SARGASSO Interview


The Freedom of the Mask: an Interview with Deborah Hunt*

Interview by Vivian Martínez Tabares
Casa de las Américas, Havana, Cuba

[Interviewer's Note: I came to know Deborah Hunt’s work during a visit to Puerto Rico, where many people mentioned her as one of the focal points of current theater practice. Almost simultaneously, I began to get signals about her work as part of the Magdalena Project, an effort to promote the work of women on stage. I even read a testimonial by her on one of the gatherings, held in Holstebro, [Denmark], with interesting reflections on the work of her colleagues. When I returned to our neighboring island as a visiting speaker at the Summer Seminar on Caribbean Theater and Cultural Performance [NEH 2003], I was lucky enough to meet Deborah, since the seminar included a workshop by her as part of its scheduled activities. And I even participated in her “Mixta con Todo” (a performance slam held every year for fundraising purposes), to present an issue of Conjunto. In the workshop, I was fascinated by the strength and, at the same time, delicacy of this woman, the commitment and the energy she devoted to the theater through this difficult artistic medium, one that is so labor intensive and that scales the actor of the possibility of showing one of his principle elements, the face, now hidden behind a mask and usually rendered anonymous. I wanted to interview her, but the rush of my last few days in Puerto Rico kept me from doing so. In June of this year [2004], Deborah traveled to Cuba, invited by the Centro de Investigaciones Teatrales Odiseo [Odysseus Theater Research Center], to give the workshop: Más caras con Máscaras [More Faces with Masks]. There,

* First appeared in Spanish in Conjunto 133: July/September 2004, 92-100.
amidst training sessions, newsprint paper cuttings, and masks that were starting to take form, I was able to share a longer process with her and her workshop participants. During the rest periods of those days and then here in Havana, after a showing of her work at Casa de las Américas, we finally had a dialogue.]

Vivian Martínez Tabares: I had news of your work when several people in Puerto Rico spoke about an actress from New Zealand who did astonishing things with masks and her body, but nobody really knew who you were. How do you relate to artistic work?

Deborah Hunt: When I was young, I wanted to be a dancer. When I was sixteen, I met a group of graduates from the Jacques Lecoq School in Paris, who traveled to New Zealand and gave a month-long workshop whose sessions lasted all day and all night. It was like being hit on the head with a wide display of Lecoq techniques that included pantomime, clowning, and work with masks. Practically, from the moment I discovered masks I said to myself: “I want to do this.” At the end of the workshop, the director invited me to join the company and I started working with them. I undertook a research process with the actor who was dedicated to masks. For a couple of years we worked exploring what worked and what didn’t. Later, since they were an international group, they returned to their own countries.

I started to work with New Zealanders, and we used masks, puppets, shadow theater, and text. We did theater of images and political theater, and we worked together for twelve years. At that time, there was no theater education in New Zealand with the characteristics that the group from Lecoq had. We would read the Tulane Drama Review [now TDR] a lot, but the drama school was a traditional school. After two years, I started a process in which I told myself, “Let’s see if this works,” solving problems to find out how to reflect what I wanted to see on stage. Basically, during those years, we built prototypes, things that didn’t work out for anything. It was a really interesting experience. I remember in the group that we always wanted to see a seagull fly on stage and we couldn’t do it. Every two years we’d try again, but we never achieved it because something would always go wrong. Two years ago, the playwright of the group, Alan Brunton, died, and they did two celebrations in New Zealand. In one of them, a friend who had always worked with us finally made the seagull fly and it was really beautiful.
With the group called "Red Mole" we traveled from New Zealand to New York, through Mexico, and we stayed working there for about five years and also worked in England. Later, we moved to New Mexico and the group split up. The man who was then my husband—a Puerto Rican—and I went south to Mexico, because the idea was to see if we could develop a circuit in the South. Obviously, we were impressed by the energy, the strength and the sense of color, of commitment, that we had experienced in Mexico. Rafael and I went to Mexico. We started working in street theater. There the CLETA [Center for Free Experimentation in Theater and Art, founded in 1973 at Mexico City's Autonomous University] people approached us, and we worked in their forums, in the Casa del Lago, and in the poor neighborhoods that surround the city, and there came a time when they proposed that we join them. In that way, we started a nine month tour, where I discovered something amazing: somebody would contact a person, a certain Juan, and he would say that he would be on the southeast corner of the central square at a given time and even if we were going in an old bus and would get there late, when we got there, there was Juan waiting for us. This impressed me a lot. If we were on time, if we got there early or late, there he was. We would work in popular districts, in places where people were fighting for water, for land, and Juan was always there on a certain corner and at night there were already five hundred people ready to watch the play. This changed my way of seeing work and life.

