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**ROSE FURLONGER**

**MASKS AND METAMORPHOSIS**

**M. A. DEGREE**

**1998**

# **MASKS AND METAMORPHOSIS**

**ROSE FURLONGER**

## **ABSTRACT**

The purpose of this study is to consider the uses of the mask in ritual and theatre, and in particular the reputed influence of the mask over the wearer, and the experiences of 'trance' and 'possession' reported by anthropologists and mask practitioners and performers. The study also examines the role of the maker in creating a powerful tool for ritual and performance, and the comparatively rare phenomenon of the mask-maker who creates a mask which he or she will subsequently wear and the potential paradox of the maker 'possessed' by the object he has made.

The first chapter focuses on the mask in its practical and ritualistic contexts in many cultures, and the second considers the concept of mask and transformation in ritual and theatre. The third describes a number of approaches to the use of mask in contemporary drama, in both the creation and performance of theatre.

Chapter Four further investigates the effects of the mask on wearer and audience, and attempts to account for some of the experiences described by wearers. The fifth chapter examines the role of the mask maker in ritual and theatre, the relationship between mask and maker, and the maker as wearer.

The sixth chapter centres on children as makers and wearers of masks, and focuses on primary school mask making and performance projects. The final chapter explores the relationship of the mask and the self, the assumed and the actual identities of the masquerader.

Appendices I-XIV describe the experiences of mask makers and wearers in a variety of contexts, and provide additional evidence of the unusual sensations experienced by wearers.

The thesis aims to investigate some of the causes of these phenomena and to consider strategies adopted by practitioners, directors and dramatherapists for utilising these heightened experiences to positive effect in performance.

# Masks and Metamorphosis

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M.A. : Degree  
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1998

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# CONTENTS

## Introduction

### Chapter 1 Masks and Faces

A	Mankind's Need for Masks, Physical and Psychological	1
1.	Masks in Everyday Life	2
2.	Material Definition	4
B.	Functions of Masks	7
1.	Concealment	8
2.	Practical Protection	10
3.	Social Control	11
4.	Punishment	11
5.	Spiritual Protection	12
6.	Healing	13
7.	Fertility: hunting and agriculture	13
8.	Initiation	14
9.	Death, Burial and Perpetuation	15
10.	Warfare	16
11.	Satire	17
12.	Witchcraft	17
13.	Disclosure	18
14.	Metamorphosis	18
15.	The Power of the Mask	19
C.	Contemporary Applications of Mask Tradition	19
D.	Reactions to Masks	20
E.	Masks in Museums and Galleries	21
F.	Conclusion	22

### Chapter 2 Mask and the Concept of Transformation 24

A	Representation and Belief: the Use of Mask in Ritual	24
1.	Representation and Presence	24
2.	The Habitation of the Spirit: Wearer or Mask?	26
3.	Motivation for Transformation	31
4.	Physical Transformation: Rites of Passage	33
5.	Spontaneity, Preparation and Secrecy	34
6.	Belief and Acceptance	35
7.	The Power of Masks of Other Cultures Over the Uninitiated Spectator	36
8.	Conclusion	37
B.	Mask and the Trance State	38
C.	Masks and Transformation in the Theatre	39
1.	Parallels with Ritual	39
2.	Surrender to the Mask	40
3.	Transformation in the Mask	43
4.	The Contemporary Wearer, Mask and Trance	44
5.	Transformation and the Audience	45
6.	Conclusion	45



<b>Chapter 3</b>	<b>Approaches to Masked Performance</b>	<b>47</b>
	A. Rationale for Masked performance	47
	1. Reasons for Using Mask	47
	2. Categories of Masked Performance	50
	(i) Masks as Spectacle	50
	(ii) Masks in Naturalistic Performance	51
	3. Masks and the Creation of Dramatic Performance	52
	4. Mask Techniques	55
	(i) Introductory Exercises	55
	(ii) Early Mask Work	55
	(iii) Exercises of the Neutral Mask	56
	(iv) Using Character Masks	58
	5. Conventions of Mask Work	60
	(i) Orientation to the Audience	60
	(ii) The Mask and Movement	62
	(iii) Masks and Hands	63
	(iv) The Face Beneath the Mask	63
	(v) The Use of Mirrors	65
	(vi) Sounds or Silence	66
	(vii) The Character and the Actor	71
	B. Creation of Belief	72
	C. Conclusion	73
<b>Chapter 4</b>	<b>The Effects of Mask on Wearer and Audience</b>	<b>75</b>
	A Effects on the User	75
	1. General	75
	2. Inhabiting or Wearing a Mask	77
	3. Actors' Responses: Resistance or Release	79
	4. Masks and Licence	80
	5. Concealment and Revelation	82
	6. The Experience of Transformation or Possession	83
	7. Physical Constraints and their Implications	85
	8. The Removal of the Mask	87
	B. Effects on the Audience	89
	1. Illusion	89
	2. Creation of Atmosphere	91
	3. Visual Spectacle	92
	4. Creation of Belief	92
	5. Emotional Responses	93
	C. Conclusion	96
<b>Chapter 5 Part 1</b>	<b>Makers and Wearers</b>	<b>98</b>
	General Introduction	98
	I. Ritual masks	99
	A. Anthropological Background	99
	1. Craftsmen and their Status	99
	(i) Specialist Mask-makers	99
	(ii) General Craftsmen	100

# MASKS AND METAMORPHOSIS

## LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

### CHAPTER ONE: MASKS AND FACES

Fig. No.	Title	Source	Page
1.	Jim Carrey, 'The Mask'	Guardian, 10.6.96	3
2.	Celebrity in sunglasses	Guardian, 9 May 1998	3
3.	Balaclava helmet	Photograph, R Furlonger	4
4.	Iroquois cornhusk mask	Internet: <a href="http://www.maineantiquedigest.com/other/hotnewsi/htm">http://www.maineantiquedigest.com/other/hotnewsi/htm</a>	4
5.	Baluba carved wooden chieftain's mask	Willett, F., plate 148	4
6.	Palmleaf mask, Cuba	Photograph, R. Furlonger	4
7.	Headtop mask, Ekoi, Nigeria	Teuten, T., p 13	4
8.	Shield mask, Nigeria	Photograph, R. Furlonger	4
9.	Bronze miniature masks, Benin	Price, C., p 40	Pl. 1
10.	Polychrome wood carnival mask, Mexico	Lechuga, R, & Sayer, C., fig 12	Pl. 1
11.	Leather theatrical mask	The Times, undated 1998	Pl. 1
12.	Ivory pendant mask, Benin	Sorell, W., fig 1	Pl. 1
13.	Trestle skyscraper mask	Company newsheet	Pl. 1
14.	North India drama masks	Exhibition, Gordon Reece Gallery Photograph, R. Furlonger	Pl. 1
15.	Gelede dance, Nigeria	Price, C, p 2	5
16.	Hide Kachina mask, Zuni c. 1890	Feest., C., plate 3	7
<b>Concealment</b>			
17.	The Pirates of Penzance, poster, 1879	Theatre Museum collection	Pl. 2
18.	Phantom of the Opera	The Times, undated cutting 1998	Pl. 2
19.	Ku Klux Klan	Guardian Weekend 11 July 1998	Pl. 2
20.	Islamic veil	The Times, 4.10.96	Pl. 2
21.	Princess Diana	Guardian, 10.6.96	Pl. 3
22.	Michael Jackson	Guardian, 10.6.96	Pl. 3
23.	Clive Sinclair	Observer Review, 15.12.96	Pl. 3
24.	Armed robber in half mask	Guardian, undated cutting	Pl. 4
25.	Student in stocking mask	Photograph, R Furlonger	Pl. 4
26.	Masked policemen in Sicily arresting Mafia leader Giovanni Brusca	Guardian 10.6.96	Pl. 4
27.	Alexander Peden	Masquerade, fig. 144	Pl. 5
28.	Protest demonstration 'The Scream'	The Times 28.1.97	Pl. 5
29.	'The Scream' mask 2	The Guardian; undated cutting 1996	Pl. 5
30.	Mexican demonstration	National Geographic magazine Vol 190 no 2 August 1996	Pl. 6
31.	Pakistan demonstration	Guardian, undated cutting 1998	Pl. 6
32.	Batman and Robin, 1938	Masquerade, fig. 146	Pl. 7
33.	Batman 1990s: closeup	Guardian 6.12.97	Pl. 7
34.	Batman 1990s: costume	The Times Magazine 29.3.97	Pl. 7
35.	Spiderman	Masquerade, fig. 142	Pl. 7
36.	Zorro	Masquerade, fig. 147	Pl. 7
<b>Practical Protection</b>			
37.	Paul Gascoigne	Guardian 10.6.96	Pl. 8

38.	Cricketer	Guardian, The Editor Supp. 9.5.98	Pl. 8
39.	Miner's mask	Masquerade, fig. 88	Pl. 8
40.	Ice hockey goalkeeper's mask	Masquerade, fig. 100	Pl. 8
41.	World War I tank crew splinter guard	Masquerade, fig. 117	Pl. 8
42.	Gasmask	Masquerade, fig. 139	Pl. 8
43.	Astronaut	National Geographic magazine Vol 190 no 2 August 1996	Pl. 9
44.	Swimming mask	The Times, undated cutting	Pl. 9
45.	Tiger boatmen	Observer 16.11.97	Pl. 9

## Punishment

46.	Duk-duk law enforcers	Teuten, T., p 8	Pl. 10
47.	Prisoners in French jail 1920s	Hammerton, J., Ed Our Wonderful World, p. 1619	Pl. 10
48.	Execution	Guardian, 30. 5.98	Pl. 10
49.	Mask of Shame	Harris, S., fig. 21	Pl. 10
50.	Scold's bridle or 'brank'	Masquerade, fig. 167	Pl. 10

## Healing

51.	Sanni disease mask, Sri Lanka	Teuten, T., p 56	13
-----	-------------------------------	------------------	----

## Fertility: hunting and agriculture

52.	Hunting mural of Ostrich hunt	Willett, F., fig. 32	Pl. 11
53.	Cave of Les Trois Freres mural	Tydemann, W., fig. 1	Pl. 11
54.	Neolithic cave painting, Tassili-n'Ajjer	Gillon, W., 1979, fig. 16	Pl. 11
55.	Hunter wearing hornbill mask, Nigeria	Hahner-Herzog et al, fig 24	Pl. 11
56.	Unicorn, Westminster Morris Men	Masquerade, fig. 11	Pl. 12
57.	Notting Hill Carnival, London	Mackey, S.,(Ed), p 330	Pl. 12
58.	Austrian Devil mask	Macgowan, p 70	Pl. 12
59-60	Austrian carnival masks	Teuten, T., p 77	Pl. 12
61.	Swiss pig mask	Teuten, T., p 80	Pl. 12
62.	Swedish mask	Teuten, T., p 80	Pl. 12

## Initiation

63.	Bambara Segu circumcision mask	Willett, F., fig. 5	Pl 13
64.	Bakuba initiation mask	Willett, F., fig. 149	Pl 13
65.	Antelope circumcision mask, Guro, Ivory Coast	Price, p 130	Pl 13
66.	Masked Initiates	Hahner-Herzog et al fig 21	Pl 13

## Death

67.	PreColumbian death mask, Mexico	Sunday Times Supplement, 31.8.97	Pl. 14
68.	Egyptian funerary mask	Commonwealth Institute exhibition catalogue, fig. 1	Pl. 14
69.	Roman funerary mask	Commonwealth Institute exhibition catalogue, fig. 2	Pl. 14
70.	Aleut burial mask, North America	Feest, C., fig. 172	Pl. 14
71.	Ivory burial mask, Alaska	Feest, C., fig. 180	Pl. 14
72.	Death mask of John Keats	The Times, undated 1997	Pl. 14
73.	Tutankhamun's sarcophagus, Egypt	Observer Colour supplement 8.6.97	Pl. 15
74.	Mexican Death and Devil masks: Day of the Dead	Postcard, Guanahuato, Mexico	Pl. 15
75.	Engungun funerary mask	Willett, F., fig. 163	Pl. 15
76.	Funerary masquerade, Senufo, Ivory Coast	Hahner-Herzog et al, fig 23	Pl. 15

## Warfare

- |     |                                  |   |        |
|-----|----------------------------------|---|--------|
| 77. | English Mediaeval helmet         | Royal Armouries Museum<br>Leeds, carrier bag            | 16     |
| 78. | Mediaeval Japanese military mask | Macgowan, p 62  | Pl. 16 |
| 79. | Early Chinese military mask      | The Times, 9.9.96                                       | Pl. 16 |
| 80. | Roman battle mask, c 2 B.C.      | The Times, 31.10.96                                     | Pl. 16 |
| 81. | Japanese helmet mask, 19c        | Commonwealth Institute<br>Exhibition catalogue, fig. 15 | Pl. 16 |
| 82. | Liverpool hitman                 | Observer Review 8.9.96                                  | Pl. 17 |
| 83. | Firebomber, Korea, surgical mask | Guardian, 10.6.96                                       | Pl. 17 |
| 84. | Balaclava gunman, Belfast        | Guardian, 10.6.96                                       | Pl. 17 |
| 85. | Firebomber with scarf            | Guardian, 28.9.96                                       | Pl. 17 |

## Satire

- |     |   |  |        |
|-----|---|--|--------|
| 86. | Tony Blair in jokeshop                    | Photograph, R Furlonger                                  | 17     |
| 87. | Bread and Puppet Theatre project, Jarrow  | Photograph, R Furlonger                                  | Pl. 18 |
| 88. | Bread and Puppet Theatre project, Jarrow  | Photograph, R Furlonger                                  | Pl. 18 |
| 89. | Mexican vendor with Salinas portrait mask | National Geographic Magazine<br>Vol 190 no 2 August 1996 | Pl. 18 |

## Witchcraft

- |     |                         |                       |        |
|-----|-------------------------|-----------------------|--------|
| 90. | Gelede mask and costume | Willett, F., fig. 38  | Pl. 19 |
| 91. | Senufo firespitter      | Willett, F., fig. 139 | Pl. 19 |

## Power of the Mask

- |     |                        |                            |    |
|-----|------------------------|----------------------------|----|
| 92. | Dogon great mask, Mali | Hahner-Herzog et al, fig 8 | 19 |
|-----|------------------------|----------------------------|----|

## Contemp Applications

- |      |                          |  |        |
|------|--------------------------|--|--------|
| 93.  | Party masks in joke shop | Photograph, R. Furlonger                                       | Pl. 20 |
| 94.  | Horror masks             | Newspaper cutting; undated<br>1996                             | Pl. 20 |
| 95.  | Wrestler                 | The Guide, Guardian 28.3.98                                    | Pl. 20 |
| 96.  | S. and M. stocking mask  | Poster, Photographic Exhibition,<br>Sunderland University 1996 | Pl. 20 |
| 97.  | Leigh Bowery             | Guardian Weekend, 1.8.98                                       | Pl. 20 |
| 98.  | Leigh Bowery             | Guardian Weekend, 1.8.98                                       | Pl. 20 |
| 99.  | Hat or mask?             | The Times, June 1998   | Pl. 21 |
| 100. | Beaded fashion mask      | Sunday Times, 11 February 1998                                 | Pl. 21 |
| 101. | Feathered fashion mask   | Sunday Times, 11 February 1998                                 | Pl. 21 |

## Reactions

- |      |  |  |        |
|------|--|--|--------|
| 102. | Monkey robber mask                     | Newcastle Evening Chronicle,<br>19.11.96 | Pl. 22 |
| 103. | Student performance - audience contact | Photograph, R Furlonger                  | Pl. 22 |

## Masks in museums and galleries

- |      |  |                          |        |
|------|--|--------------------------|--------|
| 104. | Large Central African mask<br>in glass case, Brussels                        | Photograph, R. Furlonger | Pl. 23 |
| 105. | Songe mask, Zaire, in crowded display<br>Gordon Reece Gallery, Knaresborough | Photograph, R. Furlonger | Pl. 23 |

## Chapter 2

### MASKS AND THE CONCEPT OF TRANSFORMATION

#### The Habitation of the Spirit: Wearer or Mask?

106.	Dogon masked ritual dance	Gillon, W., 1979, fig. 29	27
107.	'Dangerous' masks of the Troh Society	Hahner Herzog et al p. 64	28
108.	Balinese Barong performer	Slattum, J., p 99	30
109.	Hopi Rain Dance	Lands and Peoples, Vol 1 p 299	31
110.	Raven Transformation mask, Kwakiutl	Teuten, T., p. 67	32

#### Physical transformation: Rites of Passage

111.	Ibo Maiden spirit mask, Nigeria	Willett, F., fig. 73	33
112.	Sande dancers	Hahner-Herzog, p. 29	34
113.	Initiate with mentor, Chokwe, Angola	Hahner-Herzog, p. 19	34
114.	Initiates after ceremony. Yaka, Congo	Hahner-Herzog, p. 78	36

#### Mask and Transformation in the Theatre

##### Surrender to the Mask

115.	John Wright	Mackey, S.,(Ed), p 79	42
------	-------------	-----------------------	----

## Chapter 3

### APPROACHES TO MASKED PERFORMANCE

116.	Benda mask: Don Quixote	Benda, W.T., p 98	48
117.	Benda mask for Greenwich Village Follies	Sorell, W., fig. 18	Pl. 24
118.	Benda mask: Golden Peacock	Benda, W.T., p 116	51
119	Camino Reale	Programme R.S.C., Newcastle season, 1997	52
120.	The Great God Brown	Smith, S.V.H., fig. 19	Pl. 24
121.	St Denis as Knie in 'L'Illusion', 1926	Rudlin 1986, fig. 25	Pl. 25
122-129	Neutral masks - St. Denis	Theatre Museum Archive file	Pl. 26
130.	Trestle Theatre Company -'Plastered'	Programme	53
131	Horse and Bamboo on tour	Company brochure 1998	54
132.	Horse and Bamboo 'tall Heads'	Production postcard	Pl. 27
133.	Little World	Company booklet	Pl. 27
134.	Lecoq	Guardian 21.3.88	Pl. 28
135.	Lecoq	The Times, 20.3.86	Pl. 28
136.	Copeau as the Magician in L'Illusion	Rudlin 1986 fig. 26	Pl. 28
137-41	Trestle workshop exercises x 5	Photographs, R. Furlonger	Pl. 29
142-5.	Neutral work x 4	Photographs, R Furlonger	Pl. 30
146-8.	Oresteia masks	Herbert, J., p. 127	61
149-50	Trestle basics	Photographs, R Furlonger	Pl. 31
151-2	Trestle Intermediate	Photographs, R Furlonger	Pl. 32
153-6	Trestle Advanced	Photographs, R Furlonger	Pl. 33
157-60	Orientation: focus and status	Photographs, R Furlonger	Pl. 34
161.	Trestle theatre company: 'Creche'	Programme	62
162.	The Use of Mirrors: Tony Robinson	The Oresteia, Channel 4, 1983	65
163.	Tony Harrison	The Oresteia Channel 4, 1983	67
164.	Oresteia Furies	Smith, S.V.H., fig. 17	68
165-8	Half masks - matching face	Photographs, R Furlonger	Pl. 35
169.	'Speaking' mask - half masks	Photograph, R Furlonger	Pl. 35
170.	'Speaking' mask - half mask	Photograph, R Furlonger	70
171.	'Speaking' masks - full masks	Photograph, R Furlonger	70
172.	Greg Hicks with mask of Orestes	The Oresteia Channel 4, 1983	72

**CHAPTER FOUR:  
EFFECTS OF MASKS ON WEARER AND AUDIENCE**

**Masks and Licence**

173.	Two bullies	Photograph, R Furlonger	81
174.	Sad mask	Photograph, R Furlonger	81

**Concealment and Revelation**

175.	Bully	Photograph, R Furlonger	82
176.	Sexual predator mask	Photograph, R Furlonger	82

**Transformation/Possession**

177.]	Ian Scott hotseating	Photographs, R Furlonger	83
178.]			

**Physical Restrictions**

179-80	Dario Fo as Arlecchino	Fo, D., The Tricks of the Trade: figs not numbered	Pl. 36
181.	Student actors in performance	Photograph, R. Furlonger	86
182-7.	Ensemble performance piece x 5	Photographs, R Furlonger	Pl. 37

**Masks and audience**

Trestle:

188.	A Slight Hitch	Production postcard	Pl. 38
189.	Hanging Around	Programme	Pl. 38
190.	Top Storey	Programme	Pl. 38
191.	Ties That Bind	Programme	Pl. 38
192.	Window Dressing	Programme	91

**Creation of Atmosphere**

193.	Benda: bird of prey mask	Benda, W.T., p. 93	91
194.	Benda: mosquito mask	Benda, W.T., p. 116	91
195.	Benda: 'Golden Beauty' mask	Benda, W.T., p. 70	92

**Creation of Belief**

196.	Trestle 'baby'	Trestle booklet - cover	92
197.	Sad mask	Photograph, R Furlonger	93

**Emotional responses**

198.	Approaches to audience	Photograph, R Furlonger	Pl. 39
199.	Contact with child	Photograph, R Furlonger	Pl. 39
200.	Bodyscutping	Photograph, R Furlonger	Pl. 39
201.	Cast applause for audience	Photograph, R Furlonger	Pl. 39

**CHAPTER FIVE: MAKERS AND WEARERS**

**PART 1. MASK-MAKERS - RITUAL**

202.	Mexican mask-maker	Lechuga, R. & Sayer, C., fig. 89	101
203-4.	Dan Poro mask inside and out	Willett, F, fig. 174, 175	101
205.	Stages in the creation of two Dan masks		Pl. 40
206.	Sande masks; stages in carving	Massie Taylor, G., p 13	Pl. 40
207.	Completed Sande mask	Massie Taylor, G., p. 13	Pl. 40
208.	Shaman's mask, Alaska, early 20th century	Feest, C., fig. 157	102
209.	Dogon carver	Gillon, W., fig. 25	103

## Prescribed Observances

210.	Bali Tree Prayer	Slattum, J, p. 127	105
211.	Bali priest invocation	Slattum, J, p. 126	105
212.	Carving the mask	Slattum, J, p 127	106
213.	Decorating the mask	Slattum, J, p 126	106
214.	Mende maskmaker	Massie Taylor, G., p. 12	106
215.	Iroquois False Face	Teuten, T., p. 69	Pl 41
216.	Balinese masks in storage	Slattum, J., p 12	110
217.	Hut used to store masks	Hahner-Herzog, p. 74	Pl. 41
218.	Sacred Grove	Hahner-Herzog, p. 27	Pl. 41
219.	Masks on Benin altar	Willett, F., fig. 200	Pl. 41

## The Maker and the Power of the Mask

220.	Shaman in a trance: Norman Tait	Wyatt, G., p 111	Pl. 41
------	---------------------------------	------------------	--------

## PART 2 20thCENTURY CENTURY MAKERS

221.	Jocelyn Herbert	Herbert, J., frontispiece	Pl. 42
222-4.	Masks and puppet of Euridice	Herbert, J., p. 203	Pl. 42
225.	Mask of Orestes	Herbert, J., p. 127	Pl. 42
226.	Female chorus	Herbert, J., p. 127	Pl. 42
227.	Eagle mask from Orpheus	Herbert, J., p. 204	Pl. 42
228.	The Furies, Oresteia	Smith, S., fig 17	116
229.	Chorus of Old Men	Oresteia, Channel 4, 1983	117
230-1.	Schumann - Bread and Puppet New York x 2	Brecht, S.	118
232.	Ninian Kinnear Wilson Commedia masks	Leaflet, N. K. Wilson	Pl. 43
233.	Ninian Kinnear Wilson	Leaflet, N. K. Wilson	Pl. 43
234.	Ninian Kinnear Wilson - naturalistic masks	Leaflet, N. K. Wilson	Pl. 43
235.	Students - making moulds	Photograph, R Furlonger	121
236.	Latex mask	Photograph, R Furlonger	121

### Makers 1996 -

237.	Maquette	Photograph, R Furlonger	Pl. 44
238.	Latex whole head mask	Photograph, R Furlonger	Pl. 44
239.	Sewing a leather/ copper sheet mask	Photograph, R Furlonger	Pl. 44
240.	Painting a Janus mask	Photograph, R Furlonger	Pl. 44
241.	Decorating a Green Man mask	Photograph, R Furlonger	Pl. 44

### Makers 1997

242.	Holding up an incomplete mask	Photograph, R Furlonger	Pl 45
243.	Making clay moulds	Photograph, R Furlonger	Pl 45
244.	Large card mask	Photograph, R Furlonger	Pl 45
245.	Latex mask in mould	Photograph, R Furlonger	Pl 45
246.	Out of mould - with subject	Photograph, R Furlonger	Pl 45
247.	Applying plaster bandage to make a life mask	Photograph, R Furlonger	Pl 45

### Students - holding up masks

248.	Helen Humphreys	Photograph, R Furlonger	122
249.	Jo McNichol	Photograph, R Furlonger	122
250.	Louise Airey	Photograph, R Furlonger	122

## Carnival

251.	Venice maskshop - historical	Roiter, Fulvio, Venetian Carnival	Pl. 46
252.	20th Century Venice mask shop	Sunday Times Magazine 6.1.85	Pl 46
253.	Venetian mask	Travel brochure, U.K. Connection 1996-7	Pl. 46
254-6.	Masked revellers in Venice	Roiter, Fulvio, Venetian Carnival	Pl. 46

## New Orleans

257-8. New Orleans Mardi Gras

Newspaper, undated Pl. 47

## Mexico

259. Beautiful girl

Lechuga, R. & Sayer, C., fig. 37 Pl. 47

260. Old men

Lechuga, R. & Sayer, C., fig. 4 Pl. 47

261. 'The Twins'

Photograph, R. Furlonger Pl. 47

262. Masks displayed in Shop

Photograph, R. Furlonger Pl. 47

263-4. Day of the Dead masks

Lechuga, R. & Sayer, C., figs  
108-110 Pl. 47

## Student designer/performers

265. Louise Carr/Vicki's mask

Photograph, R. Furlonger Pl. 48

266. Sam and Bracken

Photograph, R Furlonger Pl. 48

267. Wigman dance

Photograph, R Furlonger Pl. 48

268. Clown in the hot seat

Photograph, R Furlonger Pl. 48

269. Shy mask

Photograph, R Furlonger 127

270-73. Cylinder mask x 4 pictures

Photograph, R Furlonger Pl. 49

274. 'Stone': Maria

Photograph, R Furlonger 129

275. 'Stone': Glenn and Dyanne

Photograph, R Furlonger 129

## Maker, wearer and Belief

### Bread and Puppet Jarrow:

276. Birds

Photograph, R Furlonger Pl. 50

277. Workers

Photograph, R Furlonger Pl. 50

278. Breaking up masks

Photograph, R Furlonger Pl. 50

279. Trampling masks

Photograph, R Furlonger Pl. 50

280. Giant mask

Photograph, R. Furlonger 130

## CHAPTER SIX: MASKS AND CHILDREN

### a. Masks, Children and Play

281. Hallowe'en

Sorell, W., fig. 24 133

282. Peter Rabbit mask

Mask - V. & A. Museum 134

283. Greetings card

Card, Waterstones 134

284. Party mask

Mask - V. & A. Museum 134

285. Beatrix Potter ballet

Guardian, 27.12.97 Pl. 51

286. Pluto mask, Disneyland

The Times, April 1998 Pl. 51

287. Tellytubby

Observer 30.11.97 Pl. 51

288-9. Mask-making workshop; Gateshead

Photographs, R. Furlonger Pl. 52

290. Mask-making workshop; Heddon on the Wall

Photographs, R. Furlonger Pl. 52

291. Children with cardboard dragon masks,

Oldenburg, Germany

Photograph, R. Furlonger Pl. 52

292. Masked riders

Photograph, R Furlonger 135

### b. Children, Mask-making and Performance

#### Ancient Greece

293. Tragic actors and chorus

Photograph, R Furlonger Pl. 53

294. Tragic actors and chorus

Photograph, R Furlonger Pl. 53

295. Blind child

Photograph, R Furlonger Pl. 53

296. Warmups

Photograph, R Furlonger Pl. 54

297. Decorated masks

Photograph, R Furlonger Pl. 54

298. Comic chorus

Photograph, R Furlonger Pl. 54

299. Naughty mask

Photograph, R Furlonger 137



## **Larkspur Primary School, Gateshead**

- |      |                                     |                          |     |
|------|-------------------------------------|--------------------------|-----|
| 300. | Mask for Theseus play               | Photograph, R. Furlonger | 138 |
| 301. | 'Talking' masks in the Nursery Unit | Photograph, R. Furlonger | 138 |

## **Reay Primary School**

- |      |                                  |                         |        |
|------|----------------------------------|-------------------------|--------|
| 302. | The transformed teacher          | Photograph, R Furlonger | 140    |
| 303. | Mischievous teacher              | Photograph, R Furlonger | 140    |
| 304. | 'Fretful' girl                   | Photograph, R Furlonger | 140    |
| 305. | Smiley mask with friends         | Photograph, R Furlonger | 141    |
| 306. | Mischievous boy and fretful girl | Photograph, R Furlonger | Pl. 55 |
| 307. | Cross girl                       | Photograph, R Furlonger | Pl. 55 |
| 308. | Another naughty boy              | Photograph, R Furlonger | Pl. 55 |
| 309. | Pupil 'exactly like' mask        | Photograph, R Furlonger | Pl. 55 |
| 310. | Briefing above pupil             | Photograph, R Furlonger | Pl. 55 |
| 311. | Briefing for improvisation       | Photograph, R Furlonger | 141    |
| 312. | Improvised performance           | Photograph, R Furlonger | 141    |

## **Clem's dream**

- |         |                                   |                          |        |
|---------|-----------------------------------|--------------------------|--------|
| 313-15. | Three pictures of the performance | Photographs, P Furlonger | Pl. 56 |
|---------|-----------------------------------|--------------------------|--------|

## **James and the Giant Peach**

- |         |   |                          |        |
|---------|---|--------------------------|--------|
| 316-18. | Three pictures of children making the masks | Photographs, P Furlonger | Pl. 56 |
|---------|---|--------------------------|--------|

## **Year 1**

- |      |                             |                         |        |
|------|-----------------------------|-------------------------|--------|
| 319. | Volunteers for mask work    | Photograph, R Furlonger | Pl. 57 |
| 320. | Peeping from under the mask | Photograph, R Furlonger | Pl. 57 |
| 321. | Mask on head                | Photograph, R Furlonger | Pl. 57 |
| 322. | The witch                   | Photograph, R Furlonger | Pl. 57 |

## **CHAPTER SEVEN: THE MASK AND THE SELF**

- |      |  |                          |        |
|------|--|--------------------------|--------|
| 323. | Choosing masks                         | Photograph, R Furlonger  | 152    |
| 324. | Chosen masks in performance            | Photograph, R Furlonger  | 152    |
| 325. | Smiley friendly mask                   | Photograph, R Furlonger  | 152    |
| 326. | Masks give many pupils confidence      | Photograph, R Furlonger  | 153    |
| 327. | Mask rebukes teacher                   | Photograph, R Furlonger  | 153    |
| 328. | The Bully                              | Photograph, R Furlonger  | 157    |
| 329. | Depressed masks                        | Photograph, R. Furlonger | 157    |
| 330. | Mask made by Broadmoor patient: Oberon | Jennings, S., 1997, p.99 | 160    |
| 331. | Mask made by Broadmoor patient: Hermia | Jennings, S., 1997, p.99 | 160    |
| 332. | Choosing a mask 2                      | Photograph, R Furlonger  | Pl. 58 |
| 333. | 'Naughty' Greek mask                   | Photograph, R Furlonger  | Pl. 58 |

## **APPENDICES**

### **B.A. 1 Bauhaus Project, Summer 1998**

- |          |   |                          |       |
|----------|---|--------------------------|-------|
| 334-339. | Individual examination design<br>and performance projects | Photographs, R Furlonger | Pl.59 |
|----------|---|--------------------------|-------|

### **BTEC First Diploma**

- |      |                                     |                         |       |
|------|-------------------------------------|-------------------------|-------|
| 340. | Improvisation                       | Photograph, R Furlonger | Pl 60 |
| 341. | Improvisation                       | Photograph, R Furlonger | Pl 60 |
| 342. | Dance                               | Photograph, R Furlonger | Pl 60 |
| 343. | Animal Farm - the opening lineup    | Photograph, R Furlonger | Pl 60 |
| 344. | Animal Farm - '....two legs better' | Photograph, R Furlonger | Pl 60 |

## **Horizons**

346.	Commedia exercise	Photograph, B Rapkin	Pl. 61
347.	Commedia exercise	Photograph, B. Rapkin	Pl. 61
348.	Trestle improvisation	Photograph, V. Bain	Pl. 61
349.	Trestle improvisation	Photograph, V. Bain	Pl. 61
350.	Large card mask	Photograph, V. Bain	Pl. 61

## **Sulingen visit to Gateshead**

351.	Props exercise	Photograph, R Furlonger	Pl. 62
352.	Football fans	Photograph, R Furlonger	Pl. 62
353.	Restaurant (teacher on the right)	Photograph, R Furlonger	Pl. 62
354.	Restaurant: performance	Photograph, R Furlonger	Pl. 62
355.	Hospital: performance	Photograph, R Furlonger	Pl. 62

## **British School of Brussels**

356.	Cardboard tubes exercise, A Level group	Photograph, R Furlonger	Pl. 63
357.	Half masks	Photograph, R Furlonger	Pl. 63
358.	Half masks	Photograph, R Furlonger	Pl. 63
359.	G.C.S.E. improvisation	Photograph, R Furlonger	Pl. 63
360.	G.C.S.E. Choosing a mask	Photograph, R Furlonger	Pl. 63

## **Visit from Osugi Musical Theatre, Japan**

361.	Cast photographs, with masks	Photograph, G Westerhout	Pl. 64
362.	Finale of play, Gateshead performance	Photograph, R Furlonger	Pl. 64

## **Middlesex University Students**

363-4.	Sexual Predator masks	Photographs, R Furlonger	204
--------	-----------------------	--------------------------	-----

## **Embroiderers' Guild Project**

365-6.	Masks by Embroiderers' Guild members	Photographs, R Furlonger	Pl. 65
367-9.	Masks by students of Dilston College	Photographs, R Furlonger	Pl. 65

# Masks and Metamorphosis

## INTRODUCTION

My interest is in the reputed power of the mask, in the claims that the mask itself has a direct and tangible influence over the wearer, even to the point of negating the wearer's personality and superimposing a character of its own. This phenomenon is extensively documented in the ritual use of masks in many cultures, but has also been observed in the use of masks in theatre and drama, where opinion is divided as to the nature and extent of the influence of the mask. In addition, this phenomenon has been explored in a number of fictional contexts, in books, plays and films, and the mask is often used as a symbol of the alter ego in art literature and psychological theory.

