

## Parkland College

---

A with Honors Projects

Honors Program

---

2012

# The Masks of Commedia Del'Arte, Noh Theater and Classical Greece: The Cultural Meanings, Influences and Similarities

Makena Bennett  
*Parkland College*

---

### Recommended Citation

Bennett, Makena, "The Masks of Commedia Del'Arte, Noh Theater and Classical Greece: The Cultural Meanings, Influences and Similarities" (2012). *A with Honors Projects*. 72.  
<http://spark.parkland.edu/ah/72>

Open access to this Article is brought to you by Parkland College's institutional repository, [SPARK: Scholarship at Parkland](#). For more information, please contact [spark@parkland.edu](mailto:spark@parkland.edu).

Makena Bennett

December 5<sup>th</sup> 2012-12

Dr. Amy Stoch

Theater 104-001

## **The Masks of Commedia Del'Arte, Noh Theater and Classical Greece: The Cultural Meanings, Influences and Similarities.**

Masks have been used for centuries by countless countries, ethnic groups and religions. The oldest mask today is over 9,000 years old and is held in Jerusalem. It is estimated that masks date back as far as 40,000 years ago thanks to literature and biblical references . One of the most places to find masks in history and still today is the stage. Almost every type of theatre has used masks at one point, in Rome for example the word persona meant mask, but it also meant to be a citizen of Rome. Masks play a huge role in cultural norms, and references and often reflect historical significance. Three types of Masks, Commedia Dell'Arte, Noh Theatre and Classical Greek, reflect not only the emotion an actor is trying to convey but also rules and expectations of society (Nunley 21-25).

Greek theater masks date back to the time of Aeschylus, 525-545 BC, who was the first of the great Greek tragedians, his plays can still be read and performed to this day. Unfortunately all evidence of Greek masks are found on vases and in paintings and carvings, as masks were made of organic materials meant to dissolve back into the earth as offerings after use (Jenkins 151-152). To the Greeks their masks were a part of nature and the God Dionysus. To the Greeks the mask was much more than just a dramatic element on stage, the Greek word for mask in

*peosopan*, meaning seem before the eyes, it was an object that would transcend the actors to a holy levels, and some even believed that masks were the closest thing to their Gods on earth (Jenkins 151). Used both in Drama and in Comedy the Greeks had many forms and styles of masks ranging from the scared damsel in distress to the evil creature. Greek masks are most easily depicted by their exaggerated emotion or gender, as only men were allowed to act it had to be obvious that the mask was female. The male actors would even go as far as wearing fake breasts. The women were often portrayed as extremely sexualized or as the weaker sex in need of savoir. Clearly this is due to the fact that at this time in Greece women were not as highly regarded as men, so much though that they could not even play themselves. Masks brought humor and light to the stage while at the same time holding a spiritual and sacred place in the hearts of the ancient Greeks (Jenkins 152-155).

Greek masks first started out as masks that covered the whole head front to back and often parts of the body. They quickly started to take form into what it recognized as an everyday mask. Masks were often made of leather, clay and other organic materials, with very small eye and mouth holes, thus making the actor even more entwined with the mask. The less the face of the actor was seen the better. Ears were always left out though, often covered with hair, so that the actors could hear everything, with the masks often having limited visibility it was the one sense they had to rely on.

gender for the actors. theatre and women were reached puberty

influential that many



Figure 1 A typical sprite character of mischief seen in ancient Greek theatre. (AGiLETEQ)

Masks also had the job of creating Men were the only actors in Greek played by boys who had not yet (Jenkins 153-56). Masks were so

Greeks believed that the mask made

the actor and not the actor the mask (McDonald and Walton 97).

Commedia Dell'arte a form of theatre based on their masks started in Italy in the 16<sup>th</sup> century ( Emich et al., 238). This is the type of theatre that not only started the art of improvisations, as all the acting was based entirely on improvisation, but accepted actresses to perform on stage with men. Masks were arguably the most key element of commedia Dell'arte as many actors only had one or two masks that they would use over and over as that was the character or characters they felt they connected with most. To the actors who practiced this art form their masks were their persona, and their appearance as an actor, on stage the mask was them (Emigh et al., 239).

