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Definition: **mime** from *The Hutchinson Unabridged Encyclopedia with Atlas and Weather Guide*

Type of acting in which gestures, movements, and facial expressions replace speech. It has developed as a form of theatre, particularly in France, where Marcel Marceau and Jean Louis Barrault have continued the traditions established in the 19th century by Debureau and the practices of the commedia dell'arte in Italy. In ancient Greece, mime was a crude, realistic comedy with dialogue and exaggerated gesture.



Image from: [Lindsay Kemp, a British actor, mime artist,...](#) in *Encyclopedia of Humor Studies*

Summary Article: **Mime**

From *Encyclopedia of Humor Studies*

Mime is the art of communicating without words and is used internationally to express ideas across language barriers both professionally in the theater and in personal behavior. In theater, the words *mime* and *pantomime* are often used to define the same thing, although the English pantomime is a distinct theater genre (properly shortened to “panto”). Deriving from the Greek word *mimos* (a mimic or imitator), mime is both verb and noun, thus both the act of miming and a practitioner of the art (although mimes use the word for the mimic act itself and use *pantomime* for sketches, scenes, or plays using mime).

Mime demands complete control of muscular isolation, focusing on communicative bodily and facial expression. Although some of the art is naturalistic, most involves exaggeration and stylization; for instance, miming walking on the spot or ascending/descending stairs differs greatly from the real actions, yet communicates very clearly. The imaginative participation of the audience is an essential part of mime, as in a game of charades, where the audience is continually guessing what the mime's gestures mean. Consequently its associated humor springs in part from the delight of recognition, flattering the viewer's cognitive skills. The act of mimicry seems inherently to carry the seeds of comedy, a joke shared privately between the mimes and their audience. This entry discusses the elements that make up the tradition of mime and how it has evolved in various cultures.

Early Miming

The tradition of mime predates formal theater and is found in all cultures. Mime was used extensively in performance by Greeks (the name of the masked Greek dancer Pantomimus is thought to be the origin of *pantomime*). Earliest records make little distinction between a mime and an actor, who was at once singer, dancer, and mime; but the word was more commonly used for a range of comic expression than for the more formal style of tragedy that stressed presentational, rhetorical, and vocal performance. Both tragic and comic mimes used masks (Latin *larvae*), but the built-up shoes (Latin *cothurni*), which created stature for tragedians and limited actors' physical expression, were less used by comedic mimes, who evidently were primarily dancers and acrobats. The comedies of Aristophanes and Menander, Plautus, and Terence clearly require physicality in both bodily and facial expression. They satirically mock human desires, ambition, and folly, differing little from modern comedy, which also usually requires considerable physicality. Distorted features and exaggerated props were clearly used in comic ways, especially the huge phalli notoriously used in Aristophanes's *Lysistrata* (411 BCE) and evidenced in vase and wall paintings (indeed re-creating their extreme political and scatological license has not been possible until very recent times). Such physical expression is at the heart of mime, with or

without words; however, the mimic emphasis on human physical expression tended toward the comic while the abstract tended toward dance. The concept of the physical entrapment of a soul in flesh lies at the heart of all comedy.

Mimic elements from Greek theater carried over into Roman and later medieval theaters, and many have speculated that itinerant street entertainers long preceded Greek theater proper. One can confidently say that mime, dance, and storytelling preexisted the earliest forms of entertainment in all cultures. In the polyglot world of the Roman theater audience, mime was taken to crude extremes, leading the Christian Church to associate the form with the pagan and demonic, although because of its attractions, it was never truly absent from the streets of most towns. Along with clowning, acrobatics, and comedy itself, mime became a crucial element of the *commedia dell'arte* and the even older folk plays such as English mummers' plays and Dutch *Abele Spelen*; no doubt it was part of the skills of a court jester, and gestural language is part of all “foolery,” even for puppets. The lasting impact of mimes and mimicry is evidenced in the work of William Shakespeare (the “dumb show” in *Hamlet* being the most famous example), Lope de Vega, and Molière. Always popular from the 15th- to the mid-19th century, groups of such “strolling players” offered short satirical sketches on makeshift stages, incorporating vulgarity, grotesquery, and farce. Crossing many national boundaries and languages as they did, mime must surely have been the principal element in their performances.

