

# *Chorus, Clowns and Masks*

*The Tragicomic Actor in Shakespeare's World*



*Hamlet/Macbeth/Winter's Tale*

**Directed by Sophie Brech and Louis Fortier**

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## General presentation

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“ Unfortunately, as time went by, the appearance of clichés (...) began to spread. Young actors took part in so-called “commedia dell'arte” workshops almost everywhere and the art of mask acting became poor. The actual expression itself began to bother me ... ”

-Jacques Lecoq

The art of mask acting and clowning suffers from preconceived ideas. In spite of the remarkable work achieved by world-wide known stage directors such as Benno Besson and Ariane Mnouchkine, many people still link mask acting to a basic idea of what they believe to be “commedia dell'arte”, which is often proven to be a false and namely ‘textbook’ method of the art of masks.

The people who believe in this so-called "tradition" perceive mask acting and clowning in a historical sense, failing to see its tragic and poetic potential, and therefore, its capacity to feed all types of acting.

By doing so, they reduce mask acting and clowning to a very poor and limited type of theatre, whereas it offers an opening to great dramatic texts and traditions. Mask acting and clowning is therefore much richer than one tends to believe. It questions our world in the most daring way, and heightens the actors’ capacity to reveal life’s secrets and mysteries. It teaches the actor to convey emotions through his body, bringing meaning to every gesture and word in a sensitive and subtle way.

It requires from actors a total emotional and physical commitment, and above all, the absolute need for sincerity, encouraging actors to search for truth in the most essential way. It helps actors to develop rhythmical and musical precision, and makes them aware of their capacity to improvise and invent, aiming towards beauty and truth.

Masks –and clowns, the “smallest mask in the world” as Jacques Lecoq used to describe it- are magical objects because they lead us to complete metamorphosis, which is the essence of acting. How do I therefore use those magical objects and try to serve them, in order to bring them to life? How do I, as an actor, learn to vanish behind the mask, in order to give birth to a universal being that speak to us beyond words and cultural differences, just as Shakespearian characters do?

Masks are the main symbol of theatre. But beyond their symbolic nature, they are poetic objects whose magical dimension allows us to search for dramatic truth and to reveal what is hidden, leading to a near fusion between reality and fantasy. They remind us that a stage and a cinema screen are the only places in the world where the ordinary can suddenly become extraordinary. Clowns and masks take us away from realism but somehow manage to bring us closer to real life.

Overall, this workshop questions the art of being an actor. It addresses professionals of performing arts.



Marie-Do Cousineau in "Our Hamlet", written and directed by Louis Fortier, Canada, 2008

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## Content

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The purpose of this workshop is to explore the art of acting, using a personal approach to clown, mask acting and tragedy developed by Louis Fortier and Sophie Brech in their own creations as well as through their creative collaborations with:

-Robert Lepage: with whom Louis Fortier is currently devising *Playing cards: Heart*, both as an author and an actor;

-Omar Porras: with whom Sophie Brech and Louis Fortier collaborated as actors, notably during the creation and international tour of *Master Puntila and his servant Matti* (2008) as well as in a Japanese version of *Romeo and Juliet* (2012);

-Mario Gonzales: with whom they both worked as assistant directors for four years at the *National Conservatory of Dramatic Arts in Paris*;

- Jacques Lecoq: by whom Brech and Fortier were personally taught.

The actors will explore the fundamental laws of improvisation, which allow them to discover their own theatrical universe, strengths and means of expression. At the same time, they will be confronted to the demanding reality of mask acting and clowning, which leads each actor to the discovery of his or her full theatrical potential.

Improvisation will enable actors to increase their listening skills, strengthen their imagination, and develop their storytelling techniques. Mask acting and clowning will help actors to become aware of the too often forgotten physical aspect of acting. The challenge for them will be to engage with their body, and at the same time to remain sincere and credible in their attempt to convey emotions.

We will be using those two techniques to witness the creation of characters. We will later confront those extraordinary theatrical beings to the extreme situations and passions imagined by Shakespeare, drawing fundamental links with his poetical world. This process questions how an extremely stylized form of theatre, as far away from realism as possible, can enrich more conventional forms of theatre.

It is not a question of making clowns and masked characters “more modern”, but rather about unveiling their universal and timeless nature so we sense and see how the extraordinary lives of such unique characters echo the reality of our daily more “ordinary” lives.



Louis Fortier and Jean-Luc Couchard in « Maître Puntila et son valet Matti », directed by Omar Porras, Théâtre de la Ville, Paris, 2007-2008. Photo : Marc Vanappelghem

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## 1) The neutral chorus

This exercise will allow us to explore tragedy from the point of view of the chorus. It was a pedagogical method first invented by Jacques Lecoq, and later developed by Mario Gonzalez, who was one of the most renowned mask actors' at the *Theatre du Soleil*, directed by Ariane Mnouchkine.