It has been my intention to explore the extent of this reputed phenomenon, and to attempt to account for the reasons underlying some of the experiences which have been reported. I have attempted to do this by researching both historical and contemporary practices, and through practical observation and interviews with a number of mask makers and mask wearers. As a mask-maker, and a teacher of mask-making and mask performance, I am particularly interested in the question of whether it is possible for a performer's personality to be displaced by that of a mask which he or she has made him or herself.

There are a number of authoritative studies of masks, including John Mack's *'Masks: the Art of Expression'*, which focuses on aesthetic and anthropological dimensions, and Susan Valeria Harris Smith's *'Masks in the Modern Theatre'* which takes a historical approach to the use of masks in theatre. Although some works which explore the ritual use of masks refer to the concept of trance and transformation in mask ritual, there do not appear to be any studies of the use of mask in contemporary drama which have as their central focus an emphasis on transformation. The exception is Keith Johnstone's book, *'Impro'*, which, although a seminal work, seems to give total credence to the concept of transformation, rather than debating its existence.

Given the relatively sparse academic research in this area, it seemed appropriate to explore this topic by means of observation of, and interviews with, contemporary mask makers and practitioners, and students of mask design and performance. In this context, the students to whom I teach both these subjects on a range of courses have been a valuable source which I have drawn on in a number of chapters to inform the discussion. The opportunities I have had for working with and observing primary school pupils have also provided further insights, particularly in relation to the series of mask projects carried out over a period of two years by pupils in years One, Four and Five at The Reay Primary School, Brixton. I believe that the mask can be used as a potent tool in a wide range of educational contexts, and an exploration of the concept of transformation and related experiences is of particular significance in this area.

In order to explore the power of the mask, I feel it is important to establish its context in civilisations worldwide and throughout the history of mankind. This investigation, which is the topic of the first chapter of my thesis, outlining the history and functions of the mask in many cultures, will of necessity be brief in the context of this study, but gives some indication of the power and mystery ascribed to the mask in ritual and in drama, worldwide.

In the second chapter the concept of mask and transformation in ritual and theatre is considered, with examples cited from the relevant literature, from the parallel experiences of contemporary mask practitioners and wearers, and from direct observation. The third chapter describes a number of approaches to the use of mask in contemporary drama and theatre, and includes accounts of maskwork undertaken by professional actors, teachers, students on a range of courses, and primary school children. The chapter is concerned both with the use of masks in the process of creating drama, and with the wearing of masks in performance.

The fourth chapter further investigates the ways in which the performer may be affected by wearing a mask, attempting to account for some of the experiences described by wearers, and also considers some of the effects which the spectacle of masked performance may have on an audience.

In the fifth chapter, the emphasis shifts from wearers to makers of masks, and to the possible effects of the mask on its creator. This chapter is divided into two sections, one centred on the making of masks for ritual use, and the other on the creation of masks for theatrical purposes and investigates the experiences of mask-makers who also wear the masks they have made. The chapter will also examine the phenomenon of carnival, which is perhaps the most common context in which the wearers of masks are also their makers, in the late 20th Century.

The sixth chapter is centred on children as makers and wearers of masks, and focuses on projects undertaken by primary school children, which involved them in the creation of masks and in using them in a variety of contexts and styles of performance. The final chapter aims to draw specific conclusions about the relationship of the mask and the self, the assumed and the real identities of the wearer.

As there has been comparatively little empirical research on transformation in the literature of masks, it is my intention to demonstrate, by making a detailed examination of the evidence available and through the creation of a casebook of practical experiment (*Appendices I - XIV*), some of the phenomena experienced by both the makers and the wearers of masks. In describing these sensations, my intention is to identify some of the causes from which they originate, and the means by which the energies created can be channelled into the development of performance which is both original and profoundly affective.

## CHAPTER ONE

# MASKS AND FACES

### A. Mankind's Need for Masks, Physical and Psychological

It is said that we are all attracted to faces and images of faces; babies' earliest responses are equally enthusiastically directed towards crude abstract representations of a human face and to their own smiling mothers. Paintings and photographs of faces, from naturalistic portraits to geometric abstractions, hang on the walls of galleries and private homes as clear evidence of the enduring power of the human face to attract artists and art-lovers.

People identify one another by means of their facial characteristics and human communication takes place predominantly by the use of the faces of individuals, whether it be by means of speech or facial expression. In many societies, it is believed that the spirit of the individual resides in the head, and of all the parts of the body, it is the face which most clearly portrays the defining characteristics of the individual.

The majority of masks convey the likeness of human faces, whether as portrait or metaphor, and, to a greater or lesser degree, they hold something of the same attraction as the faces they are designed to represent, with an additional ambiguity which can attract or repel, but tends to hold the viewer's interest.

'The mask, born of man's myth-creating faculty which transposes experiences from the subconscious into images, ..... has ever been the unfailing companion of the human face as its mysterious double - the alter ego.' <sup>1</sup>

The word 'mask' does not necessarily have precisely the same meaning in the languages of countries which have masking traditions. The Pocket Oxford Dictionary offers, amongst other definitions:

'(n.) Artificial face worn as disguise or for ludicrous effect, expression



assumed to conceal feelings, face covering of velvet Etc. to hide identity..  
or (v.t.) Cover with, disguise or hide..' <sup>2</sup>

placing the emphasis very much on concealment. To throw off the mask is to reveal oneself in one's true colours, and conversely, spies and other people with guilty secrets may be unmasked by others, and their secrets revealed. All these definitions stress the altered appearance of the person wearing the mask rather than the intrinsic qualities of masks in themselves.

'... the term 'mask' implicitly acknowledges human agency, that which is masked or concealed.' <sup>3</sup>

In many other cultures, in Africa, Asia and Central America, the obverse is true. Masks are defined in a way which frequently excludes the concept of a wearer; the mask is an entity in itself and it is often the case that

'... the knowledge that someone is articulating the mask from within is officially denied..to those not in on the secret' <sup>4</sup>,

and although there may be increased awareness of the fact that masks are worn by performers, emphasis is placed not on what is concealed but on what is created. In addition, the word 'mask' can be used to refer to the spirit of a character, person or deity, regardless of whether the character is portrayed as wearing a mask or any other form of disguise. This usage has been adopted by the Brazilian theatre practitioner Augusto Boal.

To revert to a more literal interpretation, in England and North America, the word 'mask' is usually associated with a face covering, whereas in South America, Africa and many parts of Europe, it suggests total disguise, including costume and headdress, and also the movement, gestures and dance associated with the character portrayed.

## 1. 'Masks' in Everyday Life

Some masks are physical, others are psychological barriers we raise to protect the

reality of our private selves. Jung<sup>5</sup> called man's mask the 'persona' - the Latin name given to the mask worn by the actor in Greek theatre. The word 'person' originates from the Latin 'personare', literally meaning to 'sound through', as when an actor speaks through the mouthpiece of a mask. Pernet suggests that:

'The person or persona is the mask itself...it represents something; it is not the real human being, the actor behind the mask.'<sup>6</sup>

This 'persona' protects us not only against the other people behind their own masks, but also against our own real selves.

Turning from the writings of genuine psychologists to those of a fictitious psychologist/ anthropologist: the character 'Dr Neuman' (a deliberately ironic choice of name?) in the film *'The Mask'*, (fig. 1) declares that,

'We all wear a mask, metaphorically speaking. We suppress the Id, our darkest desires, and adopt a more socially acceptable image'.<sup>7</sup>

Whilst this motivation is only one of many possible reasons for the adoption of metaphorical masks, there can be no doubt of their existence.



Fig. 1 Jim Carrey 'The Mask'



Fig. 2 Lenny Kravitz 'incognito'

Human beings adopt a variety of roles in their everyday lives, in order to communicate effectively with their fellows in different contexts involving changes of status and relationship. Some of these roles are more convincing to both the individual concerned and those with whom s/he communicates if an appropriate disguise is adopted; for example the adolescent girl in transition to adulthood will adopt the disguise of makeup to create an air of sophistication and maturity, and conversely an older woman will wear makeup to create a youthful appearance. The executive dons his green wellies at the weekend to



contrast with the weekday pinstriped suit; policemen, nurses and traffic wardens are readily recognisable from the prescribed uniforms they wear, not only for practical reasons, but to give them identification and credibility in the eyes of observers and in their own eyes. Other disguises are donned in order to hide the identity of the wearer, for example the sunglasses worn by celebrities (Fig 2) travelling incognito, or the stocking masks and balaclava helmets worn by burglars or terrorists (fig 3).



Fig. 3 Student in balaclava helmet

## 2. Material Definition

Psychological masks and codified disguises are clearly important for 20th Century Western man, but actual masks, made from a multiplicity of materials including wood, basketry, bark, corn-husks, cloth, leather, skulls, and papier-mache, have



Fig. 4 Iroquois cornhusk mask



Fig. 5 Baluba carved wood mask



Fig. 6 Palm leaf mask, Cuba

been used in Europe, Africa, Asia, South and Central America and Oceania since the earliest human settlements, and for a wide range of purposes, from the



Fig. 7 Headtop mask, Ekoi, Nigeria



Fig. 8 Shield mask, Nigeria

# MASKS AND FACES



Fig. 9 Bronze miniature masks from Benin, worn at hip or knee



Fig. 10 Wooden Carnival mask from Mexico 'Double mask' with sunglasses. Eyeholes above pupils.



Fig. 11 Leather theatrical mask. The stitching is used as decoration, to enhance the disturbing qualities of the mask



Fig. 12 Ivory pendant mask from Benin.



Fig. 13 State of Bewilderrment: Trestle Theatre Company



Fig. 14 Drama masks from North India Painted wood with eyeholes underneath pupils.

spiritual to the mundane. They may cover part or all of the face, the entire head, the head and shoulders, or the whole body; they may consist of a sculptured headdress worn on top of the head, (*fig. 7*) with the face of the wearer hidden by fibres or fabric covering, or a shield to cover the whole body (*fig. 8*). Some are extraordinarily naturalistic; others vary considerably in their level of abstraction, their use of symbols, and their ornamentation. A mask may be attached to the head of the wearer with strings or elastic, or a stick attached to the back of the mask may be gripped between the teeth; it may cover the head like a helmet, or be held before the face on a stick. The catalogue from the Dalhousie Art Gallery exhibition '*Masks Without Masquerades*' suggests that

'Wearing stilts or holding the head high by means of a long carved handle gives the mask a superhuman dimension.'<sup>8</sup>

Integral to the concept of the mask are the costume, headdress and movement which also personify the ritual presence or the dramatic character invoked.



*Fig. 15 Gelede dance, Yoruba, Nigeria*

Some masks convey astonishingly lifelike images, especially those which are taken from life casts, but although the effects of these portrait masks can be impressive, there is no requirement for a mask to achieve a high level of simulation in order to achieve a profound effect in use. Leach suggests that a mask is in essence a

‘geometric construction which only reminds us of the human face. The image must represent something which is both human and non-human, natural and supernatural, part of culture and part of nature. Masks which combine into a simple design the structural essentials of all faces, human and animal alike, serve such a purpose well. 9

Similarly, although some masks are sumptuously or elaborately decorated, it is often the most minimal which may be the most eloquent. (*Fig. 16*)

True masks are those which are designed to be worn, covering the face of the wearer, either in ritual or performance, rather than architectural, decorative or miniature masks, which frequently also have strong ritual or symbolic significance. To this end, they must incorporate eyeholes and some aperture to ensure that the wearer can breathe. The eyes of the mask may not necessarily be where the eyeholes are located; many Indonesian or Mexican masks have the eyeholes as slits above or below the eyes of the character portrayed (*Fig. 10*); actors wearing large-scale masks may find themselves looking out of the mouth or neck of the mask.

Having established that the mask should cover the face, it is not essential that the mask portray a face, either human or animal; it may be entirely abstract, or convey a non-anthropomorphic image, for example a flower or a building.

Leach suggests that,

‘A featureless face is an unrecognisable face and therefore devoid of personality.’<sup>10</sup>

but it may still yield dramatic power in ritual or theatre.



Fig. 16 Zuni Kachina mask, N America

The Dalhousie Art Gallery handbook defines the mask as

'a combination of materials assembled to disguise and conceal a person who thus becomes 'another'. In principle, the person wearing the mask should be concealed from head to foot so that he actually becomes the figure whom the disguise is intended to represent, bringing it to life through his gestures, sound activities and often his possessed state.<sup>11</sup>

It is this apparent ability of the mask to affect change in the wearer, both in appearance and in his or her own experience, which is to be the major focus of this study, and in order to explore this aspect of the use of masks it is essential to consider some of the the principal functions of masks in mask-wearing societies throughout the world from pre-history to the present.

## **B. Functions of Masks**

Masks are used in a multiplicity of ways to overcome human vulnerability. They can be worn for practical reasons, to protect the wearer from extremes of heat or cold, or from injuries in industrial processes, war or sport; they are

essential to the work of astronauts, surgeons and welders. Equally practical is the need for disguise, for political dissidents, criminals or guests at a fancy-dress party or masked ball. Masks are also used for their power to transform the wearer into a presence which will create a profound impression on the beholder, (Fig 17) whether the aim is to entertain or to frighten the onlooker, to create an idealised image of reality, or to attempt to provide a link with unknown or potentially uncontrollable forces.

Masks can make the ugly beautiful, disguising irregularities of feature (Fig. 18); they can make the gentle seem bold; the old, young; males can appear female or vice versa; the wearer can change the colour of his/her skin, alter his/her stature etc.

Each culture has its own interpretation of what altering the identity of a mask-wearer means; it may be for the purpose of concealment, to enhance the status of the individual or mark rites of passage; each has its own methods and ultimate purpose, but in most societies masks are traditionally used in ways which are believed to maintain both the physical and spiritual well-being of the community.

Masks created in many societies are made for movement, music, and the dance. There are masks of ancestors, and of the spirits of the countryside or jungle; masks of predatory animals and victims of the hunt; of gods, saints and political heroes and villains; of secret societies and initiations; masks that bring fertility or keep order or simply make people laugh. All have underlying reasons for their making and preordained times for their appearance before the people who are allowed to see them.

## **1. Concealment**

Man is unique in the animal kingdom in that he can choose to change his appearance, whereas other species undergo involuntary changes or those dictated by instinct. Disguise may be affected by clothes, hats or wigs, but the face is the single most important identifying factor, and therefore the focus for

transformation. When the face is covered by a mask, the appearance is immediately changed.

In donning a mask, man can escape from himself, but his motives are infinitely varied. He may wish to assume the identity of another being, for example, a spirit or ancestor, to establish contact with the supernatural, hide a secret, or simply enjoy himself. Masks enable an individual to mingle anonymously with others for a number of purposes.

It is probable that most people would consider the primary purpose of masks to be disguise, which enables the wearer to behave in ways unacceptable in normal society, hence the association of masks with highwaymen, burglars, spies, illicit lovers, partygoers and, ironically, executioners. Leach describes the anonymity conferred by the mask as the '...handmaiden to licence and romance.'<sup>11</sup> He describes the way in which Elizabethan ladies covered their features when committing the social indiscretion of visiting a theatre, and the unbridled revelry, and sexual licence aided by the mask at carnival

'Wearing a [domino] mask in the seventeenth century really amounted to saying "Please take note, I am at present travelling incognito" But in such cases the observer must co-operate.'<sup>13</sup>

A bank robber may wear a stocking over his head (*fig. 25*), or indeed a carnival mask. This may enhance the fear of victims in that they '...may sense that a man in a mask finds it easier to shoot.'<sup>14</sup> for a number of reasons associated with both the anonymity conferred, and the loss of inhibition associated with the wearing of masks. In the words of Henry Porter,

'It sets the wearer at one remove, allows him to be anything or anybody but more particularly, nobody....'<sup>15</sup>

Members of the Ku Klux Klan and other secret societies wear distinctive masks for similar reasons, in order to flout convention and perform illegal acts, (*Fig 19*) whereas in Islamic countries, social conventions are diligently observed by women whose veils may conceal not only their faces, but their whole bodies.

## DISGUISE AND ANONYMITY



*Fig. 17 Executioner; in this case fictitious, but the image represents the need for anonymity*



*Fig. 18 The Phantom of the Opera: the mask concealing facial disfigurement*



*Fig. 19 Ku Klux Klan: the mask conceals identity in pursuing illegal activity*



*Fig. 20 Veil worn by an Islamic woman. Not only the face, but the whole body is masked.*



# CELEBRITY DISGUISE .....or trademark?



*Fig. 21 Princess Diana*



*Fig. 22 Michael Jackson*



*Fig. 23 Clive Sinclair - definitely a trademark in this case*

## CRIME AND THE MASK



*Fig. 24 Armed robber wearing half mask*



*Fig. 25 Student in stocking mask*



*Fig. 26 Masked police in Sicily arresting Mafia suspect . Masks are worn in an attempt to avoid reprisals against individual policemen*

(fig. 20) In this case, masking enables the wearer to conform rather than flout convention, but for many individuals throughout the world, wearing a mask provides an individual with the

‘...opportunity to act bravely, foolishly, violently, amorously, assume other characters, behave in different ways than they would otherwise dare or be allowed to, shed inhibitions, gain temporary confidence, boldness, feeling of power’<sup>16</sup>

Concealment is essential for some political activists; the leather mask worn by the seventeenth century Scots covenantor Alexander Peden still survives, and he was never caught. (fig. 27) Protesters in a number of late 20th century dictatorships use masks for practical reasons, to defend against cameras and tear gas. Henry Porter cites demonstrators in Guatemala, who wear masks similar to those of Greek tragedy,

‘... their faces frozen in the grimaces of rage and horror as they perform impromptu mimes of the death squads.’<sup>17</sup>

Others may use the conventions of disguise as a personal signature, for example the fictional superhero Batman, (figs 32-34) or popular music icon Michael Jackson, (fig.22) in whose case it represents ‘part disguise and part mute testimony to Jackson’s history of surgical adjustment’<sup>18</sup>

When considering disguise, it is important to distinguish the difference between concealment and impersonation; the desire for anonymity and the intention to convince onlookers that the wearer is another, specific being. Impersonation may involve the masker in either the assumption of the persona of another being, as for example in the religious rituals of many cultures, or the adoption of the appearance of another specific individual, as in the case of Thorkild Weiss Madsen, who was detained, by police in 1992 for attempting to enter the Danish parliament building wearing a mask of the prime minister.<sup>19</sup>

## 2. Practical Protection:

There are instances in the ancient world as well as the scientific world of the 20th

# THE MASK AS THE FACE OF PEACEFUL PROTEST



Fig. 27 *The leather mask of Scottish covenanter Alexander Peden*

144



Fig. 28 *Protesters wearing masks based on Edvard Munch's painting 'The Scream'*



Fig. 29 *Another representation of Munch's painting, this time representing the stresses of contemporary life.*

## MASKS AND PEACEFUL PROTEST 2



*Fig. 30 Protest demonstration, Mexico City 1996*



*Fig. 31 Anti-Nuclear protest at Greek Embassy in Pakistan, 1998*

# SUPERHEROES



Fig. 32 *Batman and Robin*, 1938



Fig. 33 *Batman* 1989; a closeup of the mask



Fig. 35 Masked cartoon character Spiderman



Fig. 34 *Batman* 1989; demonstrating the integrated style of mask and costume



Fig. 36 *Latin American hero Zorro*

# PROTECTIVE MASKS



*Fig. 37 & 38 Protection for facial injuries for sportsmen*



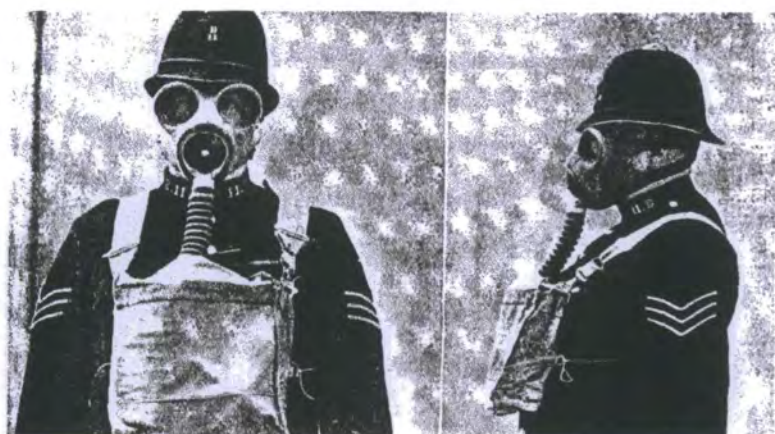
*Fig. 39 Miner's mask: protection from dangerous fumes*



*Fig. 40 Ice hockey goalkeeper's mask*



*Fig. 41 World War 1 tank crew mask*



*Fig. 42 Gasmask: front and side views*

# PROTECTIVE MASKS



*Fig. 43 Astronaut's helmet mask*



*Fig. 44 Swimming mask with built-in hat and goggles*



*Fig. 45 Fishermen in Kerala, India, were preyed upon by tigers who tended to attack their prey from behind, so the fishermen now wear masks on the backs of their heads, to confuse the tigers and deter them from further attacks.*



century, of masks used to protect their wearers from physical dangers, for example, the helmets of the samurai and European mediaeval knights, and today they still provide protection from extremes of hot and cold, bacteria and toxins, in the form of snow goggles, surgical masks or the welder's visor, they enable people to explore their geographical, practical and scientific universe and extend its limits. (figs. 37-46)

### 3. Control

Masks have been used in many societies as a means of encouraging or enforcing social control. In Mexico, during the masked dances that form a central part of Holy Week celebrations, a masked figure known as the Chapellon ensures that dancers behave in an acceptable manner and that their performance is of an appropriate standard. In some cultures, masked members of secret societies, for example the Duk-duk of New Guinea, terrorise wrong-doers and thus enforce social codes (fig. 46). In parts of Africa (e.g. West Guinea), legal judgments are pronounced by masked judges; antisocial behaviour may be made the subject of jest or reprimand, and, in many cultures,

'masked figures may pursue women and children to reinforce what may be considered appropriate social behaviour'<sup>20</sup>

### 4. Punishment

Offenders are punished by being made to wear masks for a number of reasons; firstly, to ensure the anonymity of the prisoner, as in Dumas' novel 'The Man in the Iron Mask' and similar real-life cases, and in the hoods or 'cagoules' worn by French prisoners in the early 20th century to ensure anonymity and social isolation during exercise periods (fig. 47) It is clear from the photograph, and many accounts of prisoners under interrogation in many countries that sensory deprivation created by such masks is itself a direct form of punishment. In addition, many cultures in Africa, Oceania and the Far East, use masks to deliberately humiliate the offender in public places. Although this practice is not common in Europe today, it is reminiscent of the mediaeval 'scolds bridle'



Fig. 46 Dukduk masks from New Guinea



Fig. 47 French prisoners in the 1920s wore white masks or cagoules during exercise periods. The masks were used both to ensure anonymity and to heighten the sense of isolation experienced by prisoners



Fig. 48 Execution by electric chair, U.S.A. 1998



Fig. 49 Austrian 'Mask of Shame' used in witchcraft trials



Fig. 50 Scold's bridle ; designed to curb the tongues of wives accused of nagging

and 'masks of shame'. (figs. 49-50) The latter were worn during their trials by women accused of witchcraft, '... so that they already personified the evil of which they were accused.'<sup>21</sup> In many societies, it has been the tradition for either the executioner or the excuted to be masked. (fig. 48)

## 5. **Spiritual Protection:**

Ritual masks generally depict deities, mythological beings, good and evil spirits, spirits of ancestors and the dead, animal spirits, and other beings believed to have power over humanity. They are utilised in cultures throughout the world to invoke the protection of gods, spirits and powers against witches, wars, and the rigours of climate. In many societies protection is sought from the spirits of dead ancestors and animals, and enemies killed by members of the tribe, through elaborate masked ceremonies. In many societies it is believed that after death, spirits, which can be benevolent or malevolent, may go to the spirit world or remain on earth for a time. Members of the society

'....can offer prayers and perform ceremonies for the happiness of the spirit in the afterlife or to propitiate or drive away spirits of the dead who can bring disease or death and interrupt the earth's fertile cycle.'<sup>22</sup>

In so doing, masks are used to establish man's contacts with the world of the spirits and and strengthen 'the bonds between his realm of ordinary existence and the realm of the unseen spirit world.'<sup>23</sup>

Masked rituals can take many forms and masks can appear as frightful and malevolent agents of death and destruction, or as benevolent spirits bringing abundance and the fertility of women or crops.

'At the new year, Tibetan monks traditionally staged spectacular masked plays for their local communities, combining dance and drama, and based partly on ancient rituals including ideas of human sacrifice and partly on the stories of Buddhism, during which a human effigy was attacked and the evil it contained, destroyed.'<sup>24</sup>

## 6. Healing

Shamen throughout the world wear masks in curative rites, which tend to conform to two broad categories; either summoning help and protection for individuals or communities from benign spirits which promote health, or expelling the spirits which cause diseases. In America, the Iroquois False Face Societies' masked dance rituals are intended to purge houses of disease-bearing spirits. In the "devil dances" of Sri Lanka, which are principally medical in character, every disease is associated with a particular evil spirit, and each disease-spirit has his own special mask or Rasaka. In India, rituals involve the personification of the disease, and lead to the pacification of the demon which caused the disease. It is unusual



*Fig. 52 Sanni mask from Sri Lanka*

to find masks which depict diseases, but in Bali and Java masks have been found on which the symptoms of leprosy and cancer are clearly portrayed.

## 7. Fertility

In agricultural rites, masks may represent the fertility deities; their powers are invoked to enhance fertility in people, animals and crops. Similarly, animal masks may be worn in rituals aimed at ensuring a successful hunt. (Figs. 53-55) It is believed in some societies that hunting masks acquire supernatural powers from the deity to enhance the skills and courage of the hunters; others believe that they invoke the spirits of the animals and encourage them to give themselves up to the hunters. (Fig 56)

In many societies, in Africa, Asia, North and South America and Europe, the concepts of death and fertility are strongly linked, and it is considered necessary to placate or disperse the spirits of the dead, to ensure that the area is cleansed for the living, and to ensure the continuation of the annual cycle of the harvest. In

# MASKS AND RITUALS ASSOCIATED WITH HUNTING



Fig. 52 Mural of ostrich hunt, showing disguised hunter on right



Fig. 53 Mural from Cave of Trois Freres, France



Fig. 54 Neolithic cave painting, Tssili-n'Ajer



Fig. 55 Hunter wearing hornbill mask



Fig. 56 Unicorn of Westminster Morris Men



Fig. 57 Notting Hill Carnival



Fig. 58 Austrian devil mask



Figs. 59 and 60 Austrian carnival masks : old women



Fig. 61 Swiss pig mask



Fig. 62 Swedish carnival mask

Europe, and South America, this is often associated with the Lenten Carnival, but has its roots in a far older tradition. In the mountain villages of Austria Switzerland and Northern Italy it is possible to observe wearers of masks made of all manner of natural materials culled from the countryside and representing '...devils, nature spirits...' or '...ugly toothless witches' <sup>25</sup> contrasted with finely finished, highly naturalistic painted wooden or papier mache masks, their exquisite features resembling those of the saints of '...classic mediaeval art...' or 'chocolate-box pretty' <sup>26</sup> all involved in a '...wild celebration to ensure control of demonic forces of dead souls and coming of spring/ fertility ...masks,noise,racing through streets, violence.' <sup>27</sup> (figs 59-62)

## 8. Initiation

Totem, ancestral and other spirit masks are frequently used in initiation ceremonies. Societies throughout the world have created rituals to mark significant events in the lives of individuals and communities. These ceremonies marking rites of passage often provide colourful and exciting interludes in lives which may hold few other diversions, and masks and elaborate costumes often play an important part in affecting a transformation from everyday life. (Figs 63-66) Pani claims that mask rituals,

'... often accompanied by powerful percussive music and solemn singing, lead to states of collective hysteria. The participants believe that the ritual forces supernatural powers to put in an appearance. The magic spell of the ritual is not limited only to the wearers of the masks; all the participants of the ceremony feel the presence of the divine beings summoned by the magic power of the masks.' <sup>28</sup>

During these rituals, in which spirits are believed to enter the human world, the human performer is not simply hidden from view, but actually becomes the embodied spirit.

'This supernatural and secret ability makes the mask, the masker and the masquerade sacred and powerful..The ambivalent visibility (there/not there; seen/not seen; concealed/revealed) is a visible mediation between the known world and the unknown world.' <sup>29</sup>

# INITIATION AND CIRCUMCISION MASKS FROM AFRICA



Fig. 63 Bambara Circumcision mask



Fig. 64 Bakuba initiation mask



Fig. 65 Antelope circumcision mask



Fig. 66 Initiates in Tanzania



## 9. Death, Burial and the Afterlife

In funerary ceremonies, masks have been used both 'to protect the living from the dead and to protect the dead themselves.'<sup>30</sup> Burial masks are sometimes placed on the face of a corpse (e.g. by the Hopi Indians and in ancient Egypt, Greece, Rome, China and Mexico), (*figs. 69-72*) either to protect the deceased from evil spirits, or to lead the dead person's spirit to its home in the afterlife. The Egyptians believed that these facial images, for which they had no specific name, had a dual purpose, depicting the dead person in the divine state they hoped to attain, and enabling 'the soul of the deceased to recognise its body when it returned to the tomb'.<sup>31</sup> The richly decorated funerary masks, fashioned from precious metals, of the kings of many ancient cultures around the world are evidence of the need for perpetuation and the hope of immortality.

During contemporary funeral rites in tribal societies of West Africa, for example the Senufo of the Ivory Coast, masked dancers may seek to drive the soul of the deceased into the spirit world, where it will not harm the living. (*fig. 76*) In memorial rites, masks may be worn to represent departed personages, as was the case in Ancient Rome, where an effigy of the deceased was 'worn by an actor hired to accompany the funeral cortege.'<sup>32</sup>

Among the Armat people of New Guinea, the men of the tribe

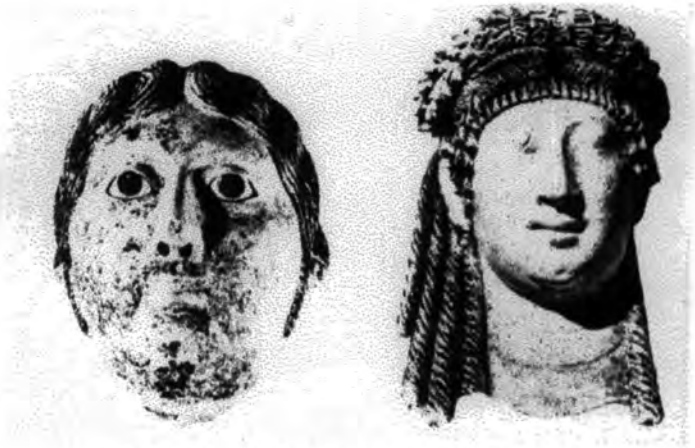
'...both make and wear masks that represent men recently slain. After a night-long dance the spirits are 'killed' at sunrise. The fact that each maker must adopt and provide for the orphans of the dead man he represents in the dance...idea of continuity.'<sup>33</sup>

Masks of human ancestors or totem ancestors (beings or animals to which a clan or family traces its ancestry) are often objects of family pride: when they are regarded as the dwelling of the spirit they represent, they may be honoured with ceremonies and gifts. Some may represent a recently deceased relative and are intended to be kept by the family, to provide a home for the soul, and to avoid the ultimate death, that of being forgotten. In Western society, a similar function has been fulfilled since the days of the Roman Empire by the making of 'death masks' in the form of plaster casts of the features of the deceased. (*Fig.72*)

## DEATH AND BURIAL



Fig. 67 PreColumbian Mexican death mask



Figs. 68 and 69 Egyptian and Roman death masks



Fig. 70 Wooden burial mask, Aleut N. America. 19th century



Fig. 71 Ivory burial mask, Alaska AD 300-600



Fig. 72 Death mask of John Keats

## DEATH AND BURIAL 2



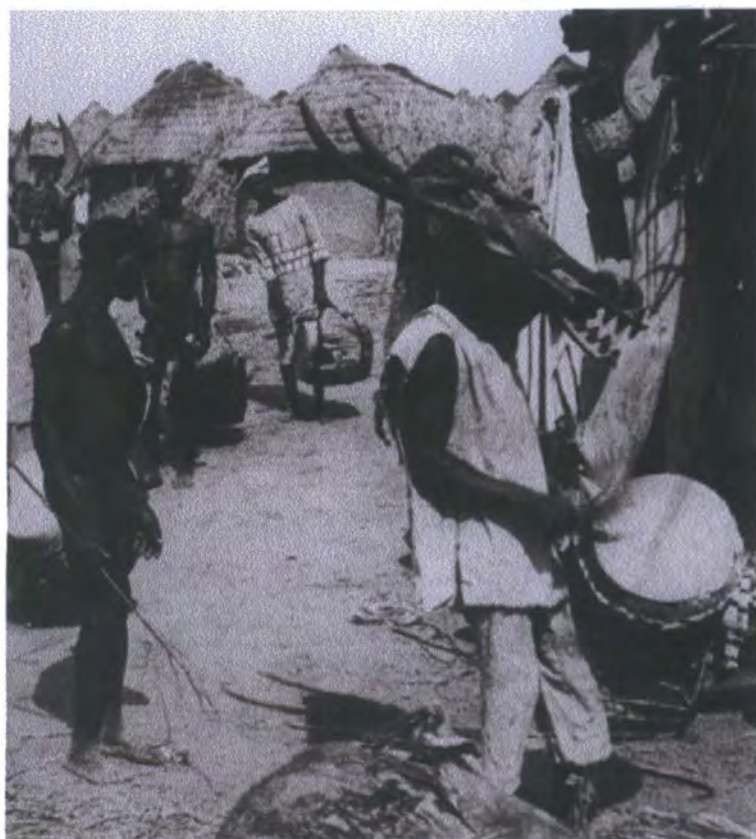
Fig. 73 *Deathmask of Tutankhamun*

Fig. 75 (right) *Engungun funerary mask.*



Fig. 74 (Above) *Death and Devil masks for the Mexican Day of the Dead*

Fig. 76 (right) *Funerary masquerade, Senufu, Ivory Coast*



Mask traditions in many cultures throughout the world, in Asia, Africa and Europe, have their origins in the desire to recall or perpetuate the spirits of ancestors. Motives and ritual procedures may differ, but the concept of re-animating distant or recent ancestors through the use of masked ritual is very widespread.

