

# Pedagogy and masks: An interview with two Canadian masters

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It is in the context of the post-doctoral thesis titled **“Brincantes mascarados da cultura popular: possibilidades para a formação do artista cênico na contemporaneidade-masked”** [Masked *brincantes* of popular culture: possibilities for the formation of the scenic artist in contemporary times] that the two interviews below are inserted. The first happened in early 2016 at the Federal University of Minas Gerais (UFMG) in Belo Horizonte, when *Steve Jarand*<sup>2</sup> presented a workshop on expressive masks for three days, organized by Mariana Muniz, who also acted as a translator at the time of the interview.

The second happened with Sue Morrison<sup>3</sup> in early 2017 in Toronto – Canada, when I had finished a workshop named “Clown Through Mask”. The contributions of Isaac Luy as translator and Mayara Gabaldi in the recording of the audio and transcription of the dialogue in English were essential for this moment<sup>4</sup>.

Steven performs in Calgary and Sue in Toronto, but the two masters systematically offer training in other countries. They offer two very differentiated work perspectives, as Steven sees masks as reflections of recurring human expressions, based on their previous studying, whereas Sue envisions a creative process of making and using masks based on the “self” and aimed at the clown inside each one of us.

Despite the two Canadian perspectives being different, they end up complementing each other in my study for two main reasons. Firstly because they bring aspects that are not limited to the recurring line of teaching adopted by me, which consists in the initiation of theater students in the language of masks from the use of neutral or *Commedia dell’Arte* masks.

The other reason concerns some similarities between these two proposals. Both consider emotion as a relevant aspect in the process of using masks and are originated from the contact with the improvisation work of Keith Johnstone. Keith and other *Improv* artists have already gained a lot of

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2. More information on Steve Jarand may be found on his website: <http://stevejarand.com/>

3. More information on Sue Morrison may be found on her website: <http://canadianclowning.com/>

4. The translation is literal and sought to preserve the conversational tone of orality.

ground in Canada and Steve Jarand and Sue Morrison's performances in this country does not seem like a coincidence, but this is not where I am going to delve into this statement. My proposal is sharing excerpts of the interview conducted with Steven Jarand and Sue Morrison because I understand that they are relevant testimonies, regardless of the more specific objectives I had when conducting them, that is, of shedding light on my research involving methodological approaches to learning with masks.

### *Interview with Steve Jarand*

VILMA – *I would love to know if you make your workshops' masks and what is the inspiration for them.*

STEVE – Yes, in Calgary, Canada, every year I hold a five-day workshop in which participants make and play with masks. Currently my process is very practical. I have a collection of masks and, whenever I realize that there are some emotions, some sensations that are not part of this collection, I start working on them. And, beyond that, it is quite common to start from an element, such as, for example – round eyes or a big nose. It is from these elements that I begin creating, that is, it starts taking shape after I have chosen them.

VILMA – *What is the profile of the people who seek your workshops?*

STEVE – I usually have actors and non-actors mixed in the classes. And, generally, people who have had some prior experience with acting and know how to free themselves from their own being can use masks more effectively than people who have yet to develop these techniques. But there are always exceptions. Many times with non-actors there is no expectation on their part, and so they can be free and very honest with the mask. Sometimes, when working with actors who already perform with some sort of mask, as for example the clown, they have great difficulty in deviating from their work pattern, including with comedy. I'm finding things here to be very interesting because I know almost everyone has prior training and performing experience. I was impressed because everyone tried to relax and abandon this previous knowledge and fully incorporate the mask. I felt that no one was willing to "plug in" their own show, that is, do what they already do best in the mask.

VILMA – *I have realized that in your work at the workshop there is a strong influence of Keith Johnstone's Improv work. What are*

*the associations that you make between the approach of Viola Spolin and Keith Jonstone in the field of improvisation?*

STEVE – I have not read all the books by Viola Spolin, only part of them. Nevertheless, what I feel from Viola Spolin's work is that her focus is the group, how they interact and discover things while performing the exercises. How the group can be generous and work as a collective. It is not a work that seeks stories or results. It is a work that explores such elements. I think it is different from Keith who is interested in the story, in public presentations and in offering viewers the opportunity to discover new things every presentation. Most of Keith's exercises show the players how the game works and that happens in front of the audience. For him, that's interesting enough. Finding out how a game works, that is, its mechanism. Most games are derived from the Sports Theater, which is one of the formats that Keith has created. They are almost the same games that we are playing here at the workshop. They are games with the same difficulties, without people knowing exactly what to do. So the directors explain that to the audience and have them watch these same exercises because there is a dramaturgical structure in the games, which is something very important to be explored.