The Italian groups that traversed Europe were known as *funambuli* (literally, “rope dancers”) and they used both mime and language, creating hundreds of stock characters, and using masks, makeup, props, and costumes. The central *commedia* role of Arlecchino was particularly bound up with mime, using gestural language and highly articulated physical skills—his famous comic routine (*lazzi*) of catching and swallowing a fly was totally mimed.

The *funambuli* influenced most of Europe, with the English transforming Pulcinella into Mr. Punch and developing a unique form of pantomime. But the most significant new developments occurred in France: Arlecchino was romanticized into the internationally recognized Harlequin and Pedrolino transformed into Pierrot. In the first half of the 19th century, Jean Gaspard Debureau developed this role, adding melancholy to his clown Pierrot and retrieving from the street performers of medieval France the tradition of the “white face” (*enfariné*) to neutralize identity, emphasizing mouth, eyes, and eyebrows. While such French pantomime characters developed their own visual and performance style, diluting satire, developing romance, and extending music, stock comic routines (with ladders, lanterns, buckets, etc.) retained *commedia* traditions.

The routines from *commedia*, *jongleurs*, masquerades, and Harlequinades diverged into vaudeville, variety, and circus and even influenced early silent-film comedy. Mime is evident in the comedies of Charlie Chaplin, Buster Keaton, Laurel and Hardy, and many others, including Clara Bow. And correspondingly, several elements from the silent screen (e.g., the Keystone Cops) are standard for many modern mimes. Often called low comedy because of its preoccupation with bodily functions and desires, such physical comedy always requires considerable skill and warrants respect. Visual gags are more instantly understood by audiences of mixed artistic sophistication, and this fact has always guided physical comedy in its outreach. The eye-catching appeal of physical extremis is as much a part of farce as it is of a Jackie Chan Kung Fu movie or of comic routines in all plays, films, and musicals. One modern example is Kevin Kline's extraordinary mime sequence in the 1978 musical, *On the Twentieth Century*.



Lindsay Kemp, a British actor, mime artist, dancer, choreographer, and teacher. He studied with Marcel Marceau and taught David Bowie.

Source: Allan Warren/Wikimedia Commons.

Silent actors, like silent-movie comedians, are in fact mimes. W. C. Fields was a pantomime silent comic and juggler before his screen career; some, such as Chaplin and Rowan Atkinson (a.k.a. Mr. Bean), use their entire body and grotesque facial grimaces. Others, such as Buster Keaton, developed blank-face comedy, which, like the *Nō* mask, allows the audience to imagine the thoughts that are not being expressed on the face, with increased humorous effect. Such deadpan humor is admired by practitioners as a more subtle art form than facial “clowning” (face-pulling).

Despite its skill and popularity, physical performance was kept off the “legit” stage for many centuries and made secondary to actors who gave voice to the wealth of more literary drama. Its influence nevertheless underlies most theater: On the 19th-century stage, for example, rhetorical gestures had to grow to reach the back row of seating capacity of more than 3,500. Accompanied by music, this heightened physical style of both acting and play gained the name *melodrama*, known for its exaggerated and melodramatic style of plot and acting. Such gestural language survives today in realms as widely disparate as French mimes and classical ballet, where it is often seen as romantic or parodying romance. Street mimes can be found performing or “busking” around the world.

Miming in Asia

Although mime prioritizes communication, and therefore reflects life, it can also deal with abstraction and distillation of emotion. In classical forms such as rhetorical gesture and classical ballet, a formal sign language has evolved that links to ritual, dance, and Asian forms of mime. The Sanskrit treatise on the performing arts, the *Natya Shastra*, attributed to Bharata Muni (between 200 BCE and 200 CE), refers to silent performance as *mukhabinaya*. This remains common in India theater, as does clowning and the use of stock comic characters. The famous southwest Indian Kathakali dance form has sung narration, but its silent performers are thoroughly trained in mime, much of which involves the imitation of animals and highly expressive body and facial gestures. The north Indian Kathak, evolved from Persian storytelling, now uses less mime, and the southeastern Bharata Natyam, evolved from the court mime

with poses and gestures from Hindu religious sculpture, has now completely abstracted its expressive aspects so that, like much of Kathakali, original meaning has often been lost with the gestures retained only for aesthetic reasons.