## 10. Warfare

Grotesque war masks were worn in battle in ancient civilisations, including China, Japan, Mexico, Greece and Rome. (Figs 77-81) It has been claimed that the shield was an early ancestor of the mask and that eyeholes were introduced so that the warrior could simultaneously protect his face and see the enemy; there is certainly evidence of shields painted with mask-like designs. (fig. 8)

Masks and the helmets worn in warfare from pre-history to the 20th century share many common characteristics: many incorporate a rigid cover for the head with protection for the face, often elaborately decorated and affording a combination of physical protection and anonymity for the wearer, and intimidation for the opponent. In some cases, because of the scale of the helmet

which provided terrifying mask, or the design, conferring wearer. 'Aztec mouth of a



additional height, the expression depicted on the sheer magnificence of the god-like status on the soldiers looked out from the puma...or a wolf .... '34

Fig. 77 Medieval helmet from the Royal Armouries Museum: Museum carrier bag

Like the heavy iron helmets of mediaeval knights, war masks afforded as much danger as they did protection to their wearers, so their use has in recent times been confined to religious and ceremonial rituals rather than in conflict.

However, the decorative masks of past centuries have been supplanted by more utilitarian masks of war. The gasmasks of the first and second world wars, and late 20th century protective helmets to combat chemical and nuclear warfare are

# MASKS AND WARFARE



*Fig. 78 Japanese medieval military mask*



*Fig. 79 Early Chinese military mask*



*Fig. 80 Roman battle mask, gilded bronze, 2 A.D.*



*Fig. 81 Japanese mask and helmet, leather and metal with pony tail tassel, 19th century*

# MASKS AND GUERRILLA WARFARE



*Fig. 82 Armed man with woollen hat pulled over his face, Liverpool*



*Fig. 83 Firebomber in surgical mask, Korea*



*Fig. 84 Gunman in balaclava helmet, Belfast*



*Fig. 85 Firebomber with scarf, Belfast*

practical in design and application, but like their antecedents in mediaeval Japan and 19th century Africa, they contribute towards the dehumanising of warfare, and induce fear in the beholder.

The use of masks continues in conflict around the world in the late 20th century, especially in civil conflicts in Northern Ireland and former Yugoslavia, where the needs to preserve anonymity and induce terror go hand in hand. (figs. 82-85)

## 11. Satire

Masks have been used in satire from the comic traditions of Ancient Greece and Rome to contemporary New York, Basle or Zaire. This form of entertainment

serves to affect social control by lampooning the actions of public figures, as well as giving pleasure and relieving tension for the audience.



The use of caricature masks has been perennially popular in theatre, cabaret and carnival. They are used in protest demonstrations; also frequently sold in fancy dress or joke shops (fig. 86) and, in many countries, by street vendors (fig. 90); the wearers may not always subscribe to the political views of the satirists, but the images proliferate nonetheless.

Fig. 86 Tony Blair in the joke shop

## 12. Mask and Witchcraft

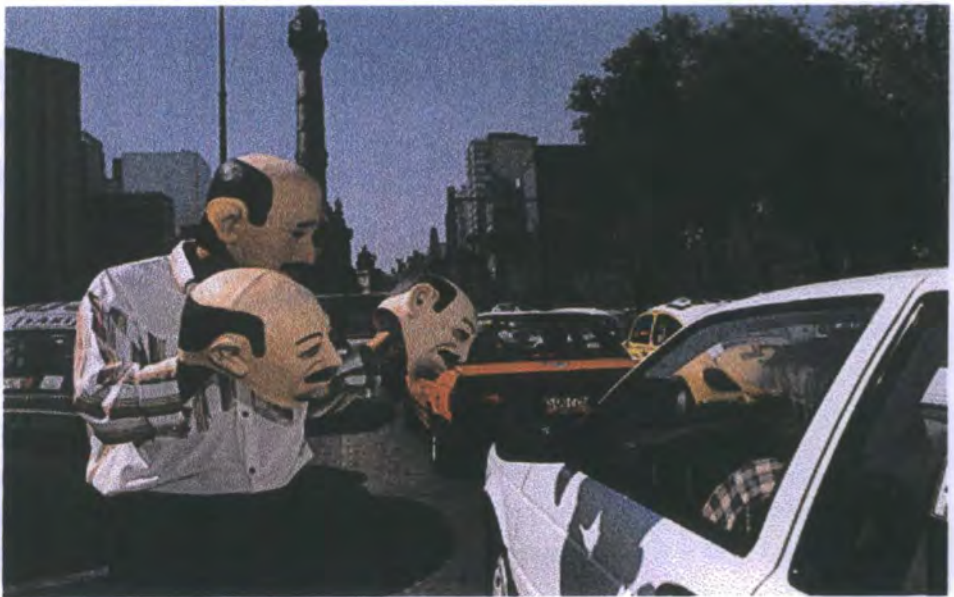
The use of ritual masks in association with witchcraft is also established in a number of African cultures. The Yoruba of Southwestern Nigeria perform elaborate masked ceremonies, known as Gelede, (Fig. 90) to propitiate and honour witches; behind this lies the anthropomorphising outlook which assumes that if flattery works on ordinary people it will work on witches too, whereas, a more aggressive approach is adopted with the

'deliberately hideous masks intended to expel witches such as the Senufo 'firespitter' of the Ivory Coast... (which) constitute a violent counterattack

## SATIRE AND POLITICAL COMMENT



*Figs. 87 and 88 Two mask/puppets from the Bread and Puppet Theatre Company's project in Jarrow in 1997, centred on the Jarrow March. The masks represent greedy capitalists exploiting the workers and rendering them unemployed.*



*Fig. 89 A street vendor selling (and wearing) helmet masks portraying Mexican dictator Salinas to passing motorists in Mexico City.*





*Fig 90. Gelede mask and costume.*



*Fig. 91 The Senuso Firespitter mask: used to frighten witches by means of the sparks which can be blown out through the jaws of the mask. Sometimes used at funerals to ward off witches and evil spirits (See fig. 75)*

This concept will be explored in greater detail in the chapters 'Mask and the Concept of Transformation' and 'The Effects of Mask on Wearer and Audience'.

### C. The Power of the Mask

In many societies, masks are believed to contain great power, and are thought to be dangerous in themselves unless the correct rituals are observed in their use. As masks are frequently agents for the invocation of supernatural power, it is inevitable that they may sometimes fall into the hands of those who wish to abuse that power, so it is essential that their use is controlled, usually by rigid adherence to long-established ritual, to prevent exploitation.

Lommel cites the Dogon people of Nigeria among whom it is believed that the power of masks must be carefully channelled; a large mask painted on a wall of rock absorbs some of the powerful forces of the Great Mask, a huge carved wooden talisman up to thirty feet long, (Fig. 92)

'..... which is itself an agent for power in smaller ... masks, which might otherwise threaten the community with excessive power.'<sup>40</sup>

The Dan people of West Africa discard any mask which they perceive to have lost its power to intervene with the spirits on behalf of the community.

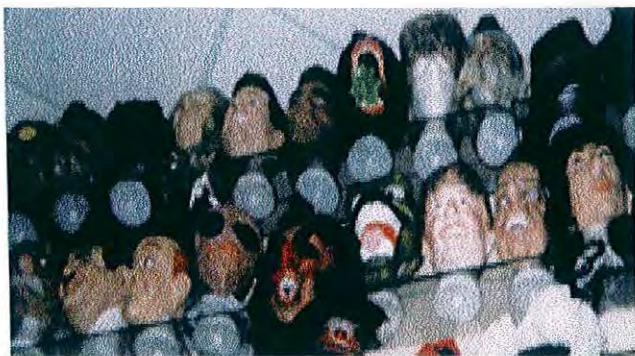


Fig. 92 Dogon Great Mask

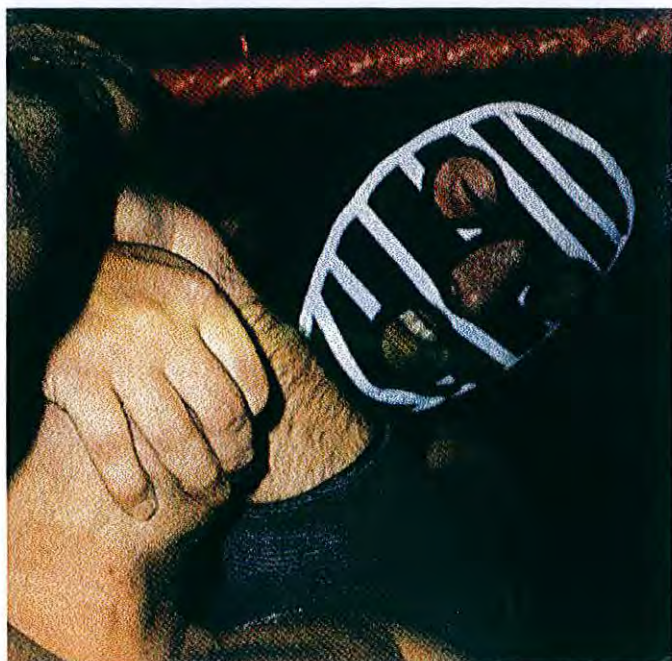
### D. Contemporary Applications of Mask Tradition

Ritual masks survive in modern Western culture in various folk pageants and customs, for example in carnival masquerading throughout Europe, and in the crude plastic masks worn, often in combination with witches' hats and broomsticks, by English and American children at Halloween.

# CONTEMPORARY APPLICATIONS OF MASKS



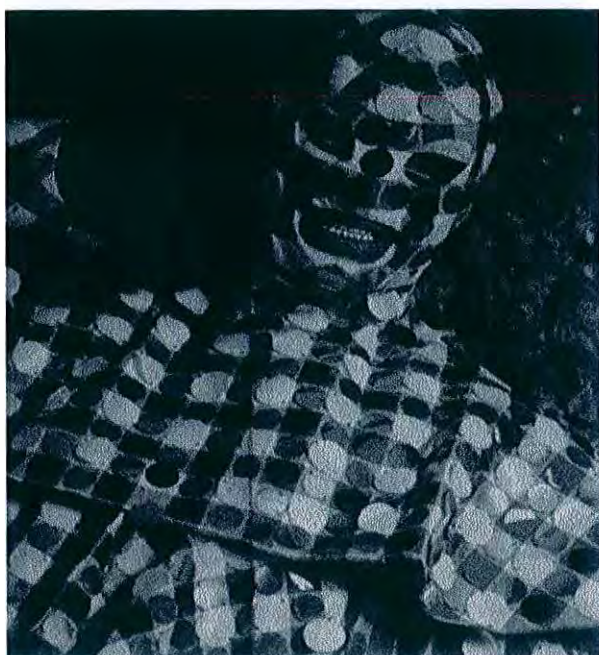
*Figs. 93& 94 Party masks: glamour, humour, horror*



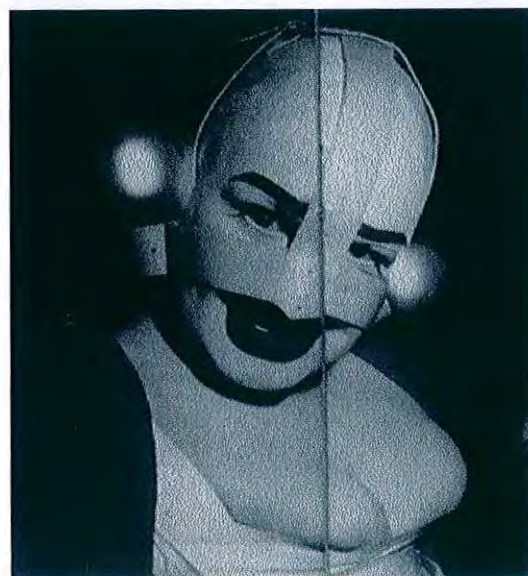
*Fig . 95 Masked wrestler*



*Fig. 96 Sexual menace*



*Figs. 97 and 98 '20th Century Dandy' Leigh Bowery*



# MASKS AND FASHION



*Fig. 99 Mask or hat?*



*Figs. 100 and 101 Masked elegance in fashion features*



In the United States of America, masked rituals are still practised by the Ku Klux Klan, but masks are used to powerful effect in support of valid political causes in many parts of the world; new social and economic conditions create new concerns, and so in response new masks and masquerades are created, as in the case with Peter Schumann's Bread and Puppet Theatre, or old ones revived.

Masks are used to create a sense of mystery in drama and carnival, and at masked parties, where they may be decorative, humorous or horrifying. (*fig. 93-94*) They are often associated with romance, but also with sexual games, included those linked with sado-masochism. (*Fig. 96-98*)

Many of the uses found for masks in the twentieth century tend to be connected with positive and creative activity in carnival, dance and drama and it is interesting to contemplate

'...the transformation of the vizard, from executioner's helm to badge of courage to fashion accessory. ....'<sup>41</sup> (*Figs. 99-101*)

## **E. Reactions to Masks**

People's reactions to the appearance of a mask are conditioned by their previous knowledge and experience; those who are have little or no knowledge of mask traditions see a figure which may strike them as beautiful, comical or disconcerting' perhaps a combination of all three. Those with an awareness of mask conventions may see a '...personification of cosmic laws and powers upheld by secret societies...'<sup>42</sup> This is the case not only in the masks of African, Melanesian, Asian and North American secret societies, which are far from being simple instruments of disguise, but also in the masked rituals which have survived in certain parts of Europe

The power of the mask to transform the wearer creates ambivalent feelings in those who see them in use; by hiding the features of the wearer's face, masks have an extraordinary power both to attract and to disturb. Many perceive them as instruments of illusion, which can bring about mysterious, even magical changes, and bring to life legendary heroes and powerful spirits; but equally, in



*Fig. 102 Monkey mask used in a violent robbery in Newcastle upon Tyne; displayed in this picture by the police officer in charge of the investigation*



*Fig. 103 Making contact with a sometimes apprehensive audience  
Student production 1996*

ritual or theatre are now confined to showcases in museums: as Malcolm Knight says, 'European museums are bursting with tribal booty from Colonial expeditions of the last century.'<sup>47</sup> and the same is also true of museums and galleries in North, South and Central America. In these settings, the masks are carefully preserved, but their power is muted. (*figs. 104-105*) Andrew Graham Dixon cites a

'... Makonde mask from Tanzania ... (which) ... is clearly an object denatured by static glass-case museum display; it was originally intended to be worn by the midimu or maskers, who impersonate animal spirits while dancing on stilts during male and female initiation ceremonies. Spotlit on a plinth, it is not the same thing, clearly. But to suggest that it is a thing more denatured by being removed from its original ritual context than, say, any work of 15th century European devotional sculpture is more than slightly patronising'<sup>48</sup>

Many would argue that it is equally inappropriate for altarpieces to be spotlit in museums instead of candlelit in churches, but in the case of masks, it is not merely the absence of the ritual context, but also the isolation of the mask from costumes, headpieces, music and above all, movement which alters the nature of the artefact seen by the museum visitor. Nevertheless, the power of the mask remains.

## **F. Conclusion**

Masks are used for a wide spectrum of practical and spiritual functions in societies throughout the world. In many of these societies, and associated with many of the functions, is the belief that the mask can conceal, alter or actually transform the person wearing the mask into something or someone else. This phenomenon may be experienced directly by the wearer who believes that s/he is possessed by the spirit of the mask, or it may affect observers of mask ritual or performance, leading them to believe that they have witnessed gods or spirits rather than human performers.

These responses may be directly triggered by the connotations associated with specific masks, or with masks in general. Reactions of this kind are normally

associated with cultures which have sustained a long tradition of mask ritual, but even in contemporary western society, the mask retains an ambiguity which makes it at the same time 'playful and powerful,'<sup>49</sup> as is fitting for its role in theatre, ritual and religion.

It is clear that the mask is an instrument of illusion which can be observed to have a profound effect on wearer and observer in a wide range of contexts and conditions; it is the extent of these effects and the reasons which underly them that I propose to investigate further in the following chapters.



## CHAPTER TWO

# MASK AND THE CONCEPT OF TRANSFORMATION

### A. Representation and Belief: the Use of Mask in Ritual

#### 1. Representation and Presence

Apart from the transformation of disguise, masks are thought in many cultures to affect transformation in their wearers which is sustained after the mask has been removed, usually in their association with rites of passage, initiation ceremonies (particularly those involved with puberty and circumcision), death and the afterlife.

A dancer wearing a mask as part of a ceremony is in many cultures believed to be not simply a performer, but, 'transformed into or possessed by the spirit inhabiting or represented by the mask.'<sup>1</sup> Levy Bruhl suggests that the mask is capable of affecting a change which goes beyond appearance:

'To put on a mask is not, as for most of us, a simple disguise under which the individual remains who he is. It is to submit to a real transformation.'<sup>2</sup>

The use of the words 'inhabiting or represented by' in the first quotation, is significant in this context as they suggest two very different phenomena. 'Inhabiting' suggests a literal belief that the spirit dwells within the mask, whereas representation, in a twentieth century context, suggests a dramatic rendering or action on behalf of another. It is the latter word that tends to be used most frequently in the literature of masks, so it seems appropriate to look at the concept in relation to ritual masks, in more detail.

It is frequently suggested that the mask represents a god, spirit or animal and in

wearing it the masker takes on the identity of or actually 'becomes' the spirit it represents. In discussing this issue, Pernet redefines the word: 'Represent (spirits of the dead): cause to be present again.'<sup>3</sup> He suggests that during the time that the actors and dancers are wearing the masks, and are involved in the rituals,

'...they are not only representatives of the dead and of the ancestors which these masks depict, they actually become them and for a time they really are these dead and these ancestors...'<sup>4</sup>

certainly in the eyes of the beholders, and to some extent in the experience of the masker. He quotes the research of Eliade who cites

'... a 'law' well known to the history of religions; ONE BECOMES WHAT ONE DISPLAYS. The wearers of masks are really the mythical ancestors portrayed by their masks.... '<sup>5</sup>

although elsewhere Eliade declares, somewhat ambiguously, that '.....behind a mask a man ceases to be himself, that he becomes, AT LEAST IN APPEARANCE, another.'<sup>6</sup>

Stephan suggests a distinction between representation and what he describes as presentification: he claims that representation assumes prior knowledge of the object, as for example the recently deceased, or ancestors; this cannot apply to other spiritual phenomena, believed in but unseen in cultures throughout history and on every continent, which can, through human or spiritual initiative, be made visible to humans through presentification. He claims that

'....representation is different from its object which is present only in the mind and not in flesh and blood; what is presentified and what presentifies it are not different but constitute the same being.'<sup>7</sup>

This could suggest that the masker can only give the appearance of becoming the ancestor spirit; that only the unseen spiritual phenomena can fully possess the masker. While accepting Stephan's definition, and accepting the differentiation he makes between these two aspects of mask ritual, I shall continue to use the

word 'representation' when referring in general terms to the use of mask in ritual.

The use of terminology in relation to the ritual use of mask can readily confuse the reader; the word 'masquerade' is used to describe many different events involving the wearing of masks; it is commonly used in relation to masked rituals in many parts of Africa, North and South America, but with its connotations of carnival and formalised stage performances in the Western world, tends to suggest theatricality rather than belief, whereas in this context, the reverse is true.

Stephan clearly emphasises the distinction to be drawn between these approaches:

'....a difference between the masked ritual in which the human wearer and the spirit are considered as identical and the theatre in which the human actor 'playing' a role is different from the character he or she represents on the stage'<sup>8</sup>

Many authors quote examples of instances when a literal transformation is believed to have taken place, for example:

'...among the Idoma of Nigeria "the masked ancestors do not represent a masquerade in the theatrical sense of the word; they really are spirits that have come back among the mortals"<sup>9</sup> Here the word 'representation' ...is discarded...'<sup>10</sup>

In many societies it is also believed that the wearing of a mask can actually alter the individuality of the wearer and even replace the resident spirit with that of another being

'When a mask is worn it hides or alters the appearance of the face, and, in so doing, allows the individual to transform himself into another being.'<sup>11</sup>

## **2. The Habitation of the Spirit: Wearer or Mask?**

Societies vary greatly in the extent to which the mask and the masker are

regarded as having become at one with the spirit of the entity represented and in some cultures the mask is a sacred object, the true home of the spirit, which exerts its power over the wearer, who may become possessed by the spirit of the mask, but, critically, does not necessarily become that spirit. Masks may be defined in a way which frequently excludes the concept of a wearer; the mask is an entity in itself and it is often the case that

'... the knowledge that someone is articulating the mask from within is officially denied..to those not in on the secret'<sup>12</sup>

In the rituals of the Dogon people, the masker is not thought to undergo spiritual transformation; he is simply the '.... anonymous mover of the mask....'<sup>13</sup> (Fig. 106) Similarly, with the Dan people of West Guinea, the spirit which the mask represents is more closely associated with the mask itself rather than the person who owns or wears it; the mask and the costume that hides the wearer are themselves the supernatural being of the mask, the actual presence of that being, rather than its representation. The spirit is equally active in the mask whether it is being worn or not.



Fig. 106 Dogon ritual dance. The Great Mask can be seen in the background

The Sande secret societies of Sierra Leone also believe that it is the mask which is inhabited by the spirit, and Pernet cites an example of a dancer of the Bobo people who, upon completing his ritual dance, made sacrifice to his mask.

' "the sacredness of the mask...derives from...the fact that the divinity considered to be present in the mask and through it, to be acting." The wearer is "depersonalised to the advantage of the mask he animates. In order for there to be a mask (sowiye), man (so) has to erase himself (wiye), that is to say, cease to be himself, shed his individuality"<sup>14</sup>

In all of these cultures, it is apparent that the power of the mask is not perceived as directly transforming the wearer, who does, however, make contact with that power upon donning the mask. Perhaps for this reason, most ritual maskers undergo lengthy initiation, ritual purification and isolation within a single-sex group.

The power inherent in the mask, even when not in use, is seen as potentially dangerous in many societies. In Tibet, among many African tribes (*fig. 107*) and the Iroquois of North America, masks are carefully hidden from public view, to avoid endangering those who might unintentionally meet their gaze. Among the Iroquois the power remains even when the mask is not in use, and anyone seeing a false face is in danger of contracting one of the illnesses the masks are invoked to combat.



*Fig. 107 Masks of the Troh Society, Cameroon, are believed to be so powerful that they must be carried rather than worn.*

In other societies, the mask is perceived as an inert device in itself, but one which can enable the wearer to 'become' the spirit.

'Usually ... the wearer skilfully becomes a "partner" of the character he is impersonating ..... bringing it alive by his movements and poses ....'<sup>15</sup>

In these instances, the mask has a dual function in both concealing the identity of the wearer and at the same time activating the mask; this combination is believed to result in the manifestation of the supernatural force evoked through the activated mask. By this process the wearer is believed to be in direct contact with the spirit force of the mask, which renders him vulnerable to that force, unless all the traditional practices associated with that mask or ritual are scrupulously observed.

The mask may be the provider of the power which enables the masker to be transformed into the supernatural being. The face of the masker is transformed in appearance by the mask, and the body, too, changes because it is aware:

'... that a new being flows in from the mask .... (and) .... seizes upon the body and transforms it so that there is no inconsistency between the new face and the new body. Thus mask acts as an instrument of metamorphosis....'<sup>16</sup>

This unity of body and mask may in some cases lead to a psychological dependence on the part of the wearer on the character he portrays; his own identity is subsumed into that of the supernatural character he portrays. He may behave as if in a dream or trance.

In many cultures this is seen as more than simply representing the spirit of the mask; the personality of the individual is negated when he puts on a mask and costume. In some cultures, the mask is regarded as an instrument for driving the personality out of the wearer's body and allowing a spirit to take possession of it. Keith Johnstone cites societies in which dead people were 'reincarnated' as masks:

'The back of the skull is sliced off, a stick rammed in from ear to ear, and someone dances, gripping the stick with his teeth...'<sup>17</sup>

Johnstone observes laconically that it is difficult to imagine the intensity of that experience.

As the wearer becomes imbued by and transformed into the spirit, as far as

observers are concerned, he too, in many cases, will believe in his altered state.

'His personal character and behaviour are modified, fused with the spirit he creates and becomes.'<sup>18</sup>

Pernet's suggestion that the spirit is actually created by the wearer of the mask is intriguing, suggesting as it seems to that an individual can be taken over by something which stems from within his own imagination; a familiar concept to Western psychologists, but manifested within the complex system of beliefs and practices of mask ritual.

In Balinese masked ritual, it is believed that the wearer of the mask can become possessed by the spirit of the being it represents, and that if this occurs, the wearer



has proved himself worthy of this divine visitation. The mask is seen as a vessel for a spirit, bringing the spirits to the people in visual form, and the wearer must bend to the will of the spirit and perform in the way the spirit dictates. If the divine energy which inspires the wearer becomes dissipated, ceremonies are conducted to re-charge the mask's spiritual powers.

Fig. 108 Balinese Barong performer

The British mask practitioner John Wright described in an interview<sup>19</sup> a project in Bali when he was working with Balinese actors who were involved in a very simple exercise starting and stopping to a rhythm; he suddenly realised they were all in a trance state. Working with masks in a mask culture, Wright feels enormous humility and awareness that he is there to learn; he has worked on projects with a Balinese priest who enabled him to observe the group playing masks in different ceremonies. In Balinese dance performance/ritual, the trance

state is the accepted norm, experienced even by tiny children.

The Native American people of the Northwest coast identify the mask itself as the seat of supernatural power, and believe that when a mask is worn in ritual, it is the spirit which inhabits the mask itself which performs rather than the human who dons the mask. Ulrich comments that the wearer has become,

'.... something beyond the human, and through this metamorphosis the audience, too, is transformed. It is elevated from the routine duties of daily life, and transported into a different plane of reality where contradiction, conflict and ambiguity are resolved into a fundamental unity. In this "altered state" shared by both the masker and the audience, basic truths and values are rediscovered as personal desires are set aside in favour of a common good.'<sup>20</sup>



Fig. 109 Hopi Rain dance

### 3 Motivation for Transformation

It will probably never be clear exactly how metamorphoses of this kind take place, but laying aside the possibility of supernatural factors, one more mundane explanation centres on man's own needs and inner desire to

'....escape from himself, to enrich himself in new types of existences, to incarnate himself in multiple personalities, and in order to feel its fullness and powers multiply, to identify himself with the demoniac or celestial forces of the universe....masks can play this role because (they are) essentially an instrument of metamorphosis'<sup>21</sup>



In the ritual use of mask, it is probable that many seek transformation for altogether more altruistic reasons. In British Columbia, where double or triple 'transformation' masks illustrate the spiritual links between mankind, the animal and spirit worlds, it is believed that humans hold the responsibility for maintaining Cosmic Order. This they undertake by transforming themselves, through the power of the mask, into spirits or animals through



the agency of the mask, and by performing the dances and rituals belonging to the mask spirit. (fig 111)

Fig. 110 'Raven' transformation mask. The external mask, representing a raven, opens to reveal the human being within

'Performances feed the spirits as the spirits feed humankind, and the mask becomes an icon for the interdependence of the forces which collectively comprise the Cosmos.'<sup>22</sup>

Among the American tribes of the Northwest coast, mask spirits are believed to be the souls of dead men which can enter living and inanimate objects, particularly masks, so that, through the masks, men can maintain spiritual contact with dead forebears, who, through their very death achieve divine status.

Other important factors are man's need for catharsis, which is perhaps achieved more effectively through masked protagonists, and to the strong links between mask, delirium and frenzy, which may induce a trance state. Many mask rituals involve lengthy preparation which often includes fasting and feats of endurance; Native American mask rituals traditionally involved dancing which lasted for days, which, through lack of sleep and food, sometimes led to hallucinations on the part of the dancers. These factors could certainly enhance the sensation of being 'ridden' or possessed by the mask, of transfiguration into a new being.

#### 4. Physical Transformation and Rites of Passage

Mask rituals in many societies are concerned with rites of passage, which are directly related to physical changes in the body, for example at puberty and death. These rituals mark critical milestones in the lives of men and women within a society, and may include initiation into adult life; secret societies, marriage, and funerals are events that are often marked by masked ritual. It is significant that masks are used at times like puberty, when a young man is welcomed as an adult member of the group, and when other changes may be brought about by physical maturation and ritual



*Fig. 111 Ibo Maiden spirit mask*

embellishments like tattooing, scarification or body painting. Masks are seen as part of the adult way of life, and may have been kept hidden from the uncircumcised, so young men and, in some communities, women, are eager to enter into the mysteries associated with the masks.

In the initiation rites of the Eskimo Kwakiul Hamatsa society the young initiate really believes that the Cannibal Bird Monster is a monster, while the shaman who wears the mask does not feel the power of transformation within himself; the spirit resides within the mask, and the shaman uses it to commune with the world of the spirits.

An elderly woman from the Eagle clan of the Northwest coast describes the process of preparation for initiation as follows:

'...a young man preparing for his initiation into manhood by fasting and purifying himself in the forest, in order to get in touch with those powers that would define his adult identity. Eventually he returns to the village

and enters the ceremonial hall. He dons the spirit mask and performs the dance as it was revealed to him during his time in the forest and becomes human. When he finishes the dance and removes the mask, he is no longer a boy but instead is an adult.<sup>23</sup>

Members of some of the Sande female secret society of West Africa use masks as an important part of the rituals which surround female circumcision; these strikingly beautiful helmet masks are described by Ulrich as evoking

'.... the image of a 'larva' or chrysalis, linking the transformation wrought by the chrysalis as a metaphor for the transformation of a girl into a woman through initiation.'<sup>24</sup> (fig. 112)



Fig. 112 Sande dancers

a poetic and curiously apposite simile.

### 5. Spontaneity, Preparation and Secrecy



One of the dilemmas associated with the concept of mask and transformation is that many people assume that the performers in a mask ritual put on their masks and are swept away in an ecstatic dance choreographed by the spirit of the mask. In fact, most mask ritual dances are complex and detailed, centred on ancient traditions and often involving large numbers of dancers performing in synchrony; they take many months of painstaking rehearsal:

'.... mask wearers often take a great deal of trouble to learn and rehearse, sometimes for months, steps, synchronised combined

Fig. 113 Initiate with mentor, Chokwe - 34 -

movements or learning texts, in order to perform, sometimes in perfect synchrony ...far from being allowed to give free rein to his darker instincts, the dancer must exercise total concentration and be perfectly conscious of what he does, in order to follow the steps and rhythms prescribed by tradition.'<sup>25</sup>

In Nigeria, both Ibo and Abua boys train intensively for up to six months, learning the secrets of the societies and practising masked dances and plays. In North America, the Zuni people attend rehearsals, meetings and prayers for a year prior to rituals involving kachina masks.

## 6. Belief and Acceptance

It is apparent that many spectators of mask ritual believe, to a greater or lesser degree, that what they are seeing is the spirit invoked, and not a performer in a mask. In many tribal societies, women and uninitiated men are deemed to believe in the spirit's presence in the mask, thus Bastin cites the masks of the Ngangela of Angola, which are

'... spirits in the eyes of women and the uncircumcised, and custom takes careful pains that these apparitions cannot be seen save from far away.'<sup>26</sup>

If the majority of those who witness masked ritual believe that the mask is indeed the spirit (and it is important to remember that women and uninitiated children will be the bulk of the population of most villages), what of those who wear the masks? It is interesting to speculate to what extent they believe that they have been possessed by a spirit from another world. Are they aware that their personality has been transformed, or are they conscious of playing a role? Many report remarkable experiences after taking part in a ritual, but Levy-Bruhl suggests that

'the actors often take recourse to 'tricks' to delude the uninformed spectators that the mysterious beings that they see dancing before them are the spirits themselves and not their neighbours in the flesh.'<sup>27</sup>

But many scholars agree that masked performers too, to some extent, believe that

they have undergone a transformation, or as Levy Bruhl sceptically comments, '...share in the illusion that they create.'<sup>28</sup> It is possible that this feeling may be the result of the euphoria arising from the effects of the ritual on the community, which are attributable to the masker's participation and evocation or creation of the spirit.

'The issue is not whether spectators know the identity of the masker, or even acknowledge that there is a masker articulating the performance from within the concealing artifice of the mask. It is the mask and not the masker which is the point, the performance and not the performer.'<sup>29</sup>



*Fig. 114 Initiates display their masks after an initiation ceremony*

Although, in the late twentieth century, there may be increased awareness on the part of spectators of the fact that masks are worn by performers, belief is still present, and the emphasis tends to be centred 'not on what is concealed but on what is created.'<sup>30</sup>

## **7. The Power of Masks of Other Cultures Over the Uninitiated Spectator**

The power of the mask to transform the wearer may create ambivalent feelings in those who see them in use; many perceive them as instruments of illusion, which can bring about mysterious, even magical changes, and bring to life legendary heroes and powerful spirits; but equally, in many cultures and historical periods, they have been feared as perpetrators of lies, deception and seduction, and '... instruments of man's surrender to the forces of instinct and sorcery'.<sup>31</sup> It is also the case that masks are increasingly regarded as works of art,

and fine examples change hands for enormous sums of money in the world's leading salerooms. Western art-lovers tend to assume that the

'...attitudes of the mask makers regarding the value and effect of their individual creations corresponds to our own...forgetting the mask is only complete when part of an entire costume and seen in its natural setting accompanied by appropriate music...'<sup>32</sup>

and often unwittingly, breaking many or all of the taboos which surround the artefacts they collect; the simple acts of displaying the mask to public view by hanging it on a wall in a museum or private home, allowing it to be seen by the uninitiated or by women, would be considered anathema by many of the peoples from whose cultures the masks originate.

