcelus Macazaga the Atelier Mask Movement Theatre. We offer a well-structured theatrical and artistic language, open to 14 students. The course lasts three months, with a journey somewhat reflecting Jacques Lecoq’s basic idea, from neutral to expressive, and another journey from silence to speech: from neutral silence, to larval silence, to expressive silence; then the mask opens, and one moves to the voice, which is like another body, made of another material. So one goes even deeper, combining movement, body, and voice.

Thirty-five to forty hours per week are equally divided between teaching, studio practice, and mask construction in the laboratory. Each week, we assign a theme—one with the neutral mask, one with the larval mask, and so on. There is also a progression in writing: for example, with larval masks, the theme might concern a place, a situation, or an event. The following week, the same theme is addressed, but relating multiple masks, which implies considering characters and human dynamics.

On Fridays, maintaining Lecoq’s model, the students present their creations to a group of professors and guests for feedback. At the end of the course, we select the best examples with the masks and, under my direction, present them to the public as a performance.