As in ancient and medieval time in the West, the actor in Asia is always also a dancer, and in Asian performance, physical expression is often valued more highly than vocal. Because Asian performance usually involves traditional or time-honored narratives, mime remains an essential element in all Asian performance, assisting the storyteller with illustration. For Cambodia's Khmer theater and its close relative, Thailand's Khon and Lakhon, drama is often indivisible from dance. Mime is similarly used in all Malay, Indonesian, and Philippines traditional dance theater. Comedy is also a valued part of all Southeast Asian cultures, essential to character and storytelling: all have their clowns and comics, with accompanying mime elements.

Through Mei Lan Fang (1894–1961), the great Chinese *Dan* actor (female portrayer), the influence of *Xiqu* (Chinese “opera”) on Western theater is now well known. The term *opera* is questioned by scholars and discounts the fact that *Xiqu* is essentially physical theater, still popular largely because of its battle scenes, acrobatics, mime, and comedy. One of the world's most famous mime sequences is China's “Ferryman and the Maiden,” from *Qiu Jiang* (Autumn River), where a boat journey around river bends and dangerous rapids is exquisitely communicated by two actors on a bare stage. *Xiqu* shares many elements with the more visually spectacular *Kabuki* theater of Japan, deriving from *ka* (music), *bu* (dance), and *ki* (skill or performance). Both forms contain a lot of physical mime in battle and combat scenes (like many Shakespeare plays); both involve elaborate facial makeup on a white rice base and often use limited props such as a fan to serve as another object. Both put comedy sequences side-by-side with tragedy and explore class systems, enjoying comedy in the form of rebellious servants as much as dullard army generals. Another feature in common is frequent mime sequences in imagined darkness (Japanese *dammari*, literally “silent,” but in *Kabuki* also a pantomime fight in the dark). These parallel *commedia's lazzi* of Nightfall and are triggered usually by the dropping of a candle or lantern, with imaginary darkness descending on stage in which characters circle each other blindly, skillfully almost bumping into each other, swinging swords, and ducking or groping for some precious object. British playwright Peter Shaffer (b. 1926) used such a “reversed lighting” technique in his play *Black Comedy* (1965), which is played entirely as if in blackout. Because audiences are the only ones privy to “seeing in the dark,” the actors' mime skills make this one of comedy's most universally loved sequences.

Masks and masked features, deadpan, blank-faced characters that magnify physicality and/or encourage audience's imagination are also commonly used in Asian theater. Examples include narrators such as Japan's “sit-down comedy,” *Rakugo*, where only the fan or a folded piece of cloth is used to assist the narrator in miming anything and everything. *Nō* theater goes further and deliberately masks all emotions, even on unmasked actors, while the leading character (the *Shite*) wears the mask of his or her role group (gods, warriors, maidens, mad people, and demons). While *Nō* sometimes uses surprisingly communicative mime (e.g., the pouring of wine or water using a fan), the best known *Nō* mime is also the international gesture for weeping: with palm curved slightly upward, one hand is slowly raised to the face. Apart from having their own plays known as *Kyōgen*, comic actors are frequent in *Nō*, usually in small character parts where mime rather than extended dialogue is important, for example, the ferryman in *Sumidagawa* (The Sumida River), a classical *Nō* play by Motomasa (1401?–1432). *Kyōgen* alternate with *Nō* plays as comic relief in a full program, echoing the Greek concept of a world well-

balanced when presented in both comic and tragic forms.

The purity of Japanese *Nō* technique greatly influenced many modern mimes, including Jacques Copeau (1879–1949) and Jacques Lecoq (1921–1999), and the *Kabuki onnagata* (female role) was copied by Lindsay Kemp (b. 1938) in his androgynous mime and transformed to comic decadence. *Butoh* dance uses extreme physical expression, born of the ashes of Hiroshima; similar to Jerzy Grotowski's (1933–1999) work arising from the turmoil of World War II, it has developed into a silent aesthetic, common now in contemporary physical theater.

