

Bianca Mastrominico

Bianca and Judy

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Judy is a mask that screams at everything, enjoys repeating her favourite few words and is a little shy with strangers. At this stage of her life, Judy is like a three-year-old child who grows very fast as soon as Bianca, the actor, releases her own muscles and inhibitions, allowing herself to be inhabited by the character of the mask. Clearly it's a technical process, but one that also demands the possibility that one can become possessed by the mask itself.

I am working on the characters of the English *Punch and Judy Show*, which is traditionally performed by puppets. In the show, Judy is the shrewish wife of Punch, the English cousin of Pulcinella. Punch kills Judy when she beats him because he has killed their Baby; a domestic tragedy, if it wasn't a puppet show, where every blow between the couple on the little play-board of the booth provokes laughter from the audience.

In choosing to work with a mask, I was inspired by a series of illustrations¹ of puppets, drawn from a show by an Italian puppeteer from Venice, Giovanni Piccini,² who performed in England from 1785 until the second decade of the 19th century, and who, it is said, created the traditional plot of the *Punch and Judy Show*, as it is still performed today. Piccini was an Italian artist who moved to England - as I did - bringing his puppets that were inspired by the masks of the *Commedia dell'Arte*.

I wanted to lose my own persona, using the mask as a distortion of my real looks, so the sculptor Roger Dean created the mould from the proportions of my head and face, then extracted from this Judy's expression and exaggerations, as a sort of parody of my features: a long aquiline nose, an extended forehead and sunken cheeks.

1. Cruikshank, George, *The Tragical Comedy or Comical Tragedy of Punch and Judy with Twenty-four Illustrations*, London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1976.

2. Byron, Michael, *Punch and Judy: its Origin and Evolution*, Aberdeen, Shiva Publications, 1972.



Bianca Mastrominico Photo: Margaret Dean

Because I saw in the mask the aspect of a bird, I went one day to a bird watching hide to allow Judy to spy on some colonies of birds gathered around a lake. In the hut there was a blackboard where bird spotters write down their sightings in chalk. I looked at it, considering the patience of those people, who sit on the benches for hours watching birds, and then record their results so accurately.

I remember Bianca found this all very silly, and at the same time, when she put the mask on and started to look around, Judy also saw the blackboard, throwing herself onto it to wipe off the chalk. She didn't care about the spotters' patient writing; she just wanted to eliminate those white signs from the black surface. To my surprise, she was doing what I unconsciously wished to do, but had repressed because of my "educated manners".

Just as Judy began to experience her rela-

tionship with her husband Punch and with their Baby, one day, all of a sudden, she had an audience: John's mother (John is the actor who performs Punch and also my *real* husband). She came to a rehearsal, during which Judy was rehearsing the scene of her first meeting with Punch, which we called *the wedding day*, because the two characters wanted to get married immediately without any preamble. The improvisation started with Punch, the groom, waiting at the end of the aisle, with a bouquet of flowers that he very soon transformed into a sexual object, the closer that Judy, the bride, approached. Repeating this scene with John's mother present, Judy instinctively recognised that she had an audience, and started to play for her, so discovering the pleasure of "playing the game of theatre". At that point *the wedding day* changed from Bianca's psychological and introspective experience through the mask into a performance state, where Judy became aware of being an actor, and put into action spontaneously all the techniques she naturally found in Bianca's training, thus starting to become a character.

In a subsequent rehearsal, when John was watching *the wedding day* from outside and Judy performed it without Punch, it was very easy for her to pretend her partner was there, at the end of the aisle, shaking his flowers. In this I discovered the mask's powerful imagination, as I had when I was a child and played at pretending that I was surrounded by a royal court (of course, in the court I was the Princess).

Just as Bianca used to see her imaginary courtiers so clearly, Judy saw her guests, and also a fantasy Punch clasping the bouquet, and I think this happened because both Bianca as a child and Judy as a young mask, in their innocence and lack of experience, trusted completely in their imaginations, unconsciously using them as instruments that allowed both to approach reality with

joyful and fearless intelligence.

