

## Birth in a New Language

by Mario Rinvoluceri

Imagine a room with a decent carpet, stillness, two teachers, 12 students and an intensive two weeks ahead. The group does a soothing relaxation exercise stretched out on the carpet. Slowly they come back from the awayness the exercise offers and are asked if someone would like to volunteer to be the first intensive listener.

A person moves into the centre of the circle and dons a simple white mask; impassive, calm, no eye-holes, no mouth hole. The listener is enclosed and safe with the distractions of vision shut out. S/he is not alone, sensing the group around. The woman teacher sits on the carpet behind the listener and lightly places her finger tips on the person's sides to find his/her breathing rhythm. The teacher allows herself a moment or two to allow the feelings of the listener to inform her own body and mind. She then starts a monologue, speaking over the listener's shoulder. The monologue takes its cue from the mood the listener is in, from what her body consciously and unconsciously tells the teacher. The monologue should be representation in the foreign language that approximates to the way the listener is feeling. It should not be a projection of the feelings and worries of the teacher.

The teacher recycles the 3-5 minute sequence two or three times. I have been the listener in this process and there is a magic quality to the foreign speech - it comes over your shoulder, somehow in tune with you, from your side of the fence and so not at all threatening. Magic.

The listener is now offered a half mask which leaves the mouth free but which still has no eye-holes. The teacher invites the listener to follow the sequence again and to pick up and repeat any sounds or groups of sounds s/he feels like repeating. If s/he wants to repeat nothing, this is fine too. The teacher lives through the monologue a few more times, spacing her speech out if the listener wants to pick things up but not cueing the person to speak in a gross, teacherish way. Sometimes the teacher and the listener achieve a kind of rhyming, in-tune complicity and with one shadowing the other and viceversa, like kittens playing. It depends, like most student-teacher things, on the rapport between them.

What I have outlined are the first two phases of the initial work with masks. Beautiful, lyrical, sensuous and sensitive, psychodramatic language learning offers learners a varied range of exercises that lead them fast from the beginnings in the foreign language to an assured being in it. Initially developed by Willy Urbain in Paris, it has achieved its present form in the hands of Marie and Bernard Dufeu of the University of Mainz, West Germany. If you would like to read a fuller account of the method than this see Dufeu's article in Le Francais dans le Monde, Feb-March 1983. The article is copiously illustrated.

I feel a fool suggesting you should read about this kind of work - you have to see it on video or live through it yourself to really get an idea of what I have been trying helplessly to describe. The best solution would be to enrol on one of Bernard Dufeu's introductory courses in psychodramatic language learning in Mainz.