

Helping Students “Get It”



Arne Zaslove

If there is one career in the performing arts that encapsulates what has been happening in the theatre and circus since the 1970's it is that of Arne Zaslove who moved back and forth between the two forms, taking something from each to create something new and unique. To understand how he came to do this, one must appreciate his background and the men and movements that influenced him.

Much of what is happening in the new circus and physical theater began with Carlo Mazzoni who later became

known as Carlo Mazzoni-Clementi. He was the Johnny Appleseed, as Arne Zaslove puts it, the pioneer in Commedia dell'arte and physical theater in America as early as the late 1950's. Zaslove met Mazzoni-Clementi in 1957, when Zaslove was barely out of his teens and a theatre student at Carnegie Tech (now Carnegie Mellon).

"Meeting" is perhaps not the best word to describe this encounter. Zaslove says he was "inspired" and eventually became the Mazzoni-Clementi's protégé. "He did masks, and he did a one man

show about Commedia dell'arte. I was a freshman and all we knew of such things at that time was Marcel Marceau and that was it. The San Francisco Mime Troupe had just about started at that time."

Mazzoni-Clementi came to this country in 1956 via the Piccolo Teatro del Milano after having studied with Lecoq in Paris. He was discovered by Ted Hoffman who was then the head of the Theatre Department at Carnegie Tech.

"Carlo was this mad, incredibly creative genius," Zaslove says, "but nobody understood what he said because he was inarticulate despite the fact that he spoke five languages. He was just full of life and energy and philosophy. I never quite understood what he said, but I always understood what he meant. I just wanted to follow him around like in that old Jewish saying: 'When you sit at the Rabbi's feet you can nimbly the crumbs that fall from his beard.' And that's how you learn from Carlo as Hovey Burgess, another disciple, can testify as well. He had the masks and the Commedia dell'arte spirit which is what he conveyed to all of us.

"I followed him around for four years until he finally said, 'Now you are ready to work with me, and as a result of my having been cast as Clov in Beckett's *Endgame*, and he said to me, 'Now you'll understand the essence of the economy of movement.'"

A year after graduating from Carnegie Tech, Zaslove received a Fulbright fellowship and went off to Paris. "I always say I was conceived in Pittsburgh, but I was born in Paris," he says of that time. "I spent two years with Jacque Lecoq, and I was the first to come from America to do that.

"It was a great time to be in Paris in the mid-sixties, and when I came back I first went to the National Theatre School of Canada. There was a French and an English section in the school, and since I had just come back from France I was hired by both sections to teach what I had just learned from Lecoq and Mazzoni-Clementi. Years later I became the artistic director of the English acting section. Michel St. Denis set the program up, just as he did at Julliard."

When Zaslove finally came back to America in 1966, NYU had just begun its very first semester of the acting program in the new theatre program there, and it was there that he met Hovey Burgess. That summer of '66 Lecoq came to Canada, and did a month of workshops or

Burgess, who came up to audit Lecoq's classes, taught Zaslove to juggle at that time.

Zaslove returned to New York for the fall semester of NYU and then headed back up to Montreal for another year and a half as the National Theatre School's movement teacher. "I wasn't teaching dance," Zaslove explains. "I was teaching acting and movement. I had what I learned from Lecoq, who was precise and pedagogical and Mazzoni-Clementi, who was wild in spirit, plus my own background as an American actor influenced by Sid Caesar and *Time Out for Beanie*. So I had the Italian, American and French cultural experience that I blended into an approach of my own, always paying homage to these great teachers."

Zaslove was next invited to the University of Washington in Seattle to start a professional actor's training program there. It was the same year that Julliard started its acting program, set up by St. Denis as a conservatory. Zaslove followed suit in Seattle, with W. Duncan Ross, who was a very good teacher of Shakespeare and acting. "It was 1967, a very rich time in the American theater when we were turning out classically trained actors," Zaslove recalls, one of whom happened to be Michael Christensen, who eventually went on to become co-founder of the Big Apple Circus.

Christensen was a student in the actor training program and Zaslove was the first year movement teacher. "But since it was the school's first year, and we were the only class, we never had to share him with anyone else," Christensen recalls. He also remembers laughing a lot under Zaslove's tutelage. "It was from him that I got my first inkling of circus stuff, and he directed the broad comedies, so he helped identify the clown in me. It was always his animated physicality that was so compelling to me. He inspired that sense of delight and that playful sense of mischief that is so essential to the clown."

But the program was designed to produce classically trained actors. "In those days we wanted classically trained actors because we were doing Shakespeare, pre-Shakespeare and all the classics, barely touching on any of the contemporary works," Zaslove explains.

