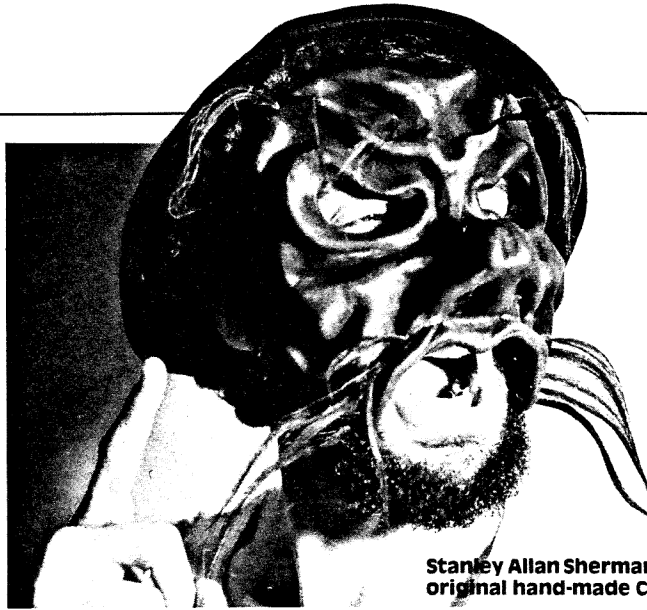


MIME



Stanley Allan Sherman wearing one of his original hand-made Commedia masks

by Stanley Allan Sherman

Stanley Allan Sherman has been performing mime for a number of years throughout the United States, and has gained considerable attention for his hand-crafted, leather commedia dell'arte masks, which he uses in his own productions as well as making them for other mime and theatre companies. The New York Public Library recently featured a display of his masks at its performing arts branch in Lincoln Center.

The Play on Silence

Mime is a play on silence. Drawing upon emotions, characterization, timing and the actor's immersion in the moment, mime alone can sing like a song with its movements or flow like a poem. Although I know what I am going to be doing on stage when I am in performance, the very act of creating becomes improvisational and must seem fresh and spontaneous both to me and to my audience. This is especially important in mime, an art form that can easily be overburdened with technique. But technique must be learned in order to be able to forget it, for it is only when technique disappears that both audience and performer can become completely involved in the play itself.

Some of the best mimes I know no longer refer to themselves as such, but go by their own names, or by their circus or vaudeville

titles. Many are doing this because there are now so many performers around the country calling themselves mimes who are nothing more than white-faced robots—an image which Robert Shields turned into a fine art in San Francisco some years ago, and one which made a definite statement about those times, but which has since been abused. While white-faced mime can be wonderful, adding a special power to a show, it can also become a crutch for the performer and a distraction for the audience, many of whom wind up staring at the artist's face instead of watching what is actually happening.

What is happening now in mime? What I see most are many mimes rediscovering American vaudeville, while keeping alive in their characters the soul of the personal European clown. The result is a combination of mime, clown, fool and juggler—with the use of masks and a little magic and a strong background in theatre thrown in for good measure. Given the wide variety of performance situations that mimes are encountering in this country as the public's interest in mime grows, it was inevitable that they would turn to vaudeville again. The vaudeville style, it seems to me, is characterized by a certain craziness and flare which performing before vastly different kinds of audiences requires. I have personally done shows, for example, at rock concerts in one of the best theatres on the West Coast, in bars with stages the size of a bar stool, in school gyms, at Universities, in small town theatres (of which there are many fine examples popping up around the country), at street fairs, in mental hospitals and prisons, and even in a bank (the only time I have ever been cheated out of part of my fee).

Needless to say, our theatrical tradition is much older than American vaudeville, and I have often been surprised and pleased to discover—after working very hard to come up

with something new and different—that my “original” creation was actually done hundreds of years ago and is a classical piece. I tend to trust this process, and take it as a sign that my own artistic development is heading in the right direction. In fact, one thing that I am doing now is making commedia dell'arte leather masks. Leather is ideal for this purpose because it breathes, giving the mask a life of its own, something that is especially important during a live performance since it tends to root the performer. When he is using it correctly, it is not the mask itself but the character he is portraying that is most apparent to the audience. When I make such a mask, I even intend for it to be able to change as the emotions of the performer themselves change.

Once, after seeing my commedia masks, someone asked me whether I had studied old prints and plates to come up with the characters they portray. It is knowing the emotions of those characters—how they think and what they feel—that makes the creation possible. Studying with Jacque LeCoq in Paris and working with Carol Mazzone-Clementi at the Dell'Arte School of Mime and Comedy in Blue Lake, California, where I also teach, has contributed to this artistic process. Because of this I have been able to discover the characters as they are, and through them, the masks as they should be.

Creativity and discovery, after all, is what being an artist is about. And while I find it easy to develop material for my performances, what's hard is to discover something that moves me so deeply that acting it out is inevitable. A performer must be honest with that material, and with himself, if he is to stay alive as an artist. Only then can he begin to evolve his own style. And only in that way can a play about nothing—working with silence, as a mime must do—become eloquent in its own right. □