Despite this lack of awareness of, or scepticism about, the conventions that surround the use of masks in their countries of origin, much of the compelling power of the ritual mask can be sensed by the contemporary Western observer. Riley vividly evokes the effects of the mask in describing:

'The vitality of the image, the urgent forces which promoted its fashioning, the richness and variety of invention in the use of materials...stir our imagination and arouse our sympathetic emotions. We can sense the emanation of the spirit... projected..through the compelling and mobile gaze of the mask.'<sup>33</sup>

## **8. Conclusion**

The power of the mask in ritual practices, occurring on every continent and dating from pre-history to the present day, is clear. The relationship between the wearer and the mask is less immediately clear, ranging as it does, in the words of Pernet, along:

'... a continuum ranging from the simple dramatisation of a character or a mythic narrative to a possible 'actual transformation' of the wearer, including a number of cases where the 'supernatural' power or element is present, completely or in part, in the mask, its accessories and the costume.'<sup>34</sup>

What is certain is the profound effect that the mask has, not only on the wearer, but also the spectators of the ritual, and indeed on many who know little of the spirits represented, or embodied, by the mask.

## CHAPTER 2: SECTION 2

### B. MASK AND THE TRANCE STATE

It seems likely that, during masked rituals, performers enter a state of altered consciousness, similar to that of a hypnotic trance. Many mask rituals involve maskers in extended preparatory rites which may involve social isolation, long periods of ritual dance and chanting, abstention from food and sexual intercourse, and sometimes the ingestion of hallucinogenic substances. These, combined with the effects of the disguise itself, all contribute to the masker's release from the constraints of daily life.

The process of the negation of the wearer's personality upon assuming a mask, which leaves the wearer in a trancelike condition, open to any influences, has already been described.

Roger Caillois describes the masker's progression from performance to possession, stating that '...the wearer is not taken in at the beginning...', an interesting choice of expression suggesting that the masker is duped or self-deluded as the ritual continues; he goes on to describe the way in which he is quickly overcome by the frenzy of the ritual and then

*'...incarnates, temporarily, the frightening powers, he mimes them, he identifies with them, and soon alienated, falling victim to the delirium, he believes himself truly to be the god whose form he first attempted to emulate with the help of a masterly or childish disguise...this is the victory of pretence; the simulation results in a possession that is not simulated.'* Caillois then describes the way in which the masker emerges, dazed and exhausted, from the delirium, left with '.... only a confused, bewildered memory of what happened inside him, without him.' <sup>35</sup>

- a poignant final phrase, echoed by a number of other writers and mask users.

The trance state is commonly associated with ritual uses of mask, but it is also an important concept in relation to mask and theatre, particularly during the twentieth century, when the trance state has been utilised by many practitioners in training actors and in devising new and original work. This will be discussed in more detail in the following section.



## CHAPTER 2 SECTION 3

### C. MASKS AND TRANSFORMATION IN THE THEATRE

#### 1. Parallels with Ritual

As cultures changed and evolved with the development of 'civilisation', in some communities the mask lost its exclusively religious connotations, and came to be esteemed for its theatrical qualities. Some sacred rites became adapted into secular entertainments, thus losing their powers to influence the elements or make contacts with the spirit world.

Nevertheless, performers who use masks tend to believe that the mask has a special quality which is not shared by their other props and costumes, a spiritual life which is regarded as sacred by the ritual masqueraders of Africa and North America, and which the actors in Japanese Noh plays and Commedia dell'Arte regard as secular, but equally important.

Ulrich points out that in Latin, the word "larva", used by the Mende people today to describe masked initiates, was used by the Romans to refer to either a mask or a spirit or ghost.

'Thus, the caterpillar is a mask that the butterfly wears until it is transformed into a moth. The caterpillar does not simply change, it becomes something else, a totally different identity.'<sup>36</sup>

Implicit in this metaphor is the suggestion that the wearer of a mask metamorphoses into an entirely different being, perhaps a more delicate or spiritual entity. The use of the Latin word, and the importance in the Roman theatre of the use of masks, raises further questions in the discussion of masks, transformation and the transition between ritual and theatre.

Is it possible to trace a chronological link between the ritual masker, translated by the spirit of the mask, and the actor of the late twentieth century? It is apparent that there are many contrasts between the two situations, but although the intentions and the end product are very different, there are some similarities in

terms of the demands made by the mask, and some of the effects on the performer, so it is possible for parallels to be drawn.

## 2. Surrender to the Mask

Sometimes the masked actor begins to believe in the reality of the mask and character it portrays, echoing what is accepted in many forms of ritual in theatrical performance. This is what the famous mask-maker of the 1920s, Benda, describes as 'the masquerader's delusion'<sup>37</sup> and he goes on to elaborate:

'Not only is one who puts on a mask seemingly transformed into the being the mask portrays but he himself is aware of this strange metamorphosis. Those who look at him are puzzled by the change in his appearance and in his behaviour, for the wearer of a mask yields subconsciously to the irresistible impulse to act like the being the mask typifies....he cannot get rid of the weird delusion that he really IS that being; he does not act any more like himself, but assumes the character and every movement of that creature.'<sup>38</sup>

The assumption here is that the actor willingly surrenders to the power of the mask, but this is not always the case; many actors who are not committed to mask work, tend to be sceptical both about their dramatic effectiveness and their ability to elicit any special qualities in performance, seeing the mask as a liability hampering movement and eyesight. Some sceptics experience tremendous surprise and delight on first undertaking mask work; others remain sceptical. Other actors have a predisposition for the mask; these are often people with an exploratory approach to performance and indeed to life in general. Bachelard states '.....the mask is the will to have a new future, a will not only to command one's own face, but to reform one's face.....'<sup>39</sup>

One phenomenon that has frequently been noted, is the mask's ability to transform the work of the actor into something unexpected and often pleasing. 'If he has never before shown any histrionic ability he surprises us by acting convincingly and with uncommon zest.'<sup>40</sup> This is sometimes attributed to the actor's tendency to surrender, to let the mask take over, thus losing his own inhibitions. It may also be ascribed to the fact that the actor has a clearly defined persona to espouse in the shape of the character mask, but does not account for

the same effect with neutral or featureless masks, or, even more intriguingly, with a mask the features of which the actor has not seen.

Early this century, when interest in the mask was revived, Jacques Copeau spoke of the mysterious dialogue that takes place between the mask and the actor:

'The actor who performs under a mask receives from this papier-mache object the reality of his part. He is controlled by it and has to obey it unreservedly. Hardly has he put it on when he feels a new being flowing into himself; a being the existence of which he had never before even suspected. It is not only his face that has changed, it is all his personality, it is the very nature of his reactions, so that he experiences emotions he could neither have felt or feigned without its aid. If he is a dancer, the whole style of his dance, if he is an actor, the very tone of his voice, will be dictated by this mask....a being, without life until he adopts it, which comes from without to seize upon him and proceeds to substitute itself for him."<sup>41</sup>

Copeau's words seem to suggest that the mask has a hypnotic effect on its wearer, and indeed the association between masks and the trance state has been a long one, in many cultures, from pre-history to the present day. Copeau is not alone in suggesting that a mask is more than a shield that enables its wearer that anonymity which enables him/her to speak the truth, but an autonomous entity which can impose its will on the individual.



Mask practitioner John Wright believes that the phenomenon of transformation is culture specific. He feels strongly that,

'Western culture doesn't believe in a god which takes over the personality of the worshipper, or respect types of performance where the actors are taken over. In our society, the mask reveals nothing that is not already there somewhere in the wearer's personality.'<sup>42</sup>

*Fig. 115 John Wright* For example, the aggressive wearer of the Trestle 'bully' studio mask is revealing something which already exists in his/her personality, however deeply suppressed and apparently alien to the individual. He describes the concept of a trance-like state in western performers as 'nonsense'

because he believes it to be a cultural phenomenon. He feels that Western performers can create a sense of 'otherness', a slightly different perception, rather than a trance state.

Conversely, mask-maker Malcolm Knight believes that in performance, the mask has a life of its own, whether supernatural or other, that this is an ancient concept, perhaps connected to vitalism, but entirely separate from modern theatre tradition, where masks are perceived as functioning tools, used to cover the face to create a disguise. Knight inclines towards the former approach, suggesting that the mask can create personality change rather than character dislocation.

### 3. Transformation in the Mask

A mask, when not in use, is an inanimate object; some are designed and made to express specific emotions of rage or joy, but far more tend to have in repose, an enigmatic expression, not related specifically to any human emotion, described by Paul Gerbauer as '... somewhere between tears and laughter'.<sup>43</sup> 'Neutral' masks, in plain white leather, papier mache or plastics, are particularly known for their ambiguous, androgynous expression. Stephan suggests that to attribute expression to a mask is essentially both illegitimate and ethnocentric. It could, however, be argued that whereas this may be true in some cases, in others interpretation of the 'expression' of a mask can give rise to highly creative experimentation.

A frequent comment made by audiences at masked performances is that the masks appear to change expression. This is especially true of masks with delicate and subtle complexities of expression, in which the viewer may identify a blend of anger and sorrow, or a mixture of sadness with a half-smile. The movement of such a mask in performance enables the audience to see it from a number of different angles, and in subtly changing lighting conditions, first one and then another expression appears to dominate, and this, enhanced by the body language of the actor, create a vivid impression of the changing expressions of a living entity. Movement or positions of the head, neck or shoulders can alter

the meaning of simple facial expressions in the mask, as in the unmasked individual; for example, a frown takes on an entirely different meaning when the head is held up with chin high, suggesting determination or aggression, rather than when the head is bowed, which suggests brooding anxiety. The mask need not be strictly naturalistic in order to achieve this effect; it may be quite simple or cartoon-like.

Himmelheber<sup>44</sup> suggests that

'.... when we see a masked person performing, we understand that some of the expressions of the masked face are totally out of place. The mask, when in action, takes on different roles, each one of which gives it a different expression. It is a completely strange experience to see the mask in action and to have the impression that you are observing all the different expressions belonging to its diverse actions. The mask shows curiosity, has pity on someone, threatens the spectators. This being so the artist gives the mask a neutral expression and leaves the interpretation to the imagination of the spectator.'<sup>45</sup>

It is certainly the case that a hitherto rigid and expressionless mask can leap into expressive life in performance, but this is not usually entirely due to the imagination of the spectator, but also to the combination of the physical and expressive skills of the masker, and the skill with which s/he allows light to play over the features of the mask in performance, thus illuminating its expressions.

Not only the mask itself, but the whole body of the masked being can appear to be transformed physically by the mask. This may be in part because of performance behaviour, which is a natural result of the actor having all facial expression hidden behind the mask, and thus relying on bodily posture and movement to convey all meaning. In addition, the relative proportions of the mask and its wearer are highly significant; if the mask is small, he/she appears taller than average, but a large mask makes the masker appear shorter and more childlike in physique.

#### **4. The Contemporary Maker/Wearer, Mask and Trance**

If the wearer of a mask in a ritual is thought to be possessed by a spirit, whether of an ancestor, god or enemy invoked by the mask, how does this equate with the sensations described by contemporary mask practitioners, actors and students who describe being 'taken over by the mask? Where does that 'spirit' come from in these circumstances, and most specifically, when the wearer has made the mask as either an aesthetic object or an aid to performance, and certainly without the specific intent of evoking a supernatural presence? This issue will be considered in a separate section, *'Makers and Wearer's'*.

#### **5. Transformation and the Audience**

Toby Wilsher of Trestle Theatre Company extends the notion of transformation even further, to include the audience, in his statement that

'..the power of the mask lies in its ability to transform, both actor and audience, to make the experience of an individual acceptance of a change that seems to have taken place.'<sup>46</sup>

In the case of the audience, of course, the transformation takes place in the mind rather than the body, and it could perhaps be described as the change wrought by the creation of belief. This belief may take two forms; firstly the belief in the characters created in the performance; despite their fundamentally non-naturalistic appearance, they evoke great empathy in audiences, and this in turn renders audiences susceptible to the 'messages' conveyed by the piece as a whole.

#### **6. Conclusion**

It is clear that in many societies throughout the world there exists the belief that the mask can translate the person wearing it into something or someone else. This has been observed in the ritual practices of many cultures, in which it is

believed that transformation may occur in the masked performer on a scale ranging from the simplest representation based on purely physical disguise to the assumption by the masker of the actual spirit of the ancestor or spiritual being evoked. This transformation may take place due to the presence of the spirit in the mask itself, or the spirit may be summoned through the medium of the mask; conversely, the spirit may be evoked directly by the wearer rather than by the mask itself. However this altered state occurs, it may lead to the negation of the wearer's own personality as it is replaced by the spirit of the mask.

Underlying this belief are powerful religious and mythical traditions, yet similar experiences of transformation have been described by actors in the contemporary Western theatre, within which no such traditions exist. Audiences, too, report unexpected reactions to the use of masks in performance, including a conviction, expressed by many observers, that masks are observed to change expression when activated by a performer. It is interesting to speculate to what extent the experiences of actors and audiences are 'borrowed' from other, more profound traditions, and whether these experiences are induced by spiritual, psychological or physiological factors. I propose to investigate these phenomena further in chapter four.

## CHAPTER THREE

# APPROACHES TO MASKED PERFORMANCE

### Introduction

When masks are used in performance, whether in a fully masked production, or for certain characters or sequences, the experience of the production is radically different from that of an unmasked performance, for both actors and audience. Actors who perform masked must obey the conventions of the mask in order to communicate effectively with the audience, yet many speak of the powerful and unexpected effects the mask has on their performance. This chapter examines some of the ways in which masks are used in performance, rehearsal, the devising of new drama and the training of actors, in order to establish to what extent the mask retains its power in a performance area which seems divided between mystique and technique.

## A. Rationale for Masked Performance

### 1. Reasons for Using Mask

After a long period of dormancy in the Western tradition, there has been a continuing revival and development of the use of masks in theatre throughout the twentieth century. Part of this new or renewed interest in masks centres upon the desire to rediscover the traditions of the past, brought about by new archeological discoveries and excavations, part by geographical expeditions, the discovery of hitherto unknown cultures and the expansion of Empire. These factors led to the generation of much interest in the use of masks but sometimes led to performances which owed more to archaeological or anthropological reconstruction than to dramatic creativity. In the words of the American mask-maker W.T. Benda:

“The mask will return to the theatre ....., although there is some slight



danger attached to a misconception of its revival and mishandling of its powers.....The theatre may admire the old Greek masks, and those of Japan and India, of Africa and America, but it must not dig in the ground for them; it must not collect them to copy them; it must not waste what power it has as a creator in attending to its fads; it must not play the antiquary.<sup>1</sup>

Although his writings and many of his masks clearly demonstrate the influence of the mask-makers of many centuries and cultures, he stresses that:

'It would be a sad thing...(as all resuscitation in art is so worthless) if masks, sham-Greek in idea and modern in their quality, should be brought into the theatre, appealing only to the curious by creating a subject for small talk.'<sup>2</sup>

He emphasises the importance of creating something which is new and original, specific to performance rather than purely decorative, and expressive of a new age and an openness to change, rather than an attempt to recreate the arts of the past, or of another culture.

'The mask must only return to the stage in order to restore expression .... and it must be a creation, not a copy.'<sup>3</sup>

He urges that:

'..... it is not the Greek mask which has to be resuscitated; rather it is the world's mask which is going to be created.'<sup>4</sup>



Fig. 116 Benda Don Quixote

Another area of concern is the obverse of the archaeological approach; the use of mask purely for the sake of experiment. Mask in twentieth century Europe is often associated with experimental theatre and thus with revolutions in both style and content, as for example in the works of Meyerhold or Schlemmer. The danger lies in the adoption of masks for their novelty value, rather than for any ability to express the ideas of the director, or appropriateness to the content of the piece. This is what Benda describes as:

' - the danger of the innovator. As art must not be antique, neither can it

be up-to-date .... To move incessantly towards this truth is the aim of artists, and those of the theatre must not lag behind.'<sup>5</sup>

Many playwrights and actors seem to use masks in the search for truth rather than for effect. The concept of concealing the outer reality in order to reveal the inner reality is widespread, particularly among writers. Eugene O'Neill, many of whose plays involved or even centred on masks, declared that,

'The use of the mask will be discovered eventually to be the freest solution of the modern dramatic problem as to how - with the greatest possible dramatic clarity and economy of means - he can express the profound hidden conflicts of the human mind which the probings of psychology continue to disclose to us'.<sup>6</sup>

The freedom generated by the mask gives licence to all involved in the performance; the actor, the director and, not least, the audience. Boale suggests:

'We revel in the mask breaking society's mores. It is the state of mind we would all wish for, beyond the bounds of politics, good evil, questions of morality and taboos but which is impractical in everyday life. It gives rise to cathartic laughter as we licence the fool to misrule.'<sup>7</sup>

Peter Hall, in an interview for the Independent newspaper, makes it clear that his involvement with masked theatre originates in the belief that the mask enables the actor to convey emotions which would otherwise prove too disturbing for audiences:

'If you scream with a naked face, the response of the audience is to recoil, but if you tell them about a scream through a mask, it's like a Munch painting isn't it? Silent and frozen and absolutely horrifying.'<sup>8</sup>

In another context, he enlarges on the same topic:

'It's possible to scream and sob and be very anguished within mask because the repulsive factor which you have with the naked face doesn't exist, so you move into almost surrealistic areas of emotion; heightened areas of emotion .... which is bigger, stronger, more acute.'<sup>9</sup>

Hall's repeated theme is that the mask has the potential to release the feelings of the actor and gain a heightened emotional plane, while shielding the audience

from the unpalatable aspects of that emotional power and channelling them into a powerful, but more controlled form. He quotes Tony Harrison as comparing the mask to a welder's oxyactetylene shield which

' .... enables you then to do something which is so white hot that you wouldn't dare to look at it without it'.<sup>10</sup>

## **2. Approaches to Masked Performance**

Masked performance is infinitely diverse, but for the purpose of this study I propose to divide contemporary theatre masking into two broad categories; the stylised approach, where masks may be extremely abstract in their design, or may form part of a ritualistic or lavish spectacle, and the more representational approach, where masks take on the naturalistic characteristics of a human face, or those of an animal.

One thing that is common to all masks is their inately static nature, the fixed expression which the actor must animate through the expressive movement of head and body, so that the audience comes to believe that the expression on the face of the mask alters to reflect changing moods and circumstances. Simply putting on a mask, hiding the actor's face, seems to create a different focus, drawing all the expressive energy into the body and limbs of the performer some of which might otherwise be channelled into facial expression.

For some actors, the wearing of a mask attains a spiritual dimension founded in a belief in its power to transform; others, while noting the changes affected in their work by the mask, achieve these outcomes through physical discipline and rigorous training.

### **(i) Masks as Spectacle**

The mask designer and practitioner Benda, famous for the 1920s masked extravaganzas like *'The Greenwich Village Follies'*, (fig. 117) believed that the only appropriate context for the use of masks in the theatre was

'... in a specially conceived mask drama where all the personae wear masks, where the whole mise-en-scene, the costumes, the acting, are as frankly artificial as are the masks and have the same degree of significance, exaggeration, simplification and style.'<sup>11</sup>



Fig. 118 Benda: *The Golden Peacock*

The elaborate, exquisitely staged and choreographed nature of many of his productions did indeed provide an

ideal context for the masks he designed, but it could be claimed that design and spectacle were their main attraction, rather than dramatic content, narrative or the communication of any kind of message to the audience.

Nevertheless, Benda's statement has significance beyond the realm of theatre as pure entertainment. Many practitioners working in styles very different from that of Benda would agree with him about the importance of masked theatre as an art-form in its own right, with its own codes, and would object strongly to the superimposition of masks onto what is otherwise naturalistic acting and staging.

## (ii) Masks in Naturalistic Performance

There are, nonetheless, many precedents in 20th century theatre for the use of masks in theatrical productions which are, in many other respects, naturalistic in style, and in fact this can create an exciting dissonance in the minds of the audience. (Fig. 120) For example, close-fitting and comparatively mobile latex portrait masks may be used to create a simple confusion of identities. However, it must be emphasised that although masks may be used to simulate a naturalistic situation, the mode of performance can never be genuinely naturalistic.

Sometimes a masked sequence may be included in an otherwise naturalistic play,

for example, the masked ball in *'Romeo and Juliet'*, or the masquerade in the R.S.C.'s 1997 *'Camino Real'*. (fig. 119) The masks used in such sequences clearly hold strong symbolic and practical significance in relation to the plot, and customarily provide a diverting dramatic spectacle, too.



Fig. 119 *'Camino Real'*; masquerade sequence R.S.C. 1997

### 3. Masks and the Creation of Dramatic Performance

Masks are often used in rehearsal, even for non-masked productions, because they aid concentration and focus, and also help the director to view the work of each actor dispassionately, and identify assets and idiosyncracies. For this reason, it is always important to have an observer of mask work to direct, comment or otherwise support the actors in successfully animating the mask and conveying to the audience characters, relationships and situations.

Even more significant is the use of mask in the inception of a devised piece of theatre. This approach has been used by a number of twentieth century practitioners and theatre companies. Mask-maker and performer Michel Saint-Denis describes his pioneering work with young actors:

'In getting the students to wear (masks), we were not aiming at aesthetic results nor was it our intention to revive the art of mime. To us, a mask was a temporary instrument which we offered to the curiosity of the young actor, in the hope that it might help his concentration, strengthen his inner feelings, diminish his self-consciousness, and lead him to develop his powers of outward expression.'<sup>12</sup>

## MASKS, FANTASY AND NATURALISTIC PERFORMANCE



*Fig. 117 Masks and fantasy: Mask by W.T. Benda for 'The Greenwich Follies, 1919'*



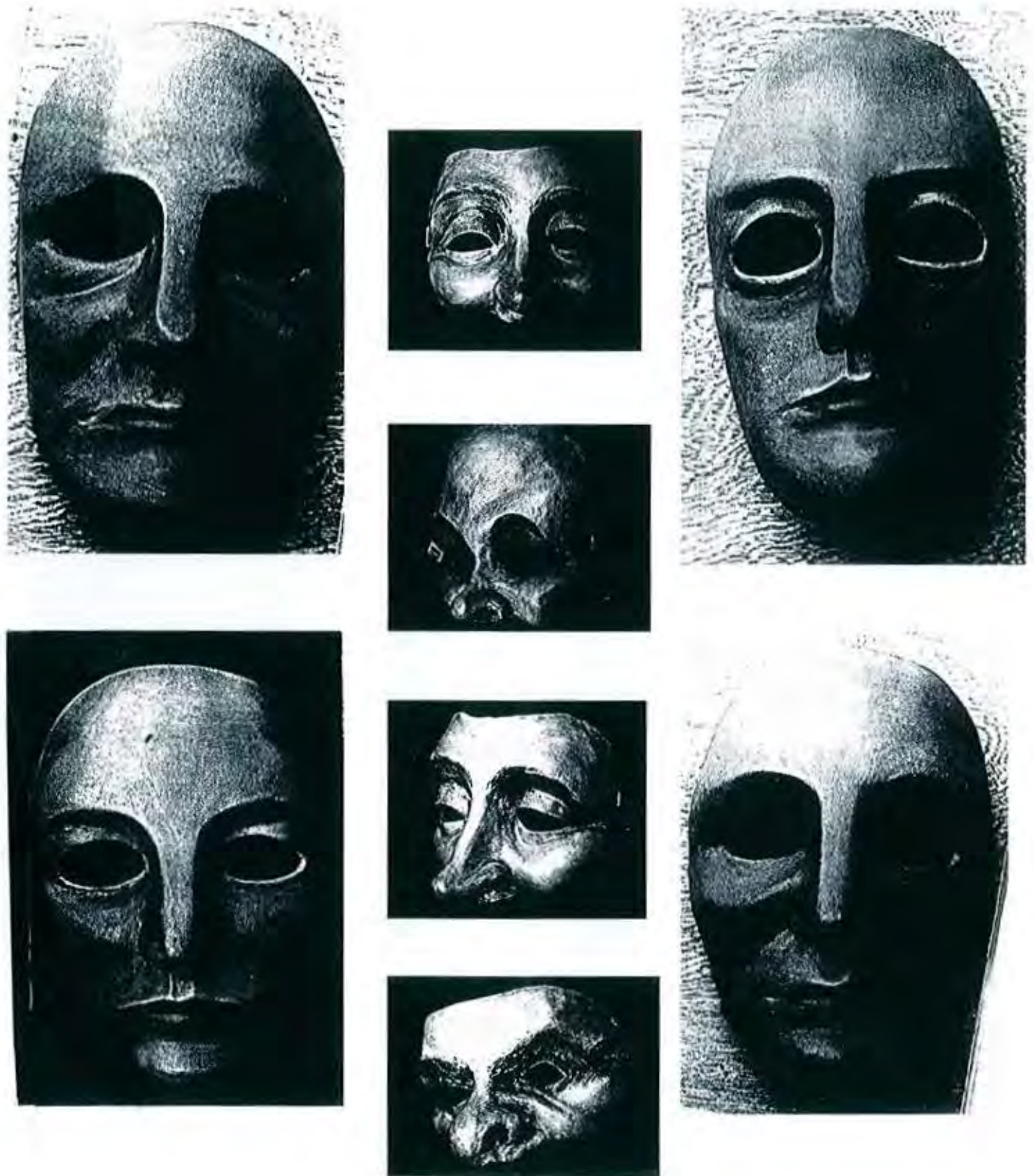
*Fig. 120 Masks and identity in a naturalistic production: Eugene O'Neill's 'The Great God Brown'*

MICHEL ST DENIS AS MASKED PERFORMER



*Fig. 121 St. Denis as Knie in L'illusion, 1926*

# ROYAL COURT STUDIO MASKS



*Figs 122-129 Neutral and half masks made by St Denis for the Royal Court Theatre, and used by Devine, Johnstone and Gaskill in their workshops at the Royal Court Studio.*



Ophaboom Theatre, a group who specialise in devised performances in the tradition of the Commedia, centre many of their performances round the key character of the Zanni.

'Fundamental to our maskwork is the state we call 'the madness of the mask' where the character operates with a different logic to everyday thought. This state is reached by the physical wearing of the mask. He reacts to a rhythm, a dance, a visual pattern, a stage occurrence, a noise or an impulse from the actor, which then evolves into the logical conclusion for the mask.'<sup>13</sup>

For Trestle Theatre Company, all of whose work is company devised,

'(... the masks) .... are part of the creation process. It's not like learning a script, saying lines, being in character. The performer must actually create a good deal of what happens. Whilst it limits the kind of work you can do, it enables you to see some work in a different light, to approach it from different angles. It extends the creative force by requiring you to make your own work.'<sup>14</sup>

Toby Wilsher goes on to describe the ways in which Trestle Theatre Company use masks in the devising of their own plays; where their approach seems to have evolved from one which centred almost entirely on the masks, to more widely ranging strategies. Early productions like '*Hanging Around*', '*Plastered*', (Fig. 130) and '*A Slight Hitch*'

'... were created in rehearsal by the masks, having first decided on a fruitful situation and made a set of masks.'<sup>15</sup>



Fig. 130 Trestle Theatre Company, '*Plastered*'

Later productions were initially written as stories, for which a set of masks would be made, and the dramatic structure and characters would evolve from this point through improvisational work,

'Sometimes we are inspired by items in the news...some other piece of art....or a short story that can be adapted by the group. .... Our recent work has started with a simple storyline, that can be told in just eight or nine points. We then break this story up into scenes...and ...stage those scenes as a series of basic images. We will then flesh out the structure .... by improvisation in rehearsal. Much of this work is done both in and out of masks. Our observational work starts with a situation we feel is rich in possibilities, i.e. the pub, the classroom, the day of a wedding etc. Improvisation is master here, with the piece being largely written by the masks.'<sup>16</sup>

The Horse and Bamboo Theatre Company (*fig 131*) also introduce masks into preparatory work for a production at an early stage, during experimental work on the project, and actors are required to audition in a stock 'tall head' mask. There is a long rehearsal process - around eleven weeks - for each production, during which the masks are made, and all members of the company are involved in making costumes, scenery, props and puppets. The designs of the masks sometimes evolve in response to the way a character develops in rehearsal, and their mask-maker and director, Bob Firth, is open to ideas from other members of the company. Because of this developmental approach, the actors may rehearse with other masks during early stages of rehearsal. (*Figs 132-133*)



*Fig. 131 Horse and Bamboo on tour*

In using masks for devising theatre, it is important to remember that they need not necessarily remain a central feature of the drama.

'But one must always ask oneself, 'why use masks?' on each production, to ensure that they're not just banged in as a good idea, but are actually used to enhance the work in some way....'<sup>17</sup>

HORSE AND BAMBOO THEATRE COMPANY



*Fig. 132 Horse and Bamboo Theatre Company  
'tall head' masks from 'The Legend of the  
Creaking Floorboard'*



*Fig. 133 Horse and Bamboo Theatre Company  
The Little World*

This latter point, the need for a constant vigilance to ensure that the use of the mask does not simply become a habit, or worse, a gimmick, is central to the effective use of masks in any production, but especially in a production which is devised using masks. There may come a time when it is necessary to the evolution of the piece, to lay the mask aside and continue to develop the performance with unmasked actors.

#### **4. Mask Techniques**

##### **(i) Introductory exercises**

It is usual to commence mask-work by using preparatory warm-ups and exercises designed to prepare actors in a number of different ways; to aid concentration and relaxation, to develop the ability to communicate intentions and emotions through bodily posture and gesture rather than vocal and facial expression, to study the nature of facial expression itself and the ways in which it communicates, in order to absorb and reflect the expression of the masks used. (Figs.137-41) Much time is spent on exercises designed to develop awareness of the essential interrelationship between face and body movement and on the enhancement of physical skills, focus and audience orientation, before masks are used at all.

##### **(ii) Early mask work**

Every practitioner has a different method of introducing the wearing of masks to groups with little previous experience in this field; some exciting work can be developed through the use of very simple card or paper masks, paper bags or other 'rubbish' masks. John Rudlin describes Jacques Copeau's introduction of maskwork to his company:

'Real progress was made .... when, picking up on the implications of his encounter with Craig, Copeau used masks for the first time for training (as opposed to occasional performance effects) in 1921. At first he used just a stocking or a handkerchief to blot out the features of the student in order to create a need for physical rather than facial expression.<sup>18</sup>

# APPROACHES TO MASKED PERFORMANCE



*Fig. 136 Copeau as masked performer*



*Fig. 134 Jacques Lecoq holding a Commedia dell'Arte mask*



*Fig. 135 Jacques Lecoq*

# WORKSHOPS WITH TRESTLE THEATRE COMPANY 1993 AND 1995

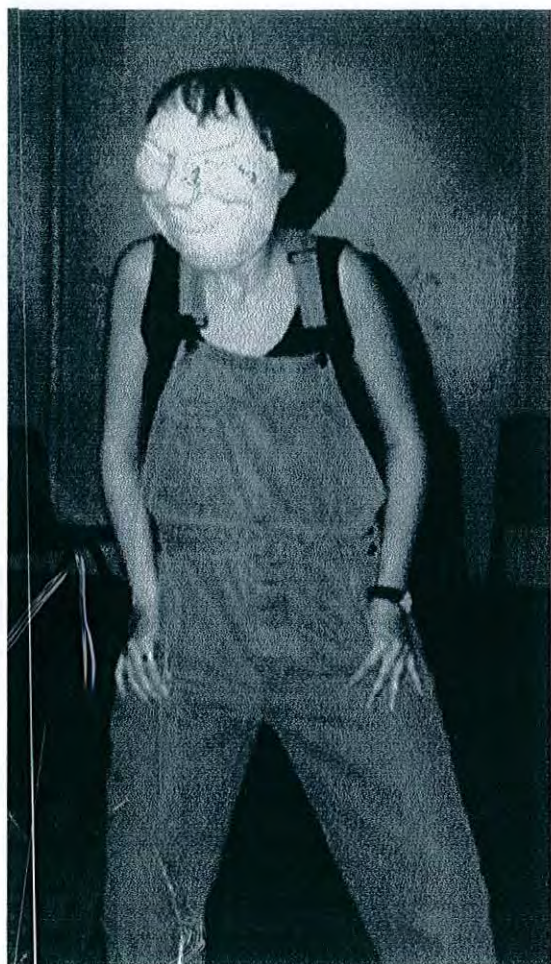


Fig. 140 (above) introductory mask exercise.



Figs. 139 Above and top: finding the face and physicality



Fig 141 Developing the stance appropriate to the mask.

In the 1990s, it is difficult for students to dissociate stocking masks from images of gangsters and bank-robbers, but when these associations are cast aside, creative and original work can be achieved. Less evocative are simple cardboard tubes, plain featureless card masks, or neutral masks. Today, basic neutral masks are available from theatrical costumers' or fancy dress suppliers; in Copeau's studio, the students created their own:

'... they were given some classes by a sculptor, Albert Marque. They learned how to take precise measurements of each other's faces and then make a positive from which the individual character traits could be removed before taking a papier mache impression. Thus each student had their own, well-fitting full-face mask to work with: a mask which evoked no particular characteristic or mood but neutralised the identity of the wearer, thus removing personal preoccupations and placing the resulting figure in an objective context.<sup>19</sup> (Fig. 136)

### **(iii) Exercises of the Neutral mask**

The neutral mask offers the performer a significant challenge because of its very simplicity, blandness and impersonal qualities.

The neutral mask is the exact opposite of the expressive mask. It expresses absolutely nothing. It may be masculine or feminine but its unique characteristic is the absence of connotated emotion. By simply stamping this neutral face on the student's countenance he can frown, squint and sweat inside the mask all he likes, but there is no expressive reaction. By watching mutual trial and error, the students begin to learn to detach themselves from emotional habit and enter a different realm of emotional consciousness through a precious mastery of the body as the vehicle of expression.<sup>20</sup> (Figs. 134-135)

This very lack of expression can itself be disconcerting. Prior to beginning work with neutral masks, some students at Gateshead College (*Appendix V*) indicated that they found neutral masks disturbing because of their absence of emotion. They found the gender ambiguity equally disconcerting, but felt that one important characteristic of neutral masks was that because they did not physically represent any character type, they allowed the audience to project their own ideas about the characters.

