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Body of language

A simple gesture can be worth a thousand words in Theatre Mime class

By Jennifer K Mahal
UNION-TRIBUNE

May 24, 2008

One by one, the faces disappear behind green, blue, orange and yellow masks. Then the masks disappear, the bulbous cheeks, long noses and furrowed brows obscured by hats held in hands. Music starts, a tune from the film *Chocolat*.

One by one, the hats come down. The 13 students in Jerry Hager's Theatre Mime class at Grossmont College transform themselves without a word. The youthful become old, the bold turn meek, the shy swagger with confidence.

Hager watches the Commedia dell'Arte-inspired sequence all the way through before giving notes.

“Be mysterious coming out,” he says. “We're still doing theater. Nothing is insignificant on stage.”

The opening of “The Enchanted Theatre” – the annual class showcase taking place 7 p.m. Tuesday at the El Cajon college's Stagehouse Theater – does not fit the popular conception of what “mime” is.

There are no white-faced students struggling to get out of invisible boxes here. The original student-produced silent works include a dating show, a piece starring a pair of cops with very different personalities and a bit about two dolls forced to play together by their owner.

Which is not to say there won't be any imaginary wall work on display as the students show off the skills they've learned. The art of illusion is part of the 16-week course, which aims to teach students to act with their whole body.

“My approach with them is to not only bring the world of mime to them in 16 weeks,” the adjunct professor said, “but also to open their eyes to look at the world as an artist.”

Hager, who for 26 years could be seen at Seaport Village as Kazoo, has been teaching the Theatre Mime class every spring for the past 10 years. In 2006, Hager stopped performing at the downtown San Diego shopping center.

The community college course incorporates everything from the silent film techniques of Buster Keaton and Charlie Chaplin to the classic mime of Marcel Marceau.

“Mime is a lot of hard work,” said Renee Morton. The 24-year-old dance major took it because she wanted to try something different, but still physical.

Hager, who also teaches beginning acting, starts the mime class with a lesson on body language. The students wear neutral masks and have to present attitude and emotions using their physicality.

Jon Sprague said acting with a plain white mask on made him feel vulnerable at first.

“It teaches you to connect everything down here to what's inside,” said Sprague. “There's something very raw and passionate about it.”

Communicating through gesture, learning to clown, and pantomime are also part of the three-unit class, which meets twice a week and is capped at 15 students.

Theatre professor Henry Jordan said he believes the class helps actors learn to express their feelings without saying a word.

“Mime is nonverbal and actors need to be able to express emotion in a nonverbal way,” Jordan said. “It's an advantage for movement (to be used) to develop character and story lines.”

Though Hager assigns “The Mime Book” by Claude Kipnis, his real textbook is a black three-ringed binder stuffed with hand-written notes, lessons created from years of practice, inspirational phrases and photocopied pages from dozens of books. Students must also keep a journal that along with tests, performances and attendance makes up part of their grade.

Ryan Payne, 19, said the class caught him by surprise. The Theatre Arts acting major expected to learn white-faced street mime. Instead, he's found that as an actor, mime is helping him to maintain focus.

“Mimes have to be able to sustain their body for a long time,” Payne said.

Ailyn Salas, 21, said the physicality of the class has helped with her sense of balance and inspired her imagination.

“I thought you had to use a standard imagination, but that's not true,” Salas said. “You can open up your stomach and take a glass from there.”

The class has even inspired the creation of a musical pantomime troupe, Steam Powered Giraffe. All four members – Sprague, Erin Burke, Christopher Bennett and brother David Bennett – have taken Hager's course more than once.

“Mime is a universal way of telling a story,” Sprague said. “Anybody can understand it.”

Steam Powered Giraffe, which has its own MySpace page complete with music videos, combines white face and robots with singing original tunes and cover songs. The troupe performs its act in Balboa Park, among other venues.


Hager points to the group as an example of how far the art can go.

“Mime can be robots that sing and talk and create sound effects,” he said. “It makes me very happy.”

■ Jennifer K Mahal is a freelance writer based in San Diego

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