One thing I find very interesting when conducting workshops is to experience the games, beyond the surface. To find other angles, other viewpoints of a same game that I had not discovered before.

*VILMA – I feel that you select the sequence of games based on the group's development.*

STEVE – I would like to achieve this at all times, basing myself on what happens. But what really happens is that I try to gather as much information about the group as possible. Such as, for example – what kind of people are they, what are their profiles, and then I combine this information with things I want to try out. So, if I have good luck, something happens and I am going to need to adapt what I had planned, and when that happens it is even better.

*VILMA – How do you see the relationship between genre and mask? Is the comic genre stronger in your work?*

STEVE – Full face masks are usually known or traditionally considered to be tragic masks. But I think that, in the same way it happens in improvisation, in *Improv*, when people are doing something funny they receive immediate feedback from the audience, and this predominates at times.

In this comparison with improvisation, it may be noted that in masks a big empathy with comedy is also common, but it is very interesting to achieve some dramatic states in it.

VILMA – *This is not really a question, but rather an observation. In your workshop you do not bring prior information about the masks, as seen when introducing, for instance, Commedia dell’Arte masks, when in a first moment some information about this and other masks being used is given. What you bring is the mirror. I confess that I had a certain prejudice regarding the use of this object, but I came to the workshop because, being someone who works with masks, I think it is important to know other approaches than those I use or in which I was initiated.*

STEVE – About the full face masks, I think it is a very sensitive job. The important thing is to wear the mask and see other people wearing the masks. To see what kind of body, of state makes this mask work and then learn from what you see. I think that, actually, I have to adapt what I do with the specific mask, because the focus is that specific mask and not a methodology for all of them.

About *Commedia dell’Arte*, it is completely different because it has a very big tradition in relation to shapes. Depending on the shape of the mask, it has to go along with the body, with the situation, as you described. And this results in *Commedia Dell’Arte* becoming more and more stylized. This is not a bad thing.

### *Interview with Sue Morrison*

VILMA – *I want to know if before meeting Richard if you had any encounter maybe with Keith Johnstone or anyone else before Richard that made you curious about teaching about performance, clowning, all these.*

SUE – I was leaving out West and there was this wonderful show called Saturday Night. And it was so new and so amazing, so risk, it was live, totally different kind of comedy. And one day I looked and then I thought – “I can do that”. And I remember seeing an episode, this was like 1978, and what people were doing was so amazing, it just blew my mind and I didn’t even know what it was. So I drove back to Toronto. And a friend said to me – “oh, Sue, you are funny! You should take this improvisation workshop”. I did and the teacher was actually (I know now) a terrible teacher. But this was something, “holy! This is awesome”. Then I started to study in a place called Second City, and they had good

teachers there. I felt a big turn in my life, I knew somehow this was for me. I was twenty-four, twenty-five. I just kept working and I did very well, it was a time when there were amazing people working, big names. I was so lucky, I had really great Improv teachers. Because these teachers were all about good development of characters, stories, of listening, it was never get a funny line of the joke. And then Keith Johnstone came to Toronto and I did a workshop with him and it was the first workshop in the morning with the tai chi and then in the afternoon we did improv. And then I was like – “what the hell is this?” The beginning of the introduction was getting the physical body aware, awake, not just using brain. It was a wonderful workshop, again never about a joke, it was really about the development, how to develop a story of a piece. I used to do a lot of Theatre Sports, we had the first women sport team. Instead of being women as props in the scene, we wanted to be legitimated. And then I had good success, but one day I wondered what it was like work from my heart and not from my head. And one day out of the theatre I saw these little flyers, Richard’s profile on it, and it said – Clown Through Mask, and I did not like clowns, I hate clowns. Because clown was just like a birthday party thing or something in the circus, but I was very interested in mask.

VILMA – *So, you did not know on that moment that Richard was working with emotions.*

SUE – No, no. Nobody knew him. Well, except the people, the small group working with him.