Modern mime, fully embraced by the United States, was first analyzed and legitimized in France and is usually understood as a European art form. In 1921 Jacques Copeau founded L'École du Vieux-Colombier (named for the eponymous theater in Paris) and for 3 years he, with Étienne Decroux, Jean-Louis Barrault, Jean Dasté, and others, explored concepts of physical theater, mask, and mime. Decroux and Barrault developed a form now known as corporeal mime, which emphasizes the body rather than facial expression; their most famous student was Marcel Marceau (1923–2007) with his company La Nouvelle Compagnie de Mimodrame, whose “Pip” became the epitome of the white-faced mime, exploring its limitations until Marceau's death. Jacques Lecoq was a student of Jean Dasté and returned to the *commedia* to develop methods now known as “Mime for the Actor.” This training evolved various strands with both neutral masks and character masks, clowning, and latterly the revival of the concept of the Fool and its Italian counterpart, the Buffone. The more grotesque clown, or Buffone, was taken further in French theater and training and acclaimed in the work of Italian Nobel laureate, Dario Fo (b. 1926).

From Decroux's work developed French classical mime, which uses classical ballet positions, posture, and grace, as well as tights and dance pumps. Whereas dance defies gravity, mime is earthbound, often struggling with obstructive natural forces such as gravity and wind, creating strong comic effects. It uses economy and essence (evidently influenced by Japanese *Nō*) and features slow-motion, statues, machine-like movements, and patterns, and its comedy can be easily analyzed using Henri Bergson's principles of mechanical patterning in comedy (*Le rire*, 1900). In this tradition, the Swiss group Mummenschanz, founded in 1972, remains internationally popular; it uses Lecoq technique together with masks and props, introducing the surreal into mime. In recent years, Philippe Genty (b. 1938) has surrounded the mime with huge visual and magical effects, and mime's scientific study of the human body and gestural language has reentered the world of dance, influencing innovative American companies such as Momix (founded 1980) and Pilobolus (1971).

Miming Today

There are now many mime groups, understood as physical theater companies, often hugely influential, particularly in the United States. “Purer” forms, like Marceau mime, are found now mainly in amateur or children's shows (in 2012, some 49 mimes advertised their availability in New York City alone). However, mime and its disciplines and principles are commonly part of actor, dancer, and circus training worldwide, an essential training for the physical actor, together with clowning, Asian martial arts, and Western combat. Mime schools and teachers are in demand internationally, especially the core skills that start—as in Kathakali training—with muscular isolation exercises and the essential principles of physics.

Festivals of mime are held today in many countries. Mimos, an international mime festival held in Périgueux, France, since 1983, includes mime, clowning, circus, dance (e.g., hip-hop), puppetry, plastic

arts, and music. All are nonverbal and range across ages and cultures, with shows including exhibitions, discussions, and films or videos. The annual London International Mime Festival is Britain's longest established international theater season, founded in 1977 by producer Joseph Seelig and mime/clown Nola Rae, inspired by Cologne's Gaukler Festival and Amsterdam's Festival of Fools. Helen Lannaghan joined in 1987 and national and international collaborations have been common, again spanning the entire spectrum of wordless performance including "live art" (performance art), physical theater, new circus, puppetry, and "object theater." Artists who have participated define the field, including Jacques Lecoq, Bolek Polivka (b. 1949), Philippe Genty, Lindsay Kemp, Annie Fratellini (1932–1997), Jérôme Deschamps (b. 1947), Marcel Marceau, and the new generation such as La Ribot, Compagnie 111, Josef Nadj, Licedei, Simon McBurney's *Complicité*, Phelim McDermot's *Improbable Theatre*, and leading new circus ensembles. Both Seelig and Lannaghan have been honored by the French government. The longevity and adaptability of mime as a communication form suggests it will forever remain part of the performer's art, whether humorous or serious.



*Jean and Brigitte Soubeyran. Jean (1921–2000) was a French-trained mime, who had an extensive career primarily in Germany, where he married Brigitte. He performed for the Marcel Marceau ensemble and wrote a book on pantomime, titled *The Silent Language*.*

Source: Ronald (Inge Worrigen, Cologne)/Wikimedia Commons.

See *also* Aristophanes; Bergson's Theory of the Comic; Burlesque; Carnival and Festival; Clowns; Comedy Ensembles; Comic Versus Tragic Worldviews; Commedia dell'Arte; Exaggeration; Farce; Feast of Fools; Fools; Greek Visual Humor; Improv Comedy; Jests, Jestbooks, and Jesters; Lazzi; Low Comedy; Masks; Medieval Visual Humor; Menander; Music Hall; Musical Comedy; Plautus; Play and Humor; Puppets; Race, Representation of; Rakugo; Ritual Clowns; Roman Visual Humor; Shakespearean Comedy; Slapstick; Stereotypes

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Aubrey Mellor

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