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## Masks: A New Face for the Theatre

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# MASKS

## *A New Face for the Theatre*

Alexi Michael Siegel



## ABSTRACT

This study seeks to reimagine and reinvigorate modern theatre's relationship with mask work through text-based historical research and practice-based artistic research. It focuses on three ancient mask traditions: pre- and early Hellenistic Greek theatre, Japanese Noh theatre, and Nigerian Egungun masquerades. Research on these mask traditions and recent masked productions informed the development and staging of a masked performance of Charles Mee's *Life is a Dream*. The production featured sections for each of the ancient masking styles and a final section that explored masks in a contemporary theatrical style. As a whole, this creative project pulls masks out of their historical context to discuss their relevance for contemporary theatre artists and to demonstrate how ancient traditions can inspire new work.

Early man donned the first mask at least 50,000 years ago, and since then masks have held special reverence for human beings (Eldredge 3). In very old, very distinct theatre traditions, as well as in timeless religious rituals, masks have transformed humans from their mere existence into something beyond it. This mysterious transformation was the reason why masks have been an indispensable tool for the theatre. The process of covering up one's face, the center of one's identity, unleashes untold potential for expressing the human experience. American playwright Eugene O'Neill described masks as being "more subtly, imaginatively, suggestively dramatic than any actor's face can ever be" (qtd. in Johnson 22), and world-renowned director Peter Brook has gone so far as to say "what is called mask [in the West] should be called an anti-mask. The traditional mask is an actual portrait, a soul portrait... an outer casing that is a complete and sensitive reflection of the inner life" (qtd. in Johnson 26). Masks uncovered the inner secrets of humans while also covering up the external expression of the literal face. Although many actors, directors, and playwrights have acknowledged their power, masks' presence in theatre today has dwindled greatly. Whether it is due to specialized training, fear, or a lack of resources, masked theatre is a rare form. Masks have been lost to the history books, relics of another time. The goal of my project was to reinvigorate and reimagine the modern theatre artist's relationship to mask work.

### *My journey began with research into Greek theatre, Japanese Noh theatre, and Yoruba Egungun masquerades.*

My journey began with research into Greek theatre, Japanese Noh theatre, and Yoruba Egungun masquerades. I focused on the history of each form, the physical design and functionality of their masks, and the acting styles and conventions of each masking tradition. Next, I examined how contemporary theatrical productions use masks to gain insights from their experiences. I then looked for a text capable of playing to the strengths of each mask tradition and a cast of actors willing to experiment. Finally, I set to work on creating a structure for rehearsals and building the masks themselves. In the pages to come, I discuss my process and share what I discovered through my exploration into mask work.

## Literature Review

### Greek Theatre

Greek theatre was the beginning of the European theatrical canon. Most research on Greek theatre today refers to fifth

century BCE theatrical practices (Patterson and Donohue 11). A large majority of the surviving evidence consists of clay vases, such as the Pronomos vase, which enables scholars to know that performers wore masks (Johnson 20). Greek theatre most likely arose from sacred rituals held in honor of Dionysus, the god of wine, fertility, and the theatre (Berberović 31). Some scholars cite the scale of the Athenian theatre as the reason for the masks, since an audience of up to 15,000 would mean that viewers could be almost 100 meters away from the stage. Masks might have carried expression out to the distant spectators better than the human face could (Wiles, *Greek Theatre* 109), and they may also have worked as a megaphone for the voice, since they covered the whole head like a helmet (Wiles, *Greek Theatre* 151). Other scholars note that Greek theatre used only three male actors to play all the roles, suggesting that they needed masks in order to switch between characters (Patterson and Donohue 26-27). The most compelling reason for the masks is that they served as a dramatic device for portraying tragedy. For translator Tony Harrison, the "mask keeps its eyes wide open when the axe blade falls, when the babies burn" (qtd. in Wiles, *Greek Theatre* 149). The horrific events of Greek tragedies became palatable with the mask. The mask created a world in which the performers could speak about the unspeakable without falling into hysterics, and, in turn, the audience could sympathize with the plight of the characters without falling into empathy. The mask afforded a degree of separation between the audience and the atrocities occurring onstage.