VILMA – *It’s interesting that somehow it was some of calling to you.*

SUE – Absolutely. It was like a moment of recognition. I went to class, I was home. Even when I had no idea what I was stepping into, because I had no background in theatre, I had never done anything like that.

VILMA – *Did you work with him a long time?*

SUE – I still work with him. Absolutely. I never stopped to work with him even after he died.

VILMA – *And how many years and he was alive?*

SUE – I don’t even know. I have to look in dates and books, but years. I did workshops with him and did shows. He sorts of directed... But my belief on him was so much that I would have done anything he asked to.

VILMA – *Why did he pick you? Even though he had another people working with him.*

SUE – Well, I don't know. I can ask – what do you think? (she laughs). Because I think Richard had the ability to see what was possible in people before they could see what would be possible.

VILMA – *Are there other people that worked with him that are now doing this sort of work or you are the only one doing this work?*

SUE – There are a few people around doing variations of the work, probably. I know he had two apprentices, myself and a woman who I believe went Oxford and did her doctorate on drama therapy and used the base of this work on that work. And there was Ian Wallace who was his partner for a long time, a friend, they worked together and he tried to find his own way to do the work, he didn't teach for a long time, but he teaches now. There are a lot of strange things and I don't like it and all these strange things written on the internet about him, because Richard didn't want to talk a lot of that, he normalizes things, I don't think he like all this, but that's what about what I think.

VILMA – *The workshop that Richard used to teach were they the same format, the same length?*

SUE – Well, I was thinking about this yesterday. How it became, if it is possible, even became more intense, because there is more watchful structure by me. He was more casual teacher – “well, do this!” Then he goes to a bar (she laughs). One of the reasons he asked me to carry on the work, is he wanted the work to develop, as well, as in a performance way, because I understood structure of a piece from Improv.

VILMA – *You talk about how Richard wanted to make clown for today, clown that spoke for today. If people change and the world changes, the methodology in a way, has to change too, is it true or not?*

SUE – Yes, absolutely. Because I hope, even in this work, that we do not become dogmatic about it, allow it to also develop as the way we communicate also develops. The way we look, the way we dress, for me... The boxes of costumes... We didn't even bring them out the last time we did Joe and August. Originally I never let anybody speak, we didn't speak in Richard's time, but now every year we speak a little bit more and more, it's just something that you have to let add to the thing.

VILMA – *I wonder if you know from which tribe or ethicality was John Smith?*

SUE – This is really awkward, I don't like to talk about it, because John Smith was not a person, he was a spirit guide, but I know that sounds weird. And Richard never talked about that.

VILMA – *And when did Philippe enter, after or before?*

SUE – After. And I was very glad when he came, because my one of my old clown partners was going to Montreal to do this workshop with this guy and said: why don't you come? I was like, I don't know and plus, I don't speak French. There were two workshops: Le Jeu and Le Buffon. It ends up and my partner didn't go but I went. I really didn't know what was going on there, I couldn't understand anything.

I can't remember the year, but I think it was 1980 or something, Philippe Gaulier was not so known then. And in the first day, the man who organized the workshop said: just keep getting up, even if he says he doesn't like it, ;don't back up. And this was a time, politically in Canada the Quebecois... No English! And there is even a law in Quebec that public signs no English either. So, I didn't know anybody, the people were not very: "do you understand anything? Can I help you?" No! I just kept getting up and I don't know what was happening, I got up, I sat down. Tried something. I don't even knew what he was asking people to do, but once I got up, I did something and I sat down, he said something and everybody laughed, and I asked someone: "excuse me, what did Philippe say?" and then he was like: "oh, you don't understand? He said you were very boring!". And then it was time for lunch break, everyone went out, and I was in the room with all the coats and I thought: "I am gonna fuck out of here, just getting out of here, this is stupid". And just then the organized he came out and he said: "Philippe wants to see you", I said "yes...". And Philippe didn't really speak English on that time, he was talking in French and then I asked the organized and he translated a lot of things and also: "you have something in eyes that I really like". And I was like: "well, maybe I'll stay" (everybody laughs). So I stayed, I had failure, I had success, anyways, one time he got up and did an improvisation with me and we had so much fun, it was so funny, just crazy, much fun.

VILMA – *That time you didn't teach the workshop?*

SUE – No, I was assisting Richard on that time, maybe around that time, but not teaching.

