

Toby Wilsher, *The Mask Handbook: A Practical Guide* (London and New York: Routledge, 2007)

The last decade has seen a proliferation of books that emphasise the significance of mask work as a revelatory tool of actor training. The values of physical theatre training has gathered momentum as a result of the availability of the works of Jacques Lecoq in English, in particular *The Moving Body: Teaching Creative Theatre* (2002) and *Theatre of Movement and Gesture* (2006) while John Rudlin has extended his seminal book on *commedia dell'arte* published in 1994 to include, with Olly Crick, *Commedia dell'arte: A Handbook for Troupes* (2001). No doubt this latest regeneration of interest has been fuelled by Lecoq's death in 1999 and equally by the spectacular success of such companies as Mummenschanz, itself highly indebted to Lecoq's pedagogy.

Toby Wilsher is both a skilled mask practitioner and a passionate advocate for the medium. He was the founding artistic director of Trestle Theatre Company (1981–2004), known especially for its work with young people and in theatre-in-education programmes. It gained, however, a particular international reputation for its mask work. In this book Wilsher makes his position quite plain: 'what theatre needs ... at the beginning of the twenty-first century, are more masks and more puppets' and thus he hopes the book will encourage 'more participants to don the mask and connect with the imagination of the audience'. The title suggests that it is intended as a handbook that might promote strategies for awakening the imagination and for

developing in actors the powers of outward expression – to paraphrase Michel St Denis' comments on mask work as far back as 1960. Nevertheless, while the title might suggest a broad coverage of mask work for the aspiring practitioner, in fact it focuses on the specific practices and values of the full mask and the implications that come from the absence of a spoken text – 'a silent expressive medium' – on its users.

The book itself starts with an historical overview of differing kinds of masks which Wilsher loosely divides between those which reflect a sacred origin and those whose function is primarily to entertain. In this respect, Wilsher's positioning is clear: he has little time for the sacralisation of masks in contemporary theatre practice. It clearly distances him from the evocation of trance-like states that informs Keith Johnstone's perception of mask work in *Impro* (1981) and, while acknowledging the transformative capacity of the mask, Wilsher is at pains to remind the reader of the full mask's carnivalesque origins.

The chapters on 'How the Mask Works' and 'Applications' are hortatory, intended to explain the benefits of full masks and the physical demands that accompany them. In the latter respect, Wilsher suggests that the expressiveness required of the mask actor is different from that required of mime, an arbitrary distinction that needs more clarification than the book gives it. However, as soon as he moves into 'Preparing for the Mask' (Chapter 5), which focuses on the physical demonstration of emotional truth, Wilsher provides useful advice about tension and energy, speed and rhythm through exercises which develop the vocabulary of a mask performer. These are further developed in exercises that challenge the performer to find what he calls 'expanded moments': the generation of moments that centre on 'the thoughts, realisations, decisions and reactions of the characters' but which masks evoke in a particularly significant way. There is an illuminating chapter on devising with masks, incorporating methods which derive from Wilsher's lengthy career with Trestle and exemplified by detailed reference to the company's 2000 show, *Island*. Perhaps the most provocative elements are Wilsher's analogies with cinematic narrative techniques. He argues that mask shows using simple means can offer parallels with the technologically derived structures of film and television. Masks can facilitate the creation of new, non-linear plot formations. The parallel is further elaborated when Wilsher writes about directing masks: 'a film director works in much the same way as a mask director: you are creating stories, moments, atmospheres, through the manipulation of the audience's focus, and by what it is you animate in that particular shot'. Nonetheless, what he says applies equally to any stage director. Indeed he is at pains to indicate that work with masks involves many of the same processes that characterise text-based performance – refinement, selection, truthfulness, observation and discovery within a context of highly disciplined physical expression.

The last chapters of the book are somewhat cursory in that they refer to masks that are less significant to the argument: the half-mask, the neutral mask and other carnival masks. As well, one chapter relates briefly some of the principles of mask-making and directs the reader to such sources as Jennifer Foreman's *Maskwork* (1999) for more detail. For me, the book is something of a curate's egg. I was particularly impressed by its position that mask work can be liberating and challenged by its insistence on the ease with which masks can address contemporary issues. Unquestionably the book is a passionate account of over twenty years of experience in the uses of the full mask by a master practitioner. Perhaps it is precisely because

Wilsher is so experienced and knowledgeable that he somehow expects a complementary understanding on the part of the reader. Wilsher admits that the soundless full mask is a relative newcomer to mask usage and that many potential users of the full mask, unlike *commedia* and character mask-users, may be put off by the absence of text. I wanted him to explain more about the differences between the impact of the various masks upon performers and spectators, so as to position the full mask within the mask repertoire more precisely.

VICTOR EMELJANOW

Victor Emeljanow is Professor of Drama in the School of Drama, Fine Art and Music at the University of Newcastle.