Photo credit: Alexi Siegel

The Greeks had a very close relationship with their masks, as the word for *mask* in Greek, *prosōpon*, was also the word for *face* (Wiles, *Mask* 1). There are large misconceptions about the appearance of Greek masks, however, The confusion stems from the common symbol for theatre: two masks, one happy and one sad. This "exaggerated and statuesque" kind of mask with dramatic facial expressions did not emerge until the Hellenistic period (323-31 BCE) and was brought into common practice by the Romans. In contrast, Greek masks were "simple and naturalistic" (Johnson 21).

They were almost expressionless and made of linen with a stiffening agent of plaster or animal glue (Wiles, *Mask* 15). These masks were not built to be durable since performers would probably wear them for only one performance before placing them in Dionysus' temple (Vervain and Wiles 255).

Taking into account the challenges inherent in the Greek theatre, such as the masks and the distance from the audience, it is no surprise that the Greek style of acting differs from most approaches today. Acting was formal and presentational, focusing on the shape of the body and how it could express emotion in an outward manner. The actors were concerned with how they could “amplify the external expression of emotion rather than draw the audience’s attention toward the inner experience of a character” (Mathews 18). The Greeks were only interested in the audience’s understanding of the emotions of the characters as they pertained to the plot, rather than the psychology of individual characters themselves (Vervain, “Performing Ancient Drama in Mask: The Case of Greek Tragedy” 165). The masks helped to define this style by reminding the audience “that the characters are elemental, not psychological beings” (Nightingale). Another facet of Greek theatre that enhanced this acting style was that “[t]here were no side walls to reflect sound, and a frontal delivery was therefore essential” (Wiles, *Greek Theatre* 109). For the audience to hear what they were saying, actors had to face directly out, so that each monologue might have seemed like a sort of public speech.

*Acting was formal and presentational, focusing on the shape of the body and how it could express emotion in an outward manner.*

Sharp body movements and vocal clarity were integral parts of Greek theatrical style. Again, the masks and the distance of the audience fed into a need for “simple, clear and bold” movements, and actors relied heavily “upon the patterns which [silhouetted] bodies made on the ground” (Wiles, *Greek Theatre* 110). The situation made it essential that “[t]he human figure becomes more indeed like a piece of sculpture, in which each line and curve complements the dominant emotion” (Walton 57). Using their entire bodies to create specific shapes, actors could communicate what their characters were feeling to the whole audience. Not only did gestures have to be easily seen by all spectators, but actors also had to be heard. Greek actors went through intensive vocal training. The plays called for the use of *stichomythia*, defined by classicist Oliver Taplin as “radically non-naturalistic,” fast-moving, “single-line dialogue interchange” between speakers (236-37). Actors spoke in specific rhythmic

patterns that were mirrored in music, and they needed to learn correct rhythms of speech as well as how to create a resonating sound while wearing a mask. One Greek orator, Demosthenes, is said to have “trained his voice by speaking with stones in his mouth or while running uphill” (Wiles, *Greek Theatre* 151). Intensive breathing exercises such as these were a common training practice for actors.

## Noh Theatre

Noh theatre is often compared to Greek theatre because both use choruses, masks, and music in performances. However, major differences are also present between these two art forms.



Photo credit: Alexi Siegel

Noh theatre had just started in the fourteenth century but became more popular by the end of the fifteenth century as both a public performance and an official ceremony (Hooas 82). The protagonist is known as the *shite*, and “the events have usually happened in the distant past—indeed, in a former lifetime of the *shite*” (Mathews 16). The *shite* has died before the play starts and is suffering in the afterlife; the end of the play is often simply a “promise of deliverance from the tortures he is suffering” (Keene 9). The text of Noh plays is minimal, as in a Japanese haiku poem, where a “complete observation about life is concentrated,” and “much is expressed by what is left out as well as by what is put in” (Devlin 59). Although long moments of silence occur onstage, characters can suggest a lot even when they do not speak.

As with the Greeks, the Japanese word for *mask*, *onote*, is also the word for *face* (Johnson 25). However, while the Greek masks were made with feeble material and used only once, Noh masks are made of wood and used for multiple plays. Even though Noh mask design is relatively “neutral and without any individualizing features” (Tamba 43), this does not mean that they are not highly expressive. Rather, “the power of the *nō* mask overall lies in its suggestiveness, hinting at the inner world of the character behind it” (Mathews 13). This suggestiveness comes from the specific

details of their carving, and how the light hitting the surface of each mask changes the way it looks. By raising the mask upwards, it appears happy, and by lowering the mask, it appears sad (Johnson 26). While there are three basic mask classifications—"the old person, the woman, and the warrior"—there is variety within the classifications, and variety in the roles that different masks are chosen for (Keene 63). Still, an actor might wear the woman mask when performing a character of a young girl in one play and then use it again to be a mother in another. The female masks especially have very blank expressions (Keene 62). Another likeness to Greek theatre is that Noh masks are paired with wigs that cover the actors' heads (Keene 65).

