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Brief Commentary on the Development of Masks to Form a Single Text for Theatre

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Nina Kane, University of Huddersfield, MA in Writing for Performance; Collaborative Text project, 2008.

Nina Kane, MA Writing for Performance: Collaborative Text Project.

The submission took the form of five papier-mache masks created from mixed-arts collaborations with others. This report was written in May 2008 to reflect on the process and its intentions. I have included photographs taken later of some of the masks in use in separate productions. Hedge-Witch has been used in *The Loves of Lady Purple* project (Judith Adams / 59 Productions), 2008 and in *Keen* (Cast-Off Drama), 2011. Minotaur Woman (Mrs Reynolds) has been used in *Unquiet Susan* (Cast-Off Drama), 2014. Magpie Man has been used in *Foil and Feathers* (Cast-Off Drama), 2009 and *Unquiet Susan* (Cast-Off Drama), 2014. These appearances represent collaborations with 'fragments' or 'parts' of this text and the masks carry something of their touchstone qualities into those projects. To date, the five masks have not been used together to explore the single text they formally constitute, but I continue to seek an opportunity to try this.

Nina Kane, June 2014.

Commentary

The five masks represent a singular text. It is my intention that they will be worked with by actors and a director at a later date. Each mask has its own inherent character and results from a series of collaborations with performers, artists, writers and clowns. They share a point of origin - *Stengam* by Cor Fuhler – a piece of improvisatory jazz. Cor Fuhler is a musician who has travelled widely and collaborated with many people through improvisation on the piano/keyboard. He has extended the sound possibilities of these instruments by taking them apart and using the insides - the strings, the computer components, the hammers, the electrical apparatus. A skilled carpenter, he builds his own hybrid instruments to generate different sound options. *Stengam* is his first solo work for years and was created with a piano and magnets.

Stengam is strong, pulsating, brimming with a deep undertow – 'there's something under the city' it seems to say - and the music itself only seems to emerge, blinking in the sunlight, in the last section of the piece. 'What's there?' I feel it says, 'what's there?' The music is its

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own thing – a character in itself – ‘but what am I?’ it says, or seems to. The powerful tension of magnets about to connect resonates in *Stengam*, as does the loneliness and stillness of the magnets, turned the same way, that don’t connect. *Stengam* – magnets (read backwards). Its essence contained in simple, single word-play. The music has a singular voice with the echoes of many voices sitting underneath. I feel that the work consolidates the energy of Fuhler’s multiple collaborations over the years and brings them to a singular, resonant, point. It is an in-breath – a point of re-collection, self-orientation, a rest between movements, time-out well-spent, time alone. It is a strong and beautiful work. Like sand falling slowly through water, there is a powerful, inevitable tumble to the sound that is hypnotic, calming, compulsive. It takes you down into it before dragging you back up to the surface to go on your way. It is music with a clear sense of journey. These qualities made it a strong thread / through-line for my project and were the reasons I chose it as a companion for collaboration.

Collaboration is central to my work as a performer and director. I am used to working in combined arts and feel that in writing for performance you effectively inhabit the roles of scribe, actor/actress, director, stage manager, technical director in turn in the shaping of text. As a writer you’re always seeing people, hearing people, re-working exchanges with the people you pass in life, documenting one way or another time spent with others. You also reinvent the world and can play at being others, seeing things through others’ eyes, step into others shoes. Most words are generated through the body and the mind – I wanted the process to be a journey of exchanges that I embodied and reproduced from the inside as well as the out.

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When I thought about the term 'collaboration', I instantly saw it as meaning – working in a group with other people, in a room, doing things and devising / creating text from that. Also – setting something in motion that gathers its own pace and draws things into it, sometimes by design, sometimes by default. Magnets are of course the perfect image for this anyway – the magnet is the hub of the collaboration and the iron filings that attach, and make shapes...the process...? I collaborate most of the time, usually through improvised means and in combined arts settings working from source stimuli. The first stage of the process was straightforward to arrange therefore and I really looked forward to the exchanges. Any excuse to get together with people in a space playing! The process brought some challenges too, however, in that it made me hold my current strategies up to the light. I have discussed this in the journal so will not repeat this here, but the process has made me want to find other people to collaborate with in a long-term way. I want to develop ongoing relationships for collaboration rather than one-off projects, leaving space for others to approach me with their work / ideas / proposals rather than me always taking projects out /setting up things for collaboration with others.