It is comparable to the classic bar exercise for ballet dancers. It teaches the fundamental laws of clowning and masks, by increasing listening skills and creating in each individual, openness, availability, and therefore "presence".

This exercise will be enriched by the use of neutral masks. The actors, stripped of all emotion, will experience a profound sense of calmness and of being centred. Once that particular state has been reached, the actor will be better prepared to truthfully explore the emotional extremes linked to clowns, masked characters and Shakespeare's texts.



## 2) The musical chorus

Once this state of calm has been reached through the use of neutral masks, actors will then be asked to improvise using rhythm and movement, which will eventually lead to a choreography.

We will then experiment with how this choreography can be enriched with extracts of Shakespeare's texts, and vice-versa. Linking movement and text will lead the actors to a less psychological approach to Shakespeare's work.

Using movement, we shall explore the rhythmical chaos hidden in the words, trying to feed situations and characters in both a more dynamic and a more sensitive way. We shall search for the colours and passions that give true meaning to Shakespeare's words.



Fortier and Brech in *The Tragicomic Destiny of Tubby and Nottubby*, 2011. Photo : G.Witkowski

## 3) Physical training and the poetic art of acting

Based on the training devised by Omar Porras, Sophie Brech and Louis Fortier, to stimulate the creativity of actors during the rehearsal period of their various shows, this training focuses on precision, voice, playfulness and rhythm.

It strengthens the actor's capacity to invent and improvise a story, takes the laws of mask acting to a higher level and therefore prepares the actor for a richer and less academic exploration of Shakespeare's work.

It is not a question of going back to being a child again, but to recreate the magical universe once known as a child and offer it to the numbed senses of adulthood.



Fortier and Brech in *The Tragicomic Destiny of Tubby and Nottubby*, 2011. Photo : Karine Côté



Fortier and Brech in *The Tragicomic Destiny of Tubby and Nottubby*, 2011. Photo : Karine Côté

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#### 4) Clowns, masked characters and Shakespeare's words

First of all, every actor will be given the opportunity to create his or her own clown on stage. Later, after having carefully chosen a mask, each actor will also create a masked character.

Then we shall link the reality of those extraordinary theatrical creatures to the following texts from Shakespeare: "Macbeth", "The Tragedy of Hamlet" and "The Winter's Tale".

This encounter between the text and the masked actor will enable us to add fascinating nuances and vitality to our understanding of Shakespeare's world and language. How do I use *who* I am in order to create someone *other* than who I am?

How do I mask my body, my voice, in order to reveal a real character, not a caricature? How do I draw from my passions and physical memories to feed the character's soul, so that his life echoes my own, in a continuous effort to reach beauty?



Fortier and Brech in *The Tragicomic Destiny of Tubby and Nottubby*, 2011. Photo : Karine Côté

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## Louis Fortier

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Louis Fortier as *Tubby*. Crédit photo : Alex Maltais, 2011

After performing with the *University of Montreal Theatre Company*, Louis Fortier moved to Sarajevo, in 1995-1996, hoping to encounter the wartime artistic resistance movement. This exceptional experience determined the course of his life. He befriended Dino Mustafic and studied under the direction of Mustapha Nadarovic, at the *Sarajevo Academy of Performing Arts*.

He moved to Paris, where he studied with Jacques Lecoq and later became Mario Gonzalez's first assistant at *The National Conservatory of Dramatic Arts in Paris*, between 1999 and 2003.

In 2005, following a proposition from South Korean author Roh Kyeong-Shik, he created an adaptation of *The Train to Seoul*, both playing the main role and being the co director. This show toured South Korea in 2005 and 2008.

He then became one of the lead actors in *Teatro Malandro*, directed by world-known stage director Omar Porras. He performed the role of *The Diplomat* in Brecht's play *Master Puntila and his servant Matti*.

This masked show was performed worldwide for two years including performances in *Theatre de la Ville*, Paris as well as in Japan and in several other countries.

With Sophie Brech, he recently took part in Omar Porras's latest theatre project, *Romeo and Juliet*, which was created at the Shizuoka Performing Art Centre, in Japan. This show involved Tadashi Suzuki and Satoshi Miyagi's group of actors and three Western actors altogether, and toured Japan and Europe in 2012-2013.

Louis Fortier has written and directed *Our Hamlet*, and adaptation of Shakespeare's tragedy for eight actresses, performed in Canada both in 2006 and 2008. He has also directed several plays for France based theatre companies, including an operatic adaptation of Kafka's novel, *The Castle*, which was performed in Bulgaria, France, Hungary and Romania, in 2010.