During *the wedding day*, the initial relationship between Punch and Judy developed from animal attitudes and behaviours, and the same thing happened when Judy met the Baby, a new born baby doll in swaddling clothes, with a face very similar to Punch's mask. When John put the Baby on the floor, Judy didn't recognize it at first, because she had no idea that she had had a baby: she was still at her first meeting with Punch, involved in the sensuality she had experienced while celebrating their marriage by dancing with him. Probably, she didn't expect to have a baby so soon, still being such an immature mask.

So now, looking at the Baby, she saw it first as an object, but because of its similarity to Punch, a feeling began gradually to move her towards the understanding that this *thing* had come from *the wedding day*, and that it meant she was a *mother*. At this point she went to explore the Baby very carefully, eventually holding it in her arms, then becoming sweet and tender, as well as strongly attentive to protect it from any possible danger from outside. With the Baby firmly held to her breast, Judy felt responsible for it and finally the Baby became her own baby. She started to lick and nurse it with such a sensual passion that soon she felt guilty - experiencing a sort of Jocasta complex - and to remove the guilt, she began to reject the Baby. She became more and more aggressive with it, until the fear of having her perverse feelings discovered created a second sense of guilt that forced her to act like *a very good mother*, although she soon lost motivation, finding the task of being a good mother really boring. Now she was looking at the Baby again as an object, a thing that would limit her life and oblige her to look after it, right at the moment when she just wanted to enjoy her marriage with

Punch, whom secretly Judy started to hate for having given her this Baby. But while she was kneeling on the floor, bent over the Baby and snarling at it with a wild visceral sound, she realised she wasn't alone and glanced at John who was standing, following and observing her behaviour: Judy felt found out, got embarrassed and, avoiding eye contact with him, left the Baby on the floor, while John asked Bianca to take the mask off.

Because Judy had always worn a skirt in her life, I decided to buy her a pair of blue jeans, so I took the mask into the changing room of a second hand clothes shop and when Judy looked at herself in the mirror, she couldn't believe she was wearing trousers. It was a real act of emancipation from which Judy developed a mood of independence, that pushed her all around the shop to meet every customer and to try on every single piece of clothing she liked, and which inspired her to go into the street to wave to everyone and say: look at my trousers, they're blue jeans. But unfortunately, the shop assistant warned me that she would close in five minutes, so I was forced to take off the mask very quickly, pay for the jeans and leave.

On the way home, I was still breathing as Judy, and I had to sit on a bench because of a sudden stomach ache: tension was blocking the energy in my belly, for without the mask and out of character, I couldn't physically release all of Judy's emotions. So the blue jeans experience taught Bianca to be careful when putting the mask on and taking it off in a very short time.

But what happens to me, while improvising with Judy? At this stage, I am discovering that, through the release and freedom that the mask is giving me, I am exploring some of the archetypal and collective feelings,

impulses, internal movements and external behaviours that belong to every woman in whatever culture, at specific stages of female life: the desire for sex and its repulsion, the passion to have children and their rejection, the need for personal evolution denied by submission, but also the discovery of one's own identity, and the acceptance of one's feminine image, as well as the eagerness for psychological and social self-determination expressed in the way of dressing.

"What's Judy then, and what's a character?", I asked John to ask me one morning during breakfast. And because I started thinking in a wider way, I said: "Suppose I am God - from whatever pantheon or religion - and Judy is my first creation, a creature with the ability to reflect the divine and with the consciousness of having a spirit, but yet without a body. Seen in this way, I can use the whole period of training and rehearsal with Judy's mask, and then the expectation of being in front of an audience with her, to reach the point where I will need only the touch of a finger to put my breath into this character and afterwards give way, in the faith that Judy can live just by herself." It was easy to speak like that with a reassuring box of biscuits in front of

me. In reality, the more I put the mask on, the more I know that the elusive truth of my character lies in the humble discipline of everyday work with Bianca and Judy.

BIANCA MASTROMINICO (Italy/Britain) was born in 1969 and started to first make theatre at Teatro Sancauluccio with her parents in 1972 in Naples. She studied drama at the Università degli Studi Federico II and from 1994 trained in dramaturgy and biomechanics until she travelled to India and Japan to practice Asian forms of theatre, dance and martial arts. She has led workshops at the Institut del Teatre, Barcelona, and at Exeter University. In 1995 Bianca created UnderTeatro - Project for a Theatre of Creation and Formation and in 2001 she founded the group Organic Theatre with her husband, John Dean.