"What with the physical theatre that I was teaching and the Shakespeare and language skills taught by Ross we had a very good, balanced curriculum, and I got to direct some great plays."

Zaslove's next career move was back to Montreal in the mid 70's, where he became the artistic director of the English acting section of the National Theatre School "While I was there I was

able to train people in the way that I had been trained, using masks and clowning and circus skills. I also brought Hovey and Judy Finelli up to the school, in the early 70's."

Then it was back to the Seattle and the Seattle Rep to work as an associate artistic director. He eventually founded a theatre company there called the Bathhouse Theatre, which he ran for twenty years. At the same time he taught at the University of British Columbia for ten years. By the 90's he was devoting himself fulltime to running the theatre, creating pieces that he called 'collage shows' like the history of the Sunday funnies. One such show ran for twenty-five years. It was called the *Big Broadcast*, and in it he recreated the golden days of radio.

"I love the popular culture," he says by way of describing these shows, "and I made the funnies into a form of physical theater. We took the comics and used them as a story board. Each frame had dialogue and action. Eventually I broke out of the frames with characters like Mutt and Jeff, Little Lulu, Buck Rogers, Dick Tracy, and Little Orphan Annie, which was way before the musical *Annie*. These were family touring shows, which were very popular and very successful. Now these superheroes have become main stream. Hollywood has finally caught up to the classics. And, if you notice, they got great classical actors to play these larger than life characters. I've been touting that for years. I grew up loving that stuff, the radio and the golden age of comics, the 40's.

"I imagined what it would be like to



Photos by Maike Schulz

spin the dial of the radio through time, so we started with the beginning of radio in the late 20's and we recreated the actual shows. With so big a company we could ask, 'Who can do Bert Lahr? Who can do Jack Benny?' and find the right people. We did some research and found some of the scripts. The show began with a wonderful program called 'Vic and Sane,' an obscure, hilarious, daytime soap opera, which ran for fifteen minute with four characters and some brilliant writing. We showed people how the radio shows were done. We ended up doing the history, the songs, the drama and the children's programs. That was our collage show. People were on stage with live mics and listening stations and an open area. We did a touring version, a holiday version, twenty-five different versions in fact. It became my cash cow. I balanced the budget with this every year. Every year we did a different version because by the time we finished the tapes of the originals had become available."

While working on the west coast Zaslove got to see the original Pickle Family Circus with its brilliant trio of clowns, Larry Pisoni, Bill Irwin, and Jeff Hoyle. "I thought I had died and gone to heaven," Zaslove recalls, upon first encountering this remarkable trio. "When Larry wanted to do his solo show, he asked me to direct it. I helped him create what he called *Clown Dreams*. It premiered at my theater. I helped him create maybe five or six new pieces for the show. The first half consisted of his standard routines and the second half was original material."

After working with Pisoni, who was then on leave from the Pickle Family Circus, Zaslove was asked by Judy Finelli to create a show with her that was actually based on a big Russian poster. It was set in a cabaret or café. "The poster was our jumping off spot. I went down to San Francisco and wrote the scenario, using the skills that the cast had, and I made it like a silent film. It was called *Café des Artiste*. Joan Mankin and John Gilkey were just starting out. Lorenzo (Larry's son) and Gypsy Snider (his step daughter) were in it, too, as very young performers. That was how I got involved with all these guys."

Eventually the Bathhouse Theatre ran out of money in '99, as most mid-sized theatres did at the time, so Zaslove began free lancing, and along the way he met David Shiner, who was in residence at a local theater in Seattle with a grant to develop a new show. Zaslove remembers getting a call from Seattle's A Contemporary Theatre, saying that they had this crazy guy and didn't know what to do with him. Could I come and meet him?

Zaslove had previously met Shiner when he was asked by a former student to lend a hand getting an American version of *Pomp Duck and Circumstance* up and running in Seattle. The result was Teatro Zinzanni which has been running ever since in Seattle and San Francisco. Zaslove recently directed a new version of the show since it is changed every six months. Shiner later recommended he do *Pomp Duck* in Berlin.

Zaslove and David Shiner became wonderful friends after working together in Seattle, working on a new show that has yet to be done. "We worked together for four weeks, jamming, talking, telling stories, and working on routines. When it came time to do the show, the theatre couldn't handle the technical aspects. It was too big, so it never got on, and Shiner went back to Germany."