The characteristics inherent in the mask mean that the actor has to work hard,

yet with subtlety, to make the observer see beyond the blank impersonal beauty of the mask. Marie Helene Copeau describes the early stages of Jacques Copeau's mask workshops, during which the students initially remained motionless, simply '.... letting the mask be.', after which they explored simple poses and everyday movements, before returning to immobility. This experience led them to describe

'.... a power of unknown security - a sort of balance and consciousness of each gesture and oneself....' in which the ego was '.... subsumed to the id, ready, if required, to select a new ego for portrayal without the interpolation of self-interest.'<sup>21</sup>

Exercises of the neutral mask encourage actors to concentrate on the microcosm, to slow down their movements and develop their own internal energy. A student on the B.A. Performing Arts course at Gateshead College (*Appendix 1*) observed:

'....we slowly - very slowly raised our arms at either side of our bodies up towards the sky until our hands almost touched and then brought them back down again. The movements we used were so slow that they were hardly visible to the naked eye. The extraordinary consequence was that everyone's arms appeared to have extended far beyond their actual size and capabilities, this was due to the extended energy field we had created in our exercises throughout the morning. Our own personal spaces had grown and our auras also increased in size.'<sup>22</sup> (*figs. 142-5*)

Actors are enabled to work freely with the mask in developing codes of movement and behaviour which are not tied to the concept of developing a character:

'....it did feel funny in the fact that no character is expected of you. Normally there is a pressure to take on a character.'<sup>23</sup>

The neutral masks, although uniform in size, shape and colour, appear to take on different characteristics as a result of the ways in which they are animated by performers:

'As a spectator this was interesting to watch as each mask, although neutral, took on a different persona.'<sup>24</sup>



## EXERCISES OF THE NEUTRAL MASK - BTECND STUDENTS 1997



*Fig. 142 Students lie on their backs with masks on their chests*

*Fig. 143 Students 'shoe' their masks, then rise to their feet*

*Fig. 144 Students slowly turn to look over their left shoulders*

*Fig. 145 Students slowly raise their arms, focusing on the distant horizon*

Its subtlety and clarity in performance, its very precision and uniformity, enable the neutral mask to provide the actor with a barometer of his/her own performance, described below by an actor from the Royal National Theatre:

'The neutral mask is a tool to become more aware of how I am in my body. I become more aware; I give off certain signals ... people see me as sad..... I don't feel sad, but people see me as sad ..... It's because the mask is working from the outside in by changing your body and trying to do things differently in your body; it affects you inwardly.'<sup>25</sup>

This concept of working from the 'outside in' is described further by Sir Peter Hall when he refers to:

'... two kinds of actors; those who work from the outside in and those who work from the inside out. The 'outside in people' overdo it, make a lot of noise, stamp and roar, and the other nurses a little seed inside him, which sometimes you can hardly see; it grows and grows, and if they're good actors they both reach the same point. But you have to go with the mask, and whether you're an outer actor or an inner actor, you have to allow it to influence you in a very profound way and a very personal way. It's ..... terribly private to the actor.'<sup>26</sup>

This analysis clearly extends to all mask work, not simply that involving neutral masks, and indeed could be extended to include acting without masks; nevertheless it has particular significance for mask performers using both neutral and character masks.

#### **(iv) Using Character Masks**

Once the initial introduction to mask-work has been made, and the idea of masks as characters has been clearly established, Copeau believed that it was important for those characters to work in response to externally imposed motivations:

'The mask lets the need for expression have an interior inspiration, to fetch something for example. But it then also demands that the gesture be sustained. Thus the dramatic moment can be extended without breaking the flow of the spectator's imaginative participation. The gaze of a successful mask raises metaphysical rather than temporal issues, even if

worn by a novice.’<sup>27</sup>

There are many approaches to character work with masks, from the experiential, which may involve the concept of ‘growing’ the character from the foetal state within the mask:

‘... you actually grew with the mask...’<sup>28</sup>

or gazing at the face of the mask to imbibe the mask’s character, or donning a mask unseen, and working towards the freeing of the unknown character.

Other approaches are centred more on practical technique, focusing on movement and orientation, the development of archetypes and on status work. Thanos Vovolis describes the effects of mask work on actors taking part in his workshops:

‘“It usually takes half an hour or so for an actor to become attuned to a mask,” says Vovolis. “First, they have a feeling of death, then find they can breathe. I instruct them not to try to do anything or even think very much, but just to realise that there, behind the mask, is liberation. The same mask can have different physiological effects upon different people, but some effects have now become familiar. For example, the site of voice production seems to settle in the pelvic region.”’<sup>29</sup>

An article in the Independent in August 1996 describes National Theatre actors involved in character work with masks, illustrating clearly the variety of responses elicited amongst members of the company:

‘... Alan Howard chooses a diaphanous red cloak and one of the masks from the Oresteia and nips out into the corridor and drapes them on a post, lights up and surveys the effect. ...After a good quarter of an hour, he nods slowly and sagely and drapes and masks himself. Suzanne Bertish winds a shawl round her face and puts the mask on top of that ... no-one speaks.....

‘Silence. Some choose the subterfuge of acting. Alan Howard puts out his arms and runs round like a child playing aeroplanes. Others curse “Fock you, fock you,” spits someone at no one in particular. Some feel nothing at all. By now several crouch despairingly in the corner, spectators rather than participants. Greg Hicks casts aside his third mask, derobes and curls up in a foetal position on the floor, his back to the action. The silence is

broken by Alan Howard bursting into an aria of the first twenty lines of Homer's Iliad.<sup>30</sup>

One aspect of the actors' experience emerges with clarity; the lowering of reserve, and the ability to be something other than you normally are, when wearing a mask. (Figs. 149-156)

## 5. Conventions of mask work

### (i) Orientation to the audience

Much has already been said about the freedoms working with a mask confers on the actor, but a mask imposes many restrictions.

'Because your face is covered, the audience cannot automatically see where your eyes are looking, so you have to be the focus of attention using your body and head movements'<sup>31</sup>

Perhaps the foremost of these is the need for the masked actor to present his/her face to the audience far more than is expected of the unmasked actor. The face of the mask is the actor's primary tool of communication, and in the case of masks which cover the face alone, the illusion is broken if the actor presents a profile to the audience. Even with helmet masks, which are designed to be seen from any angle, much is lost if the subtle nuances of angle and lighting which, together with the body language of the actor, create expression on the face of the mask, cannot be seen by the audience. The rapport which the actor establishes with the audience through direct gaze, is known as 'clocking' the audience.

'...this is a way of addressing the audience, similar to giving an aside or talking to them directly. If a masked actor looks directly at the audience, that character is made the focus of attention. When there are a number of characters on stage, clocking the audience can focus and concentrate the audience's attention.'<sup>32</sup>

'Clocking the audience' is described by Gateshead College B. A. student Dyanne Armstrong as a 'non-verbal comment'<sup>33</sup> on the person, object or situation.

This technique, borrowed from a comedy tradition which dates back to

Commedia dell'Arte, and popular today in pantomime and farce, creates an instant bond between character and audience, as well as providing punctuation and emphasis in the action of a piece.

Mask-maker Jocelyn Herbert observes that:

'The mask only works well when it is confronting the audience. Even



*Figs. 146-8 Oresteia masks*

when talking to somebody else, it should face front. Masks do not work in profile or being conversational in a naturalistic way.'<sup>34</sup>

This is true not only of face masks, where the artifice is readily apparent in profile, but also for helmet masks, where the illusion is sustained, as no borderline between face and mask is apparent, but the power of the body to animate the still features is no longer apparent.

Action animates the mask; so, sometimes, can inaction, which can give focus to the movements which are to follow:

'It is important the audience is given the chance to read each new character by the character standing facing the audience and motionless for a few seconds. Before and after each important piece of action, a moment's stillness helps define the understanding of the event and restore the focus. Just as it is possible for masked actors to give themselves the focus by looking at the audience, the focus can be moved to another character or a prop ...by the character holding the focus turning its attention to another character or object ... handing on the action.'<sup>35</sup> (Figs. 157-60)

# TRESTLE MASKS (BASIC) - B.A. STUDENTS



*Fig. 149 The lesson - Who is the cleverest?*



*Fig. 150 Improvisation.*

# TRESTLE ADVANCED STUDIO MASKS



*Fig. 153 Strongly developed facial characteristics*



*Fig. 154 The old lady at bingo*



*Fig.155 The old man*



*Fig. 156 Advanced masks: bingo at the day centre.*

# TRESTLE INTERMEDIATE MASKS: MASKED DANCE PERFORMANCE JUNE 1998



*Figs. 151 and 152 Dance performance using Trestle Intermediate masks*





Aside from this form of direct communication with the audience, certain other general maxims are important in establishing mood and presence. If the mask is tilted upwards, the character tends to be perceived as positive and confident; if the mask is lowered, it tends to suggest a darker, more depressive presence. When the mask gazes levelly at the spectator, the normal state is established. Thus the actor is able to convey through subtle movements of the head, many facets of the character's personality.

## (ii) The Masks and Movement

'... if an actor wears a mask he has to move in a completely different way to the way he moves naturalistically.'<sup>36</sup>

The very constrictions imposed by a mask are creative; a masked actor's movement is, of necessity, very different from that used when unmasked, partly because of the need for orientation towards the audience, and partly because the actor's face is hidden, so all elements of the character must be channelled into the body, but it is essential that movement does not become over-exaggerated; much can be conveyed by the subtlest movement. There seems to be a belief amongst some actors beginning mask work that large, bold gestures are needed to compensate for the absence of facial expression and speech; in fact almost the obverse is true, but each move must be significant and contribute directly to the meaning of the performance.

Sometimes this significance is directly attributable to physical restrictions imposed by the mask. In an interview, John Wright<sup>37</sup> described the early evolution of the Trestle style of movement, attributing it to the size and positioning of the masks' eyeholes in one early



Fig. 161 Babies and toddlers in 'Creche'

production, *'Creche'*; the eyes were not lined up with the wearers' as the helmet masks were large to simulate toddlers' proportions; this resulted in problems with both hearing and balance. The difficulties experienced with picking up objects meant that the actors had to step right back from objects in order to see them, then stretch to reach the object. This became a style of performance, giving substantial meaning to every small gesture, slowing things down and creating 'significant' pauses.

### **(iii) Masks and hands**

Another widely observed convention is that the actor should avoid touching the mask, because of the dissonance created by the juxtaposition of the non-naturalistic appearance of the mask, and the natural appearance of the actor's hands. Dario Fo suggests that:

'...the mask imposes a particular obligation - it cannot be touched. Seeing hands on a mask is damaging, unbearable. When you speak, the gestures you make seem to have become amplified.'<sup>38</sup>

With some masks, however, the temptation to use the hands in close proximity to the mask is irresistible, because of the facial expression of the mask, or other factors. With the 'tall head' masks used by the Horse and Bamboo Theatre Company, (*fig. 132*) the only visible parts of the performers' bodies are their hands, and much use is made of these; actors are positively encouraged to use their hands in juxtaposition to the mask, which is taboo in much conventional mask work, and, in the words of Veronica Lee, 'took some getting used to'.<sup>39</sup> It is important to remember that, despite the excellent rationale for most rules of mask work, there are also often very sound reasons for departing from those rules.

### **(iv) The face beneath the mask**

The face of the mask is impassive, its expression altered only by the posture and movement of the actor's body. During performance, and especially during improvisation, the actor may find his/her face contorted into expressions which

will never be seen by the audience, but which may spontaneously occur because of the strength of the emotions he/she is called upon to portray. One student describes the intensity of an early pre-mask exercise in which she was asked to perform 'blind' under a large paper bag:

'... I was pulling faces, my expressions were much stronger than I would ever use in theatre, they were more raw.'<sup>40</sup>

while another student comments on the strong influence of the character mask he chose to wear for an improvised piece:

'When I wore the scowling mask I had the same expression on my face. It controlled what I was doing. ....'<sup>41</sup>

'I found that under the mask I was pulling facial expressions which affected my body language.'<sup>42</sup>

Horse and Bamboo performer Veronica Lee said that she and other members of the company pull the faces of the characters they are portraying, whether in a helmet mask, or with the 'tall head' masks.

In the 1920s, Benda described the actor's awareness of this illogical but apparently uncontrollable phenomenon:

'the way his face endeavoured to mimic the features and expression of the mask he was wearing... obstinately in spite of his reasoning that this was an absurdly wasted mimicry. Since his whole body assumed the characteristic motions and attitudes of the creature the mask represented, his face was forced to act in accordance with the laws of rhythmic co-ordination and feign the character and mood in concord with .... the rest of his body.'<sup>43</sup>

Purists argue that these grimaces beneath the mask should not occur, that they drain emotional energy which could otherwise be channelled into the bodily movements which convey the emotion, in the words of Dario Fo:

'Underneath, my face remains impassive and expressionless, because it is the body which gives all expression to the mask.'<sup>44</sup>

It could be argued that the performance should come from the actor's thoughts and emotions, but that the actor should empty his or her own self and be open to the character, remaining impassive him/herself and channelling that character into the mask. Once again, though, I believe that it is important to remain open to different approaches, rather than deal in absolutes, when working in a medium which demands a great deal of creativity from the individual actor.

#### (v) The Use of Mirrors

Similarly, the use of mirrors is a controversial topic amongst mask practitioners. Many modern practitioners are very much opposed to their use, believing that they can make actors self-conscious rather than spontaneous in their approach to mask-work, and that this could lead to shallowness, to acting for effect rather than experiential work. Jocelyn Herbert describes problems encountered in the early stages of rehearsing *'The Oresteia'* in 1981 at the Olivier National Theatre:

'The cast ... were very disturbed by the idea of masks ... they had been given a mixture of masks that were nothing to do with the *'Oresteia'* ...they had been told to look in the mirror all the time (Fig. 162) and that is one thing you don't do with tragic masks. The tradition is that you never look in the mirror with a tragic or serious mask; the actor looks at the mask, puts it on and lets the text motivate his moves and gestures. The practice of looking in the mirror comes from the half masks used in comedy where an actor looks at his reflection to find his character.'<sup>45</sup>



Fig. 162 Tony Robinson, the mirror and how not to work with masks!

The use of the mirror when working with half masks is readily justified; not only does it help the actor 'find' the character, but it is also important in enabling the actor to match the live bottom half of his/her face, with the set expression of the masked upper half of that face. Johnstone describes the process in *'Impro'*

' "When I show you the mirror, make your mouth fit the mask, and hold it so that the mouth and the mask make one face ....Become the thing you see, turn away from the mirror and go to the table. There'll be something

there that it wants. Let it find it." '46 ....I present the mirror very smoothly, slicing it upwards into the air between me and the actor....If the actor seems to be resisting the change I might say, "You're changing now", or "Make the face fit the mask".'47

He explains that he uses a head-sized mirror because what the wearer needs to know is reflected in the face alone; if he or she sees the body as well, it may result in their adopting complementary poses.

'I don't want them to think about being another creature, I want them to experience being another creature.'48

The objects provided on the table, together with the provision of an assortment of clothes and Johnstone's encouragement to actors to use non-verbal sounds enable them to find the character of the mask unselfconsciously, avoiding any attempt to act out any preconceived ideas of how such a character might behave.

However, a Gateshead College B.A. student describes the experience of having her concentration broken by the image in the mirror when undertaking a similar exercise using half mask:

'... this was a bit off putting because when you don't know what you look like, you feel in character; the moment I saw myself, my character went and I found myself looking at ME in a mask.'49

Yet others, particularly students on short courses who have no previous experience of mask, for example, pupils from Sulingen Gymnasium in Germany, (*Appendix X*) found that the image in the mirror enhanced their perception of the character and added depth to their performance.

Japanese Noh actors use mirrors only immediately prior to the performance. They regard this as sacred - a moment of direct link with the spirit of the mask, and communion with the character they are to portray on stage.

#### **(vi) Sounds or Silence**

Another contentious issue in mask performance is the debate as to whether

masks should be used in silence, and masked theatre should essentially be a form of mime, or whether speech may be used in performance by masked actors.

To many, the use of speech with masks is anathema, a contradiction in terms, and part of the essential power of the mask lies in its silence. In the 1920s, Benda's masks were made with closed mouths, and retained their eloquence without the use of speech

'This has to be a silent drama, for the incompatibility of speech, especially natural speech, is obvious.'<sup>50</sup>

Although Benda is opposed to the use of speech with the mask, music was a very important factor in all the productions he designed. This accords with the age-old traditions of mask ritual, as well as those of carnival, which was clearly highly influential on Benda's work.

Benda's attitude to masks and speech is still held by many practitioners in the 1990s. The pioneering mask and physical theatre company, Trestle Theatre Company, emphasise the importance of illusion in mask performance, and maintain that any vocal sound heard by the audience from under a full face mask will break the illusion created by the mask. Trestle masks, like Benda's, are made with closed mouths. One audience member, seeing Trestle for the first time (*'Fool House'*; 1997) commented that she had been horrified when she was told that there would be no dialogue; instead she found herself watching the actors' movements closely and found the subtle nuances of movement clarified the meaning to the extent that you would normally expect from words.

The playwright Tony Harrison (*Fig.163*) takes the opposite view, based on his experiences of working with the designer Jocelyn Herbert on the National Theatre productions of his translations of *'The Oresteia'* and *'Orpheus'*, emphasising the importance of language in mask performance and the strengths which can result from the effective interaction of mask and text. He stresses that to Jocelyn Herbert, language 'was central to the vision



*Fig. 163 Tony Harrison*

of what a masked drama might have been like. ... She taught us all that the mask learns from the language it has to speak....'<sup>51</sup> Harrison takes exception to Susan Valeria Harris Smith's statement in *'The Mask in Modern Drama'*, that 'mask challenges the primacy of language', (*Herbert: 229*)<sup>52</sup> which he dismisses as an erroneous generalisation, declaring that:

'...for me, the mask reinforced the primacy of language...the classical mask of Fifth Century B.C. Athenian theatre was an existential device to carry tragic meaning and survival and allow speech to continue in situations that might render us otherwise speechless.'<sup>53</sup>

Whereas many other practitioners would see the actor's movement as the central animator of a mask, Harrison clearly regards the text as a major factor in creating characters from the masks. Referring to the masks Herbert made for the Furies in the *'Oresteia'*, he says:



*Fig. 164 Oresteia: the Furies*

'...The masks she created did not have their features distorted by the passions they were supposed to be feeling. They had a beautiful neutrality until ... they were worn by the actor and became animated by the emotions expressed by the text.'<sup>54</sup> (*fig. 164*)

Harrison emphasises that, although he perceives text as central to mask performance, it requires a specialised approach, and should not under any circumstances be attempted in a naturalistic style.

'Another example is the discovery we made about what is called stichomythia in Greek tragedy....formally matched pairs of questions and answers which ...have a great bearing on the use of masks and also the style of language. Actors tend to look upon these exchanges as a bit of real dialogue and play them naturalistically. It doesn't work like that. In masks the intimate tete a tete is in any case prevented by the way the mask turns all performance towards the audience.<sup>55</sup>

He is particularly interested in the way the visual appearance of the mask seems to be altered by the words which come from its mouth, suggesting that there is no need for different masks to create changes in mood, age or attitude within a production:

What we discovered was that the mask could have its emotion turned from one colour to another ... you read scholars trying to work out how masks were changed from scene to scene to express new emotions, and that new entrances had to have new angers and fears etched onto the mask's features .... Jocelyn made us realise that the etching was done by the text.<sup>56</sup>

When addressing this controversy it is important to note that if a mask is to speak, it is of critical importance that the audience is able to hear clearly all that is said, and that this need for audibility should not adversely affect the actors' ability to communicate subtle nuances. Herbert's solution for the *Oresteia* directly evoked the masks worn by its original actors in Ancient Greece; she designed the masks with wide open mouths frozen in a tragic grimace, which gave the actors sufficient space to project their lines and visually enhanced the content of the words they spoke.

The Greek mask-maker and practitioner Thanos Vovolis declared that in 1989 he had reached an impasse in his work 'Everything I had discovered about (*masks*) seemed to hide the truth still further'<sup>57</sup>, when he saw the Greek actress Mirka Yemendzakis performing in a production of '*The Persians*' in Stockholm. She had revived the ancient ritual cries used in classical Greek theatre, and used the same vocabulary of sounds in teaching voice. Vovolis saw Yemendzakis doing voice work with an actress wearing a mask he had constructed with the traditional domed forehead,

'Suddenly, the actress felt a powerful resonance in the cavity between the



# HALF MASK EXERCISES - B.A. STUDENTS



*Fig. 165 Students improvising with half masks 1997*



*Figs. 166 and 167 Neutral and character half masks; exercise using coats and hats.*



*Fig. 168 Unmasked student 'teaches' half mask to talk.*



*Fig. 169 Hotseating a half mask*

mask and her forehead. She was a little stunned, but enlivened.<sup>58</sup>

Vovolis claims that there is no evidence of an external amplifier in the tragic masks of Ancient Greece, so amplification must have been created both within the head of the actor and in the resonating hollows between the actor's head and the mask.



Half masks are frequently used in situations where speech is essential in a play. They enable the actor to speak clearly, without obstruction, and, when used effectively, can transform the appearance of the actor to almost as great an extent as many full-face masks, provided that the actor moulds his/her lower face to match the features of the mask above. (figs 165-9)

Fig. 169 Half mask in use

While Tony Harrison believes that the actors and the way they use masks are conditioned by the dramatic text, Geoff Boale claims that the use of masks, whether full face or half mask, brings about a change in the way actors use language, and indeed the very nature of language in performance.

'As the act of bringing the mask to life alters the actors physicality and consciousness so it alters perceptions of language.'<sup>59</sup>

The voice of the mask is frequently observed to have unexpected qualities; some of these are probably attributable to the contours of the mask, but they may also be attributed to the mask itself. A student commented:

'It was strange to think that the sound was born from the character and that 'he' controlled its tone and meaning rather than myself - as if my organs of speech were merely a vehicle for the mask to have its way!'<sup>60</sup>



Fig. 171 Choric speech exercise

Thanos Vovolis uses abstract sounds rather than

speech to introduce actors to maskwork. An article in *The Independent* describes one of his ten-day seminars in mask performance, which begin with the unmasked participants moaning and wailing:

‘Mouths gape and eyeballs disappear under eyelids. It takes several days for the chorus to achieve what he calls a common breath’ Then the masks are put on and the harmonisation continues. .... a cross between ‘overtone’ chanting and the throaty reverberations of pundits reciting the ancient Sama-Veda of India. “It’s a physical experience of catharsis. You feel that your whole body has been cleansed and purified.”<sup>61</sup>

Many practitioners would agree that the mask itself has an eloquence which transcends spoken language, but speech can add an important extra dimension in many types of mask performance.

#### **(vii) The Character and the Actor**

‘It is said of the actor that he enters into a role, that he puts himself in the skin of a character. It seems that this is not exact. It is the character who approaches the actor, who demands of him all that he needs, who little by little replaces him in his skin. The actor applies himself to leave him a free field.’<sup>62</sup>

Masks can be used to help actors allow the character to replace themselves within their skin, whether or not a mask is to be worn in the actual production. George Devine used masks with writers and actors at the Royal Court Theatre in the late 1950s, to develop characters which could be used without the mask when the actors were cast in plays, but he stressed that in order for his technique to work, the mask must be ‘inhabited’ by the actor. His approach to mask work is described in detail by Keith Johnstone in his book *‘Impro’*. Johnstone made much use of, and further refined and developed, Devine’s work with masks. (See chapter on *Masks and Transformation*)

Many actors find that masks can be a great help in discovering a character: ‘The mask enables you to create and invent and be the character.’<sup>63</sup>, but the converse can equally be true if the actor cannot fully engage with the mask. Greg Hicks declares:

‘There’s no greater torture for an actor than to give him a mask that he

doesn't believe in. If he is resisting the mask, nothing will happen. If he is happy with the mask and comfortable, he will begin to walk and talk in ways which may surprise him and you.'<sup>64</sup>

Many find that masks, despite, or perhaps because of, their impassive appearance, enable them to access levels of emotion which might not otherwise be accessible to them. Thanos Vovolis observes that:

'... mask work ... makes the emotion more possible, not less; the mask enables intensities of emotion to be expressed and intensifies not only verbally and orally but also physically.'<sup>65</sup>

Whatever the revelations brought about by the mask, it is crucial that the spirit of the mask, and that of the performer, work in harmony. When this harmony is achieved, it sometimes appears that the character which inhabits the performer by means of the mask becomes disconcertingly real, to the extent that

the experience may be overwhelming, and the actor feels that s/he has been transformed, or 'taken over' by the mask.(see Chapters 2 and 4)  
Hicks states that:



'You have to surrender your ego to the mask. When it goes well, it's like having an encounter with something other than yourself, something otherworldly and not necessarily kindly - it depends what the mask is like. You can be transported and feel immense power.'<sup>66</sup>

Fig. 172 Greg Hicks with the mask of Orestes

William Gaskell and Keith Johnstone believed that the actor should attempt to enter the 'mask state', in which their trance-like condition is closely monitored and controlled by the teacher, enabling them to respond freely to the promptings of the mask without experiencing the dangers perceived to be inherent in the condition.

## **B. Creation of belief**

It is important to find ways into drama which will enable students to shed their

own personae, 'lock into' characters, whether in improvised, devised or scripted work, and to achieve a measure of belief in the characters and the situations in which they are contextualised. One means of tackling these twin problems could be by using the time-honoured theatrical tradition of disguise, not in the traditional way, to convince the audience of the authenticity of the character, but in order to create the character within the mind of the actor. The intention would be to release him/her from everyday inhibitions through the adoption of a face or body image entirely different from their ordinary persona, to the extent of making the individual unrecognisable, and even, perhaps, enabling the wearer to reject his/her own personality and 'become' the character. (*see Chapters Two and Four*)

The nature of acting demands that actors dispense with their natural reserve to create a rapid empathy with fellow actors and the audience; behind the mask, the timid novice and the seasoned actor are levelled to the same status; both are invisible as actors; all that can be seen by the audience is the character. This 'removal' of the actor from the audience's awareness enhances their belief in the character portrayed.

From the point of view of enabling the actor to 'find' a character and to develop a sense of belief in the dramatic situation of which he/she is a part, it has long been established that physical aids like costumes and hand props can be of immense value, helping an actor to lose his/her inhibitions and establish new patterns of thought and movement relevant to the character and situation. How much more potent the effect of disguise can be when it incorporates a mask so that the actor can physically obliterate his own persona and replace it with another, literally perceiving the world through the very eyes of the character s/he seeks to portray.

## **C. Conclusion**

Masks have been used by practitioners in twentieth century Western theatre seeking spectacle, seeking truth, challenging society's mores and questioning the essential nature of the individual. The use of masks in the creation of original performance has its origins in the heyday of Commedia dell'Arte and the

tradition continues with renewed vigour in the late twentieth century. Their continuing use in this field attests to their effectiveness in eliciting new and original work from actors and directors.

Many of the techniques and conventions of maskwork have been established over centuries and originate in diverse traditions, but it is clear that their purpose is to enhance belief either in the performer or the audience; sometimes in both, so that, despite the fact that training in maskwork is very strongly technique based, it also customarily expects the actor to 'become' the character of the mask, which, for some actors, and in certain circumstances, may be a profound experience.

It is agreed by many practitioners that masks can affect surprising changes in actors' performances, lowering barriers and creating far greater access to character, but whether actual transformation with the mask as agent or catalyst can take place is a hotly contended issue, which will be explored more fully in the following chapter.

## CHAPTER FOUR

# THE EFFECTS OF MASK ON WEARER AND AUDIENCE: SOME PHENOMENA OBSERVED AND POSSIBLE EXPLANATIONS

### A. Effects on the User

Has the mask some mysterious property which enables the actor to renounce his own identity and somehow become another character; a property powerful enough to justify John Rudlin's description of the actor as 'the prisoner of the mask' ?<sup>1</sup> Can s/he actually be 'taken over' completely by the mask? If this is the case, does the phenomenon originate in the mind of the actor, or in the mask itself?

#### 1. General

The effects on the actor of wearing a mask in classes, workshops or rehearsals vary greatly, depending on the types of exercise undertaken, the masks used, and the individuals involved.

Highly enthusiastic performers, professionals, amateurs and students, have all shown strong commitment to this subject area, as have, more surprisingly, a number of students who have long declared their dislike of acting. Mask workshops and classes consist almost exclusively of practical work, including warm-ups, extended preliminary exercises and improvisatory work; the level of concentration has been consistently impressive. Work has involved a fairly evenly balanced combination of mask practical performance techniques and experiential, belief-centred work. Some exercises have been lengthy, e.g. 'growing a character', but this has proved no deterrent.

Mask performance classes have proved attractive to students of Performing Arts at Gateshead College, at all levels from BTEC First Diploma to third level B.A.; enthusiasm and creativity have been apparent at every level, although

concentration has been more sustained with students who have opted to work with mask, rather than those for whom it was a compulsory part of their coursework. Mask has proved particularly valuable in teaching students with profound learning difficulties, and in workshop sessions with overseas students; this is possibly because mask enables both of these categories of performer to shed inhibitions and work at a creative level without the need for spoken language.

Some masks are more readily accessible than others; Johnstone suggests that

‘The full mask was as difficult as learning to sing; while a half mask could spring into existence at the first moment...’,<sup>2</sup>

but whereas many find neutral mask work challenging, character masks often prove irresistible.

Observation of students and children involved in mask work makes it clear that the extent to which belief is generated depends to some extent on the motivation and susceptibility of the individual, and also, to a considerable extent, on the degree of comfort they experience when using a mask. Many wearers are distracted by physical discomfort, for example, their eyelashes catching in the eyeholes of the mask, slack elastic etc. Good ventilation and sightlines are also important, although problems with both of these factors can, curiously, have positive as well as negative outcomes.

It is difficult to argue with the hypothesis that because masks provide an element of disguise for the individual, he/she feels secure with this sense of anonymity and is freed to perform with fewer inhibitions than would otherwise be the case. For some actors, the experience goes deeper; the feeling of identification with the character they are embodying becomes overwhelming, and they believe that the mask itself is gaining control of their emotions and actions.

This is the situation which Keith Johnstone described as the ‘mask state’, a controlled trance in which permission to remain entranced is given, either by an individual (the teacher) or a group. (*See Chapter 2 Section B.*) In this way, the dangers, both physical and psychological, which are perceived to be a hazard of this approach to mask work, can be avoided.



## 2. Inhabiting or Wearing a mask

For some, the concept of 'inhabiting' the mask is a spiritual matter, others, while still using the mask to achieve belief, approach their goal through physical discipline and training. A student comments on the interdependence of mask and actor:

'The mask is a being without life until the performer adopts it.... The mask controls the actor but the actor can maintain some control of physicality, emotion relating to the other actors.'<sup>3</sup>

This control is thought by some practitioners to be minimal and is achieved at considerable cost on the part of the actor who

'.... gives up his individuality when he puts on the mask, and his interpretation of the part he plays is almost completely governed by the mask he has chosen.'<sup>4</sup>

Not only does the mask demand the identity of the actor who wears it, it also demands the attention of all of his/her body. Dario Fo declares that:

'It is all a question of the particular style of gesture imposed by the mask: the action and movement of the body are continually all of a piece because the whole body acts as a frame for the mask and transforms its inertness. It is exhausting to perform for and with a mask.'<sup>5</sup>

A student comments on the concept of the performer as 'frame', and the unevenness of the mask experience:

'... One minute I'm a frame, the next I AM the mask.'<sup>6</sup>

Many actors and practitioners would agree with Fo's statement concerning the power of the mask in determining the movement of the actor, even in cases when the actor has donned the mask 'blind', without having seen its face.

That sense of liberation seems to be a critical factor for many people, creating a transformation independent of the spiritual dimension, but equally significant

in creating a powerful performance. A Trestle Theatre Company actor, Karina Garnett interviewed after a performance of *'Top Storey'* at the Edinburgh Festival 1996, declared the concept of possession by the mask to be '...rubbish...' <sup>7</sup> and totally impractical within a company in which not only may one actor undertake a number of different roles within a performance, but equally, one role may be undertaken by several different performers. She did however concede that the fact that the wearing of a mask disguises the performer makes them lose their natural reserve, and added that the only situation in which she would feel comfortable improvising spontaneously in front of an audience would be when wearing a half mask. She also made the point that the masks were of great importance in helping her find the characters in the production.

This release from reserve as a result of the disguise of a mask is cited by many performers as an essential characteristic of mask work; for example, a third year performing arts student described

'...the mask in general covering my face seems to give me the 'right' to be different and enough disguise from reality that I can let myself go.'<sup>8</sup>

another student's poignant entry in his Mask and Movement journal was:

'I was grateful to the mask for allowing me to hide my stage fright and be someone else...' <sup>9</sup>

Jocelyn Herbert neither rejects nor advocates transformation in the sense of possession; what she does cite is a kind of 'ostrich' response, perhaps not unrelated to that of the Trestle actor, in relation to the National Theatre production of *'St Joan of the Stockyards'* in June 1964;

'...the moment people put on masks they think they're not seen, so their bodies are liberated; it's a completely unconscious response.'<sup>10</sup>

Peter Hall suggests that 'What a mask does on one person, it doesn't do on another.'<sup>11</sup> , and this can often be the case; a mask will come alive with one actor, and remain puppet-like and inert with another. But there are instances

both in workshops and performances, when the parallels between one person's 'interpretation' of the character of a mask, and another's, are stunningly similar although years may have elapsed since one performance and another. This is also usually the case when one character is played by more than one actor in a single production, but in the latter case the similarity is carefully rehearsed; in the former it is hard to escape speculation that the character is inherent in the mask, and is in fact imposing itself successively on a number of actors. Of course this may to a large extent be due to the appearance of the mask imposing itself on the consciousness of a number of actors, but it is interesting to note that this phenomenon has occurred in workshop sessions where no actor is allowed to look upon the face of the mask s/he has chosen.

'... you actually seem to do the opposite of what I generally try to do when I act. ... It made me think of what I was doing instead of being a more instinctive process, and that was good. That is what intrigues me about mask, not so much what we show as what we conceal.'<sup>12</sup>

It is important to remember Johnstone's poignant comment: 'The mask dies when it is entirely subjected to the will of the performer.'<sup>13</sup>

### **3. Actors' Responses: Resistance or Release**

Actors' responses to wearing masks in performance are predictably varied, ranging from lifelong commitment, via the enthusiasm borne of new discovery, to total scepticism.