For me, collaborative working is always about people, things that occur with and between people and art forms – I think this is central to theatre. The collaborations that went into making the artefact included:

1. Collaboration with my son Dante (aged 12). I was keen to understand his aesthetic world –a world of lego, computer games, mobile phone imagery – and suggested he collaborate with me using these. He had a powerful aversion to the Cor Fuhler music

so I suggested he make something connected to that. He made a short video animation using lego and writing, drawing, soundtrack which he performed with his own voice and built in his bedroom. I took a character from his story – the Flame – Thrower – as an archetypal hero / troubadour lover figure to develop further. (Animateur - Dante Hall, 20th January 2008)

2. Collaboration with the Drama Improvisation Group. (2nd and 3rd year students from the drama department). I have worked with the group before as an ensemble performer-improviser and wanted to improvise with them. It was an open collaboration for the duration of the *Stengam* music, with the proviso that anyone could step in or out at any time and write / scribe something on the sheets laid out around the room. The character of the Hedge-Witch and the colour purple emerged strongly from this process. (Drama Improvisers – Ben Myers, Siobhan Harrison, Kerry Ely, Aileen Shaw, 1st February 2008)
3. Collaboration with life-drawing artists at Leeds City Art Gallery – ‘Minotaur’ - with Cast-Off Drama and in response to ‘Labyrinth’ by Leo. I set up a Cast-Off Drama workshop day improvising as a life-model performer and inviting life-drawers and writers to come and make drawings and writings from me. I worked in response to *Stengam* (played twice), and to an installation / mixed media/ film / photography work currently exhibited in the gallery – ‘Labyrinth’ by Leo (also from Amsterdam, like Fuhler). Two strong characters emerged from this – Minotaur Woman (Mrs Reynolds) and Marigold (the Cleaner), with a third (Jasper Reynolds) referenced. The performances choices, images and writings helped me visualise the characters and make colour / texture choices for making. (Life-Drawers at Leeds City Art Gallery:

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John Rider, Christine Smith, Joseph While, Roy Slater, Paulette Walters, Matthew Pinder, Anni Winter, Aaron Adamson, Jenny Willis, John Marlow, Julia Knight, Christine Hinchcliffe, Gisele Bone, Andy Beresford. Photographer: John Tunney. Installation by 'Leo'. (7th March 2008)

4. Collaboration with Jenny Willis on her rat project: I did some life-modelling performance for Jenny improvising on her rat project and looking at the Pied piper story, for her to develop drawings / ideas further. The collaboration also helped me work more with materials from the Minotaur day and develop the character of Marigold further. Writer / Life-Drawer: Jenny Willis (7th April 2008)
5. Collaboration with the MA Writing for Performance group – The Word Laundry: I developed objects and writing props to make 'a word laundry' and introduced some clowning techniques for a clown / writing improvisation played to the full *Stengam*. This consolidated Jasper Reynolds into Magpie-Man, and gave me a chance to make objects in preparation for the final artefact. Clown Writers: Judith Adams, Jenny Willis, John Dwyer, Karen Naylor, Lindsey Vann (24th April 2008)
6. Collaboration with daughter, Emily, (aged 6) on costume ideas for each character. Emily looked at the final masks and the making materials for each, then chose costumes from her dressing-up box, and fabric pieces to suggest costume designs. She also helped advise me on adornment of the masks. (Costume Designer / Mask Adornment: Emily Kane-Horsler, 11th May 2008)

I also assisted Karen Naylor in constructing a maquette of a breast for her project. Though this did not connect in any definable way to my artefact, it generally helped me progress my feelings and ideas around the need for me to collaborate more with others on their projects.

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She has asked me to make a mask for her project at a later date which I am looking forward to doing.

There were some proposed collaborations that didn't happen due to pressures of time, availability of participants, dates, space, etc. These included:

1. Dance / movement collaboration with Kim Tilger-Holt in response to *Stengam*
2. Voice / Music improvisation with 2nd year Music improvisation group using found scores and in response to *Stengam*
3. Video collaboration, possibly with Lindsey Vann

I hope to take these collaborations up at a later date in connection to the project.