We traveled through the south and southwest of Mexico, my daughter was born in Oaxaca, in Juchitán. We went back to New Mexico, and there we worked with indigenous communities and with people who live in the mountains, who speak very ancient Spanish. With the CLETA compañeros we did another tour through Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, and Nicaragua, at the time of the war of the "Contras." We traveled with the Sandinista Army and with members of a circus from Nicaragua and we presented our show in different camps.

After a series of personal traumas, we came to Puerto Rico and separated. I decided to stay in Puerto Rico; my daughter had turned five and I decided she had to go to school. Then I proposed to myself to continue doing what I had always wanted: to work on the street again, what had been our "modus operandi" all through Central America. One day I went to work on the street and a policeman stopped me and said that I couldn’t do that, that I needed a permit and liability

insurance and a thousand other things. Then I started to work in storefront windows in Santurce. I asked a friend who had an art supplies store if I could use her windows and that’s how I started. I would spend two or three hours doing my work. I wasn’t making money — I was unemployed, I could stay home and do nothing or go to the window and sweat for two or three hours. I opted for the second. It was a private space with certain public conditions. People would pass and see what I was doing. I only needed the permission of the storeowner, and I did several plays this way. That created reactions in audience members. Little by little, I began inserting myself in conferences or workshops, always looking for my own place to do things, building my house.

Four years ago I got together with Margarita Espada in opening the Teatro Estudio Yerbabruja, a space on the fourth floor of an attorney’s building in Río Piedras, that had a cement floor. We built a wooden stage on car tires, we put in bleachers and we opened the theater. Since then, it has been the space for my work, the place where I produce my own plays. It is one of the two independent theater spaces that exist there; the other one is in San Germán, at the other end of the island. The Institute of Puerto Rican Culture has the big theaters in Fine Arts Center, they can be rented, but they are very expensive, and the price of the tickets is high. There are other theaters used by the commercial theater people, but I’m not interested in those, and there is also theater performed at the University of Puerto Rico. I travel when I can to festivals; once in a while, I submit proposals to the Institute of Puerto Rican Culture for funding, and once in a while I do things independently.

It wasn’t my intention to develop a style, since I never set out deliberately to do something different. My work is born out of constant production. Each piece I do is only presented from between six to ten times. When I hear groups that talk about fifty presentations, I’m very surprised because, for me, that is not possible because I produce a lot. I am also part of the Magdalena Project, an international network of theater women, and this has supported me a lot in the exchange with other artists.

**VMT:** Do you ever think of New Zealand?

**DH:** I left New Zealand over fifteen years before I arrived in Puerto Rico, and I had spent a great part of that time in Latin America, a generation and a half, and although I love New Zealand, and it is a very interesting country and my passport is from there — I need a resident’s

permit to live in Puerto Rico, which is a colony, and I’m not going to deny that— but I no longer feel the same in New Zealand.

In the University in New Zealand they teach Theater History and I am included in that history. For me it is very strange because I always think I am [still] twenty-five years old and I’m caught up in my next play. I go on and on and on, and then suddenly you are part of history and you say, wait, O.K., but I keep on working and working and working. I have spent a lot of time far from there, and I’ve spent a lot of time in Latin America. And I like it, I feel like an adopted daughter of these lands.

