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James has worked for the Grimsby Institute for just over 2 years. In this time he has worked as both a module tutor and Programme Leader on BA (hons) Special Effects Makeup Design for TV, Film & Theatre. James' field of research focus's on actor performance through prosthetic makeup and creature suits.

## **Finding the Character:** The impact of prosthetic make-up and creature suits on the actor's performance

**“It's not just a matter of putting on a monster suit and saying, ‘Grrr, I'm a monster!’” –**

**Makeup FX Artist Howard Berger**

### **Introduction**

With the advent of CGI (computer generated image), the notion of bringing fantasy (or existing) creatures to life through practical effects and live performance may seem an out-of-date concept. With the release of Jurassic Park in 1993, audiences were introduced to a technology that could realistically simulate the movement, texture and nuanced behaviour of animals long extinct. Pioneering advancements in computer graphics have continuously pushed the boundaries of what can be recreated with notable advances in the simulation such details as fur, skin and even interaction with set-bound actors.

While it is tempting to pursue the ongoing (and some may say 'tired') question, 'Is digital technology replacing practical effects?' The aim of this essay is to focus more so on the later discipline – specifically, the impact and influence practical effects have on the performer. To quantify further, does a prosthetic makeup or creature suit help the actor elicit a particular performance and if so, how?

Through out his paper, the term 'practical' will be used when describing something created from tangible materials such as rubber or silicone. 'Practical' may also be used in reference to the techniques of both the performers and technicians who contribute to the creation of the character.

This essay will also investigate the psychological aspect of performance either under prosthetics or within a creature suit – Specifically, performance art and acting through movement. Psychological and cultural themes such as Liminal space and ritual will be introduced and placed within the context of performance. Numerous perspectives from established creature suit performers will be acknowledged and any correlation with research will be discussed.

## Psychology of Performance

*“...the audience may at first notice your costume and make-up, but as the curtain falls what they will remember best is your performance.”* – Patsy Rodenburg Auth. *The Actor Speaks*

Rodenburg’s comment, although it implies theatrical performance, can be applicable to acting within a creature suit or under prosthetic makeup. While initial reaction from an audience maybe based purely on seeing the look of the character, a deeper connection can be elicited through watching how the character moves and the physicality embodied by it. In **Robocop** (Dir. Verhoeven 1987). Actor Peter Weller, after being cast as the titular character, began studying mime in order to convey the movements of a humanoid machine.

Movement is an obvious component of performance, especially when applied to performers who cannot rely on their own facial gestures to aid in the delivery of a character’s emotions. Firstly, we need to refine the term ‘movement’ into an even more specific description – Mime. Author Jacques Lecoq states, ‘The word mime refers to a phenomenon, that of imitation. If to mime is first to imitate, one can only imitate that which already exists and which one recognises, sees and hears.’ This indicates that one must observe specific gestures and other stimuli in order to imitate effectively and evolve a specific gestural language.

Once again, we can use Robocop as an example of such practice. Actor Peter Weller recounts his experience with mime artist, Moni Yakim " **He [Moni] said, 'What we want to do here, I think, is have some sort of liquid movement with a staccato on the end of it, so it's like butter, but then with a big, hard definition at the end of the movement,'** Weller said. " **And we started working on it, and I said, 'This is the guy for me.'** And he designed it, and I just worked on it for four hours a day, that stuff. It was tough, man, but fun."

However, Weller initially found the fluid movements he had perfected, were not initially possible when fitted into the Robocop suit. The fluid motions he had rehearsed were restricted by the costume, and the character’s movements had to be rethought quickly in order for Weller to move harmoniously within the suit. Ironically, the limited mobility of the suit was instrumental in helping to achieve the character’s signature movements. – Jacques Lecoq suggests that the costume is a different body that the performer must inhabit and therefore adapt to. This philosophy, while geared towards both theatrical costume and even everyday clothes, would also seem to apply to heavy creature or animal suits and possibly prosthetics. Suit performer and special makeup effects artist Tom Woodruff jr. echoes this **“The more unique the design, the more important the movement. While the more similar the character is to a human, the more simple the performance...A re-animated human creature like a zombie, will have a more familiar motion template than a non human creature from another world. The aspect of working out movement in tandem with the design provides and opportunity for each to influence the other.”**

While performing through a heavy body suit may bring about (as discussed earlier) its own set of physical and technical challenges, the key goal in creature performance is to convey intent and personality, either through implicit or explicit gesture. The intent of a masked maniac such as Micheal Myers is made clear through his actions, but more subtle gestures such as a gentle cock of the head are more open to interpretation – for example, does this action connote a childlike curiosity? A character can be conveyed through gesture, movement, physicality and more obviously dialogue. However, a performer must undergo a process of transformation into the character through that of rehearsal.