The acting style of Noh theatre is the complete opposite of Greek theatre because it is about the internal experience of the characters as a whole rather than their internal experience only as it pertains to the plot. The movement is slow and subtle, where "the body is bound, restricted by inaction and the actor still must project the character's feelings" (Shirō 202). Actors must keep their movement steady because quick movements are thought to be ugly. Often, "long intervals pass virtually without motion onstage, to be succeeded by brief and violent action" (Keene 10). This subtlety does not deter the audience from experiencing a highly emotional piece of theatre. Rather, the restricted body movements communicate the vast inner life of the characters because "inner turmoil is occurring" in those "who appear to be still" (Shirō 204). The body is restricted because it feels emotion so strongly. The Japanese believe that "formal movement does not prevent the expression of emotion in Noh, but becomes an aid to its controlled release" (Johnson 24). The tension provided by the prolonged expression of emotion creates an impactful experience for viewers.

## Egungun Masquerades

In examining mask traditions, it was important to return to the roots of masks by examining a religious ritual. Ritual is at the center of every masked tradition, even as religion has fallen to the wayside in modern performance. Egungun masquerades are performed by the Yoruba, who "live on the west coast of Africa in Nigeria" and are one of the continent's "largest cultural groups" (Mullen 9). I chose the Egungun masquerades because, while their masks are extremely different from the Greek and Japanese traditions, the basic structure of the performances is actually very similar. Unfortunately, there is little scholarly research on this sacred religious ritual.

The Yoruba do not believe that death is the end of life; instead, people move into a spiritual world called *Orun* and watch over the living (Mullen 21). The masquerades that occur during annual festivals are a way for the living to

honor their ancestors, so "in exchange for being ritually remembered, the living-dead can watch over the family and can be contacted for advice and guidance" (Strong). Performers born into the traditional Yoruba masquerade cult talk about "the spirit of the dead literally inhabiting their bodies when masked" and give advice to the living through storytelling, song, and dance (Bell, "Mask Makers in Nigeria" 42). There is a strong sense of community during the festivals, as the masquerade "supports community life, expresses local values, and contributes to its people's worldview" (Cole 37). It is a time for the community to come together to reflect on their previous year.



Photo credit: Alexi Siegel

The masks that the Egungun wear are essential for embodying their ancestors. They may be made of wood or cloth (Strong), and cloth covers the entire body, with the performers wearing gloves and leggings to ensure that no part of the skin is seen (Bell, "Mask Makers in Nigeria" 43). One reason for the full-body coverage of the Egungun masks is that the Yoruba believe that their ancestral spirits are fully covered in *Orun*, and therefore their physical appearance on earth should be the same (Strong). A second reason is that the masks create an otherworldly effect. John Pemberton III, a scholar of Yoruba art and rituals, observes that "because they are without the structures that shape human experience, the representation of [the ancestors'] reality—of their presence among the living—is swathed and enshrouded in layer upon layer of cloths, bird plumage, bones of animals, the skin of a snake" (43). These costumes are "in no sense portraits, but rather generic symbols of the unnamed incarnate dead" (Cole 35). They gesture at who the ancestors were, instead of trying to recreate their physical appearance.

One of the most important aspects of Egungun masquerades is that the performers transform completely into their ancestors, which they accomplish in part through their change in physicality and vocal quality. In the mask, "all traces of individuality and of time fall away" (Pemberton 46). The performers should succumb completely to the

new person they are embodying. They are even expected to disguise their voices, so no trace of themselves could be found to ruin the illusion (Strong). The vocal quality of performance is of high importance because the specific sound quality of each word is essential. Education Specialist Nicole Mullen explains that “Yoruba is a tonal language. Words must be pronounced in the appropriate tone (pitch) in order to understand speech in its correct meaning” (26). The music of the Yoruba is inspired by these tonal patterns as well (Mullen 26). This is important because Egungun masquerades include singing, music, and dance (Cole 36).