**VMT:** *I believe that at this point you simply say “daughter”...*

**DH:** Yes, I believe that.

**VMT:** *Although your work has the peculiarity of combining masks with puppets, shadow theater, and other languages, masks have been the center, and when you looked for a name to identify yourself, Maskhunt emerged. What has the mask given you? What is the mask for you?*

**DH:** The mask opens doors; it is an incredible medium for communication. You can go to China with it; you can present a piece to a different culture, in a language that you are not capable of pronouncing a single word. My own entry into Latin America, my passage through all of Central America, was without knowing Spanish. If the plot is mythical or abstract, if the masks are moving well, if they come to life, they open doors. I remember a Maya Quiché community in Yucatán, where we were going to present our play. Nobody said it openly, but everybody knew that PEMEX [Mexican Petroleum] had burned the fields of henequén, that have a ripening period of seven years. The first language of this community is Maya Quiché. The women were on one side and the men on the other, with their very showy traditional clothing. We started and there was a loud noise, the voices of people speaking. I thought that something was wrong, but it wasn’t that, it was their way of receiving our work, they were commenting on it, and they did not need for us to speak an oral language to understand us.

The mask for me is also an opportunity to play different characters. As an object it has physical limitations for the actor: you see less with it, you hear less, there is less air; there are severe limits, but there is also an enormous liberty for expression and for being precise. The mask is

Martinez Tabares, Vivian and Deborah Hunt.  
“The Freedom of the Mask: An Interview with Deborah Hunt.”  
very old. The oldest one they’ve found to date is nine thousand years old. That’s a long time. I don’t know why I chose the mask. The first time I put one on, I don’t know if it was something from past lives or a connection to who knows what. The mask has its shamanic roots and almost all cultures have their traditional forms. There are not a lot of people working with masks in a theatrical sense, but I also think they are great training for actors. Even if they are or aren’t used later, they are incredible in terms of developing precision, exact details, minuscule moments that give us the whole character, that allow the development of integrity, the integrity one feels of the character with the actor and the character with the actor. When that doesn’t happen to you as a spectator, you start looking at the lights, the costumes, and all that. The mask is the leap between quotidien energy and extra-quotidian energy that, for me, is absolutely necessary and that keeps me awake.

I like to give workshops and training because I always tell people to look at the others very carefully, because that way we can steal their vocabulary. I learn a lot in these processes. Someone does something with a mask that I haven’t seen before, and I keep it. It is something useful.

When I work with adults or children who feel invisible, anonymous, or think they can’t do it, or that they are not good enough or ugly, I have proven that all those negative thoughts that people can have about themselves disappear underneath the mask, because they feel hidden, and that gives them a strange permission to flower. I have worked with women that suffer domestic abuse and the mask has been a useful vehicle to express themselves. For me it is magical when that happens, because I don’t necessarily work with the people who are well trained or who trust themselves; once in a while when they are people that don’t even get noticed, suddenly with the mask, WOW! They become strong, like animals.

**VMT:** Do you think then that the mask lets us find something essentially human?

**DH:** Yes, because it helps us to look beyond the cliché. The mask deals generally with archetypes, but it is very easy to fall into a cliché, and to use that as a language. And masks require special observation — I think it is like a snapshot with a camera, a complete frame of the character. For example, an old man, it is not the stereotype of the body bent over or the hand supporting the back, since the majority of

old people don’t walk like that. Look at them! Look at their own cadence, the singular way each one has of behaving, very different from the other. What is it? That detail is the moment that gives your mask truth. If not, the mask falls, not physically off the face, but it can become merely like a hat. The moments in which the mask is alive is when the spectator feels that its expression changes, even though it is a fixed object. Between the light that falls on it and the shadows that form around its facial expressions and intention, the exactness with which it moves, these can make it change, and that is magical.

