



SHA SHA HIGBY - BEYOND MASKS

-ARTICLE BY DOUGLAS BILLIS-



The word "mask" is uncertain even of itself. It comes from the French *masque*, which is derived from the harlequinesque word *maschera* of renaissance Italy, and from thence back into an antiquity far remoter than its first recording as the Etruscan language *maskharah*. The word "mascara" which originated to describe pancake makeup comes from the same source.

The word's ambivalence comes from the fact that it means both "a disguise" and "a protective cover." Yet another meaning comes from the word *mascotte* from Roman-times Provencal; it means "lucky charm." Masks in one form or another, from a mere enhancement of the skin to a wholesale replacement of every identifiable human feature, are as common to the human race as skin and eyes.

By any definition masks are life under a new set of rules. The Noh actor must contemplate himself in a mirror immediately prior to going onstage in order to become fully the character he is about to be. A dressing room without a mirror is like May without flowers. If flowers exist to adorn fields, what then do masks do for humans?

Sha Sha Higby is a California-based globetrotting designer/performer who has probably taken the mask further than any other known costumer. Her real-world self is of pixyish humor who begins an interview with, "In the morning when I wake up it is so good. I can feel my back, feel my tickles, feel my elbows, feel alive. Things start growing off me. They go into my costumes."

Her mask self is an entirely different order of being. Her performances often commence under a pale phosphorescent light that resembles life under a waning moon. Accompanied by a gamelan-like background of soft whistles, creaks, clicks, howls, whistles, buzzes, rasps, and siffles of wind, she enters in a costume so elaborate and incomprehensible it evokes the simultaneous appearance of every known god plus a few we haven't yet devised -- buffalo hide from Indonesia, pieces of bone, parts of dolls, twirling toy spinners from Hallmark's, sticks painted with spirals, a wooden snake, fragments of candycane, pouches of dust which she sprinkles as she walks.

Her costume is constructed of a seeming multitude of layered lozenges of silk and leather, yet it covers her so completely only the barest hint of herself can be seen. Indeed, she has even camouflaged her nude body beneath the costume with yet more body paint.

All but the paint she sheds throughout the space of an hour as she creates a dance of emergence. The being which entered in such stately solemnity is shedded into a jumble of broken glitter as she dances the exploring, stretching being of earth-discoverer. There are so many layers to her there's no more room for layers.

The stage around her is adorned with as many masks as she, but these are the masks of the objects a goddess visitor might need to get through a human day: found objects, toys remade into soft warm fuzzies from a remote corner of the universe, costumes of past selves in odd combinations of mute green and pink mixed with chartreuse and cerise and then embroidered with gold; faces split open to reveal other faces, sacks of artifacts, workaday masks of objects such as sticks which are swords and stones which are hammers; wooden heads, stuffed chiffon toys, quilting made with an old Singer, bits of doily.



Top left, 'Tin Twin', 1989; middle, 'Moon Puppet' (photo by Ilka Hartmann); top right, 'Pineapple Tent Under a Pink Moon'. Above, 'Sasadhara' (in Javanese Moonlight), 1983. Opposite, left, 'Cows Under a Pepper Tree' in performance, 1986.

The whole assemblage looks like a dollhouse that grew up to invent universities, libraries, the fashion industry, and opera. Her voice-over commentary is a mask of the bird gods, resembling a parade of cheerfully chirpy R2-D2s. She brings to mind a child with a newfound trinket which it now uses to balance itself as it tries to stand.

She then rummages through a box for textured artifacts that look like the parents of all future fur-bearers and which are an utter delight to the audience's children. One is a remade battery-powered fat-tired toy pickup truck which she has saved from the world of the macho by covering it with dots, china-doll fimo faces, and wisps of string. It constantly tips over from its overload of decor, unmasking the prissy conceit that hides under the bluster of macho. An excess of mask reveals more about a thing than no mask at all.

Then, taking up her strings and faceplate and what's left of the costume, she re-attires in the mask of the new character she now is, and departs us that way. The piece is named after the costume, "Pineapple Tent Under A Pink Moon." The seeming message left behind on the empty stage is that if god is in the details, we've invented a lot of gods.

In her own tangential and much-adorned way, Sha Sha says the same thing: "Masks are the recovery of all the things that happen to us during the day."

Our word "person" comes from the old Etruscan word "persona", which means both "the thing that hides" and "the thing hidden." Sha Sha's costume-making process reflects this quality as she looks over her Bolinas, California studio absolutely crammed with bits and pieces: "I have hundreds of projects all over the place. I can't distinguish one detail over another. They're all the same details." This is equivalent to the Buddhist saying that when you light one lamp from another the flame is always same.

Yet, as the symbols embedded in the Indo-European languages drifted north after Rome, the French kept up the old linguistic attitude with the word *personne*. It means "someone", "anyone", and "on one" all at once. We who speak the Anglicized version of old German have to do with separate words for these qualities: "jemand" means "anyone" and "niemand" means "no one."