Shiner is now preparing Cirque du Soleil's new touring show. In the development stage of preparations the casting department went to its files and invited eighteen clowns to come and spend a week in Montreal. "David and I did improv with them and just tested the talent. It was fantastic. I had a wonderful time. David teaches one way, and I teach another, but we would both agree on talent and on what was funny. And that's the hard part: finding people who are funny. I think they ended up making an offer to only three people and two accepted."

Zaslove was in New York recently, having just completed a three-week workshop for a show that is going to go into rehearsal in Pittsburgh and hopefully come back to New York. It has been created by the choreographer Gracielle Daniele and Steven Flaherty (composer) and Lynn Ahrens (writer). They are the team that did *Suessical, the Musical* and *Ragtime*. Zaslove was brought in to work with the cast on commedia dell'arte technique, which is how the show is being done. "So I came in with my bag of masks, and while I was here I got another call from Cirque du Soleil asking, if while I was in New York, could I do a workshop with the cast of *Delirium*. I ended up doing two workshops with anyone in the cast who wanted to take them. They want their cast to have more experience doing that kind of thing, to be enriched. It was great, and I had a ball."

This past August Zaslove went back to Europe and attended what they call a clown intensive, taught by Pierre Byland. "Pierre is my age. People from all over the world attend his workshops. He has taught these so-called intensives for fifteenth years. I went as a kind of reunion. He was my acrobatic teacher, a protégé of Lecoq, and we performed



together in a little mime company in the 60's in Paris. It was back to my roots. "For forty years I have been teaching this point of view or what I call a mind set," Zaslove points out. "Sometimes the students get it, sometimes they don't. The ones that do have a certain freedom that I feel I can liberate and, give them a license to be free like a child again, to have the imagination of a child and the freedom and the lack of inhibitions so they can be very creative.

"I had a group of students years ago, French Canadians. They were the best students I ever had, and I always say they got it. They got the language, the physicality, the sense of absurdity, the sense of the grotesque, the comic and the tragic. Occasionally I will have a class like that or a group, or an actor. Michael Christensen was like that. He got it. And as I was watching this group of about thirty-five people in Switzerland, I realized they were all getting it. Ninety percent of them were getting it. The ten percent who didn't get it were the Americans. It was a revelation after forty years of doing this stuff.

"Carlo Mazzoni, this great teacher, was up against it. He kept saying, 'They don't get it; they don't understand.' Now I understand it's in the DNA in Europe. They get it. They don't deal with the psychological. They aren't dealing with 'what is my motivation. Why am I doing this?' You have to find the actors who have the flexibility, who can intuit. Jeff Hoyle has it. Of course he's an Englishman, and he knows the silent films. When you bring up 'Have you seen Buster Keaton's film, *The General*?' the current generation doesn't know what you're talking about.

"So just before I left I asked Pierre: 'What do you attribute this to?' We had just finished two weeks that were a corroboration of everything I believe in as a teacher, a director, a performer. Why did Sid Caesar and those guys get it? 'What do you think is the reason that Europeans seem to get it better and are able to create an ensemble right away through improvisation while they're looking for their own individual clowns, their so-called personal clown.' He thinks it's because the psychology of the American cinema has kept Americans from understanding that sense of the absurd and the comic. That goes back to Strasberg who single handedly has ruined the American theatre.

"In my workshops with Cirque du Soleil, there were about ten or twelve people, all Europeans and I got results in three hours which would take me two years with a group of American actors. I just finished with American actors on this new show called *The Glorious Ones*, about a commedia dell'arte acting company. They all had training and can sing and dance and act, but when it came time to improvise they were all shy. They were inhibited. Eventually I had to write a scenario and had them do it, and then they were great. But in terms of that freedom, that spirit of taking a chance, taking a risk, we don't have it in our system or spirit or souls. The exceptions are people like the David Shiners, the Bill Irwins, the Jeff Hoyles."

Zaslove's workshops begin with an over view of the mask world, using everything from funny glasses to the neutral mask, and the emotion masks. He talks about the style of the world of the mask and then the participants do improvisations wearing the masks.

"The thing to understand about a mask is that it reveals rather than conceals," Zaslove says. "It reveals something about the character, and who you are. Our culture doesn't use masks, but everyone has a mask that he wears. I have a theory that we all have a posture, an inner spirit, a rhythm, a mask that we are born with. It changes, of course, as we become more neurotic and have more experience, but it's given to us by our parents. We are victims of our parents, just as we are products of our parents, and we are unique. All the Eastern cultures use masks to tell their stories, but in America the puppeteer is allocated to children's entertainment."

We are only now beginning to breakaway from the idea that physical theatre is only for kids.

Zaslove is currently directing *Macbeth* in Los Angeles. He now lives in Seattle with his second wife and two children, ages six and twelve. ●