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**The Path of Performance:  
The Archetype of the Trickster in Theater**

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*“A fool, and a cruel, lecherous cheat, and epitome of the principle of disorder, [the trickster] is nevertheless the culture-bringer also.”*

-Joseph Campbell

*“An actor must never be afraid to make a fool of himself.”*

-Harvey Cocks

To be a performer is to embody the archetype of the trickster who deceives in order to cause transformation. The transformation may be in the performer themselves, in the audience, or in both. The choice to follow the performer’s path is to embrace the mercurial trickster and acknowledge its capricious effect on one’s life, as well as the rich sources this archetypal symbol affords in the world’s mythological traditions. This paper will show that, through performative, somatic, and spiritual practices, this embrace also welcomes individuation.

The trickster archetype is found in every major culture, traditional and modern. Like the name suggests, trickster is multi-faceted, but is not simply relegated to the role of a great deceiver. Trickster represents the unknown, the chaotic, the unexpected: our worst fears and our greatest successes. But, according to Joseph Campbell (1990), the well-known scholar of mythology and literature, the trickster brings about the conditions necessary to make important transformations in individual life as well as culture at large (p. 164). These unknown elements could be as varied as weather, so-called “acts of God,” subtle human characteristics like moods or disagreements, or important discoveries. In the

case of one well known trickster myth, the titan Prometheus stole fire, (a wholly trickster-like trait,) and gave it to humans, allowing our upward ascent toward civilization (Hyde, 1998, p. 6). The trickster can give us the tools for our own destruction, but is also the force that causes us to stumble and confront our own potential. It is when we are face-down in the mud that we can see the gold buried there.

Hyde calls the trickster a “lord of in-between” because he is never at rest, but navigates transitions from opposing spaces. He moves between heaven and hell, and between gods and humans, living and mediating the crossroads—the symbolic points of decision and transition. The trickster frequently transforms from animal to human and back again, often the means by which the character transmits a boon to humanity, like Prometheus’ fire, or other technologies, like language (Dundes, 1984, p.158). Transformative language in our modern world is most evident in urban settings, in marginalized neighborhoods where slang and subversive codes are born. The trickster’s language articulates and disjoints normal patterns of continuity in our everyday lives, sometimes in words, sometimes in contexts, sometimes with image (Hyde, 1998, p. 257).

But the trickster is always vulnerable and never afraid of being seen as fallible. In so doing the trickster contains elements of “prophetic shamelessness” (p. 299). Not in the context of a soothsayer, but of one who speaks eternal verisimilitudes in the face of the mundane. The king’s fool is a good example of this type, and a performer besides. The fool is able to tell the truth to power without fear of losing his head, and for this service was fed well. The trickster is often portrayed in desperate need and with an appetite insatiable, as hunger is a primal human condition. Sometimes this is represented as a bodily function, but at others it morphs into a desire for revenge and autonomy, as with Prometheus. In either case, the archetype highlights our own desires for independence and the feeding of our

appetites. The gross and unavoidable aspects of our characters bring out the trickster, which is what makes these stories so dramatic. And, as we will see, drama is inherently the domain of the trickster.

Among the earliest forms of Western drama were Greek celebrations of Dionysis, the god of theater, the arts, celebrations, and of ritual (Hall, 2018). But he is also the god of chaos and disorder, making him a prime example of the trickster. The first actor, Thespis, audaciously, (and perhaps apocryphally,) voiced the epic dithyrambic stanzas as the character, rather than as himself as was the oral tradition (Gaster, 1961, p.19). This conceit is the height of trickery. The storyteller was now free to direct traffic at the crossroads of the theater in the guise of the gods, demanding the suspension of disbelief and getting caught up in the act. The ritual assumption of the *dramatis personae* was no less a subversive and world changing action than Prometheus' radical gift. It took the stories out of the audience's imagination and gave them real-life action heroes in the flesh.

In his well known explorations of the common threads of mythic structures throughout history, Campbell touches on the immediacy of the archetypal, pointing out that, while it may be easy to disregard mythology as "outmoded quaintness of the past," it is in fact, "a living complex of archetypal, dynamic images, native to, and and eloquent of, some constant, fundamental stratum of the human psyche" (Campbell, 2018, p. 17).

The discoveries of these fundamental layers, at least in psychological terms, can be largely attributed to Sigmund Freud and C. G. Jung, the latter whose theories influenced the direction of Campbell's studies greatly. It was their work that established the concept of an unconscious, and later proposed by Jung (1977), the theory of the collective unconscious (p. 127); the notion that, always active under the surface, there exists in all humanity a vast storehouse of symbolic memory which bubbles up into the preconscious mind as images. In this way myth is a language of collective

experience, as it is a language of images. The boundary between the conscious and unconscious mind is an intersection—a crossroads—where the artist performs the trickster’s role of interlocutor, directing traffic and meaning.