Many actors are reluctant to become involved in maskwork, partly because of the physical and creative constraints they believe maskwork will involve, partly because they may consider it rather gimmicky, but also for another, fundamental reason cited by Peter Hall:

'Actors, of course, resist the mask. If what you sell and what you communicate with is your identity, then your face is a primary part of that, and for someone to come along and say, "I don't like your face, here's another one" is a terrible imposition.'<sup>14</sup>

Nevertheless, it is certainly the case that whereas for people who saw them, Hall's production of the *'Oresteia'* is an unforgettable piece of theatre, few remember, or even knew at the time, who the actors were who animated those stunning masks, and in Trestle productions, where actors undertake several roles in each production, the audience is both amazed at how few actors there are at the curtain call, and bewildered as to who played whom.

The mask frequently demands a selfless commitment to this kind of ensemble playing which may not be the *modus vivendi* of all actors, but which can hold enormous appeal for others. Not all actors feel the need for simple facial recognition and many are intrigued by the changes they experience both in their appearance and in their performance.

For some it can be a revelation, in terms of both physical transformation and performance. When she took the dual role of Shen Te/Shui Ta in *'The Good Person of Szechuan'* at the Royal Court Theatre in 1956, Peggy Ashcroft was initially hesitant, but the experience of wearing the mask completely altered her viewpoint.

'I said to George Devine that I would like to feel I could move from one sex to another just using the costume but he suggested I might find a mask exciting and helpful .... it thrilled me to see its effect on me.'<sup>15</sup>

#### 4. Masks and Licence

It has already been suggested that the mask affords the wearer the opportunity to act in a way which is not characteristic of his/her normal behaviour, and this may in some cases take the form of behaviour which is regressive, even amongst mature adults. Peter Hall is reported as saying:

' "Put a mask on a group of actors (*sic*) and, if they do anything at all, they become very primitive. Most can't talk - the words won't come out - or don't want to talk. Others get very aggressive and cry and shout and hit out like small children. The mask does that." '<sup>16</sup>

Similarly the mask can enable the wearer to transcend his or her role in everyday life, adopt either sex or any nationality, any type of personality; to quote Peter

Hall again:

'We contain in ourselves all that we have been and might be and the mask can take you anywhere - to the feminine side of yourself, to the brutal side of yourself, the old side. It's a completely liberating device.'<sup>17</sup>

For others, too, the experience of the mask is like a joyful epiphany, releasing unexpected energies:

'... it seemed as though some form of spirit the mask held in it, once on, automatically triggered something inside me allowing the movement and action to work in association with the facial expression. I just lose all inhibition and take on the identity of a new character and bring it to life.'<sup>18</sup>

Certain individuals seem to be drawn to particular masks; the Trestle 'bully' masks enjoy much popularity with certain students; others are cited by a fellow student as seeming,



'... to have a particular liking for .... "sad" masks who immediately evoke pity ...'<sup>19</sup>

Fig. 172 Two bullies



A number of students who used a 'depressed' mask very effectively, explicitly avoided using one in subsequent classes because they found it too upsetting; one declaring that she could not wear the mask without crying. It is clear that actors tend to identify with the mask and attempt to establish references for it, finding resonances with their own experiences. (See Chapter 7, *The Mask and the Self*)

Figs. 173 Sad or anxious mask

In more general terms, the use of the mask can certainly help actors to overcome the effects of stage fright and anxiety about failure and negative criticism. The actor is safely anonymous and at the same time incontrovertibly the dramatic character he claims to be.

## 5. Concealment and Revelation

This was noticeable in the work of one married student, always pretty and feminine, who tended to work in groups dominated by male students. She was particularly attached to the 'aggressive' Trestle mask, and frequently undertook the role of an aggressive young man. After one improvisatory exercise in which she took the role of a bully, she commented:



Fig. 175 *The Bully*

'It wasn't until I took the mask off and saw the audience reaction that I realised how much the spirit had taken over possession of the body. I can see how many people can become scared of masks, because we distrust spontaneity. We like to be in control and fear ... being carried away and taken over - like I was.'<sup>20</sup>

One of the questions which needs to be asked at this point is, to what extent the mask enables the actor to invent a new persona, or reveals an aspect of his or her own personality which has hitherto remained hidden, probably even from the actor him/herself? It has been suggested that the liberating nature of the mask stems from the freedom it provides for the wearer to explore a character which is evidently and explicitly not him or herself, but it appears that this is not always the case. One mask made by students at Middlesex University was used in mask workshops by students at Gateshead College, and consistently emerged as a sexual predator in improvisation. (Fig. 170) One group of BTEC students enacted



a disturbing scene of child molestation, which, it subsequently transpired, reflected the early experience of one of the participants. She was deeply shaken by the way in which the use of the mask reawakened her dormant memories. This phenomenon will be further discussed in the chapter on *The Mask and the Self* and Appendix. XII.

Not everyone finds masks liberating; Patsy Rodenburg cites actors for whom the physical factors preclude that

Fig. 176 *Sexual predator mask*

possibility:

'..... it takes them weeks before they can actually stand for long periods of time in a mask without feeling enormous panic is partly because they can't see, they can't hear, so a lot of actors don't find them initially liberating.'<sup>21</sup>

Actor Greg Hicks uses the mask as a diagnostic tool to establish his real engagement with the character:

'For me, the mask is a barometer which always exposes if I am going for an effect instead of for real depth. It's an extraordinary process. ....'<sup>22</sup>

Again, a reference to the mask as an instrument of revelation rather than concealment.

## 6. The Experience of Transformation or Possession

For some, the experience can be even more powerful; the response of another third year B.A. student with some experience of mask work, using a simple character mask, was as follows:



Fig. 177 Hot seating...

'The mask, once you are familiar with its facial expression, takes you over, YOU BECOME THE MASK .... I was no longer wearing a mask, but becoming what the mask represented.' (when 'hot seating'), 'As soon as I sat with the mask on, the character of the mask took control of my being.'<sup>23</sup>



Fig. 178 ...A timid mask

This sentiment is echoed in the experience of other students on this occasion referring to work with neutral masks, in contrast to the character mask cited previously:

I have always wondered how much truth there is in the notion that wearing a mask could possess you ... .. when I did wear the masks ... I did not feel that I was ME any more. I was another person behind the blank masks.'<sup>24</sup>

Another third year B.A. student was initially altogether more sceptical:

'Using mask can at times make us feel as if we are viewing the world for the first time.... I can understand after reading up on Commedia why it is that people believe that masks can possess people .... actors often gave up their own names and just took on the name of the character .... I can understand the use of masks in magic and religion .... that people have mystical experiences when wearing them and feel the gods move through them, but describe the same experience in terms of acting and it really angers me and makes me think of the typical 'luvvie' and yet .... I have felt someone other than myself when I've used masks. Perhaps my anger is at the defiance of masks to be rationalised.'<sup>25</sup>

This statement echoes the ambivalence which is felt by a number of actors and observers in relation to the use of mask in twentieth century theatre.

One student's belief in the transforming effect of the mask led to a quandary in a performance in which she elected to wear two masks, one inside the other, taking off the sad mask to reveal a happy one beneath. Afterwards she reflected that:

' ... wearing two masks at a time means to me that I am not taking the exercise seriously, because I cannot fully express myself to get sufficient emotion across to my audience ... it goes against the parallels of the mask laws. How can you become the mask if the mask that you are transforming into has a solid barrier between you? ... felt like I was cheating myself.'<sup>26</sup>

On hearing of this student's dilemma during an interview, John Wright confirmed that her feelings were valid, because the fact that the mask is in contact with the wearer's face is an essential part of the experience.<sup>27</sup>

The feeling of becoming something or someone other is by no means universal. Another student, like the others a strong mask performer, found the experience entirely different

'George Devine said that a mask must be "inhabited and that the actor possessed" by the mask, but I didn't feel any of this when I put on a mask; to me it was just another acting role and I didn't become the mask. I felt nothing for it at all. ... I enjoyed all of the session but couldn't become the mask.'<sup>28</sup>



## 7. Physical constraints and their implications

For Dario Fo, the mask has been an important factor in his work for many years, influenced as he is by *Commedia dell'Arte*, and also by the traditions of the Chinese and Japanese theatre. (*Figs. 179 and 180*) He has written much about the origins and history of mask in the theatre, particularly concerning the *Commedia dell'Arte*, but in the following extract he writes about the physical practicalities and effects of masked performance, addressing many of the issues which affect mask wearers in the theatre:

'....there is for me something magical in the fact that wearing a mask, after an initial moment of awkwardness, allows one to see more clearly and act with greater liberty than with the face completely uncovered.'<sup>29</sup>

This is a different kind of freedom from that described by many advocates of mask work who talk, like the Trestle actor, of its liberating effect because the actor's face is hidden. Fo suggests a different dimension of perception; perhaps a narrowing and tightening of focus because of the restrictions imposed by the mask. This viewpoint is reinforced by a mature performing arts degree student who suffers from hearing loss and poor vision, but finds her faculties sharpened rather than further impeded by the wearing of a mask.<sup>30</sup> Others comment on the mask's assistance in enabling them:

'....to focus directly and on an isolated level .... as a result I had a greater ability to look at the session's events as a whole 'concept' that led us into the wearing of masks and how our physical selves should be feeling.'<sup>31</sup>

Another student commented during an improvisation class on a sense of

'isolation; it's easier to work on your own, with someone else it becomes forced, not spontaneous.'<sup>32</sup>

Others agreed that the need to interact with others interrupted their absorption with the character of their mask, and reminded them of the mechanical problems of mask work. Other problems arose because of misconceptions concerning the nature of the characters involved, but students were impressed

## DARIO FO AS MASK PERFORMER



*Figs. 179 and 180 (Above and below) Fo as the Commedia dell'Arte clown, Arlecchino*



with the degree of synchronicity of movement which occurred, in view of the performers' restricted vision.

On a different occasion, another student also comments on the physical restrictions of mask work, but identifies the positive aspect of what can be a serious problem for actors, particularly in improvised work. (Fig. 181)

'It was very hard to interact with each other.... because the masks don't enable you to have a wide vision. I think the lack of vision encouraged people to think about their own character more, which benefited the piece.'<sup>33</sup>



Fig. 181 Student actors in devised performance

In performance, however, this restriction of vision has the potential of causing serious lack of communication between performers, as well as the hazard of missed cues and accidents. A student describes his uncertainties in relation to a specific production; a devised piece performed in the round:

'it was down to our intuition when to move but one problem that arose from this was that if you were at the forefront of the huddle you couldn't see everybody. So you had to rely on your feelings, but there was always a chance you could get it wrong.'<sup>34</sup> (figs 182-7)

This problem is commented on by many mask performers, from Trestle Theatre Company actor Karina Garnett, to five year olds at Reay Primary School. It is often the case that smaller eyeholes lead to very powerful, naturalistic-looking masks, but simultaneously create physical and dramatic hazards in performance. There are no easy answers to the problems which arise from this, except that, in the words of Anthony Taylor, Manchester youth theatre workshop leader:

# ENSEMBLE PIECE B.A. STUDENTS SUMMER 1996



Fig. 182 *The anxious group of characters*



Figs. 183, 184 and 185 *Masked faces lit only by torches*

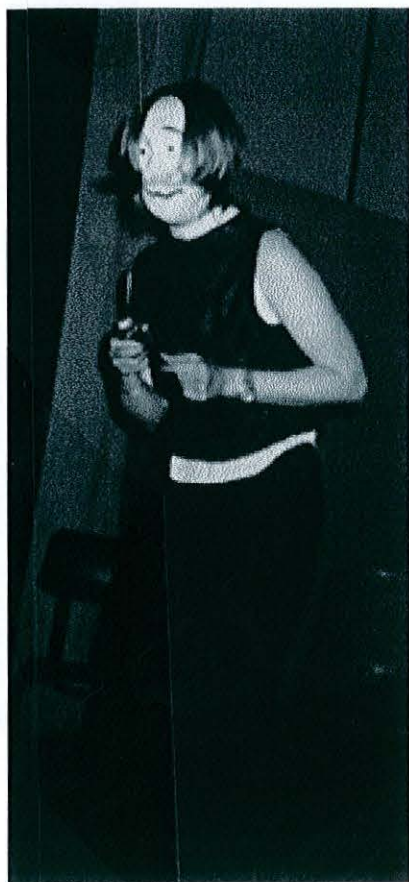


Fig. 186 *The mischievous group of characters*

'When you're using masks, your visibility (*and vision - rf*) is restricted, so your sensitivity to the other person you're performing with has to be more acute.'<sup>35</sup>

and John Wright suggests that, rather than immersion in the character of the mask, the masked actor's

'.... first sensation tends to be enclosure, peering through tiny eyeholes (rather like looking through a letterbox), and the sound of breathing'<sup>36</sup>

Dario Fo, too is aware of the physical limitations and the sense of enclosure, and that the mask:

'... can ... induce anxiety deriving not so much from the use of the mask itself as from the fact that the mask restricts both the visual field and the acoustic and vocal range. Your own voice seems to be singing at you, stunning you.... and until you master it you cannot control your breathing. The mask feels like an encumbrance and can easily transform itself into a torture-chamber .... it removes your powers of concentration.'<sup>37</sup>

All these sensations have been described by students involved in mask performance, and it has been postulated that the trance-like sensation experienced by some wearers may be brought about by a combination of sensory deprivation and oxygen starvation. One student who produced some interesting and original mask work observed in her journal that she was,

'...averse to having my face covered by anything, which is why I am frightened by masks The sensation of not being able to breathe properly scares me a lot as I am prone to hyperventilation and panic attacks...I think part of the reason people talk about the power of the mask taking over you until you are in a trancelike state has a lot to do with breathing being restricted, as lack of oxygen can do this.'<sup>38</sup>

## **8. The Removal of the Mask**

Whatever the causes, the feeling is powerful, deeply moving for the individual and can produce work of great concentration, creativity and originality. The actor truly feels at one with the character s/he has created, even to the extent that

Dario Fo describes:

'A singular sensation affects you when you take off the mask - the fear that part of your face has remained stuck to it, or the fear that the face has gone with the mask ... you have the impression of annihilating yourself.'<sup>39</sup>

Few performers I have interviewed have experienced such an extreme reaction to the wearing of the mask; although many have reported strong feelings of identification to the point of trance whilst wearing it, and some have described feelings of anti-climax or even 'bereavement' on removal of the mask, typically

'When you take the mask off you feel you're leaving the character behind....' <sup>40</sup>

Benda describes graphically the multifaceted experience of the masker, based on his own experience as well as that of the many actors who wore his masks:

'When our masquerader unmask, if he is in any degree observing and communicative, he will tell us what a peculiar experience he had behind the mask; how his soul was suddenly released from the usual constraint of self-consciousness, what freedom of movement he experienced, how naturally and spontaneously he could act, and how irresistible was the urge to express in movement the character of the mask. He may also confess he imagined himself to be the creature he represented. <sup>41</sup>

Many have experienced relief on the mask's removal, however powerful and exciting the performance experience had been. This, again, is probably largely due to the feelings of physical restriction, the heat and constricted eyesight and breathing. Conversely, some feel a definite sense of relief in returning to reality and putting their character to one side:

'The thing I love about masks is that the moment you take it off you get rid of your performance, you don't carry the character home and agonise about it.'<sup>42</sup>

Peter Hall sees the moment of removal of the mask as a very delicate one, perhaps because the actor is still in a state of transition between the two characters; the mask's and his/her own:

'If you said to any actor as he took his mask off, "Well, I don't know what you were doing, that was simply dreadful", he would either hit you or burst into tears. It is a moment of great danger, when you could hurt people very easily; they're extremely vulnerable.'<sup>43</sup>

Part of the response of the actor to the wearing of a mask may stem directly not from the mask itself, but from the audience's response to his or her appearance in the mask. The audience may accord the mask character a certain status, which may reinforce and heighten the belief of the actor and increase his or her sense of one-ness with the mask.

## **B. Effects on the Audience**

A surprising number of people are alarmed by masks, finding them frightening for a number of reasons; others find them attractive and disquieting in almost equal measure; yet others find them fascinating and mysterious; few are indifferent.

### **1. Illusion**

It has been noted that in the theatre, masks are used for a number of reasons, and in masked performances, the use of mask is inseparable from its effects on the audience. Masks can convince an audience that an actor is ugly rather than beautiful, old rather than young, male rather than female - or vice versa in each example. They must also be able to convince the audience that the mask is the real face of a real character. Masks may be used for many other purposes, but among them will always be that of deceiving the audience.

Toby Wilsher of Trestle Theatre Company stresses this aspect of the mask, and the key role of the actor in creating this deception.

'Illusion is of primary importance in mask work. Mask performers must enable the audience to forget the actor through the creation of a convincing character. This illusion is mainly dependent on the skill of the performer, but can be aided by ... construction of the mask.'<sup>44</sup>

The extent of the illusion which is created is another paradox. Different types of illusion can be affected, the disguising of a character so that their identity is unknown to the audience and possibly also to other characters in the play. This can readily be done with a domino or other simple mask, or a clown mask as in Peter Schaffer's play, *'Sleuth'*. More complex is the situation when the mask is intended to represent a 'real' character rather than a disguise, or (a situation of even greater complexity) an aspect of a character who may appear unmasked at other times during the dramatic action. To what extent can an audience believe that the character played by a masked actor is 'real', and is it indeed desirable that this should be the case?

A number of factors increase the credibility of a masked actor as a 'real' character in a play. Firstly, it is important that all the characters in the play, or in the dramatic sequence, are masked, as, for example in the early Trestle Theatre Company plays, *'Plastered'* and *'Top Storey'* (figs. 130 and 190). In these circumstances, despite the fact that the characters may not look, behave or communicate in a naturalistic manner, the audience will accept the consistency of style amongst the characters, and respond to their 'human' behaviours.

One audience member, watching a recent Trestle Theatre Company performance (*Fool House, Edinburgh 1997*) observed that,

'The mask gave the basic character trait - a clear impression, before they do anything, of what sort of character they are.' <sup>45</sup>

Sequences in which both masked and unmasked characters appear greatly reduce the likelihood of audiences believing in the masked characters as 'real', unless the masked and unmasked characters exist in separate realities. In Trestle's classic early play about incest, *'Ties That Bind'*, the central character, the young girl victim of abuse, was unmasked, but all the other characters were masked. This heightened the audience's empathy for the character and also the sense of her isolation from the other characters, whether exploitative or sympathetic. (fig. 191)

The device of mixing masked and unmasked characters was much less successful in a later Trestle play, *'Window Dressing'*, (fig. 192) which adopted a 'game-





Fig. 188 *A Slight Hitch*



Fig. 189 *Hanging Around*



Fig. 190 *Top Storey*



Fig. 191 *Ties that Bind*

*Examples of the distinctive helmet masks used in early Trestle productions.*

*In 'Ties That Bind', the central character is unmasked, and Trestle's recent productions have combined masked and unmasked characters, masks and puppets, and different styles of mask.*

show' format in which the presenters were unmasked, but the 'punters' were masked; this led to the proximity of mute and speaking characters, as well as the contrast in appearance between masked and non-masked actors. This play, was,



Fig. 192 'Window Dressing'

however, fascinating in many other respects, not the least of which was another illusion which can be created with masks; the simultaneous appearance on stage of two identical characters, and the deliberate planting of confusion in the audience's minds about which character they are watching at any given time.

## 2. Creation of Atmosphere

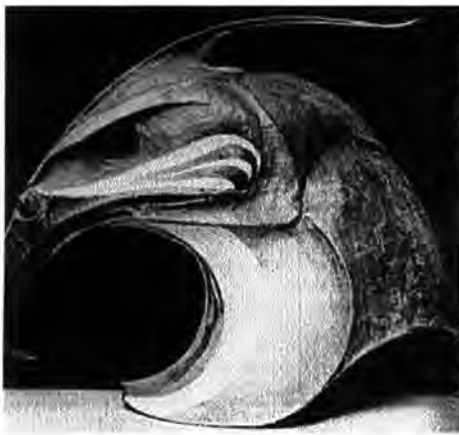


Fig.193 Benda eagle mask

Masks, naturalistic, stylised or abstract, can be used in performance to create a specific atmosphere, and audiences are frequently highly sensitive to the atmosphere generated. Because the very nature of mask work dictates that performers move slowly and tend, far more than in other types of performance, to turn their 'faces' towards the audience, this frequently results in a dream-like quality communicating itself to spectators.

Perhaps, also, the very nature of the masks themselves, with their still, unchanging features, whether aggressive or serene, further enhances the communication of these sensations to an audience. This can work particularly well depicting supernatural characters or events, dreams, nightmares, fairies and devils.



Fig.194 Benda mosquito mask

### 3. Visual spectacle

Masks have frequently been used in both ritual and theatre to create important aspects of a visual spectacle; in this they are always accompanied by extravagant costumes and headdresses, elaborate settings and, in the twentieth century theatre, stunning lighting effects.

Masks can add to the effects of a spectacle of this kind partly because they are inherently decorative, impressing the spectator with their beauty or elaborate decoration, or they may have almost the opposite effect by providing a serenely beautiful but impassive face, which does not allow the expressiveness of the human face to detract in any way from the elegance and style of the performance, as for example in *'The Greenwich Village Follies'* and many other productions designed by Benda.



Fig. 195 Benda Golden Beauty

### 4. Creation of Belief

Initially, an audience may be reserved about suspending belief in relation to a masked character, who possibly does not speak or behave in a way associated with the conventions of naturalistic theatre (see the section on *'Illusion'* above).

It is interesting to see how rapidly many audiences cast aside these expectations, and soon respond wholeheartedly to the masked characters, whose behaviour, although not conventionally naturalistic, is often very closely observed and highly evocative. In the words of Meyerhold *'...is it not that the mask helps the spectator fly away to the land of make-believe?'*<sup>46</sup>



Fig. 196. Baby in *'Creche'*

(Trestle Theatre Company, *'Hanging Around'*) (fig. 187) The response is

not logical, but the degree of suspension of disbelief is remarkable.

When students work on mask performance projects, it is usual for some to be involved in improvised or devised work, while others watch, acting as an informal audience. Reactions are strong, especially in the early stages of mask work, especially to the masks which evoke pathos, the characters who fix the audience with a woebegone stare, and shrug their shoulders helplessly at the ironies of fate. (fig. 197)



Fig. 197 Trestle anxious mask

It would seem that in many instances, that the feelings expressed by masked actors communicate with some immediacy to their audiences.

## 5. Emotional responses

Some individuals find masks very disturbing or even frightening; watching a masked performance, they may become seized by panic and even leave a performance, to avoid meeting the inscrutable gaze of the masks. This has happened, even during student productions, when many of the audience members know the performers personally.

' - the consensus was that it is scary being approached - the masks are extremely powerful'<sup>47</sup>

'... what had to be practiced today was how to look encouraging within each character, as masked people are very intimidating and powerful.'<sup>48</sup>  
(figs. 189-192)

Audiences at masked performances experience a wide range of responses in relation to the masks, depending on the type of production and the style of mask. Spectators may be moved by their beauty or frightened by their ugliness; they may find themselves believing in the life-like qualities of masks which are grotesque or larger-than-life, or which are devoid of key features. They can elicit

**ENSEMBLE PIECE B.A. STUDENTS SUMMER 1996 -  
THE AUDIENCE**



*Figs.198-201 This piece centred on the audience in a very literal way, with the audience seated in the middle of the room in total darkness, and the masked figures, lit only by hand-held torches, performing around the perimeter of the studio. The performance culminated in the actors bodysculpting members of the audience into a huge 'sculpture' then sitting down as 'audience' to applaud them.*



a sense of mystery, or sometimes unease. Among the reasons for this unease is the ambiguity of the masks, expressive yet expressionless, life-like despite being stylised, and eliciting a strange feeling of uncertainty as to whether or not the face they see before them is alive.

'When a mask is put on and enacted by someone this uncanny quality .... and the mystification it creates are intensified to the point where the real personality of the masquerader is totally obliterated from our perception...we see only the creature the mask represents.'<sup>49</sup>

Thus, audiences respond in accordance with the emotions the mask's face evokes in them. Audiences may find this transformation, which is caused not by the merit of mask but the way in which we perceive things, fascinating or appealing, but they will probably also find it puzzling and disturbing. Benda ascribes this ambivalent response to the conception that the face is the index of the soul; we tend to trust what we read of a person's character from their face, so, 'when a false face is substituted for a true one - we still let ourselves be guided by it.'<sup>50</sup> and then perhaps feel a little foolish when we remember that the face to which we are responding is a false face which reveals little or nothing about the actor who wears it.

One drama lecturer had for years found watching any masked performance deeply disturbing, but after watching the simple sketches performed by the 'Mask Group' during an exchange visit by German students to Gateshead College, (*Appendix XII*) she asked if she could borrow a set of Trestle basic masks to use with her own students. Having used the masks with one group of students, she reported that this group had shown more progress in performance than others, and additionally that her aversion to masks was greatly lessened by the experience of working with them.<sup>51</sup>

Students watching their fellow students performing in mask classes and productions are intrigued by their own responses to what they are witnessing:

'The mask seemed to take over not only the actor, in some cases, but us, as the audience ...'<sup>52</sup>

They are frequently taken aback by the way in which the masks transform their

peers, despite the fact of their own awareness of the processes of mask performance:

'When I watched others, I ..... did not see Lesley, Dyanne, Joanne ... they became something else, or possibly someone else. I feel that no matter how much one looks at a mask before they (*sic*) place it on only a small part is .... planned ... do we really become someone else, are we really POSSESSED? ..... Are masks so strong that they can completely transform?'

53

The fact that members of the audience may believe the mask to be the character, and believe in the reality of that character in the dramatic situation portrayed, does not, however, parallel the belief of spectators at masked rituals who believe the masked figure to be the spirit of their ancestor; the transformation is credible, but it does not include a supernatural dimension.

Audiences often associate masks with sinister or evil characters. This may be partly because of the fact that in the cinema masks are often used by bank robbers, by sinister characters like Hannibal Lecter in the film *'The Silence of the Lambs'*, or to hide facial damage or deformity, which itself often arouses irrational feelings of distress and horror. For similar reasons, spectators may be disturbed by the exaggerated or distorted features often seen in masks, although many people find beautiful neutral masks particularly sinister. A common factor which many find disturbing is what they perceive as the blank impassivity of the masks.

A teacher at Reay Primary School in Brixton, who has undertaken a number of mask projects with pupils aged from five to nine from 1996 to 1998 (*see Chapter Six*), reports the reaction of a four year old watching mask work by the school Drama Club.<sup>54</sup> She was thoroughly enjoying watching the session, until she saw her older sister put a mask on; she immediately started screaming, stopping only when the mask was removed. She was comforted by her mother, the teacher and her now unmasked sister, and appeared reassured, until her sister once again donned the mask, whereupon the four-year-old once again screamed hysterically. The little girl couldn't explain why she was so upset, but eyewitnesses felt that it was because she couldn't understand where her sister had gone, or perhaps why she had been replaced by this strange, impassive entity.

Perhaps these are some of the anxieties which lurks behind others' fear of masks.

Conversely, many people watching mask performances find the animated masks compelling to watch, and fascinating in their eloquence and in the variety of their expressions.

### **C. Conclusion**

The mask can elicit powerful effects in both wearer and spectator when used in performance; few remain indifferent to the ways in which they alter the appearance and behaviour of those who wear them. Opinions are divided, both among experienced mask practitioners and theorists, and amongst actors and students, as to the exact nature of the changes that take place, and the causes which underly them. It is clear that the source of the change must be in part the mask itself, and that at least part of that influence must stem directly from the appearance of the mask; other sources may be concealment, and the consequent loss of inhibition, and the necessity of discovering a new and often entirely physical means of expression.

It is possible to identify an informal hierarchy of experiences which could be interpreted as transformation, starting at its simplest level with the loss of inhibition frequently associated with the masquerader, and progressing to a stronger feeling of licence to behave uncharacteristically, even outrageously, while still retaining a sense of one's own self. The next phase is behaviour which leads to insights into aspects of the wearer's personality unknown to him/her and others, and their counterpart, false self-revelation. All these sensations are heightened by audience responses to the character depicted in the facial features of the mask. All these experiences can be readily accounted for, and must constitute the majority of mask experiences, and yet others have reported experiences of far greater intensity, of actually being the mask.

These may be accounted for through physiological and emotional factors specific to certain individuals, but while this can appear possible in some cases, with others it seems unlikely; one common factor to all mask wearers, however, is



the physical restriction the mask imposes on all wearers; the limited field of vision, the sense of enclosure and isolation from 'normal surroundings, the amplification of the wearers own sounds, both breathing and vocal sounds when these are used, and the exclusion of all outside sound. Above all, with full face or helmet masks, the wearer experiences a lack of oxygen which may result in a sensation of elation and 'otherness'. All these factors added together are potent agents for change or displacement of character.

Audiences can also be profoundly affected by masks, and respond strongly to events on stage, particularly if there are elements of hazard or pathos involved. One significant factor is the potential for individuals to identify with the character which emerges with apparent spontaneity from the mask, and the establishment of resonances between the characteristics and experiences of the mask and their own experiences - this discovery is common to both actor and audience, but the experience and, necessarily, the means of arriving at it, is different for each.

## CHAPTER FIVE

# MAKERS AND WEARERS

### General Introduction

The relationship between the wearer and the masks seems of its very essence to be ambiguous and complicated; that between the mask and its maker is intrinsically different in that the making of the mask is a deliberate act, involving craftsmanship and aesthetic decisions, although the bond may, in some cases, be equally complex.

Man has always sought to re-create images of himself, and the making of a mask provides unique opportunities for him to represent the different facets of his personality, or disguise or hide them, to create gods or spirits in his own likeness, or even, in the case of a maker who wears his own mask, to re-create himself as a god or spirit.

The making of a mask is a peculiarly intimate act, partly because of the mask's potential for being worn in close proximity to the wearer, and some mask-makers would claim that there is a spiritual dimension to their work, which may be partly attributable to the long tradition of using masks in religious rituals, but may also be associated with the fact that the inanimate object created by the maker is destined to become a living thing in performance. This gives the maker a unique status among artists and craftsmen, akin to the mythical sculptor, Pygmalion, who brought his statue of Galatea to life. Is it possible that like Pygmalion and the fictitious characters of Doctor Frankenstein and Doctor Coppelius, who also created artefacts which they animated and subsequently fell in love with, mask-makers have a special affinity with the artefacts they create? This may be the case with some individuals, in some cultures, but it is by no means universal.

One factor remains dominant; despite the growth of interest in masks as an artform in their own right, avidly collected and displayed in museums and art

galleries, the true mask-maker (as opposed to the ones who make masks for the tourist trade) is creating an artefact which is to be worn in a ceremony or performance, so the object must always be functional as well as visually exciting and representative of the spirit, character or concept depicted.

# **I RITUAL MASKS**

## **A Anthropological Background**

### **1. Craftsmen and Their Status**

In societies with an established tradition of mask ritual, there are few records of mask makers who were also wearers of the masks they made; masks were usually made by craftsmen whose work was often commissioned by individuals or societies, or who worked directly for these organisations. These craftsmen fall into two broad categories:

#### **(i) Specialist mask-makers**

In some societies, the mask maker is a specialist, making only masks, or perhaps masks and other associated ritual objects. He is regarded as a privileged member of the community; his work is often held in the same esteem as that of a painter or sculptor in Western society. Sorell records that it was customary among some African tribes for the chief to invite well-known makers of masks from other tribes to make masks for their rituals, for which they would be handsomely rewarded.<sup>1</sup>

Other cultures' masks may be made by a small elite group, for example, among the Bakuba and Baluba tribes of western Africa, the tradition was that only members of the aristocracy of the tribe could become mask-makers; members of this social elite were trained by experienced craftsmen.<sup>2</sup> In Melanesia, while some masks can be made by any adult male who has undergone initiation, other, more important masks are created by acknowledged experts who may specialise

in a particular style or type of mask.

Within some societies, it is believed that the artist is imbued with a spiritual power which permeates the objects he makes, obviating the need for further consecration. For the most part, however, the sacredness of the mask is not associated with the maker, but rather with the mask itself, and the rituals with which it is associated. Stephan emphasises '... the primacy of use and the user over that of production and the producer.'<sup>3</sup> in African societies, and this does appear to be the norm in many other cultures.

## **(ii) General craftsmen**

It is more usually the case that, rather than a specialist making only masks, the mask-maker is customarily a trained craftsman; he would usually make other objects for the tribe, frequently those associated with ritual practices, for example, statues of ancestors, fetish figures or musical instruments, but also, more mundanely, furniture or agricultural implements. In Africa, there is little distinction made between utilitarian and aesthetic objects; the emphasis is on appropriateness to purpose. In such a society the craftsman is an honoured member of the community, and may often be exempted from hunting and warfare.<sup>4</sup>

In Mexican communities, whether urban or rural, there is usually a specialist responsible for making masks for local people. This is only a part-time occupation for most mask-makers; they earn their living from a range of occupations, mainly agricultural and tend to learn their skills from older members of their families. Most masks are made for carnival dancers, although some are bought direct from the makers by collectors.

'Although they have not been 'danced' (i.e. worn in dances) such masks could have been purchased by performers, so should be regarded as "authentic".<sup>5</sup>



Fig. 202 Mexican mask-maker

Mexican mask-makers have a detailed knowledge of the dances of their local areas, their characters and the stories they portray. They are much respected within their local communities.