**VMT:** And how do you conceive dramaturgy?

**DH:** In my shows two things can happen: once in a while there is a premise, I write a proposal about a theme that I’m interested in, even though in my mind it is not yet developed. For example, biopiracy. I want to research genetic pirates and I want to do it in the style of a thriller. I write the proposal and I submit it to the Institute of Puerto Rican Culture. I still don’t know if it’s going to work or not, but I start the research and reading about the thriller and the images it suggests to me. I start to figure out the crossword puzzle.

Another thing that can happen to me is that I have nothing in mind and suddenly I start feeling followed by something. It’s a feeling, as if someone was walking behind me, nothing more, it’s nothing threatening, but there is someone close. Through the years I have recognized that sensation as “O.K. Pay attention!” And I start to see images that relate to each other on the street, or it could be flipping through a magazine and suddenly that presence is concrete and I see it as a mask. And I start to build it. It’s an anxious process because it makes me ask myself what comes next. It is not all channeled yet, until more elements fully come together, I don’t know very well where the play is going.

In the last show something else happened. I decided to stage *Ubu Roi* by Alfred Jarry because I live in Puerto Rico, and these are Ubu times, in particular with what is happening in the United States with George Bush. It is the first time that I have staged a pre-existent script, [before] I’d just use stories, myths, written texts, from which I take the skeleton to stage my work.

During the research process and the improvisations, I write, and many times, as part of the puzzle, the plays end up having words. In the show about biopiracy, *Arquearse* [alter, stretch, transmute] behind

---

[the genre of] the “thriller,” Gerome was born. He is a detective, 40 or 50 years old, a half-loser, who has a light bulb hanging in his office, and suddenly a blonde walks in to hire him for a case. It’s like a Humphrey Bogart guy, and there is another character, a geneticist, the gene chaser—a sort of androgynous character, but I call her female, fat, monstrous—who travels South and looks for isolated communities for her work, and there the “Blue People” show up, who could be, for example, members of tribes in the Amazon or other indigenous groups or the Amish in the United States.

VMT: In the year 2000 you did Burka, where the hands were the masks, huge hands visually located on a first level of contact. What motivated you to take this path? What has the body meant to you?

DH: When I began receiving news of what was happening in Afghanistan under the Taliban regime, the first thing I did was to make my own burka. I started walking around the house with it pretending that I was outside, imagining that I was on the street, with everything that can and that can’t be done in public, with the consciousness that no part of my body could be revealed. Suddenly I started to use my hands over the body, since who doesn’t use their hands? I thought that if at any point I needed to buy something, I would have to make my hands constantly visible. In Latin America, hands are very visible, because people use their hands to speak; they are part of their body language. When I imagined that I couldn’t use them, I explored how to make transactions and those huge hands came into my imagination. They come off at the end of the piece and suddenly become untied from the burka, and red ribbons of cloth appear that represent blood. For the last image, I put a transparent plastic sheet with eggshells that were as whole as possible on top—so I spent hours and hours blowing eggs out from their shells. The last image was that woman walking over the eggs. That gives the idea that something is forbidden, that great care must be taken to do it.

Also, when I started to call people’s attention to what was happening and telling them: look at what’s happening and I showed images on video about the execution of women, for a while I would always receive the same answer: Oh but that’s over there, that’s part of their culture. Then I started to examine the idea of the invisible burka, the untold, what is not allowed in a culture. In some way, I was telling the audience: how many times do you stay silent in order not to offend. In Puerto
Rico it is very fashionable for women to cover their hands with fake fingernails. That had something to do with the invisible burka concept for me, what we keep inside, what we don’t talk about, what is not allowed, even in a “free” country. There are many codes that produce signs of oppression very well. Violence against women is as horrible as it is against girls. In the United States all of that is horrible [too]. In spite of the supposed freedom, there is an invisible burka, while in Afghanistan things were visibly shocking. In this play, the burka itself was a mask, because the whole body was hidden, and the hands took on great importance.