## Project Design

### Modern Productions of Greek, Noh, and Egungun Masks

My initial goal in researching contemporary masked productions was to understand how they use masks so that I could borrow from their practices. However, I found there are not many contemporary examples of mask work and even less explanation as to how theatre companies structure their mask rehearsals. Instead, I gained an understanding of different philosophies about how to use masks that I could apply to my own process.



Photo credit: Melissa Carter

For Greek theatre, I turned to Peter Hall and his production of Aeschylus’ trilogy, *The Oresteia*, because it was performed in the Greek amphitheatre at Epidaurus as well as in the National Theatre in London and because both performances were filmed. Contemporary critics have offered mixed views of productions that endorse the classical masked traditions of Greek theatre. Arts critic Michael Billington explained in his review of Hall’s 2002 *Bacchae* that he was “impressed rather than moved” because it seemed as if “Hall’s production sacrifices raw power to formal purity.” Similarly, reviewer Charles Spencer noted that “Hall remains wedded (perhaps that should be welded) to the convention of the mask in Greek tragedy. . . . But the masks hold the audience at a distance, turning a story as

urgently topical as a newspaper headline into remote ritual.” These concerns perhaps explain Chris Vervain’s reference to Hall’s 1981 *The Oresteia* in recounting his own approach to staging *The Bacchae* in 2010. Vervain acknowledged “that a consideration of the ancient theatre, or rather what we understand of it, can inform our practice today” but had “no intention of reconstructing ancient performance practices” (“The Masked Chorus”). For Vervain, it was more important to lean into the principles of mask work to emphasize “the physical aspects of performance” as well as the text (“The Masked Chorus”).

### *Adjusting ancient forms for modern audiences allows for a greater cultural exchange as opposed to creating alienation.*

When looking for examples of contemporary Noh theatre, I discovered a San Francisco-based theatre company called Theatre of Yugen dedicated to creating theatrical experiences inspired by Japanese theatrical styles. Like Vervain, Theatre of Yugen believes in “the evolution of live performance” and that “artistic hybridity. . . stimulates intercultural understanding” (“Our History”). In other words, adjusting ancient forms for modern audiences allows for a greater cultural exchange as opposed to creating alienation. One of Theatre of Yugen’s Noh-inspired productions was called *Emmett Till, A River*, based on the story of a young African American boy killed in a hate crime. According to reviewer Ken Bullock, by “concentrating on the stillness of the stage, the voices of actors and chorus, the sounds of musical instruments, the company recreates the poetic echo chamber of a Noh play.” For Bullock, the form bolsters the story and vice versa, creating an experience that both communicates a tragic story and introduces the audience to the Noh form.

When it came to Egungun masquerades, I was curious to see how much the ritual had changed over time and whether there were instances of Yoruba performers practicing their craft outside of the religious ceremony. Professor of Costume Design Deborah Bell has written several times about a man named Ojetunji Ojeyemi, who performed at the 2005 International Mask Conference at Southern Illinois University Carbondale (Bell, *Mask Makers* 20). While this was only one instance I could find of the Egungun in such a setting, I did find an article that discussed the changes occurring in modern Yoruba society in relation to the masquerades. A large change has been that religious items used to decorate the mask costume have been replaced in favor of more aesthetically pleasing design elements (Aremu et al. 285). It is unclear whether

this progression away from the tradition has been seen as positive or negative. Ultimately, I decided that the most important element of Egungun masquerades is to maintain the community it fosters in my mask work, and therefore, I could avoid the religious aspect.

## My Production

The first challenge I faced in creating a masked performance was choosing a text that would work for all three mask traditions. I chose the work of playwright Charles Mee because he encourages people to “pillage” the structure and content of his poetic plays in order to build “your own, entirely new piece” (Mee). Essentially, I could freely modify or adjust Mee’s texts to fit my mask work. Furthermore, Mee borrows the content for his plays from other writers, so “his plays are collage-like blends of theatrical styles and genres encompassing tragedy, romance, and farce, and incorporating music, dance, and video” (“Getting to Know Mee”). Reading through Mee’s catalogue, I discovered that the blend of styles in combination with song and dance in Mee’s 1996 *Life is a Dream* was perfect for my project. I was able to separate the text out into four sections that played to the strengths of each of the mask traditions. The Greek section spoke of horrific tragedies with some verse. The Noh section contained more reflective stories, where the actors could luxuriate in the subtlety of the words and movement. The Egungun section was filled with cautionary tales that could be told in a very active, dance-like manner. The last section, where I truly experimented with how masks could function using contemporary theatrical acting conventions, was simply a list of words we could experiment with as we saw fit.