Rehearsing choreographed movements when inside the creature suit is vital as we have previously discussed, allowing time to experience the limitations on the suit will help inform the performance and identify the certain compromises that may need to be made. Through repetition, the actor can begin gaining empathy with their character. The ritualistic nature of rehearsal also provides an opportunity for the performer to improvise and experiment with movements and gesture. The behaviour of the creature or animal becomes instinctual through experimentation and repetition.

### **Practical Creature Effects and Prosthetics**

So far, we have focussed more on the limitations creature suits can place on the performer. However, we must also acknowledge how practical effects can liberate the actor and be a positive influence on the final performance. When sealed inside a creature suit or under prosthetic makeup, it is logical to assume that this can lessen inhibition and allow the individual a greater amount of freedom in which to explore their character's physicality further. In his book *The Moving Body: Teaching creative theatre* Jacques Lecoq discusses his experiences in running a clown workshop in which he encouraged his students to make each other laugh through physical performance - The class was a failure and became an embarrassing experience for all involved. He explains, “**The clown doesn't exist aside from the actor performing him. We are all clowns, we all think we are beautiful, clever, strong, whereas we all have our weaknesses, our ridiculous side, which can make people laugh when we allow it to express itself.**” Although this example is geared towards physical comedy, the notion of the actor subconsciously resisting what the assigned role is intended to convey is interesting. Lecoq is essentially saying that our own idealised self-perception can be an invisible barrier and hold us back from delivering a performance befitting the character. Lecoq explains this inhibition was lost when his students allowed themselves to be seen as the clown as opposed to portraying a separate persona, “**...I noticed there were students with legs so thin that they hardly dared show them, but who found, in playing the clown, a way to exhibit their skinniness for the pleasure of the onlookers. At last they were free to be as they were, and to make people laugh.**” He continues to explain that the key to the performance was turning personal weakness into dramatic strength, thereby discovering a unique and appropriate gestural performance.

The loss of inhibition and embodying a role through physical performance is lampooned in *Shaun of the Dead* (Dir. Wright 2004), our main characters must pass un-noticed through a horde of

zombies. The character, Dianne, initiates an impromptu 'zombie acting workshop' where she instructs her friends on how to rehearse their best 'zombified' gestures in order not to arouse suspicion from the vast numbers of undead. The film does not clearly specify as to whether the archetypal, slow moving zombie is a pop culture staple in this world – so the characters' impersonations of zombies could purely be based on what they have personally seen and experienced. This scene although played for comedy, is also inherently meta– It is essentially implying that everyone instinctively has their own physical interpretation of how a zombie moves, and if asked, could likely express that interpretation through physical gestural performance. Whether it an imitation of a 'Zarloffesque' Frankenstein's Monster with stiff, plank like leg movements, or a Romero styled zombie with sluggish, shambling and uncoordinated gestures.

This honesty through loss of inhibition can be applied to performance through character makeup and creature or animal suits - An intricate old age prosthetic, whose time consuming application and potentially restricting nature can paradoxically help the actor in their interpretation of the character. During the application stage, the creation of a liminal space gives the actor freedom in which to play with their external appearance and in turn, allow those facial and gestural contortions to influence their own perceptions of the character.

## **Conclusion**

A term while researching physical theatre and performance has been 'truth'. A description that seems somewhat paradoxical when applied to art of performance. After all, a performance is made to believe, a construct that carries or implies a narrative. However, when approached from the point of view of the performer, truth, honesty, and sincerity are vital qualities.

Specifically, the search for truth seems an almost impossible task when portraying a creature or monster. Hopefully, the audience want to believe such a character could exist, but circumventing logical thinking and the suspension of disbelief begins with the actor's perception. Perception is probably a more accurate term when describing creature suit performance. The actor's personal truth of what their character embodies is a vital component in conveying those same perceptions to us, the audience.

The performer and the character do not exist separately – but coexist in a symbiotic relationship where instincts are explored and decisions are made based upon specific information provided by the outer form.

In finding the truth behind a creature performance. There must be a compromise in terms of how a human form can be exaggerated and manipulated while still being free to explore the possibilities of movement and gestural language.

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