For me the body is definitive, a fundamental instrument that has to be trained, because without it the mask doesn’t move. It is necessary to have a combination of movement and imagination . . . not in the sense of dreaming, but of visualizing an idea and in a moment capturing all the details of a person. A way of walking, a rhythm, a texture that can be on the street, in a house, and at that moment the flexibility that training gives you is fundamental, the possibility to isolate parts of the body. I also try to transmit to people the idea of taking a picture, viscerally, of taking a picture with the body, through the use of imagination and instinct, through the observation of people.

VMT: Do you always recognize your debt to Lecoq explicitly?

DH: That workshop with his techniques changed my life in terms of what I teach. I recognize the neutral mask that comes from Lecoq as an extraordinary tool to prepare the body, to let go of all the para-psychic movements that we are not conscious of, that have nothing to do with the preparation of an actor. I am also interested in the notion that the neutral mask lives in the present and when we do theater, we are always bringing the past to the present and projecting it towards the future. With that mask, as soon as there is a reflection towards the past, that can be simply a gaze, a movement of the eyes towards the left, a psychological expression comes out.

I've created a series of masks in which I really recognize what Lecoq formulated, or helped to formulate in regards to training, that results in something that is very useful. But I don’t use those masks in performance. I use them in demonstrations to explain what the work process is like, because the masks in my shows have nothing to do with Lecoq’s style. I think I have developed another style.

In Puerto Rico there is a very beautiful mask: the "vejigante," that belongs to a traditional celebration that is held once a year in July, the Carnival of Loíza. It is not easy to use those masks in a theatrical context because they are full of colors, they have a thousand dots and their expression really doesn’t change that much. The "Vejigante" is a street performer, like a kind of sacred clown. In workshops, I try to avoid having people make something like that because later it will not work in a play.

**VMT:** What other teacher do you recognize as having had an influence on you and with which contemporaries do you identify, in and outside of Puerto Rico?

**DH:** In New Zealand we studied everything. And even though I didn’t train in any specific manner in relation to them, for me Artaud, Grotowski, and [Tadeusz] Kantor were influences of great importance. I studied in the University for a short time, because when that group came it changed my life, but afterwards I’ve read them often.

In New York I had the pleasure of seeing Kantor and many other groups I have admired, but I would say that the biggest influence on me has been film. I like film more, people like Passolini, Fellini, Tarkovsky. And the painters of the Dada movement; the surrealists have had a big influence on me, as well as some writers that provoke images.

My introduction to Latin American literature was through Eduardo Galeano. When we got to Los Angeles, we left there quickly and we crossed the border into Mexico without my knowing any Spanish at all. I had studied Latin and French in High School, and like that, with a dictionary and with another book, that was the first volume of *Memorias del Fuego* [Memories of Fire], in English, I made that trip. Years later I read *Las venas abiertas de América Latina* [The Open Veins of Latin America.] I like Galeano a lot because of his way of being so specific, simple and poetic. And I still consider him to be one of the best authors. There are some of his things that are mind-blowing, they are images that immediately make me see a mask or a person.

I learn a lot seeing grownups as well as young beginners, all of those who are searching. The other day in Santa Clara I really enjoyed a rehearsal with adolescents that was above all a technical rehearsal. The teacher had not been at our presentation and she was apologizing to me, but I told her that those rehearsals, for the old and the new,
were always the same, sort of sketchy, halfway there. I realized how I liked theater spaces, beyond what is happening in them. But mostly my sources have been different ones.

**VMT:** The critic Lowell Fiet has written that you achieve in your poetics a mixture of mythical moments, mysteries of the ancient world, and the common rituals of everyday life. Did you propose anything like that to yourself?

**DH:** I am not a great intellectual. I see things in a simpler way. I am interested in people’s inner world, archetypes and myths of different parts of the world. I read like a madwoman and that has to be somehow condensed in my work. In the most anxious moments of my life, in the difficult moments, by producing images, theater has healed me. It’s that shamanic thing about theater. I don’t want to go into the metaphysical side, I am interested because it presents a whole world for the character: a mythical world, a more caricaturesque world — like the detective, who is a complex being and who can enter into resonance with everybody.

