

MASK DANCE

WITH
RADIAL ELDER
VARSTE MATHAEUSSE

Reflection -Radical Elders with Varste Mathaeusse

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Mask Dance

In working with Mask Dance practitioner Varste Matthæusse, I explored using my face as the secondary accommodation to the eyes. Through that exploration, the mouth stick then became a powerful tool with which the face could be accentuated. She then introduced the use of the body and I found that the action of the eyes and mouth stick began to collide with each other and I was not thinking about isolating one from the other, yet it was more about how they could all work together. I further discovered the power of sound as a part of the mask dance practice and how that improves or positively impacts the collision of these elements.

Working with the three distinct qualities of the mask dance performer (Comedy, Spirit and Sensual) allowed me to shape the characterized movements and narratives that I explore. It was also valuable to note that mask dance did not require a linear or defined narrative, instead, it focuses on manipulating the elements that are both physical and mental. Whilst unfolding the qualities of an animal through which one could play, and how that could offer an authentic and explorative experience as is created by practitioners of mask dance.

The Superpower eyes

It's fascinating in discovering how the eyes become a powerful tool for communicating when words are no longer available. Working with mask dance has taught me about the eyes being the speaker and communicator in its practice, whilst the mask itself remains as support. It reminded me of my experience working with masks in theatre from Greek theatre and Caribbean masquerade. The mask is represented in various ways in these practices (Mask Dance - painting the face and the mouth stick, Greek theatre- grotesque and stately rigid masks fully or partially covering the face, Masquerade - mesh masks and elaborate face

coverings.) yet they contain similar energies, requiring the performer to use the mask as an extension of themselves.

The Mouth Stick

The use of the mouth stick on the first day was crazy, it was unusual and felt obstructive. The process of creating the mouth stick was a highly valuable experience. I was able to create something that was for me, done by me. The cutting and sanding process allowed me to connect with the object beyond the act of an external element. As I created and used the object it became an extension of my performance acts as a performer. Using it was funny and the addition of the vaseline gave it more flexibility to dance around in my mouth. I drooled a lot and that was quite exciting. I didn't have to be proper or stately. I could just be.

The Makeup /Face Mask

Adding the Facemask presented a challenge for me in the beginning. I think I was aiming for symmetry, working on being precise and aesthetic. My second experience brought me to be playful with the movement of the lines and how that would relate to the animal I was aiming to mimic. The process of putting on and taking off the mask became ritualistic for me each time. It presented me with being respectful and aware of the cultural practice I aimed to embody. Learning about the colours and their meanings (black- spirit, red - blood) reminded me of the culture I am from and how the act of putting on a headpiece or colour represented various sacred acts.

Varste - A Radical Elder

Through the experience, Varste highlighted the significance of mask dance in the Icelandic culture and how impactful it has been in uniting disjointed parties/individuals within the community. The week led me to understand and somehow conclude that practices such as mask dance although specific to the indigenous people in Greenland, present themselves in other cultures with different names and purposes, yet have a common thread of being rooted in the cultural fabric of our ancestors and presents themselves in contemporary forms as the culture is uploaded to us through socialization. Nevertheless, I think that these practices such as mask dance deserve a space in the contemporary practices of performance as they are loaded with unique elements that allow the performer to explore the performative.

In addition, the experience with Varste was amazingly beautiful, she was so gentle and tender in how she showed up in the space. As a radical elder, she owned the space with her presence

and in how she shared the information and guided us in the exploration of something that has such a strong meaning to her and how she identifies. Learning about her life outside the classroom was also a very beautiful experience. She has a very beautiful laugh and smile that was very welcoming and that was enticing.

It was a powerful act to share a song with Varste throughout the exploration. The song was both impactful and rendered me feel like a warrior, yet calming to the spirit.