The masks strongly depicted people with exaggerated figures, particularly the nose. The masks usually depicted common social types such as the elderly and men who are filled with a false sense of bravado. Satiric characters started to develop out of the common social types used such as Pantalone with the Venetian merchant who is always miserable (McDonald and Walton 147). Commedia Dell'arte was always performed by professionals, amateurs were not allowed under no circumstances, it was a highly regarded art form. The performances were held outside on simple wooden stages with costumes ranging from drab to fantastical. It all depended on the character. Character often would differ slightly from town to town, often masks were modeled after people passing through, important people of the time, or just somebody that was found interesting that could be acted, there was no limit in characters in Commedia Dell'arte, the actor could choose to be whoever they wanted, and they became that person, in Commedia Dell'arte one must never separate the actor



Figure 2 A Commedia dell'Arte mask depicting an elderly man. (Venetian Artiquity Art 101 Marketing)

from the mask (Emigh et al 241-43).

Noh, also known as Nogaku, is a musical theatre from Japan in which the actors are commonly found in masks. Men play both male and female roles in Noh, as well as singing male and female parts. The plays are mostly humorous and are often composed of smaller plays in one. The plays and performances are based on old-fashioned values and the performances always based on the original plays, new plays are very seldom written, and when they are, are often frowned upon by the Noh community. Noh first started to emerge in the 1300's, and with it the famous masks recognizable around the world (Udaka 146-148).

Masks play a very sacred part in Noh theatre. The rarest masks in Japan are kept in prestigious Noh schools and seldom seen. Noh masks have always been made the same way, first the mask is carved out of a Japanese cypress tree and sanded, after that it is covered in glue-like substance and crushed white seashells to give it a smooth and neutral base. The paint can only be made of the finest organic materials, red, black and white are the most prominent colors used in Noh, with almost every outline being in black. If the mask is not perfect it will not be used (Irvine 145). In the productions only a select few wear masks, the lead of the Shite, always wears a mask regardless of the character he is portraying. Since only male actors are allowed to perform Noh theatre, female masks are the most common and well-known type of Japanese mask. Often the masks are carved so expertly that the slightest tip of the head can change the expression on the mask, such as a geisha from sad and looking down to looking up and happy (Udaka 68). Beyond women, the most common masks are demonic creatures and animals, which show emotion through body movement and sound (Irvine 142).

One of the main goals of the masks of Noh is to create a character that is not a man, besides the Shite, everyone else playing a man appears with their human face. Since the masks are so sacred it is believed that they possess the spirit of the creature of women the actor is trying to portray, it is an honor to perform in a Noh mask, as when you are in it you are no longer a man, but the creature you wear on your face (Irvine 142-43).

Masks play a huge role in theatre today, and society, theatre had never been without masks,

as

All

lesson

never

actor



Figure 3 A female Noh mask with three expressions depending on the angle of the actor's face. (Wmpearl)

examined by the above examples.

three art styles have one very key

about masks, which is a mask is

simply an ornamental item that an

can just rely on. A mask must be

understood, and the actor must be

one with his mask as much as he is one with the play. To some they are sacred, and to others

they transform people into extraordinary creatures and people, even genders, you will never be.

A mask is a statement and metaphor, as much as it is a persona. In every type of theatre that

involves a mask the actor knows, it is never enough to wear the mask, first you must become it.

#### Works Cited

McDonald and Walton, Micheal. *Greek and Roman Theatre*. New York: Cambridge University

Print, 2007. Print.

Baranski, Mathew. *Mask Making*. Worchester: Davis Publications, 1969. Print.

Emigh et al. ``Theater.`` *Masks: Faces of Our Culture*. 1<sup>st</sup> Ed. McCartney and Nunley. New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc, 1999. 178-250. Print.

Vollman, William T. *Kissing The Mask*. New York: Harper Collins, 2010. Print.

Jenkins, Ian. ``Face Value: The Mask in Greece and Rome``. *Masks and the Art of Expression*. 1<sup>st</sup> Edition. Mack, John. New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc, 1994. 150-168. Print.

Irvine, Robert. ``Japanese Masks: Ritual and Drama``. *Masks and the Art of Expression*. 1<sup>st</sup> Edition. Mack, John. New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc, 1994. 130-150. Print.

Udaka, Michishige. *The Secrets of Noh Masks*. Tokyo: Kodansha International Ltd., 2010. Print.

Nunley, John W. ``Prehistory and Origins.`` *Masks: Faces of Our Culture*. 1<sup>st</sup> Ed. McCartney and Nunley. New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc, 1999. 21-24. Print.

<http://www.bing.com/images/search?q=greek+masks&view=detail&id=76BFCA2C9AA1CA74D5D22BF94060ABBCFB53707E>

<http://www.venetianartiquity.com/store/pid-63/Pantalone-Commedia-dell-Arte-handmade-venetian-masquerade-mask.html>

<http://www.venetianartiquity.com/store/pid-63/Pantalone-Commedia-dell-Arte-handmade-venetian-masquerade-mask.html>