VILMA – *The games that we did everyday they were...?*

SUE – Yes, Philippe Gaulier. But again, I play different from Philippe Gaulier plays it.

VILMA – *But Richard didn't play these games?*

SUE – No, those games get turned around inside out, sort of, when Richard was at Lecoq, Lecoq said: “you go home and make your own way of working”, Richard used a lot of exercises but he turned it inside out.

I mean, I did more than a workshop with Philippe, and used to bring him to Toronto, I studied with him in London, he also rock me in.

VILMA – *I want know, if it's possible, to talk about the book, and also about Veronica Coburn<sup>5</sup>, if she did the workshop?*

SUE – Yes, Veronica did the workshop. She already was a very well regarded clown performer in Ireland, she came and this kind of workshop blew her mind, then she came and did Joe and August, so she asked me if would I had written a book about this process. I had started to write a book, but I really resisted the idea of doing it, but there was someone that wanted to write the book, we started but we never finished it. I didn't have a good moment with that. And then Veronica was saying: “you should write the book, could I write this book with you”, I wasn't sure because you write something down as an academic, I don't like academics, I am sorry. They have to compartmentalize, to define, label... And clown is anarchist, as soon as you do that, you make a box. It's a nature of us to resist definition. Because I really can't say anything absolute of clown.

5.  
She is co-author of the book together with Sue.

VILMA – *The experience happens; it is not something that you can explain.*

SUE – Exactly, people want to talk about the process but the explanation is in the doing of the work, it is not of theorizing it, it's like when you try to break a joke down, you kill it. Just to say again, Richard was so amazing because he wasn't even himself dogmatic what his work would look like or how it would be used, because I had a problem with theory, personally, and he just kept opening the possibilities all the time for me. I don't know what learned about clown with Richard but what I really hope I learned was a lot about teaching, because the other will come, but to get it from people, that's the trick.

VILMA – *One of the last things that I want to ask you is how do you see or how do you feel, because the work is usually with*



*people from all over the world, different places, I fell it's sort of you are planting seeds and they are like spreading. So, how do you see that, how do you feel? How is the work?*

SUE – Well, it is just that. It is exactly that. And people take it, they use it, work in the way that is good for them and one day we are going to have it all over the world, basically (everybody laughs).

The cultures are all unique, but underneath is always the same, it is all about love and connexion. When you surpass the culture behavior to get to the humanity... Well, and I want to say to Veronica, also to acknowledge what she said that: “if you don't write this book, somebody is going to write this book. So you'd better write it”. So if wasn't from Veronica, we would not have it. So, thanks Veronica. But I never read it.

VILMA – *Yesterday when we had the Soirée<sup>6</sup> I caught myself looking at you because I fell a fascination of not only in the process but in the way you teach.*

6.  
Last day of the workshop,  
an open class.

SUE – My constant desire to control everything (she laughs).

VILMA – *The work it is itself is a lot, is very intense, but even with this intense, you have a way of doing or moving through it, you and people through it that is charismatic in a way and even when it is firm, hard it is not to deconstruct, to break, it is to build.*

SUE – Exactly. Because sometimes I think people when they look at a student working maybe they make a joke, they work in a hard way with the student and then the student has to ask is this to make me less or is this comment to make me more? It may look like a main comment but that person is trying to make you less or they are really trying to make you more? It is also about to create tension, not attention, you have to create tension and you have to recognize when you have to break that tension, when there is too much tension, you have to break it, to release the room, because clown is about release, transformation and release, you have to know how to build it, build tension and then when is the moment of to release that tension.

But I wanted to say that room must be supportive, you must have to create support in the room, I have come from other classes in comedy where it's more competition, you don't want to see someone doing well, because maybe it means that you didn't do so well, I survived working in this improv comedy theatre, I did not find nurturing and so thing started to get

smaller and smaller. But to create this supportive environment, this was important for me, I think this came from my own survival in different groups, and not like false support, but to say that was crap but you are still a good person, I want you to try again. Because this false support is just dangerous.

The first time I started to teach, we Richard passed away, I didn't teach for one year and he came every night that I taught. He visited, it was not like a dream and I never felt that I worked alone, really. Without Richard I wouldn't be here. It was like coming home. So I worked like that, as a performer and teacher because I can not work like that.