

The Man Behind the Masks

An interview with Paolo Consiglio

Leslie Katz and Jorg Bochow

LK: How much do you draw from other cultural mask-making traditions, and what are some of those traditions?

PC: I have been looking intensely, drawing from all possible masks I come across, from all possible cultures. But now I am not looking anymore; I am not looking to inspire myself. Now things are becoming more simple, more basic. Even materials and technique—like the *commedia dell'arte* technique I teach—I am not stretching leather on the wooden models anymore. Each mask suggests its shape according to the material that seems useful for the purpose.

LK: How do you arrive at the choice of materials for the masks in this production?

PC: From many sources. For this Dionysus mask, it was necessary to find certain material which could be used independently from the face or the head of the actor... [The mask] should be suspended in the air. It was supposed to be the mask of Dionysus, the god of transformation, appearance, manifestation, and so on. What better to represent Dionysus than the bull?

I looked all over Italy for the big horns, which went very well with the drumskin. That round, almost translucent material, when it is wet, you can give it all the shape you want, the curve you want, and when it dries, it really grips. The idea was to make a triangle inside the round mask, so that this top part can grip the huge horns that I normally find in Tuscany, on the coast, being from a wide kind of bovine race. And that was the image I had. But because of mad cow disease, there were no more bones, no horns. So I had to do without.

JB: You bring up the relationship of the mask to everyday realities, like mad cow disease. You use only natural material. You say you hate to use any contemporary material. But synthetic material, this plastic stuff we are surrounded with, is also part of our reality. Why do you reject these materials?

PC: I cannot use [synthetic materials] because I don't feel they are comfortable with the actor and I've been told that you should make a *commedia* mask, the beauty is that it becomes a glove on the face of the actor. So, plastic material... I am against plastic. I am against this plastic world, consumerism and so on.

JB: Masks have always been associated with magic, with transgressing the boundaries of the individual. Do you see a magic function in your masks?

PC: Magic? No, I don't concentrate on magic, because I think it is the lowest level of metaphysics. I like to concentrate on metaphysical tensions, but the magic is not part of this.

LK: Someone might say that masks distance the audience from the horror of the spectacle in Greek tragedy. Is that your opinion?

PC: I am not sure that tragedy should be something which suggests horror. The story, the topic is horrific, but... it seems to me that what the Greeks were doing with their tragedies was not different from what the sacred performances in the East are doing. If you watch a Kathakali performance, you experience a certain contemplation of what is happening, which is normally the same horror as in the Greek tragedies. And that to me is the *katharsis* brought into the audience. The fact that you experience this state of suspension of reaction... which gives you the feeling that you are, in the meantime, also watching Charlie Chaplin. Which is something that recently [Benigni] is doing with *LA VITA E' BELLA* [*Life is Beautiful*]. I am reminded of the effect of only one film I can remember from my experience: *Apocalypse Now*, in which, you're right, the point is that out of all the horror, you get this feeling that there is so much beauty.