I think Lowell was pointing that out in his review of Cloche and the Crow, where the character and the archetypes of the ego appear. I did that play two years ago with my daughter. I had a great uncle who was a night watchman, an invisible person, who would leave every night and would come back in the morning to sleep. He was someone with a very private life, and that man always fascinated me. I thought about speaking of an invisible and forgettable person, that gets home one day and goes on a trip, he finds a crow — at that time I was reading [George Ivanovitch] Gurdjieff — and that crow and others try to stop Cloche from traveling.

We did several variants of Cloche in different sizes, one in natural size, the other one in miniature, but through the work process it was obvious that we had to speak. It was very easy for my daughter, whose mother tongue is Spanish. For me, who still has to learn it better, it was very difficult and that was the test of fire, a very interesting challenge.

Maybe the screens were sort of mythical or sort of epic, there was something of that. Lowell has supported my work tremendously. I don’t think I can do a deep play, that can solve the problems of the world, but I try to reach a complete character in that there be no doubt of the integrity of the character.

When I go to the theater, I try to let myself be taken away, as if I told the artists: “take me away;” it can be Shakespeare or Siglo de Oro, whatever, it can be a performance or a musical, but take me somewhere. In the moment when there is no integrity between the actors and the characters, when I start looking around, I always get a huge sadness, because the only thing that I want is for them to take me to their world. You have to deal with technical aspects, like power shortages, things that don’t go on stage on time, but I think that once you are in front of the audience, you have to be exact, [it happens] there or nowhere. It’s what we love about big performances. I aspire for that moment when the audience has no way of escaping the moment. It’s not that everybody has to like what I do, nor do I care, but I can’t lose my commitment to that moment with the character and what I do. My plays are very different, one from the other, but I always aspire to [create] that moment of integrity in which the mask will be a complete character.

**VMT:** What are you working on now?

**DH:** *Frankenstein* is the theme of the nine-month long workshop that I am doing with a group of adults. I also have a work in progress, which the “La Verde” [The Green] character that I included in the demonstration I gave here is part of. I am interested in the subject of alienation, everything started with some keys I found in Seville. Some years ago, I did another nine-month workshop that was called “Despertando a Osiris” [Awakening Osiris], that was the name of a play by Normandie Ellis, a woman that had done extraordinary interpretations of the Egyptian Book of the Dead. There is a line that says, “I’m surrounded by a human bonfire,” not as a means of torture, but in the spirit of flames, that reminds me of Artaud’s idea, pointing through the flames...

**VMT:** Is that why you called your demonstration, “Human Bonfires”?

**DH:** I think so. They asked me for a name very quickly and it was the first thing that came to mind. I think it was more or less a translation of that idea of alienation, but with the spirit burning in flames. Right now I am working on a very intuitive, abstract level.

**VMT:** You always say that you learn from others in each workshop, both what you shouldn’t do and the discoveries. How has this experience in Cuba served your purposes?
**DH:** First of all there are few times when I have the possibility of giving so much in such a short period of time: training, construction, and staging. Normally, it is a process that lasts longer or, if shorter, [doesn’t permit] construction. I was impressed by the sense of teamwork, and of sharing that I have found here; the humanistic sense is extraordinary.

I am a little tired, but I feel renewed. I have met people that have produced in me a feeling of relief, and I give thanks for their presence on the planet, because they make it a better place for everyone, with their commitment, non-stop energy and sense of not giving up and keeping up the struggle. I have always told myself, continue, go on and I have struggled to not give up. To be with a people who have not given up is something incredible. For me it had always been a dream to come, and I want to come back and get more involved with the work here. I will possibly be back in January; I am very willing. Once in a while I feel lonely in Puerto Rico, and I ask myself if I am on the right path. Coming here and sharing with you, your struggle, your commitment and giving of yourselves, renews me and gives me inspiration. I feel like part of a family.

Translated by Lydia Platón