To Sha Sha, costume is a glimpse into a very much larger thing. "In performance, all the emotions are doing things at once," she says while feeding a now not-so-diffident cat, flicking its tail tip alongside that food dish. "The air is full of shapes. The intricacy around our body is full of energies. You wake up, feel sensations around you - stretch over a frame like living canvas. You become more alive in certain parts of yourself at certain times of the day. You can almost see the things in the transparent air, the things floating like emanations or smoke, thousands of ethereal drawings all around our bodies and inside of them, all around everything, putting us into real physical form."

Event and meaning are united by the mask. And as mask, life. "It takes about a year and a half for me to make a mask," she relates. "The wear and tear of performance takes that long to damage them beyond use. I repair them - add on new things and so on - but eventually I retire them."

The new mask in the old arrives in subtle ways: "I've already started my next costume by sitting on pieces of the present one, deforming them. Once a costume's arms were broken so I replaced them with feathers."

Cultures with the strongest mask-making traditions are often the ones most socially restrictive. The caste system of Hindu South India, with over 3,000 known niches, also gives us the Kathakali costume so elaborate that the

...continued on page 56....

Tin Twin' in performance



body paint is itself painted and the clothing so doughy that the dancer can do little more than glare fiercely and stomp - which says a lot about the role of masks/threat/gestures.

Our own Mardi Gras comes to us from a Middle Ages Lenten burlesque in which one could for the only time during the year satirize authority.

Masks serve the vital social duty of keeping us from going crazy beneath the weight of our own restrictions via the vehicle of art. Sha Sha identifies art as "a union of self with all else." Far from covering up, it is the mask's real job to reveal the hidden truth.

Sha Sha has visited Japan many times, lived in Indonesia five years, and not long ago returned from a year-long stay in India to pick materials and ideas for her current costumes. How does a tyke from Michigan who moved to San Francisco at four come to be so fascinated with theatre all over the world?

"I've loved birds as far back as I can remember," she reminisces as she sorts her way through a bits-and-pieces box so exotic and complex it looks like the hope chest of all childhood. "My favorite time as a child was going to the zoo. I drew some birds when I was three, made a paper eagle when I was six. Once I was sick so I drew a hummingbird. I thought, 'If I can draw this bird I'll be OK.' When I got to the red place on the chest and colored it, it felt like a real bird and I knew I was going to get well."

Her mother had the artist's equivalent of perfect pitch. Sha Sha recalls, "She could match colors exactly and had a taste for fine things. My stepfather taught me how to work with tools, be handy. When I began to work in theatre, both of those qualities came out. The environment determines its own performance. You fall in love with the technical things like finding the right size lid to fit on things or right color of cloth, but the performance itself becomes its own moment. I can never predict what happens."

Ad lib inspirations notwithstanding, performance requires an obsession with minutiae that would give pause to a librarian. "Right before I go on, while I'm still behind the screen, I'm all anxieties - Are the wires and batteries in the right place? Is this string tight enough? But then when I put it on those things don't matter. The costume comes alive, it becomes as real as it seems. I relax. I give myself up to it. I've done every possible thing to prepare. The audience becomes a new set of forces. It all interrelates when you know you can't repeat this moment before this group of people. I still think of whether the stick of incense is on. Are the strips of arashi shibori revealing their hidden colors?"

The observations demonstrate how childhood artistic proclivities grow up into art forms. One of her first self-made toys was an eggshell from which she cut away a segment to reveal the interior. She made a mask to fit inside so it looks like an apparition of one being inside another. "My first costumes began with faces. To this day I love the face. When you break open a face it becomes free to do other things."

Her self-taught mastery of materials turned her to patterns cut from cloth and made into little stuffed pillows turned inside out. She created a dollhouse "with overstuffed details like doilies covering the stairsteps, a fat chair with bulbous things falling off each side, a bird sitting under a trampoline, furnishings on the furniture, everything wildly overstuffed."

At twenty she was making dolls she could take apart so they would fit into a box. At her "one year of art school" she made drawings on boxes, she stuffed paintings with batting so they looked like low relief on canvas, she suspended dolls from strings and turned arms into feathers, and later when she showed some of these to a local children's store they told her "These are awfully eerie. Try an art gallery."

Instead she went to Japan and spent a year studying Noh. "Noh is the theatre of the gods," she reflects in her cryptic sentence-fragment conversational manner, "stylized emotions, layered techniques, painting the spirit of the words, expressions subdued, sculpture that floats and comes alive as you imagine it far away."

She then got a fellowship and lived in Indonesia five years "because I loved the wildly profuse ornamentation of their art, water-buffalo hide cut into the filigree of chiffon, lots of energy over doorways, rabbit skin glue and natural starches, a chrysalis wrapped in a cocoon. The Balinese burn their costumes after the performance.

She adds reflectively, "My costumes make me perform. When I first began to make them I didn't think of them as static art. If I made them to put on a pedestal or sell they'd be boring. They have to have a moment when they can ignite. Until they do, you don't know what's going to happen". ■

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THE TAPESTRY WEAVERS

was completed and "The Tapestry Weavers" was born.

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For further information about "The Tapestry Weavers" phone (03) 376 6430 or (03) 836 9076 or write to 6 Ailsa Street, Ascot Vale 3032. ■