With Sophie Brech, he created the *Theatre Fools and Feathers*, their company based in Paris. Together, they wrote, directed and are currently performing *The Tragicomic Destiny of Tubby and Nottubby*, a show hailed by worldwide famous director Robert Lepage as "an exceptional theatre production whose strength, intelligence and art will undoubtedly feed generations of audience to come".

This truly shakespearean production brings together the worlds of clown, tragedy and comedy, has received great reviews and has had a tremendous success both in Canada and in France. It was short-listed as "Best foreign production 2011" by the *Quebec Association of Theater Critics*, and has recently been invited by the British Art Council, the French Institute as well as by the British, French and German embassies in Afghanistan, to be performed in Kaboul in June 2013.

Since 2001, Louis Fortier has directed several workshops on tragedy, chorus work, clowns and masked theatre, in countries such as Afghanistan, Bosnia, Canada, France, Hungary, Iran, Italy and South-Korea. These workshops have allowed him to work with actors directed by Jean-Luc Godard, Irina Brooke, Robert Lepage, Omar Porras, Philippe Adrien, Daniele Finzi Pasca, Wajdi Mouawad, and formed in prestigious schools such as "*The Lee Strasberg School of Acting*"; the National Acting Schools of Bulgaria, Canada, Hungary, France and Romania; "*The International Jacques Lecoq School of Acting*"; *The International Marcel Marceau Mime School*, ...

Louis Fortier is currently working as an actor and co-author with director Robert Lepage on his latest creation: "Playing Cards: Hearts", touring internationally.

## Sophie Brech

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Sophie Brech as *Nottubby*. Crédit photo : Alex Maltais, 2011

Sophie Brech studied theatre from 1993-1996 at *The University of East Anglia*, in England, under the direction of Tony Gash, a specialist of Shakespeare. This experience allowed her to do a placement with *Theatre de Complicite*, in London, where she had the opportunity to assist director Simon McBurney in his revival of the show *The Three Lives of Lucie Cabrol*. This exceptional experience inspired her to move to Paris and attend *The International School of Jacques Lecoq*, who taught her from 1997 to 1999. She soon developed a passion for clown, mask work and Shakespeare, which led her to become an assistant at *The National Conservatory of Dramatic Arts*, in Paris, under the direction of Mario Gonzalez.

She has lived in Paris ever since, and works both as an actress and a director in Canada, England, France and in Asia. She has also directed

actors and teachers in chorus and clown workshops in Afghanistan, Canada, France, Iran, Sarajevo and South Korea.

She has had extensive experience in running theatre workshops to learners of English as well as native speakers in France and abroad, working for several different theatre companies including *The American School of Paris - Extension Programme* - where she was Head of Theatre for secondary students for many years, as well as at *The Ecole Active Bilingue* where she ran theatre workshops for primary students. She has created and directed many shows for young people and children in English (notably Shakespeare plays).

Under Louis Fortier's direction, Sophie Brech has performed in several plays, including *Our Hamlet* (Canada : 2006/2008) ; *A Train to Seoul* (South-Korea : 2005/2008) and *The Castle*, an operatic adaptation of Kafka's novel (*Touring Eastern-Europe and France* : 2010).

Between 2001 and 2010, she was the main actress with director Andrew Wilson's *Company Act* based in Paris, which specialised in theatre in English for young people. She performed in eight productions including Shakespeare plays and contemporary texts, and interpreted roles such as *Ophelia* and *Eliza Doolittle*. She also ran theatre workshops in English with secondary students around France.

She took part in Omar Porras's latest theatre project, *Romeo and Juliet*, which was created at the Shizuoka Performing Art Centre, in Japan. This *Teatro Malandro's* production was created with Tadashi Suzuki and Satoshi Miyagi's group of actors and toured Japan in 2012.

In 2011, together with Louis Fortier, she created *Theatre Fools and Feathers*, their company based in Paris. They wrote, directed and are currently performing *The Tragicomic Destiny of Tubby and Nottubby*, about which Robert Lepage said :

“ I was very impressed by the skill with which Sophie Brech and Louis Fortier made use of the art of clowning, by the intelligence with which they renewed this theatrical genre, and by the finesse with which they interpreted these two wonderful characters. *The Tragicomic Destiny of Tubby and Nottubby* is an ode to dreams and a tribute to the power of imagination...”

She has recently played the lead role in a French contemporary production *Au Fil de La Craie* in Picardie, France, written by Marion Bonneau and directed by Charles Lee.

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