I originally planned on only using one actress for the performance. I thought this would be ideal because then I could work intensively on each mask form, and rehearsals could be collaboration between the two of us. My research made clear that I needed more performers to establish a sense of community and to create masked theatre’s “collective gaze of the chorus,” which “directs the audience and tells them where to look” (Vervain and Wiles 262). The power of a group of masks to focus attention for the audience was too much of a dramatic convention to ignore. I also wanted to play with music underscoring text, which inherently required more people.

I was adamant that all three of my performers should be women, as women were banned in all three mask traditions that I studied. In the past, some Yoruba have gone so far as to put women to death for touching the Egungun, since women were thought to have “secret and destructive power which expresses itself in witchcraft” (Bell, “Mask Makers in Nigeria” 42). The ban against female performers seemed

to stem from cultural bias rather than an actual inability for the women to perform, so I did not feel I was going against the masks by casting women. Moreover, *Life is a Dream* deals largely with the experience of women. The performance quickly became about the experience of women as the world’s empathizers.



Photo credit: Alexi Siegel

*Learning how to move with a mask is difficult, but it is even more challenging while simultaneously learning how to speak poetic texts in rhythm.*

My rehearsal process was a month-long intensive. The first week was dedicated to bookwork and text analysis, the second to playing with the masks themselves, the third to solidifying and memorizing the text, and the fourth to combining text and mask work to create the piece itself. I decided to split up the text and mask work in the initial phase of rehearsals because of Peter Hall’s advice. In her preview of Hall’s 1996 *The Oedipus Plays*, Georgina Brown summarizes Hall’s views: “You can’t, however, short-circuit the time needed for the mask to grow up [and] therefore mask work and text work have to be done independently until a point is reached when the actors know the form and the rhythm.” Learning how to move with a mask is difficult, but it is even more challenging while simultaneously learning how to speak poetic texts in rhythm. I found it necessary to divide the work until the actresses were comfortable enough with both skills. Determining how to teach my actresses to use masks presented another challenge, as I have never been formally trained in mask work. To formulate exercises I felt would build the skills necessary for each mask tradition, I pulled from a combination of sources (namely Sears Eldredge’s *Mask Improvisation for Actor Training and Performance*), the training style of the Neutral Mask formalized by Jacques Lecoq, and my experiences with neutral masks during a play I directed in fall 2016.

During Greek rehearsals, I focused on how to act with outward expression, move as a cohesive choral body, sculpt the body in space, and speak in specific rhythmic patterns. The women spoke these parts in unison as a chorus. During Noh rehearsals, my object was to explore how to move with economy and stillness while still maintaining an active inner life. We played with the overlap of voices in this section as well as a more measured pace. For Egungun masquerades rehearsals, I emphasized the use of fabric in movement and in song and dance. Each woman would tell a story and the other two would sing. With the modern section rehearsals, I allowed my actresses to experiment with more pedestrian movements and to discover how the mask could influence those as well. The last week was probably the most exciting because it was when we combined both text and movement and worked on creating the framing for the final product. To that point, the actresses had worked in isolation, which meant that they could not interact as they were exploring in masks. During the final week, they were able to work off one another, and I encouraged them to experiment and play with how the masks and text interacted, as well as to discover how they might interact and inform one another. Their work improved exponentially, and—because I was building our performance masks alongside rehearsals—we were able to adjust the masks each day based on what was working best with our temporary rehearsal masks.



Photo credit: Alexi Siegel

I was excited but also terrified about creating my own masks for the piece. Since masks were at the heart of the whole project, I felt it important that my masks be very specific to our performance. However, I had no idea how to make them and have limited visual art experience. I found a material called plaster cloth, similar to the linen and glue method of the Greeks, which allowed us to mold the masks to the shape of the actresses' faces. Keeping in mind that Greek and Noh masks always had wig pieces attached to them and that fabric was an essential part of Egungun masquerades, I decided that each mask would have a fabric veil attached to its forehead, so it could serve multiple functions. We also determined in rehearsal that leaving the mouth open and cutting out the chin would allow for the

best sound quality and ease of speaking for the performers.