When comparing the artist to the trickster archetype, we can look more closely at the manner in which an artist dips into the well of the personal and collective unconscious in order to retrieve salient information. The psychologist and protégé of C. G. Jung, Erich Neumann (1959), pointed out that the artist can be seized by inspiration with an “autonomous force of an instinctual drive [taking] possession of him without the least consideration for the individual, his life, his happiness, or his health” (1959, p. 98). Like the shamans of traditional societies, these possessions are not invited, though the individual must prepare for these events if they want to continue their work and remain psychically whole. The artistic process then, could be seen, not as an independent and willful expression of self, but almost as an exorcism of the inhabited image. The less interference offered by the artist, the truer the expression, or exorcism, as it were. It might be thought of as a rider on a wild horse; the more the rider fights, the rougher the ride. There exists a kind of distant control in surrender. As Brian Bates (1987) describes in his book *The Way of the Actor: A Path to Knowledge & Power*,

The traditional actor’s state of possession is a powerful phenomenon, which alters the actor’s behaviour and experience to that of the ‘spirit’; but it is nevertheless a *performance*. It is a controlled possession. The traditional actor has a double consciousness; one part is possessed, the other observes and controls. (pp. 71-72)

So, by means of performance, the shaman, actor, or dancer conveys the archetypal image with the immediacy of the human form and experience. When we couple this behavior and result with what we know about the trickster, we can immediately see the parallels.

One of the curious aspects of artistic practice is how closely its form resembles spiritual ritual. Highlighting some of these attributes, Bates continues, “the way of the actor adds nothing to our lives. Rather, it *takes away*; blocks, restrictions, fears, boundaries and conventional views of self and experience” (1987, p. 202). From a psychological perspective, theater as a creative practice contains all the elements necessary for individuation and self-actualization. In a world where mimicry and imitation are easy and common substitutes for identity, it becomes ever more critical to source and house the authentic in our lives. In fact, Jung goes so far to say that “individuation is an ineluctable psychological necessity” (Jung, 1977, p. 155). But this is not an easy task. Here we find the particular mode of the actor and its archetypal subject, (the physical body,) give it a unique ability to bring the individual through this “psychological necessity.”

Because it utilizes the human body as its method of transmission, it is a truth-telling medium (Barba, 1995, pp.50-51). In psychological terms this is known as somatics: any practice that utilizes a mind-body connection to access internal information and a deeper knowledge of self (Hartley, 1994, pp. 248-249). Stanley Keleman and Joseph Campbell spoke at length about the connection between myth and the body, specifically asserting that “images that are grounded in the soma are authentic” and that our bodies are among the most primal of archetypes (Keleman, 1999, p. 33). It is from this embodied, somatic understanding that we can source all myth and performance.

Myth has always been the domain of the artist. In his introduction to Maya Deren’s *Divine Horsemen: The Living Gods of Haiti*, Campbell explains, “it has always been my finding that the poet and the artist are better qualified both by temperament and by training to intuit and interpret the sense of a mythological figure than the university-trained empiricist” (1970, *xvii*). The temperament to which Campbell refers is the capacity for belief, or in the parlance of the actor, “what if?” Campbell

(1987) is prolific on this point. It is not surprising then that his first words in the premier volume of the monumental work on world mythologies, *The Masks of God* are: “The artist.” Later in that same volume he specifies how the “game of belief” brings the devotee closer to their possession by the spirit (p. 24). This is an exact description of what occurs on stage in the spirit of the actor. Actors “play” at becoming another entity. The game of belief allows them to inhabit the form of another person, or deity, or animal. This is the “representation of the invisible by means of the visible.” Eliade’s definition of sacred art (1985, p. 55). He continues; “the function of sacred art . . . [is to] translate religious experience and a metaphysical conception of the world and of human existence into a concrete, representational form.” To become the divine, one must enter into a sacred space. To create that sacred space requires the structured authority of ritual.