## 2. The Mask-maker's Role

It is important to be aware that the ritual mask is seldom the product of one man's creative endeavour, but rather is created as a result of what Sorell describes as 'a collective will'<sup>6</sup> on the part of the community affecting the craftsman making the mask. As an essential part of their sacred rituals, it is vital that the mask be readily identifiable by members of the society, so the

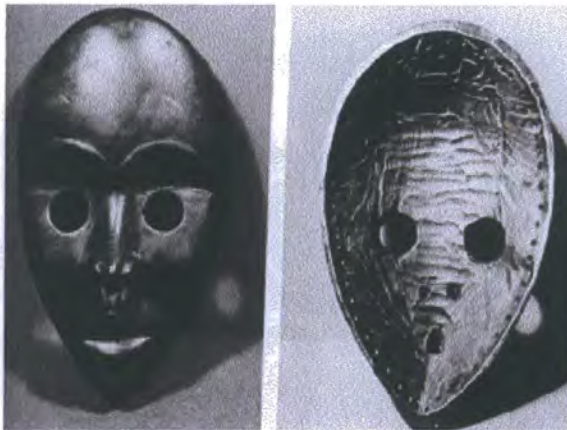
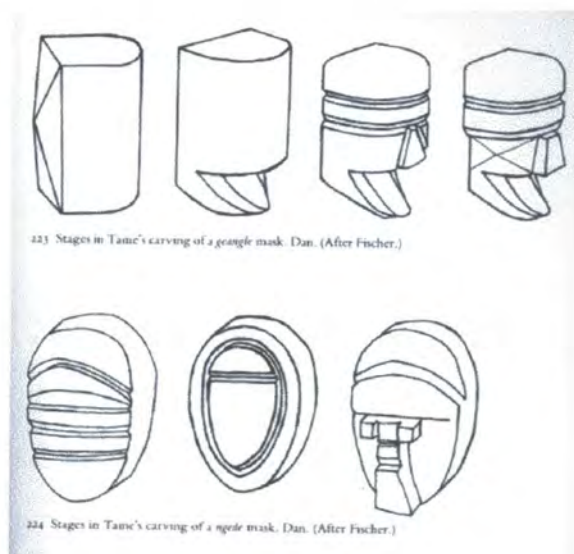


Fig. 203 and 204 Dan Poro mask outside and inside

mask craftsman must temper aesthetic factors with spiritual factors and follow the traditions which will render his work recognisable, thus combining, in the words of Andre Malraux, 'not only what the eye perceives but what it cannot see'.<sup>7</sup> He would be requested to make different types of mask for specific rituals.

'Each mask he made not only had to conform in general character to

## STAGES IN CARVING A MASK



*Fig. 205 Sketches depicting stages in the creation of a Dan mask*



*Figs. 206 & 207 Photographs showing a Mende mask of the Sande Society, (above) during early and later stages of carving, and (right) completed.*



ancient tribal traditions, but the face itself had to symbolise and clarify the tribal concept of a particular deity or spirit...'<sup>8</sup>

Despite this need to adhere to the established traditions, most societies still allowed the craftsman some scope for expressing his individual skills and aesthetic judgment.

The work of Melanesian mask-makers is infinitely more varied than that of their African contemporaries; the Melanesians produce masks which, although still clearly following tradition, are more experimental and more abstract. This may possibly stem from the fact that there is very little awareness of the significance of the rites, centred on commemorating the dead, which have survived to the present day simply on the basis that '.... that was what our ancestors did...'<sup>9</sup> This uncertainty seems to give the mask-maker additional freedom to interpret traditional forms.

In the making of Alaskan Shamanic masks, the woodcarvers are given detailed instructions by shamen who travel to '.... the realm of the spirits in order to gain new knowledge of the spirit world.'<sup>10</sup> so that the vocations of shaman and carver are inextricably bound together; the shaman instructs the carver, who produces the mask that enables the shaman to return to the spirit world whence the instructions came.



*Fig. 208 Shaman's mask, Alaska, early 20th century*

Secrecy is important to the craftsman in many cultures; for example, in both the Hopi and Zuni Pueblo peoples in North America, the painting of masks is carried out in secret, and in many parts of Africa, carving and painting form part

of elaborate and secret rituals.

### 3. Societies Where Masks Are Made by Members of the Community

Far fewer are societies where masks are made not by expert craftsmen but by ordinary members of the community. These mask-makers are almost invariably male, and usually members of a secret society; the making of masks is frequently associated with initiation rites and ceremonies surrounding circumcision and entry into adult society. For example, among the Dogon people of the Niger River area (*referred to in chapters one and two*), the mask society, which is called Awa, which means mask or bull-roarer, is responsible for making all the masks for the tribe. All young males become members of the society after circumcision and learn how to carve a mask and how to dance for the ceremonies in which it will be worn.



Fig. 209 Dogon carver using an adze in the early stages of making a mask



Dogon mask society members also carve a 'great mask' thirty feet long, which is renewed every sixty years, partly because of physical decay, perhaps also as an act of communal affirmation. This enormous mask, which represents the first man to experience death, is more like a fetish than a conventional mask.

#### **4. Selection of Materials**

Masks of every imaginable type are made in communities around the world from an almost infinite variety of materials; precious metals like gold, silver, copper or tin, wood, fibres, gourds, cloth, leather, paper, cornhusks, felt, and decorated with stains and paints, feathers, shells, fur, and many other substances. In some cases the reason for the selection of materials is obvious; the craftsman makes his masks out of the materials most readily available to him, choosing where possible those best suited to the purpose in hand.

Materials are not, however, always chosen on grounds of availability or suitability; there may be symbolic factors involved in the selection. In some societies, the power of the mask is attributed directly to the very material from which it is made, as much as from the spirit or god represented. This is certainly the case with the Iroquois False Face Society.

#### **5. Prescribed Observances**

Materials may be significant in contributing to the power of the mask, but so too is the treatment it is accorded in the process of creating the mask.

The ways in which masks are made may, like their wearing, be dictated by custom. For example, Iroquois false-face masks must be carved from a living basswood tree, in order that the mask too may be a living thing. The carver must ritually ask the tree to give permission for the carving, and offer it tobacco, and the carving and final cutting of the mask from the body of the tree must be done to the accompaniment of apologies and incantations.<sup>11</sup>(Fig. 201)

Riley describes similar rituals associated with mask-making in Africa

'Making a mask to an African was .... an act that required the most propitious circumstances. Often the sculptor had first to be purified by prescribed rites. Since..the forest was the domain of venerated spirits, trees could not be cut down without proper ceremony. With the help of a priest, atonement was made to the spirit of the tree to be felled...with every taboo observed the mask could then be carved, often in secret and always bound by ritual and tradition.'<sup>12</sup>

Similar rituals take place in Bali, where permission is sought from the tree before a knot is removed, with full religious ceremonial, so that it may be carved into a mask. (Fig. 209)



*Fig. 210 Invocation to tree spirit, Bali*

A priest is then called upon to purify the cut wood and invoke a blessing from the gods before carving begins.



*Fig. 2 11 Balinese priest blesses wood for masks*

It is only after this that the carving and decoration of the masks can commence.



*Fig. 212 Early stages of carving a Balinese mask*      *Fig. 213 Adding fur eyebrows to the painted mask*

Among the Mende tribe of Sierra Leone, the design and carving of the masks follows a prescribed formula according to Mende conventions and criteria of beauty and symbolism, which does, however, allow the artist-carver some scope for individual creativity. The last act of carving is normally the piercing of the eyes, a process which should not be watched by anyone.<sup>13</sup> There is no suggestion in Massie Taylor's description that the mask-carver has any further part to play in mask ritual, when the making of the mask is completed.



*Fig. 214 Mende craftsman carving a mask for the Sande society*

The opening of the eyes of a mask is an important ritual in many cultures. It is

frequently the final stage in creating the mask, whether it be carved, moulded or assembled, usually prior to painting, and is clearly perceived as the act which gives the mask life, or enables the inhabiting spirit to interact with the world. In the latter case the moment is potentially hazardous to anyone who is present, although the mask-maker himself seems to be immune to the danger, possibly because he is the agent of the spirit in whose likeness the mask is carved? I have as yet found no evidence of why he escapes the danger so clearly feared by others. The opening of the eyes is not necessarily functional:

'...among the Yoruba, the GELEDE mask is worn not over the face but on top of the head; it is therefore technically useless to pierce the eyes of the mask in order to allow the wearer. to see well. But they are pierced in order to 'give life' to the mask'<sup>14</sup> (*Figs. 15 and 90*)

In many cultures, masks are made in secret, often to the accompaniment of percussion, singing or chanting. The purpose of this chanting may be to propitiate the gods or spirits, to invoke their presence or to ward off danger which may be feared either from the presence of the supernatural, or from the masks themselves. In many societies throughout the world traditional tales are told, not only of the spirits, the distant ancestors and the recently deceased, but also of the origins of such practices; yet other traditions are continued into the late twentieth century long after their origins and rationale are forgotten, or remembered only by a tiny minority.

## **B Mask-makers Who Are Also Mask-wearers**

It has already been established that although it is probable that in most cultures where masks are an essential element of religious ritual, the masks are usually made by a specialist member of the community, there are also a substantial number of cultures where adult males form groups or societies devoted to the making and wearing of masks. Pernet cites the Dogon of Nigeria, among whom every male who has undergone initiation,

'... must sculpt (or have sculpted) and then wear the mask of his choice in

order to dance at funerals, fertility rites and protection against certain dangers; sorcerers, theft, plunder.<sup>15</sup>

this in addition to the collaborative work of the tribe in creating the Great Mask referred to in Section 3 of this chapter.

In other groups, men are required to make their own masks for a specific ceremony. It is also important to remember that in many cases the face mask is only part of a larger work, including an elaborate headdress and costume; these will probably not all be made by the wearer, and could be made either by specialists, or by a number of villagers, contributing to the unified image of mask and costume.

In New Guinea, members of the Armat tribe make and wear masks that represent men who have recently been killed. This suggests an urgency in the making of the masks, so that they are completed in time for the funerary rites to commence.

## **C. Storage and Disposal of Masks**

### **1. Taboos Related to Masks Not Currently in Use.**

Kenneth Macgowan declares that "The mask is not to be put aside carelessly."<sup>16</sup> and it is true that many traditions involve ceremonies centred on the removal of masks, and taboos concerning their treatment and storage, as well as rules about the ways in which they are made and worn in rituals.

In some cultures, the power of the mask is perceived to be present when the mask is animated by a wearer; when not in use it may be treated with the same respect as other ritual objects, without being perceived as having any special powers or spiritual force. It may not be considered to have any particular value or significance until it is once again required for ritual purposes. Alternatively, it may be seen as retaining its power when it is not in use; and that power may be

considered strong enough to constitute a danger unless certain taboos are imposed to control the mask itself and people's exposure to it.

The Iroquois False Face (*Fig. 215*) retains its power beyond the dance. Any uninitiated person confronting one of the masks unexpectedly would be in danger of being struck down by one of the very illnesses from which the False Faces protect their devotees.<sup>17</sup>

Part of the ritual surrounding masks in some cultures involves restoring their physical appearance, through oiling or polishing, or painting the masks. This not only physically preserves the masks, but may also be intended to restore their supernatural powers; the mask may be offered food or sacrifices may be made prior to its use in ceremonial rites.

## 2. Storage or Destruction

Most masks are used on many occasions over a number of years, and when they are not in use they are often stored in special houses, to maintain secrecy and avoid accidental sightings of them by women and the uninitiated.

Among the Native American peoples of the North West Coast, the masks for certain ceremonies involving guardian spirits are used once, and then destroyed. Those involved in some other rituals are kept for four years, and afterwards 'destroyed or hidden in the forest or given away.'<sup>18</sup> Members of other tribes regard masks as family property, to be passed down from one generation to another.

The Iroquois do not store their False Faces in special houses, but because of the taboos attached, they must be carefully stored, 'wrapped, or hung with their faces to the wall'<sup>19</sup> to defuse their power, and protect the unwitting observer. In Bali, masks are never displayed on walls, but rather stored in fabric bags, the colour of which is said to affect the spirit of the mask; the masks are then stored in baskets or boxes within the temple.

# RITUAL MASK-MAKERS



Fig. 215 Iroquois False Face mask



Fig. 217 Masks and other sacred objects stored in sacred hut

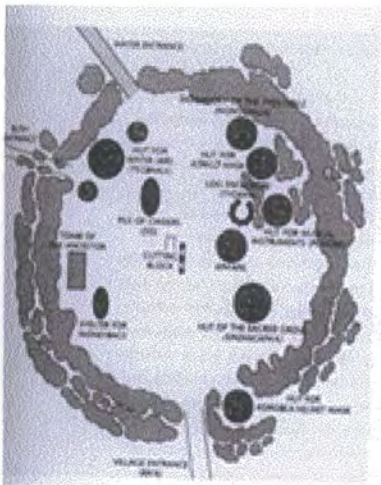


Fig. 218 Plan of a sacred grove, showing the hut where masks are kept



Fig. 219 Masks on an altar in Benin. The marks on walls and altar are the blood of sacrificial animals

## CHANGE AND RENEWAL OF OLD TRADITIONS

Fig. 220 Contemporary North American Shaman's mask





Fig. 216 Balinese masks stored within a temple

Not all societies preserve their masks with such care and part of the ceremonial ritual may involve the destruction of the mask. In New Ireland, a mask maker may spend months carving and painting masks depicting villagers who have died since the previous ceremonies, but because the masks commemorate certain individuals, once their rites of passage are completed, the masks are discarded. (n UCLA: 31) Similarly, in Papua New Guinea, after rites are completed, the masks are either burned as part of the ritual, or cast into the bush

Riley quotes Maurice Leenhardt's *Folk Art of Oceania*'

'At funerals, after days of dancing, all the effigies, masks and works of art accumulated in honour of ancestors and totems, are thrown into the fire...'  
20

Among the North American Hopi, kachina masks are often buried with their owners as part of the funerary rites, 'to ensure his admittance to the sacred lake where the kachinas dwell.'<sup>21</sup> This practice of burying masks with their owner is also common in some parts of Africa.

#### **D. The Maker and the Power of the Mask**

In a number of cultures within whose mask ritual involves the evocation of spirit beings, it is believed that the power of the spirit evoked is felt by the maker of the mask as well as the wearer and spectators of the ritual. This is partly due



to the animistic belief that spirits inhabit all matter, so that the mask created from that matter will contain the spirits of the wood, fibre and other materials from which it is made. This represents a potential danger to the artist, as may also the taboos surrounding the artists' tools, which may also be thought to be inhabited by spirits. Certain prescribed rituals frequently have to be followed in the process of a mask's creation. As the mask takes shape under the hands of the craftsman, it is believed to gain spirit power, so that it is necessary for the craftsman to observe certain ritual practices to ensure protection from hostile spirits.

'In some cultures it is believed that because of the close association between the mask maker and the spirit of the mask, the artist absorbs some of the magic power. ...in Mali ...the creators of masks are even potentially capable of using the object's supernatural powers to cause harm to others.'<sup>22</sup>

For example, among the Bobo people it is believed that the power of the mask is present from its creation, and is at its strongest when it is first made; no-one but the mask-maker himself is allowed to wear it on its journey from the mask-maker's workshop to the village; any other wearer would be endangered by its proximity. After the ritual ceremonies, the force within the mask declines, and it is comparatively safe for villagers to see, or even touch.<sup>23</sup>

It is interesting that the Bobo believe that the maker has some immunity from the dangers of the mask; or is it perhaps his affinity with the spirit of the mask, for whom he has acted as midwife in providing them with a safe passage into the world of human beings? His knowledge of the rituals associated with the safe creation of the mask sets him aside from others of his community and draws him close to the supernatural.

In some societies the mask is dedicated or activated before being used in ceremonies, but in others it is believed that certain craftsmen have mystical powers which mean that the masks they make do not require such consecration.

## E. Masks, the Retention and Development of Tradition

Reservations are sometimes expressed about the notion of the mask as a work of art, hanging in a gallery or museum instead of being used expressively in traditional ritual and performance; a recent production by Kokuma Dance Theatre Company<sup>24</sup> devoted a substantial part of its programme to the exploration of this theme. Many masks produced by craftsmen today are intended for the collector or even the tourist, rather than the members of a tribal society. Purists may shudder, but although some may be debased, many of the masks, and the mask-makers, are keeping alive a tradition which might otherwise have been almost extinct.

Is it possible for a mask displayed in these conditions to manifest, or retain, the spirit presence so central to its ritual existence? It is clear that some masks engender a feeling of power so strong that it is felt by onlookers even through the glass walls of a museum showcase.

Some contemporary Native American Mask-makers from the Northwest Coast make masks on commission for galleries, but regularly absent themselves in order to fulfil tribal obligations; the galleries accept these absences in the belief that the artists' involvement with these ceremonies will help them to create more powerful artefacts as a result. In this way these mask-makers can help shape the revitalisation of their culture as their involvement has led to increased interest in masked ritual, together with its associated songs and dances. Their re-interpretations of ancient forms and styles of decoration have similarly enriched the culture, rendering it representative of contemporary experience rather than retrospective. (*Fig. 220*)

The artist who creates or is commissioned to produce a mask knows that each being is defined by certain stylistic traits, through innovation and creativity are encouraged. Since the artist understands the necessity of representing both the external appearance of the character as well as its internal spiritual force, new interpretations of the character revitalise the image from within.<sup>25</sup>

Work of this sort ensures that the making of traditional ritual masks can yet be a living artform.

#### **D. Conclusion**

In the majority of mask-wearing cultures, the sacredness of the mask is not directly associated with its maker, although specialist carvers are venerated within many societies, and the maker may, as in Alaska, work under the instruction of the spirits through the intervention of a shaman or spiritual leader.

The spirit of the mask is still pre-eminent, and this is reflected in the fact that masks are usually created under conditions of great secrecy, sometimes by members of secret societies, and elaborate rituals and taboos are often observed in their making. In societies where it is believed that the maker is in direct contact with the spirit of the mask during its making, there may be fears either for the well-being of the carver, or for the danger in which he may place other members of the society, because of the power of the spirit.

## 2. TWENTIETH CENTURY MAKERS

As the mask has been re-discovered and re-defined in the theatre of the twentieth century, so too has it been reclaimed in many of the societies where it held sway for centuries in rituals and rites of passage. Masks have become collectable, desirable as exotic artefacts, and in many instances the mask-maker has become an artist in his/her own right rather than a craftsman serving the needs of a local community, a theatre company or a samba school. This change of status and function on the part of many (but by no means all) mask-makers has raised a number of questions concerning the effects of such a change on the roles and effects of masks in the theatre and in societies where mask rituals are still a living part of the country's tradition.

### A Introduction

Masks are made and used both for theatrical and ritual purposes in many countries in the 1990s, and continue to attract the attention of collectors as works of art. Gregor suggests that the evolution of mask from ritual to theatre has freed both the makers and wearers of the masks, that has enabled man to have

'.... mastered his own myth, instead of letting himself be mastered by it. At its height the mask stands for the plenitude of creative power that is yet aware of the secret of its source.'<sup>1</sup>

and the origins of mask in the ancient rituals of many countries do indeed remain of vital significance in both the making and the wearing of masks in the twentieth century.

Some contemporary masks, made for theatre or carnival, or to perpetuate ritual traditions, are fine pieces of craftsmanship, adhering to the stipulations laid down by Gregor in 1968:

'A mask made nowadays whether as a work of plastic art or for a definite theatrical purpose, must be subject to the same conditions as the masks made in the Hellenistic period or by the great Japanese carvers.'<sup>2</sup>

Others are produced in a variety of materials, for example, vacuum-formed plastics or latex, which are well suited to mass production, but which do not by any means conform with the traditions of the Noh masters, although the original mould from which the casts are taken may well have been created according to equally stringent conditions. One factor remains unchanging: the need for the mask to communicate with its audience.

'Understanding why some shapes don't say anything can be very confusing; one reason is that they need to be much stronger at the sculptural, clay stage than one would instinctively make them and the emphases must be moulded very boldly. The paint needs to be virtually all one colour as it is the shadows thrown by the moulding that give the character rather than the paint.'<sup>3</sup>

Jocelyn Herbert's words emphasise the need for the designer to remember that an effective mask must always be bold, clear and essentially simple, in order to communicate the meaning of the character and the production to audience members in the nearest and the furthest seats in the theatre.

## **B Practitioners: Masks and their makers**

It has already been suggested that mask-makers are often felt to have a particular relationship with their creations, different in quality from that of other craftsmen and their products. The source of this relationship centres on the anthropomorphic character of the artefact which can, uniquely, attain a life of its own, and can affect the contemporary theatrical mask designer in some of the same ways as it does the maker of masks for ritual purposes in Africa or Asia.

Because of constrictions of space, only a very few mask-makers can be considered here, but for the purposes of this study I feel that it is important to consider not only a limited selection of contemporary professional designers, but also the experiences of student mask-makers. Children's mask-making will be

considered in another chapter.

## 1. Professional mask designers

### (i) Jocelyn Herbert

Jocelyn Herbert, whose most memorable mask creations to date must be her powerful designs for the Royal National Theatre's production of the *Oresteia*, trained at the London Theatre Studio before the second world war, working with Michel St Denis and George Devine. She emphasises the need for the mask to be an integral part of a production, designed specifically for each character and reflecting the underlying purpose of the production. (Fig. 221)

'I do think masks have to be designed with a reason. Anything can become a mask. You can cut holes in a piece of paper or cardboard or take a face out of a magazine, and they are fine for improvisation, but I do think that if you have a text, the masks have to be designed for the text, for the characters in the text, so that the words have power and clarity when spoken by the still face.'<sup>4</sup>

She describes her experimental approach to developing the *Oresteia* masks, observing that, 'There's absolutely no tradition of masks in this country and I know very little myself.' (Herbert: 120) <sup>5</sup> She experimented with both styles and materials, working closely with director and actors.

'To start with we made some abstract and some more real and the actors were given them to try. We discovered shapes which looked good in clay but by the time we cast them and made moulds and then the masks themselves, they sometimes didn't work at all.'<sup>6</sup>



Fig. 228 *Oresteia Furies*

The necessity for actors to speak the text created some restrictions:

'One of the problems was that each character had to have an open mouth and that is such an expressive feature.'<sup>7</sup>

and creating a common style for the chorus also posed some challenges.



Fig. 221 *Jocelyn Herbert*



Figs. 222-4 (Above) *Orpheus: the masks and puppet of Euridice*



Figs. 225-6 (left) *Orestes and female chorus from Oresteia*

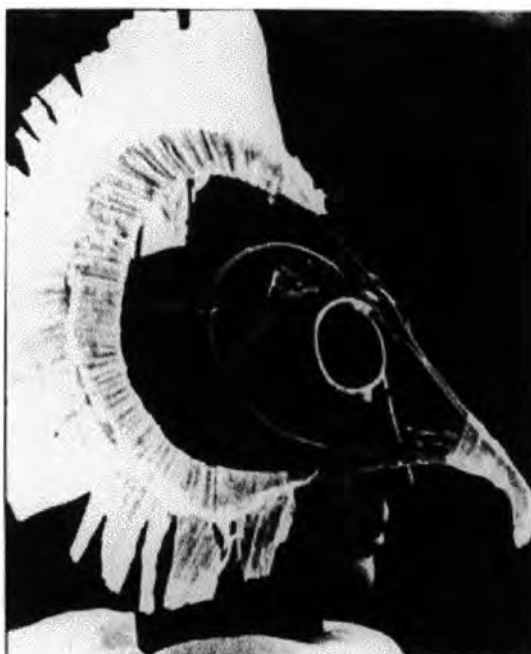


Fig. 227 *Bird mask from Orpheus*

'If I had had sixteen different male masks it would have been very confusing, but by making them similar I could enhance the telling of the story by strengthening the feeling of age, of things remembered, and of coming near the end.'<sup>8</sup>



Fig. 229 *Oresteia: Chorus of Old Men*

Herbert later made masks for Hall's production of '*The Mask of Orpheus*', which involved her designing half-masks, full masks and puppets to represent each character, (fig. 222-4) and worked with him on several other masked productions.

## (ii) Bread and Puppet Theatre Company

Peter Schumann's Bread and Puppet Theatre Company integrated the use of masks and puppets in New York during the mid-sixties to the mid-seventies, and at times it is difficult to distinguish between the two forms.

'...we used giant faces that I had made, paper mache faces and one giant figure of a woman who had a little baby mounted on her stomach, out of chicken wire and paper mache' (questioned as to whether it was a puppet or mask) '....it was a puppet that had no limbs....the masks were similar to what we have still in the theatre; they were faces with fabric hanging from them.'<sup>9</sup> (figs. 230-31)





Fig. 230 Schumann Figure 'Mother and Child'



Fig. 231 Bread and Puppet in New York

Schumann was originally a sculptor who later became a dancer and puppeteer in order to promote awareness of the evils of war and social injustice on the streets of New York and throughout the world. The company involves professional and community artists, community groups or even passers-by in the construction of the enormous faces and figures which are then used in highly political street theatre performances. (See also figs 276-9 and pp 129-130)

'we have no interest in art. we are no pupils of any kind of dance. Our interest is in purpose, in joy, in ecstasy.'<sup>10</sup>

### (iii) Ninian Kinnier-Wilson

Ninian Kinnier-Wilson is a mask-maker who studied Commedia dell'Arte with Carlo Bosso and mask-making with Stefano Perroco in Paris, London, Cardiff and Avignon. In 1981 he co-founded UNFORTUNATI Commedia company and, until 1986, performed with and made masks for the company on tours of Britain and Europe. He has made masks for numerous theatre companies and drama schools since 1981, including John Wright, R.S.C., Middlesex University, Rose Bruford and Royal Holloway colleges and taught maskmaking and Commedia at a number of centres from 1983.

# MASK-MAKER NINIAN KINNEAR-WILSON



*Fig. 232 Kinnear-Wilson at work*



*Fig.233 Commedia dell'Arte masks by Kinnear-Wilson*



*Fig. 234 Full-face masks*

'..masks are powerful things...it is necessary to be conscious of your motives in making them work. There is also a further parallel with magic, in that just as magic is neither good nor evil, so masks don't exist on their own but work within their own traditions. And because masks show lies and untruths very clearly it is impossible to hide behind them. For this reason you must be true to yourself before you start the making process.'<sup>11</sup>

It is interesting to see this dictum, which despite the mask's associations with deceit and trickery, is often applied to mask performance (*see chapter on Approaches to Performance*), used with reference to the making of the mask.

Although he works closely with performance arts lecturers and theatre directors, Kinnier-Wilson clearly identifies himself as a mask-maker and not a teacher or user:

'... because I make them, I can't teach them. You need the mask-maker and the mask-user. For my part, I like to give them to someone else to use them.'<sup>12</sup>

#### **(iv) Malcolm Knight**

Malcolm Knight founded the Scottish Mask and Puppet Centre in Glasgow. He studied mask-making under Sartori, the Japanese master Nohzin Suzuki, a Balinese master and has studied mask performance with Dario Fo. He has given mask workshops in a variety of contexts, including some in Mexico, where he found students' work displayed 'incredible verve and originality, because from mask culture. In Britain people have lost the ability to think ..?' <sup>13</sup> He felt that a 'less sophisticated society produces much more humane, vibrant response to mask work.' and spoke of the role of the mask-maker in cultures where all are seen to be artists, and there is no association with elitism;

' .... all are equal; makers, narrators (Dalang), and wearers. Then the collective creative mind becomes the instrument of transformation enabling the masks to express images of themselves and others.'<sup>14</sup>

Knight believes that the craft of mask-making has been neglected because of

' .... the increasingly sharp division of labour drawing the mind and the

hand further apart, separating the project and the execution, the goal and its realisation.'<sup>15</sup>

#### **(v) Trestle Theatre Company**

Trestle Theatre Company still make all their own masks; their Company Handbook describes their early experiments in creating the masks for which they have become internationally famous:

'After many months spent in workshop .... an original style of mask ... evolved. A long period of workshop in the spring of 1987 enabled experimentation with a mask-making material called selastic which was lighter and smoother than the fibre glass paste used to date. ....The characters created looked less cartoonlike and more realistic with the head more in proportion to the body than previously.'<sup>16</sup>

Trestle are committed to sharing their expertise in both mask-making and mask performance; this they have done through outreach workshops for students and schoolchildren, and more advanced workshops in mask-making for teachers and practitioners. In addition they have produced three sets of studio masks for use in schools and colleges, and include detailed instructions for making three-dimensional masks of cloth and glue, modroc and selastic with the Teachers' Pack for their Basic Mask Set.

## **2. Student designers**

Students at Gateshead College taking courses in a wide range of Performing Arts courses have participated in mask-making, either on a discrete module or in support of productions which require masks. (*Appendices I,II,III,IV*)

B.A. Second Year Students follow a fifteen week mask-making module, which involves them designing and making masks in a wide variety of materials and



Fig. 235 Building up moulds for papier mache masks



Fig. 236 Student starting work on a latex mask

adopting a range of styles and approaches. Almost all of the students who take the module would consider themselves primarily as performers rather than designers, in fact few have achieved 'good' passes in art or design at G.C.S.E. level, yet without exception, all of the students produce some original and wearable masks. Each student also produces a portfolio of mask images and information, and a written and photographic record of all the masks s/he has made. During the semester students also take turns to present a seminar on an aspect of mask, either ritual or theatrical. This module is viewed as very pleasurable by students. It is possible that this is due partly to the creative excitement of producing original artefacts, perhaps enhanced by the Pygmalion factor, that of making a human image which can then be animated. It is certainly the case that students spend much time gazing at their masks, lifting them up and looking at them as if at a beloved child; as masks reach completion, many also hold up their masks to their own faces (*figs. 242, 248-250*) or urge others to do the same on their behalf, so that the maker can see his/her mask in wear.

Student mask-makers frequently comment that they do not feel entirely in control of the creative process of making the mask, and that, in the words of student Susan Jones,

# B.A. LEVEL 2 MASK MODULE 1996 STUDENTS AT WORK



*Fig. 237 Chickenwire armature for large-scale mask*



*Fig. 238 Making a latex whole-head mask*



*Fig. 239 (above) Sewing together a mask constructed of leather and copper sheet*



*Fig. 240 Painting the two sections of a Janus mask*

*Fig. 241 (right) painting and adding collage details to a contemporary Green Man mask.*



# B.A. LEVEL 2 MASK MODULE 1997 - STUDENTS AT WORK



Fig. 242 Holding the uncompleted mask up to the maker's face - a frequent occurrence during mask classes.



Fig. 243 Students making clay moulds



Fig. 244 Finishing a large card mask



Figs.245 Making a latex portrait mask



Fig. 246 Latex portrait of Tanya (above)  
Fig. 247 Applying plaster bandage (right)



points of view; not only do the masks sustain and develop the company's approach to masked theatre, but they are created with a strong awareness of the needs of the actor who will be wearing them.

### 3. Carnival

Perhaps the strongest convention in which the makers of masks traditionally wear them which survives today is the carnival. Indeed, Dario Fo claims that,

'When we think about the mask, our mind jumps automatically to its natural context, Carnival.' <sup>23</sup>

The carnival tradition, which is established as widely as Europe, the Far East, North and South America and the Caribbean, almost certainly had its origins as a fertility festival encouraging the renewal of growth in nature after the winter season. Although these festivities had their origins long before any of the established religions of today, in early Pagan ritual and magic, in many cases they became incorporated into the calendars of many religious traditions; several carnivals feature in the Roman Catholic liturgical calendar, for example, the pre-Lenten celebration usually associated with Mardi Gras. These celebrations have lost their religious meaning and are now simply a pretext for an extended party. Thurston James suggests that:

'Our society's use of the mask has become trivial compared with the serious and meaningful masquerades of our world neighbours.' <sup>24</sup>

During the carnival normal rules and roles are reversed and elaborate masks and costumes enable the participants to preserve their anonymity;

'the poor were free to mimic the rich and the respectable had a rare opportunity to join in the general debauchery.'<sup>25</sup>

Carnival gives the ordinary citizen the opportunity to put aside inhibitions and participate in an improvised ritual. W.H. Auden describes carnival thus:

'During carnival, all social distinctions are suspended, even that of sex. Young men dress up as girls, young girls as boys. The escape from social



# VENETIAN MASK MAKERS AND THE CARNIVAL



Fig. 251 *The Mask-maker's workshop, 18c*



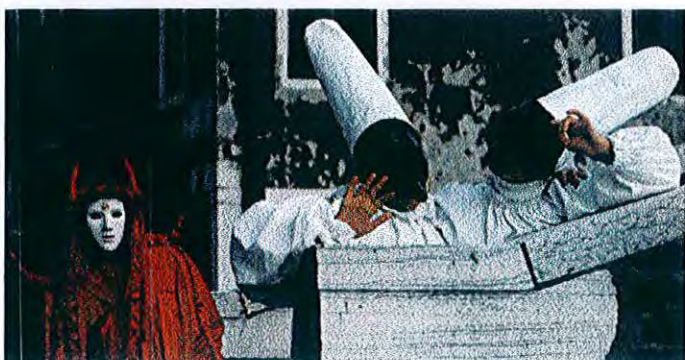
Fig. 252 *Contemporary Venetian mask shop*



Fig. 253 *Venetian mask*



Fig. 254 *Sun and Moon masks*



Figs. 255 and 256 *Venetian masked revellers*

human animal expresses itself through the grotesque - false noses, huge bellies and buttocks...'<sup>26</sup>

The universality of Carnival has already been discussed; the tradition of the wearers making the masks is widespread, from Mexico to Venice. Masks may be made collectively, as in the Samba Clubs of Rio de Janeiro, who together create all the costumes and masks (if any are to be worn) for their members.