Another challenge came in deciding what to paint on the masks, and I enlisted my friend Melissa Carter. In our first attempt, I wanted to experiment with color and texture. Each woman in my cast had made a collage of images that she felt represented her character, which we used to inspire our mask designs. We soon discovered that these masks were too busy visually, and we were losing the facial structure of the mask itself. In our second attempt, I decided to lean into the simple subtlety of Greek and Noh masks. We painted the masks with a light grey background and then dry-brushed them with pink, red, white, and copper paint in order to enhance their features. We still wanted the masks to have a bit of individuality, so we emphasized the colors differently on each mask. The women wore simple leotards and tights so they could move without restriction, and we painted their bodies with grey streaks to tie their lower halves into the masks.

*The ritual of putting on a mask is extremely tender and transformative and is one of the most magical moments of mask work.*

The performance itself was held in James Madison University's Wayland Hall performance space on March 19, 2017. I gave an introductory speech on the scope and purpose of the project, and then my actresses took the stage to perform *Life is a Dream*. They entered carrying their masks, briefly studied them, and then put them on in front of the audience. The ritual of putting on a mask is extremely tender and transformative and is one of the most magical moments of mask work. There is a sense that you are discovering the world for the first time as a completely different being when you begin to look around in the mask. I was privy to this discovery multiple times in rehearsal, and I wanted the audience to see the transformation. I also wanted to give the audience a chance to slowly enter the world of mask work with us and get adjusted to the masked face. Then the Noh-inspired section began, followed by Greek, then Egungun, and then finally the more modern approach. After the performance, I led a talkback with the audience to get feedback and to start a discussion about the role of masks in modern theatre.

## Response and Reflections

In this section, I discuss the responses I received from my audience and my performers before reflecting on the process as a whole. For reference, I have included the



specific questions I asked my audience and performers.

## Audience Response

1. What moved you, what struck you, what moments do you remember?
2. How did the mask work illuminate the text? When was it moving? When was it distracting?
3. What elements did you see of contemporary theatre in this performance? What elements could you see being used in contemporary theatre?

The audience was most excited by the transformation of the performers' bodies. The first few minutes of the performance were the most difficult for the audience members because they were still adjusting to the masks. However, the masks soon melted into the performers' bodies and were no longer distracting. The audience had a similar reaction to the fabric veils. Once the audience saw the performers interact with the veils a few times, the veils became an extension of their bodies. Furthermore, the audience was moved by the sense of unity between the three performers. The audience felt that the three performers worked together so well that they appeared to become one character, so it seemed like they would have been able to switch places at any time and still continue the story. Indeed, my audience noted that the performers' were clearly in tune with one another's bodies, and they spoke and moved as if they were one body. Building an ensemble is an important part of theatre today, and my audience noted that the masks appeared to be critical in bonding the performers, so that they were able to react honestly to one another. Respondents also said that the performers' physicality was highly detailed. They used every inch of their bodies to communicate throughout the entire performance. Another observation was that the mask work seemed to awaken the performers' sensibilities; they appeared more physically live and present even after they took off their masks.

## Performer Response

1. How did this experience compare to other roles you have prepared for?
2. How did your relationship to the text change while working with the mask?
3. How did the mask impact your connection to one another as performers?
4. How did the mask awaken your body as a communication tool? What was the experience like not being able to rely on your face as a communication tool?
5. Which exercises did you find most helpful?
6. Which exercises were you confused by? Which exercises needed additional instructional support to them?
7. Did you feel like you had a strong understanding of the purpose of the project as a whole?

The performers found that their bodies reacted strongly to the masks. They felt a need to push beyond the masks that covered their faces, to bring all expression and meaning into their delivery of words and body movement. This forced them to find more meaning and connection to the text itself and unlocked their bodies to move in new ways that could teach them more about the text and themselves. Moreover, the masks separated the performers from their characters. They reported that having their faces covered detached them from the situation, making it easier to step into someone else's shoes. Put differently, their masks took them away from who they were as humans or who they "should be," freeing them to explore whatever they felt. My performers endorsed masks as an amazing rehearsal tool, a bridge between exploration and performance of a text.

Working together was clearly their favorite part of the process. Getting to see another person in a mask created a world where any movement was acceptable, which allowed them to physically open up. Equally importantly, they said that the masks joined them together to almost create one body, one woman, telling a story. It became less about the individual and more about the story and how they could use each other to convey it.