When Native American shamans, Hatian houngans, or Catholic priests presided over their congregations, they made theater. But the theater occupies a unique niche in today’s world quite different from its historical precedent. What once was a place for a society to be reminded of its myths, stories, and legends is now largely sequestered and relegated to mere entertainment and distraction. Theater and art is tied to structures of society and functions of experience, but rises only to the level of the audience’s participation (Schechner, 1969, p. 61). It is the rare theatrical performance that creates a lasting change. But this has more to do with the role of art in the modern world than the squandered potential of theatrical performance. As the role of the shaman transformed into the artist, so the shaman’s craft of meaning making has transformed into the artist’s process being separated from the art. This separation is the difference between play and ritual. Both are important, but one exists within a self-assertive “I”, while the latter within a self-transcendent “other” (p. 87). The shaman’s performative domain was ritual, while the artist’s domain has been relegated to play, easily dismissed in

a culture obsessed with entertainment and distraction. In *The Ecstasy of Being*, Joseph Campbell (1950) explains this seemingly contradictory dichotomy:

The artist who really knew their secrets might still play the magician—the priest of the potent sign—working marvels purging the community of its pestilential devils and bringing purity and peace. Only we should tend to explain his effects in psychological rather than theological terms: the heavens and hells being now reinterpreted as chambers of the unconscious. (p. 74)

His assertion is that the truly effective performer understands the archetype and symbols, and can manipulate them to conscious and unconscious effect within the context of a work of art.

The continual problem the artist faces in our modern world is the forced separation of the artistic process from the final artwork. One look at any prestigious gallery will demonstrate the commodification of art and the resulting separation of the symbolic from quotidian daily life. This is why the domain of the performer has so much potential. In the theater, because the making of the artwork exists in real time with the audience, there is a freedom to bend the audience's perception of intangible factors such as time or emotion. In other words, to give the audience a somatic awareness. Here, again, is a crossroads: the theater itself. The audience comes, meets, experiences a mediated moment, and departs. What happens in that space is entirely up to the mediator. The stronger the ritual aspects of this event—the more engaged and aware of the “rules” the audience—the more meaningful and transformative the event (Schechner, 1969, p. 84-86).

What are myths but archetypal dramas? While the oral tradition has declined in the modern era, stories are “the soul's way of communicating” (Estes, 2000, p. 5). The urge, or even the calling of the artist to ride these dramatic waves and symbols indicates a particular skill set: the ability to perceive

and enact these motifs from the collective unconscious. But what is the effect of these actions? How do the stories and the process express an inner experience?

Ritual served a dual purpose in traditional culture: to embody and demonstrate agreement between authority and self (Schechner, 1969, p. 87). The actor's path follows a similar structure. By taking on the forms of play, (characters, actions, and emotions,) the actor initiates a transformation. Like the trickster who creates the circumstances for humans to experience transcendent moments of an "oh no" or "a-ha," the performer guides their inhabited self through a crucible, patterned after real life. The audience recognize themselves and have the choice to turn toward the image or turn away. But the performer is inside the image through somatic awareness and must experience a transformative change in being, if they discharge their part faithfully and with skill. Because they are still themselves and simultaneously other, the actor's psyche must be the source for information that fills this new character and gives it life (Bates, 1987, p. 97). This leads to a myriad of psychic phenomena most clearly identified with the Jungian concepts of individuation mentioned earlier. Among these are new patterns of behavior. These include the manifestation and integration of unconscious images associated with the newly revealed parts of the psyche as pertains to the character portrayed. In other words, individuation.

### **Conclusion**

Myth comes from the human experience and the human experience is synonymous with the body: the somatic pathways of feeling and knowing. As a result of successive generations and evolution of our species, the same mythic shapes—the archetypes—emerge and present themselves throughout our history and cultures. Of these, the archetype of the trickster is the symbolic link between the horizontal world of our common, mundane experience, and the

vertical realm of the *spiritus mundi*—the soul of the world. The trickster is continually placed at this intersection, as evidenced by countless traditions. The role of the shaman often serves to bridge this space between the symbolic archetype and real human life. In traditional societies the shaman is not just a storyteller, but also the interlocutor for the tribe to access and, in some cases, shield the group from the charged spaces around this vertical spiritual pathway.

In the modern world which experiences a lack of competent mediation of these sacred events and places, the artist has rushed in to fill the gap. Among these, the physical performer occupies a unique position as an embodied, somatic presence, well placed to manipulate and control these latent powers of the collective unconscious. By inhabiting a charged space with the basic rule “I believe,” the skillful performer transcends the horizontal mundane and reaches into these archetypal, universal realms. And, bridging this gap, the performer is afforded a level of self-actualization not easily gained, except through this mediation. The performer’s audience, with a literal front row seat, can, by grabbing onto the coattails, trail through these mythic realms and catch some of the celestial stardust in their pockets, if not in their souls.

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