I had originally set up nine different collaboration options, but by February was already overwhelmed with story material, characters, words, sounds, actions, memories and faces arising from the exchanges with Dante and the drama improvisation group. I'd planned to scribe texts from each exchange and develop writing from this, but felt spun-out and strangely flat by this idea. I decided early on to develop a mask from each exchange, hence the focus on 'characters'.

The idea of chopping up texts appealed. I wanted to produce an artefact resonant with language but with few written words on its surface. Producing a papier-mâché mask to consolidate and express the essence of the collaborations, usefully channelled the resonances of each encounter. Using the chopped-up, mashed-up words written in / after the exchange helped me process, filter, recycle and reshape and reuse the logos without it dominating the artefact. There is, however, an overspill of words happening in the log – a journal – as it were, so the words still went somewhere!! But it didn't overwhelm the

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artefact which is the important thing for me. I was able to embody the process but let it go – with words I inhabit the text but somehow end up emeshed in the spiderweb of them, as it were. This didn't happen on this occasion.

The set of masks became my artefact. Could each mask have a phrase? I became interested in the idea that each mask would have a carefully chosen word or set of words to speak – almost like a 'touchstone' – or a secret word. When the masks have been worked with in rehearsal I may opt to develop a Haiku poem for them. As the action of Haiku happens between the lines – in the unsaid – I feel this would be an appropriate form of writing for the masks, but this would obviously depend on what happens in process.

Masks, by their nature, are hybrid creations. They represent the human face yet invariably hold an aesthetic identity that adorns / objectifies / mythologises and in some cases dehumanises the performer to greater or lesser degrees. The performer is at once themselves and another. In our identity-conscious West, where portrait is conventionally the highest form of art, mask-wearing – the substitution of our own face with another – offers powerful release into character play and encourages instant connection with others in a group to form connection and to shape meaning. A full-face or head mask liberates the performer from talking, challenging her/him to use body, objects, space, gesture, sound and interplay with other performers to communicate. Mask design for theatre has a rich and varied history and processes of making and wearing masks invariably brings us into contact with that history with its multiple visual and narrative associations. Mask-wearing is always a negotiation between the present moment and history, between suggested story / character

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(inscribed in the shape / story of the mask) and the ritual, spontaneous, moments brought by the performers themselves and occurring in the space through mask-play. Like a written script for theatre, a mask exists as an object, containing its own set of meanings / stories that come alive when animated by the action and inhabitation of its character by the actor. A set of masks created together from a singular making process will therefore constitute a cast of characters to be played out in relationship to one another by the company. But just as any words or line in a script can be voiced in different ways, any set of dialogue be acted with different emotional emphasis, the masks exist as a baseline – the prompt to action, emotion, exchange and meaning that can only be fully realised once taken up by the performers and played out in rehearsal, production, finding further consolidation in the perception / viewing/participation of the audience.

I became interested in the slippage between the mask and the actor's face. In some ways, making a mask is a collaboration-in-waiting – you shape the mask as best you can to fit another's face – you anticipate, at all stages, where her/his face will fit, how they will see, making sure they can breathe easily, hopefully make the mask snug enough to sit comfortably but not too tight. It is not unlike making a puppet, but the physical proximity of the mask to the actor's face makes you aware of the needs of the performer – in a way you step into their shoes, trying the mask on for size - how comfortable is it, how uncomfortable. What effect will this have on a performer? Connection to other human beings is inherently a part of mask-making. Connection to the mask – and the face that grows out at you is part of this – in some ways, I felt I was in collaboration with each mask as I made it, and in making it, honoured the people with whom i'd created the essence of the

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mask in collaboration. As with children, you craft the mask as best you can, then let them go. Masks always grow up, grow old, grow into themselves and become objects of collaboration with others. Their inherent character, however, remains consistent and this balance appealed to me. Mask-making is a negotiation between the maker and performer, and for the performer, it is a negotiation between her/him and the mask itself. No-one has total control of the process. The mask is as it is. In choosing a mask to wear, you accept the face it gives you, but in turn, you animate the mask by your own physical, emotional and performative impulses – it is always in process, and always intensely human.