Photo credit: Alexi Siegel

## My Response

I still have much to learn when it comes to masks, but this was a step in the right direction. Not only did I get to explore three different styles of acting with masks at once, but I also experimented briefly with how masks might be used in tandem with contemporary acting styles. I loved testing my way through mask work with my performers, and by the last week of rehearsals, I had gained a much deeper understanding of the strengths and weakness of the masks. For example, we learned quickly that tilting the chin too far up or down breaks the illusion of the mask. I could never have found such an apparently simple insight like this in any textbook or article about masks. We had to uncover it ourselves by actively working with masks. Our rehearsals were full of this trial and error. I could lead my actresses through multiple activities I had prepared, and then we could discuss at the end of that rehearsal what the

mask helped them learn and what was confusing. From then on, I was able to adjust our rehearsal plans.

In performance, the Noh-inspired section felt truly unsuccessful, as we could not achieve the necessary clarity of movement and tension in the body. When each movement is so small and slow, it must be perfectly defined; if it is not, the meaning becomes muddled. I think that we did not have the time to train and practice moving economically while also keeping tension in the body. Despite our inability to master Noh's subtle techniques on a tight schedule, I believe Noh mask work can be as successful as the other two forms for a contemporary audience.



Photo credit: Alexi Siegel

*This moment and its one simple gesture encapsulates the reason I love masks and believe in their power.*

During the Greek, Egungun, and contemporary sections, the women were completely transformed. They developed a strong relationship with one another, their bodies, and the text, and therefore communicated a breathtaking story. My favorite moment of the performance was when the women said their last three lines: "The sunlight you see in water as you pour it from a pitcher into a bowl. / The earth itself. / Dirt." They pulled their veils up and over their masks and let them cascade down in front of them. The fabric was long enough that it covered a large portion of their bodies. This moment and its one simple gesture encapsulates the reason why I love masks and believe in their power. It is the moment when the performance stops being about the masks themselves and becomes about the whole body being able to express something in complete unity. The body itself becomes a mask, capable of revealing so much expression if individuality and ego gets put aside.

## Conclusions

I began this project hoping to answer two questions. First, what is the role of masks in theatre today? Second, how can

a director use ancient mask traditions to inspire new work? I discovered three major benefits to using mask work, along with a general guideline for directors.

1. Masks help to build strong ensembles by removing the ego of the individual performer.
2. Masks unlock the full expressive range of the human body.
3. Masks allow the performers and the audience to experience a more universal expression of humanity onstage.
4. Contemporary masked theatre should not attempt to replicate past masking traditions but rather should allow the form and the masks to evolve along with the humans who use them.

The human body is capable of unbelievable expression. Masks facilitate this expression by removing the ego of performers, helping them to both become present in their bodies and to transform into a completely different type of being. Moving forward, it is important for theatre artists to continue bringing masks out of antiquity. However, adhering too strictly to the ways artists used masks in the past would be a detriment to modern theatre and to masks themselves. Masks are an unbelievably powerful tool for contemporary theatrical practice and contemporary theatre artists. They strip us down to the raw expression of the human body. In this state, we can communicate truths not just specific to the performer or character but to the human experience itself.



Photo credit: Melissa Carter

## Author's Note



Alexi Siegel graduated magna cum laude in 2017 with a degree in Theatre Education. She has since returned to her home in Chicago, Illinois, to work at Steppenwolf Theatre Company in their Apprenticeship program as a Scenic Carpenter. She hopes to learn as much as she can about professional theatre before returning to the classroom to pass that knowledge on to her students. Ms. Siegel believes that theatre is the greatest tool for teaching empathy, and that empathy is the greatest tool in the world.

“Masks: A New Face for the Theatre” builds on a Creative Honors Capstone project that Ms. Siegel presented to the faculty of James Madison University’s School of Theatre and Dance in May 2017. Ms. Siegel is grateful to Dr. Ingrid De Sanctis for her brilliant and loving guidance throughout the process and to Professors Ben Lambert and Zachary Dorsey for their support as readers. Melissa Carter—friend, photographer, painter of masks—also deserves thanks.

A photo gallery of images taken during rehearsals, mask building, and the performance is available at <https://www.flickr.com/gp/149465887@N08/B38536>.

A video of the performance is available at <https://youtu.be/zomQ47m9e5o>.



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