I am happy on the whole with the masks but was short of time and need to work more to complete the Marigold mask. I am unhappy with it as it stands as it looks too much like a 'character' mask and needs more work to achieve the hybridised balance of the other four. I need to structure the head-piece more to strengthen it, and want to make it much higher – like the 'Empress' pictures from collaboration 3. As it stands at the moment, it reminds me of the cloth-animated Afro-Caribbean figure in the Lenor advert (with the simpering smile!) and also of a Horse & Bamboo African character mask I once wore. It's effectively still in process, and I need to work on it more to pull it through to its 'true character' and likeness. I'm very happy with the other masks and benefitted from advice from Dante and Emily on adornment.

There were two stages to the process of this collaborative project. The first stage involved collaborations with others using *Stengam* as a starting point, played in full each time. This lasted for a period of five months with space in-between each exchange. The second stage

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involved a solo mask-making process which lasted intensively over three weeks with no space inbetween. The first stage was located in different studio spaces, the second in one location – my kitchen! The artefact – a set of five masks with clearly-defined characters and a loosely-sketched set of stories / words / relationships between them – is complete. My next stage will be to take the masks out to a group of actors, musicians and a dancer to progress the masks' collaborative journey further.

The five masks of the artefact are:

1. Flame-Thrower / The Soldier
2. Hedge-Witch
3. Minotaur Woman (Mrs Reynolds)
4. Marigold (the Cleaner)
5. Magpie-Man (Jasper Reynolds)

Each mask has a touchstone text with them for the performer to reflect on. These are words that acquired particular resonance during the collaboration processes and which I embedded in the making of the masks.

6. Flame-Thrower / Soldier: 'Full fathom five, thy father lies, Of his bones are corals made'
7. Hedge – Witch: 'Feet. Skipping. Tripping. Feet. Always moving. There's never been a gate here before' (This may change)
8. Minotaur Woman (Mrs Reynolds): 'There's a minotaur in every woman. Heavy is the head that wears the crown. Forget-me-not'
9. Marigold (the Cleaner): 'Burn like a lobster / I will burn you'
10. Magpie Man (Jasper Reynolds): 'I am here to serve and to hinder'

As the names suggest their identities are not entirely fixed, and hang somewhere between mythology and something more naturalist. The process has uncovered a set of relationships which I would suggest to the actors and director. Hedge-Witch is The Soldier's mother, Marigold is Magpie-Man's mother, Minotaur Woman is Magpie-Man's wife. An old story emerges for me as a starting point – the Soldier knows Minotaur Woman of old and is in

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love with her. He is a flame-thrower and spends his day forging flame and weaponry. Minotaur Woman has worked her way up and unhappily married to a rich self-made man – Magpie Man (Jasper Reynolds). Jasper's mother Marigold is a cleaner. She is ambitious for her son and has helped him rise. The Hedge Witch loves her son. They move from town to town and are barred entry to many places. Flame-Thrower's father was a soldier but died in a snow storm. These are narrative nuggets – little embers, flickers of story, back story, history and connection shaped into the masks arising from the process – they are 'back story' but may prove a starting point from which to play things off.

I would recommend that the director work with the masks as they are using improvisation, mask and object-play to develop stories and to deepen the relationships between the masks. I also have an instinct that working with Shakespeare may unlock more of the masks' characters and would suggest exploring Hamlet using the masks to play with this. I would cast – Flame-Thrower as Hamlet, Hedge-Witch as Gertrude, Minotaur Woman as Ophelia, Magpie man as Polonius and Marigold as all the other characters. I would also, of course recommend playing with masks using *Stengam* – though my instinct is that the masks may find it too loud! I almost feel that the first part of that journey is complete and we may need to find some new music for the next stage. I would like to take this process further and hope to at a later date.

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1. Hedge-Witch.
2. Flame-Thrower / The Soldier.

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3. Minotaur Woman (Mrs Reynolds) exploring the role of Lady Capulet in *Unquiet Susan*, Cast-Off Drama, Leeds Art Gallery, May 2014.



4. Magpie Man, exploring the role of gate-keeper in *Foil and Feathers*, Cast-Off Drama, Leeds Art Gallery, December 2008 and the role of Mercutio in *Unquiet Susan*, Cast-Off Drama, Leeds Art Gallery, 2014.

Unfortunately, due to computer error, I cannot upload a photograph of Marigold (the Cleaner) mask, but will do so at a later date.

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