In Venice, where the the carnival is as important today as it was during the Renaissance, attracting revellers from all over the world, grotesqueries mingle with sophistication; mask shops and mask-makers thrive, but many of the masks, headdresses and costumes are made by the carnival goers themselves. Art students play a large part in the carnival, creating both individual masks and extravagant masked set-pieces. Carnival masqueraders may spend a great deal of their income on masks, and those who make their own may additionally spend a great deal of time on creating an original masterpiece. In addition to partygoers, harlequins and impassively masked and hooded strangers, the dramatic ancestry (and legacy) of the carnival is evident in Commedia dell'Arte performances and puppet shows. (Figs. 251-6)

#### **4. Mexico, Carnivals and the Day of the Dead**

Mexico is a country with multitudinous carnivals; few days exist when there is not a fiesta in some small village or town. Travellers report disturbing encounters with laughing, grotesquely masked revellers. Masked figures parade through the streets, dancing in their elaborate masks and costumes, many of which have been made by the maskers; others are commissioned from established makers or purchased from shops or wayside stalls. (Figs. 259-62) Masqueraders may be male or female, but although many traditional artefacts are made by women, mask-making is monopolised by male craftsmen;

'.... only in exceptional circumstances does a (*mask-maker's*, R.F.) widow continue her dead husband's calling.'<sup>27</sup>

In Mexico mask-makers may take an active part in dancing the masks during Carnival, or in directing dancers in rehearsal. Some makers may lead teams of



*Figs. 257-258 The New Orleans Mardi Gras carnival is the haunt of the rich and influential. Only the men are masked, wearing face masks and/or elaborate veils.*

MEXICAN CARNIVAL



*Fig.259 'Beautiful' mask of a young woman., usually worn by a man*

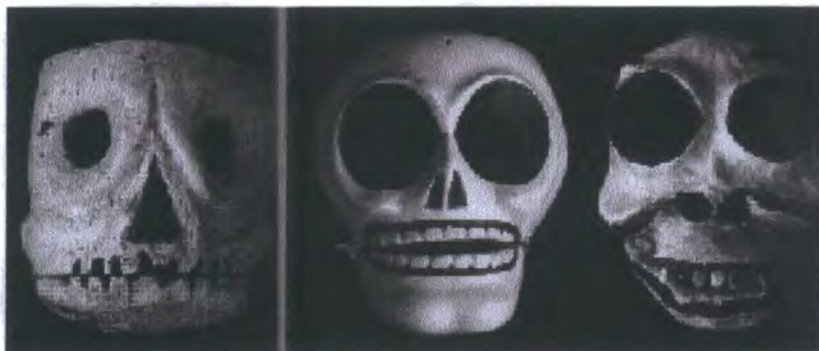


*Figs. 260 'Old men'*



*Fig. 261 "The Twins" - a popular theme for masks showing man's dual identity - in this case, black and white, in others, man/skull or man/devil*

*Fig. 263 -4 Masks for the Day of the Dead*



*Fig. 262 Masks for sale in S Miguel d'Allende, Central Mexico. Many of these masks are old, but sometimes newly carved masks are sold unpainted, so that they can be painted by the wearer .*

dancers in procession, accompanying them on musical instruments

'In some parts of Mexico masks are not bought or commissioned by professional makers but made by the dancers themselves. '.... If a dancer has no mask, he wears dark glasses. ...to adopt a double disguise, he may wear dark glasses over his mask.'<sup>28</sup> (fig. 10)

Improvised masks are made from an astonishing variety of natural and scrap materials.

Within Cora culture, each performer is honour-bound to construct his own mask for Holy Week, using papier mache over a clay mould. The mask is painted white, in which condition it is worn on Easter Wednesday; on Thursday, black lines are added; on Good Friday it is painted. The Yaqui and Mayo people also create their own helmet masks for Holy Week, using animal hides. After Holy Week, these masks are burned, while the wearers undergo ritual purification.

The Day of the Dead is the biggest single festival. (Figs. 263-4)

'These are a homage to deceased ancestors who have returned to earth for a brief period to accompany the living. In some places celebrants perform the dances that are usual at other times of year; in others, they actually represent the dead. Dances take place in streets and patios; they are performed outside the gates of cemeteries, or even inside among the graves.'<sup>29</sup>

## **5. Student Designers/performers**

B.A. Performing Arts students at Gateshead College experimented with the masks they had made the previous year in an aura of great excitement; a black leather mask representing Gregor Samsa in '*Metamorphosis*' was picked out by a single spot, and scuttled in and out of the shadows - some of the girls screamed. Very large scale masks of Roald Dahl's '*BFG*' and Mr Quilp from '*The Old Curiosity Shop*' were too big for the wearers to support, so others stood behind to support the masks and enable the performers to interact and use their bodies freely. It was noted by the audience that front lighting made the BFG look friendly and sweet and the top light, sneering and evil.

PERFORMANCES USING MASKS MADE BY STUDENTS 1996/8



Fig. 265 Performance by Louise Carr using mask made by Vicki Bain , Summer 1996



Fig. 266 Duo performance by Bracken Gorman and Samantha Armstrong, using masks made by Bracken Gorman, Summer 1996



Fig. 267 Dance in the style of Mary Wigman, using masks made by performer Lynsey Wilson and choreographer Richard Allan, Winter 1997



Fig. 268 Hotseating Tony Howard in a clown mask of his own design., Summer 1998

A very unconfident student was happy to demonstrate others' masks, performing with great gusto and physical energy, responding creatively to questions and direction from a number of sources. However, when it came to performing wearing a mask he had made himself, he became his usual anxious, reticent self, and the character he portrayed reflected this, peeping out from behind the stage drapes, walking on, then hesitating, retreating and hiding and repeating the same manoeuvre on the other side of the performance area. Then he gingerly emerged and appeared to gather confidence, performing a short dance, approaching the audience and sitting briefly among them before returning to the stage, retreating into the wings and waving goodbye. In discussion he revealed that although he could appear extrovert when wearing others' masks, when he wore the one he had made himself, he had to be true to its character, which reflected in many ways his own feelings about himself. (Fig. 269) It is perhaps significant that the mask he chose to wear on this occasion was decorated with a handprint right across the face: a double negation of his identity?



*Fig. 268 The shy mask*

One particularly innovative experiment was carried out by a third-year student who was observed lying 'asleep' on the studio floor wearing a plain white cylinder mask. He awakened and discovered he had no face- no eyes, mouth etc, rose to his feet and blundered into the audience, chair and wall, appeared to think for a moment and drew on ears, revealing that he could hear the accompanying music by tapping his feet. Next he drew on eyes, which enabled him to 'see' the audience, play cards and cry, and ended with drawing a large smile, lying down and going back to sleep. (Fig. 270-3) The audiences who watched this performance were delighted by its originality, humour and a certain quality of pathos. The performer himself had been 'apprehensive about whether

it would work.<sup>30</sup> He had wanted to do something radically different, but had found devising the piece very difficult because of sensory deprivation; the rehearsal process had been downright dangerous, and had been complicated because he had no way of determining whether his strategies were working. What he particularly wanted to convey was the shock of the character's discovery that he had lost his faculties, and registering the gradual regaining of his senses.

A group of students, some of whom, during their second year B.A. mask design module, showed a marked preference for replicating and decorating neutral masks, rather than creating original shapes by making clay moulds, or building on neutral masks to create original moulds on which to form masks. This was in marked contrast to the groups who preceded and succeeded them; in these groups almost all the masks submitted for assessment were original in form as well as in decoration. Many of the group who showed a preference for neutral masks showed skill and originality in decorating them, but they did seem preoccupied with the bland perfection of the neutral mask.

When the same group progressed to the third year of the course, some of them opted to undertake the Mask and Movement module. Their work on the module was impressive, lively, creative and imaginative, using a variety of "rubbish" masks, white neutral masks, Trestle masks, and character half masks. When they were undertaking their first coursework assessment, it was surprising to note that despite the range of different types of mask and styles of work undertaken in classes, approximately half the group opted to use neutral masks cut into half-masks, and painted flesh colour.

The students in this group were actively encouraged to experiment with wearing the masks they had made the previous year, both by exploring the characters of the masks through movement and hotseating, and in improvisation. The students showed little interest in using their own masks; only one student expressed the desire to see her masks worn under lights, and she vigorously declined the offer that she might wish to wear them in performance herself. This was in marked contrast with the previous year's students, who were extremely keen both to wear their own masks and to see them worn by others in

performance.

A group of Third-year B.A. students working on a production of Edward Bond's play, *'Stone'*, as their final-year Drama practical assessment in Summer 1997 decided to use half masks in the production for a number of reasons; they wished to portray characters who changed and aged over a number of years; they needed to double some characters and clearly differentiate between them, and to use female actors to portray male characters. In addition to these practical requirements, they wished to present the play in an abstract style, and to use the masks as a Brechtian alienation device. The masks were made and adapted throughout the rehearsal period by one member of the group, to ensure a good fit and sightlines.



Fig. 274 *'Stone'*: mask and body-mask



Fig. 275 *'Stone'*: Other costumes were 2-dimensional, pinned to the front of studio blacks.

## 6. The Maker/wearer and Belief

If an individual who has made a mask, wears it, does this affect his/her use of it, and belief in its power? Can that individual be possessed by the mask he/she has made? And if that mask is worn by another individual, are the results the same, in the eyes of the maker?

Kathy Sprague, an artist involved in the Peter Schumann project based on the Jarrow March in October 1996, in which artists and performers worked together to create giant puppets and masks from scrap material, felt that transformation



# BREAD AND PUPPET THEATRE COMPANY JARROW PROJECT 1997



*Fig. 276 The birds - local primary school children*



*Fig. 277 The men of Jarrow - painted on the backs of doors*



*Figs. 278-279 Maker/wearers smash up the mask-puppets at the end of the performance*

can occur even when the maker is the wearer of the mask. (Figs 276-9)

'It depends on your own self-perception and the value you place on your work. The belief you experience is all part of the creative process'.<sup>31</sup>



Fig. 280 Outsize mask made and worn by participants in the Jarrow project.

Lars Schroeder, a student at the University of Oldenburg, attended a course in Switzerland, during which students were given one month to make one mask, gathering their materials from the countryside around. They used clay moulds as the basis for their masks, and were instructed that they had to start working blindfold to create a mask, and couldn't take the blindfold off until after the mask work was finished. Students used wood, feathers, branches, bark, stone, coke bottles and other objets trouves. The final object was not necessarily a mask in any conventional sense, because the makers had not been allowed to look at their products. When the masks were finished, the participants in the workshop were asked to meditate. The mask ceased to be a simple object, and became a fetish. Initially, they were not allowed to wear their masks - only to contemplate them; then they were asked to become like the mask - they found themselves changed, both mentally and physically; they moved differently, walked in different ways, etc. Finally, each student spent a whole day in the woods with his/her mask - by the end of the day they felt emptied, drained of everything, with nothing left, only the mask. Lars reported that he found the experience both liberating and intimidating.<sup>32</sup>

Young people with severe learning difficulties involved in a week-long performance project at a South Tyneside playscheme appeared to have little doubt that the masks they made had changed them, 'I am not me any more, I'm a new boy'<sup>33</sup> and they clearly found this a positive experience. (See Chapter Eight and Appendix VII)

Conversely, John Wright, founder of Trestle Theatre Company and currently

Director of mask theatre company Told By an Idiot is himself a mask-maker, and has made masks for Trestle Theatre Company, and more recently worked with Bosso in the Sartori studio making leather masks, with Imadi Bagus Alit in Bali, Lecoq in Paris, and with Mike Chase, who currently makes the leather masks used by Told by an Idiot. Wearing a mask he has made himself, Wright does not experience any special emotional bond, perceiving it as 'just another mask'.<sup>34</sup>

## **7. The Maker as Spectator**

B.A. (Hons) Performing Arts students on the Mask and Movement module in 1996 (*Appendix 2*) experimented with wearing the masks they had made the previous academic year, then requested to see them worn by other students; they were highly excited at the results, some of which are described above. Cries of astonishment were uttered as the masks' expressions appeared to alter under the stage lighting as the wearers improvised or moved in response to direction. Some of the most 'minimalist' masks evoked the strongest reactions from the assembled group. In several cases in this and subsequent years, the makers were clearly moved by the sad or otherwise evocative qualities of the masks they had made, when they saw them in performance.

## **D. Conclusion**

Although it is clear that makers of masks tend to develop a special bond with the artefacts they create, little evidence has emerged that the makers interviewed have experienced sensations of transformation or possession when wearing a mask which they had made themselves. The exceptions identified in this research have been the artist involved in the Bread and Puppet project, whose perceptive comments about self-image and purpose are recorded above, and for whom the ideology of the project was clearly a strong additional motivation, and the extreme experience of the participant in the Swiss mask-making workshop, who may well have been conditioned by the unusual conditions and the grandeur and isolation of his surroundings.

There is clear evidence that several of the participants in the South Tyneside

playscheme believed that the masks they made had changed them, and this may be linked to the possibility that some may suffer from low self image; they may also have an openness to belief which is not shared by all. (*See Chapter 7, The Mask and the Self*)

This openness to new experience is shared by many children who have been involved in mask-making and performance, and their experiences will be discussed in the following chapters.

## CHAPTER SIX

# MASKS AND CHILDREN

### A. Children, Masks and Play

Many children appear to be greatly attracted to masks, perhaps because they are at home in the world of fantasy and play.. Little girls usually enjoy dressing up either in specific costumes, or in their mothers' clothes, or experimenting with makeup, which they apply with more gusto than expertise. Hats, helmets and masks allow children to undertake the roles of heroes and villains in fantasy games, often emulating their favourite characters from film and television. (Perhaps for adults, the wearing of masks licences a return to the world of childhood? Children need no licence, but masks still fascinate them)



*Fig. 281 Trick or treat at Hallowe'en*

Each autumn, the streets throng with goulishly-masked children carrying mask-like turnip lanterns and demanding 'a penny for Halloween' - or, in America, 'trick or treat'.(fig. 281) Party masks in a wide range of designs are available from

department stores and specialist shops, as well as from art galleries and museums, who sell Beatrix Potter and Alice in Wonderland sets, and reproductions of Victorian adult wear. (figs. 282-4) impressive lists of titles of make masks, and many of adults working with children; offer 'make your own' and by Parragon; and in 1996 one storybooks telling traditional half masks illustrating the illustrating basic mask designs can be cut out and worn by the recipient (fig. 264), and a visit to the local pet shop revealed children of customers wearing masks



Fig.282 Peter Rabbit mask

party masks suitable for child or Bookshops and libraries stock books demonstrating how to these are orientated towards supermarkets and chain stores popout mask books published chainstore was selling fairytales with simple characters. Greetings cards



Fig. 283 Mask greetings card



Fig. 284 1920s card mask, V. & A. Museum

illustrating cats, dogs and rabbits. Children relish tales of masked superheroes and the phenomenal popularity of the Teletubbies on British television has led to the proliferation of small masked figures among the crowds thronging town streets and shopping centres. (Fig. 287) Young children enjoy making masks of all shapes and sizes, either as part of school projects or just for fun. (Figs. 288-91)

All this is evidence of the lasting popularity of masks among small children and their parents; but it is interesting to speculate about what it is that renders masks so attractive to young children. Some are too young to explain; two young visitors, aged 18 months and three, having discovered some adult sized masks, immediately tried them on without any prompting or conferring, and took turns to climb onto a rockinghorse to rock incognito. (fig. 292)



Fig. 285 Masked ballet, 'The Tales of Beatrix Potter'



Fig. 286 Pluto mask /hat at Disneyworld



Fig. 287 The ubiquitous Teletubby

*Figs 288-89 MASK-MAKING WORKSHOP FOR GATESHEAD ARTS AND LIBRARIES Gateshead College students Irene Cunningham and Camille Hall, Easter 1997*



*Fig. 290 MASK-MAKING WORKSHOP FOR HEDDON-ON THE WALL EASTER FAIR Gateshead College students Karen Lothian and David Wilkinson Easter 1998*



*Fig. 291 Children in a street in Oldenburg, Germany, after a mask-making workshop*





Fig. 292. *The masked riders*

## **B. Children, Masks and Performance**

### **1. Ancient Greece Living History Project**

First Year B.A. Performing Arts students from Gateshead College were involved in the creation of a Living History project based at the Shefton Museum at the Classics Department at Newcastle University. The project involved approximately 432 children, aged seven to eight, from Newcastle upon Tyne primary schools, in dramatised workshops over a period of two weeks. Four students led a group of children in a workshop intended to introduce the children to aspects of Greek tragic drama, enacting the major roles and training the children in choric speech and movement. The actors all wore felt tragic masks closely modelled on a Greek terracotta mask, based on one dating from the fifth century B.C., from Epidavros. (*fig. 293*)

The students' masks had widely gaping mouths in order not to impede vocal projection, but it was soon discovered that the mask of the female student playing the part of Electra was too long for her face, and her mouth was above the mask's opening, which revealed her chin. Little could be done to correct this, but fortunately excellent vocal projection meant that she was still clearly audible. During the dress rehearsal the fact that this group of students had not studied mask performance became apparent because they were acting naturalistically, facing each other and not the audience. (*fig. 294*) A rapid re-blocking resulted in a powerful and rather eerie presentation.

LIVING HISTORY PROJECT: 'ANCIENT GREECE' 1996/7



*Fig. 293 The actors wore full-face masks based on Greek originals, with wide open mouths*



*Fig. 294 Lack of orientation towards the audience was occasionally a problem*



*Fig. 295 The boy on the left was severely visually impaired, and wore his mask all the time*

Another group of students involved in the same project were to involve the children in presenting a scene from Aristophanes's comedy 'The Knights'. They were to use comic half masks, which had been used for the chorus in an earlier production of *Lysistrata*. These were very easy to use as they were close-fitting and made of soft vacuum-formed plastic foam, and did not impede speech or vision in any way.

The schools had been requested to ask the children to make their own masks, which they all did, with the exception of one school whose teacher had not been at the teachers' briefing. Masks varied greatly from one school group to another, although all had followed instructions in that the comic masks were distinguishable from the tragic in that each comic mask sported a feather on top. Some schools' masks were all made of gold card; others were boldly painted, and highly individual. (*figs. 296 and 297*) One school simply photocopied the enlarged reproductions of Greek originals which had been supplied to them at the teachers' briefing; this was very effective. Some groups wore their masks on entry to the museum; most carried them. Quite a number were damaged by the time they were needed, and the 'Greek slaves' had to mend them for their often impatient owners.

When the small-group work on the plays started, masks were not worn during the explanations and initial warmup games which enabled the children and students the opportunity to relax and get to know one another better. (*fig. 296*) Nor were they needed in the early stages of learning the chorus lines and moves. During the latter phases of rehearsal, masks were donned, which frequently resulted in crashes in the chorus line, as the masks impeded the young performers' vision. Most could see the board with the chorus's lines well enough to take a prompt from it if required, others simply pushed their masks back on top of their heads so they they could see the words clearly, until they felt confident with their lines. Most of the children were very proud of their masks, showing them to performers and spectators.

Teachers from some of the schools were also clearly proud of their pupils' masks, and felt they played an important part in preparing children for active involvement in the exercise. The school with the gold card masks explained that

LIVING HISTORY PROJECT: 'ANCIENT GREECE' 1996/7



*Fig. 296 Warmup games for the tragic actors*



*Fig. 297 Masks made by a school group*



*Fig. 298 The comic chorus rehearse their lines*

these had been mass produced quickly as the pupils had already undertaken a Greek mask-making project the previous term. Another teacher explained that all the children in her group had been given a basic template indicating positions for eyes, nose and mouth and giving the pupils free rein in all other aspects of the design of the mask ' ..... so that each child really felt that the mask was his or hers - they had control of them ..... '<sup>1</sup> the standard of masks, and dramatic performance, from this centre was exceptionally high. A third group of pupils from each school, who were participating in role of novice priests and priestesses rather than actors, had been asked to make diadems for their part in the temple ritual, and these seemed to carry significance equal to that of the masks.

One school brought a number of pupils who were visually impaired; they too had masks, and one little boy who was totally blind wore his mask all the time, never taking it off. (fig. 295) Together with their learning support assistants, these children took a full part in the workshops, and students modified the chorus dances to make it easier for them to join in.



In the context of the project, in which the children were in role as Athenian citizens in a fast-moving dramatic sequence, it was clearly not appropriate to elicit responses from the children concerning their experiences in making and wearing the masks, but many volunteered comments about their own masks, including one high-spirited group of 'tragic actors', one of whom explained, 'it isn't me acting like this, it's the mask that makes me do it; it makes me frightening.'<sup>2</sup> (fig. 299) Other children were fascinated by the students' three-dimensional masks, declaring them spooky and clamouring to try them on. One child said. 'Did you know that if you

Fig. 299 "...it makes me frightening" put on a mask, it can really change you into another person? When asked if that happened with the mask he made, he said that it might, but that ' ..... it happens more with masks like those ...'<sup>3</sup> (the moulded tragic masks)

The masks were not the primary focus of the project, which was to involve the children in an interactive re-creation of life in Ancient Greece; nonetheless, they played an important part in the experience for many of the children, and teachers from several of the schools commented on the value for the children of making the masks, in preparing them for the Living History experience, enlarging their knowledge about Greek life and arts, and as a particularly personal form of creative activity. While the rigorous demands of script and movement on the children's concentration did not create an ambience appropriate for transformation by the mask, some of the children were obviously aware of the changes that can be affected by masks on their wearers, and most of them clearly gained confidence through performing masked.



Fig. 300 Theseus mask

## 2. Larkspur Primary School, Gateshead

At Larkspur Primary School, 10-11 year old pupils studying Ancient Greece were involved in a project making large-scale, open-mouthed full face masks out of card for a performance of a play based on the legend of Theseus and the Minotaur. (Fig. 300) The masks were boldly painted and photographs of their production were impressive; their teacher, Norman Hewitt, emphasised their dramatic merit and their role in enabling more timid pupils to overcome their shyness when acting in front of the class.

Also at Larkspur Primary, masks are used in the Nursery Unit as a means of encouraging late talkers to find a voice. The masks are simply made of plywood, with an integral handle so that the child can hold the mask up in front of his/her face; they are painted with cartoon-like animal faces. (Fig. 301) The teacher stressed the value of this exercise, 'You see, it's not them; it's the mask talking.'<sup>4</sup>



Fig. 301 'It's the mask talking'

back to the assembled children to don the mask; as the strange, grotesque face peered over her shoulder as she swung round to face them, the class gasped out loud at the sudden transformation. (fig. 302)



Fig. 282 the transformed teacher



Fig. 283 The mischievous teacher

The first volunteer was called up and given the opportunity to select a mask from a row of seven lying face up on a side table. She chose an anxious, fretful mask, and examined it closely for a putting the mask on with teacher, who encouraged behaviour appropriate to immediately did, folding her arms and stamping her foot: the rest of the class astonished. (fig. 304)

cheerful, widely grinning everyone was his friend - as towards the audience, excitedly stretched out out him on the shoulder.



Fig. 304 The fretful girl

face up on a side table. She looking mask, and few moments before the assistance of the her to adopt a stance and her new face. This she her arms and stamping her once again gasped its Another child was given a mask and told that he sauntered confidently waving his hands, they to shake his hand or pat



Fig. 305 *The friendly boy*

Three children were asked to pick props from a table and create an improvised story involving a cross old woman who is outwitted by a mischievous child, which they did with great alacrity and flair. (figs. 311 and 312) Several other improvisations followed, and by this time the class had been joined by a number of parents, children and teachers from other classes, and the head teacher, all of whom applauded the improvisations warmly.



Fig. 311 *Briefing for impro*



Fig. 312 *Improvised performance*

Afterwards, the children returned to their classroom, and although there was little time for discussion, several interesting points were made. Several of the





*Fig. 306 The naughty boy and the sad girl.*



*Fig. 307 The cross girl; the body language was spontaneous.*



*Fig. 308 The mischeivous mask animated by another boy.*



*Fig. 309 One of the pupils said to look 'exactly like the mask he is wearing' in the picture on the right.*



*Fig. 310 Briefing performers.*

performers commented on the fact that as soon as they put the mask on, they knew what to do and how to behave. Spectators commented that some of the masks made the wearers behave very differently from the way that usually did, and conversely, that some of the masks looked exactly like their wearers. This latter was an interesting observation not only because of the rather grotesque, abstract design of the masks, but also because the two children singled out for their exact resemblance to the masks were Afro-Caribbean, while the masks were a very pallid, yellowy colour. (*Figs 309 and 310*)

All the children were very enthusiastic about this first, brief foray into mask work, and agreed with their teacher that they would like both to obtain some masks similar to the ones they had used that afternoon, and also that they would like to make some masks themselves. Because of the teacher's previous experience with similar styles of mask, she was not surprised at the successful outcome of the afternoon's work, but she was delighted with the children's enthusiasm and the wholeheartedness of their approach. She was particularly impressed by the transformation in one little girl, who she chose as one of early volunteers because she was usually extremely quiet and repressed during all school activities. (*Figs. 304 and 306*) This was not the case when she wore the mask: although remaining silent, as dictated by the form of the mask, she became strong-willed and assertive.

#### **(ii) Mask-making and performance project, 'Clem's Dream'**

The second project undertaken by Reay Primary pupils was a week-long combined mask-making and performance project, which was jointly led by the class teacher and a Performing Arts graduate with specialist mask skills. The project involved pupils in creating a performance based on a Joan Aiken short story, "Clem's Dream", making masks of the characters and then undertaking roles in the production, which had been scripted by the class teacher. The teacher chose to use masks because all the characters in the story except one were fairies, which provided considerable creative scope, and because making them would involve children fully in the creative interpretation of the original story; besides, as Vicki Bain, the mask-making facilitator, observed, it was, 'Much more fun - an amalgamation of art skills and drama'.<sup>5</sup>

The masks were made of card, decorated with collage in a range of materials, and were basically very simple, because time was at a premium. The children were both enthusiastic and imaginative in their approach to making the masks, and particularly enjoyed painting the masks and decorating them. Both children and facilitators were delighted with the results, which turned out 'Much more colourful and imaginative than I had dared hope!' <sup>6</sup>

During their practical drama work leading to the performance, each child wore the mask that he/she had made, and when they first put on the masks, they were highly excited, despite the need for minor adjustments; some eyeholes had to be readjusted and elastic tightened. (Figs 313-5) None found the masks intimidating or frightening, although a few were concerned that the masks they had made did not turn out quite how they had visualised. In spite of this, the masks were a great help in enabling the children to 'find' their characters; mirrors were not used during the development of the piece, 'They saw their masks when they were making them. That was enough.' (Workshop facilitator) <sup>7</sup> All the children had different perceptions of the effects of wearing the masks in performance: the class teacher commented that, 'some felt very affected; others were surprised at the suggestion of a possibility that masks could change in the wearer.' It was difficult to ascertain to what extent the children were directly influenced by the masks, because, in the words of Vicki, the workshop facilitator,

'...it's hard to tell with small children because they are so 'taken over' by the play, anyway.'<sup>8</sup>

### **(iii) Mask performance project, 'An Introduction to Earth'**

In one play devised by the group for an 'assembly' presentation, the children voted to mix masked and unmasked performance. One pupil undertaking the role of an alien wore a mask, and it was agreed by the class that the wearing of the mask gave the character licence to do anything, and that the character of the alien was deliberately 'alienated' by wearing the mask. The style of mask used was a Trestle 'surprised' mask, coloured green with face paint. The child who took the role of the alien was a very unconfident individual who receives learning support, largely because of his extreme shyness. Although he had

# REAY PRIMARY SCHOOL MASK-MAKING/PERFORMANCE PROJECTS



*Figs. 313-315 Clem's Dream:  
performance in school assembly hall*



*Figs. 316-318 James and the Giant Peach: making moulded felt masks*



clearly gained confidence in earlier mask work (*Fig. 305*), pupils and teacher were very surprised when he volunteered for the role and braved the ordeal of auditioning in a number of different masks. He showed no lack of confidence whatever when wearing the mask in performance and was voted 'brilliant' by fellow pupils and 'hilariously funny' by teachers, who commented that the audience, often hysterical, were kept attentive for half an hour. The teacher further commented that the group were inspired by the use of the mask to portray the alien, and that this was their point of contact in relation to the concept of an alien.<sup>9</sup>

#### **(iv) Mask making and performance project, 'James and the Giant Peach'**

The fourth project undertaken by Reay Primary School was a production of 'James and the Giant Peach', again performed by the class for the whole school at assembly. They chose to use masks for this production for a variety of reasons, most obviously to enable them to look like the insect characters from the story, but also in preference to stage makeup, 'Because some people might be allergic to face paints'<sup>10</sup> A further important point was made by one of the class '.... face paint would come off, but masks you can keep.'<sup>11</sup>, an important factor in many mask cultures around the world. They made the masks themselves, for a number of reasons; in the children's eyes, economy was a key factor, but it would in any case have been impossible to obtain the range of insect characters for 'James and the Giant Peach' from any supplier, but by far the predominant reasons were 'Because it was fun ....' and '..... because we wanted our own ideas....'.<sup>12</sup> The children worked in groups of two or three, and they had to negotiate within their groups what strategies to adopt in achieving their objectives. The masks were moulded in felt over mask forms that had been built up with plasticene, (*figs. 316-8*) and when the masks were dry they were painted and varnished with acrylic glue. Pupils wanted the masks to show the audience the characters' physical and behavioural characteristics; 'she is a ladybird and she has spots', 'like a proper earthworm/centipede' or 'sleepy', 'Scared, blind and old and dirty',<sup>13</sup> This they did by using appropriate coloured felts and painting on the physical characteristics, and adding special details for each character, ' a big smile', 'Dark glasses, bags under eyes, dirt and scared expression', or 'silver to make it look like a silkworm wing'.<sup>14</sup>

Pupils greatly enjoyed making the masks, feeling 'very proud', and 'Very excited and glad I got the ladybird' (Bola)<sup>15</sup>, They greatly enjoyed most aspects of the process, from shaping the plasticene to stretching the felt over the mould they had created, and decorating the completed mask. Some particularly enjoyed, 'when we got messy', soaking the felt in cellulose paste, although this was perceived as the worst aspect by others. The majority of pupils felt that their mask had turned out as they had hoped, although a few expressed reservations: '..... we wanted (it) to be a happy mask'.<sup>16</sup>

At first, a small number of children did not want to wear the masks they had made because they felt their masks did not look like the characters they were intended to portray, for example, the grasshopper was thought to look 'too kind', but after several days of the masks being displayed in the classroom, the children became reconciled to them.

Most of the pupils were elated when they put on the masks for the first time; two complained that they were itchy, and one reported that it was 'very hot in the mask' (Alexander).<sup>17</sup> Opinion was divided equally as to whether the masks were comfortable, but sightlines were a major problem; many had problems in seeing when wearing the mask. Most of the pupils felt excited, and four felt a little frightened or nervous, but this was immediately overcome in the excitement of working on the piece. During rehearsals, most of the children felt that the masks helped them to feel like the character that they were performing, although Germaine had reservations, ' .... just a little bit.' Another child stated categorically that, 'It felt like in "James and the Giant Peach"'.<sup>18</sup>

The performance was rated a great success by the audience, the class teacher and her colleagues, and, not least, by the pupils who took part in it.

The children were asked whether they felt that the mask itself can affect the way the wearer behaves. The majority felt that this was possible, although again Germaine had some doubts, 'Yes I do but only if you're a big imaginer'. The group was divided equally as to whether this could happen with a mask that the wearer had made him/herself.<sup>19</sup>

#### **(v) Not Now Bernard**

This was a project based on the book by David McKie, undertaken with Year One pupils, introducing them to work with masks and choric speech. The action of the story was mimed by masked performers, while the rest of the class chorically spoke the lines of the central character's mother (the girls) and father (the boys). This was a new challenge for the young performers; speaking in unison is legendarily difficult, and this production introduced them and their assembly audience to a more abstract style of performance than they had used in the past. This presented no problems, and the performance received an enthusiastic response.

#### **4. Further Work with Trestle Masks**

Following the success of the initial introductory workshop, Reay Primary School purchased their own set of Trestle masks, and pupils have been able to use them in workshop sessions, for performance work and also as moulds for creating their own original masks for projects and productions.

#### **5. Mask work with Year One Pupils**

The younger group were equally as enthusiastic about masks as the Year Four group, (*fig. 319*) and the teacher commented that they seemed to have a natural instinct for maskwork and needed fewer sessions on mask technique than the older children, taking instinctively to the Trestle approach of looking at the mask and adopting its expression, without any prompting from their teacher. In performance, they were highly comical and imaginative in their portrayal of character, but, after several weeks, still had a tendency to try to talk through the mask, and had no concept of working to the front.

The children were promised that they would be doing 'something exciting', and the teacher produced a box of Trestle masks. The pupils craned forward avidly,

but one small voice was heard to say "That's not exciting.", to which another pupil responded reprovably "That's very, very exciting!"<sup>20</sup>

The teacher explained that the class were going to tell stories and act them out, and that each child, chosen to be a character in the story, was to choose a mask which he/she felt to be right for the character, then take the mask round the corner into the class 'home area', look at the mask for a few minutes in silence, then put on the mask and 'become' that person.

The situation and characters - mother, father and naughty baby - were chosen by the children, and volunteers for each role looked earnestly at the masks on the table before making their selection. Next to be chosen were two grumpy neighbours, both selecting angry-looking masks. All five children showed an instinctive feeling for mask performance, spontaneously adopting appropriate posture and body language for each character, and inventively interpreting the story, which was narrated by the teacher from ideas supplied by other members of the class.

A second story involved the children in telling the story collectively throughout, starting only with the premise of a wicked witch, a good wizard, a little girl and a little boy. Again lucky volunteers chose their masks, but this time members of the class chose their names and established their characters, motivations and locations, and proceeded to construct the story, in response to open questions from the teacher. At one point the children insisted that the witch needed a disguise, and the teacher intervened; "Phoebe, where's your coat?" and again, "Phoebe, where's your hat?"<sup>21</sup>, but no response came from Phoebe on either occasion; she was much too busy being the witch in the market place. (*fig. 322*) Others found a coat and hat, and she emerged briefly from behind the mask, looking dazed, then resumed her witch-like demeanour, this time 'disguised'.

More and more children became involved in the performance, and as the story became more involved and exciting, some of the pupils experienced increasing difficulty in keeping their masks in place. The most affected was Harrison, who took the part of the little boy, and who, towards the end, simply pushed his mask on top of his head out of the way. (*fig. 321*) Others occasionally peeped out from



REAY PRIMARY SCHOOL INFANTS MASK STORYTELLING PROJECT



*Fig. 319 Volunteers for maskwork.*



*Fig. 320 Peeping out from under the mask.*



*Fig. 321 Mask consigned to top of head.*



*Fig. 322 The witch working her spell.*

behind their masks to check their position and orientation in the acting space, or, on occasion, to check the audience reaction.(fig.320) Sightlines are even more problematic in these adult sized masks on five-year olds, and several complained that the drilled eyeholes hurt their eyes.

These problems were greatly outweighed by the immense enthusiasm and excitement engendered by using the masks, and the children's completely natural, untutored aptitude for mask performance. The use of masked enactment has also proved to be a great stimulus in storytelling with this group, slowing down and focusing their performance, (see *John Wright in Chapter Three pp. 62- 3*)<sup>22</sup> as well as helping them to overcome any inhibitions.

### **C. Outcomes from the mask projects**

During the space of just over one academic year, eight to nine year old children at Reay School learned a great deal about both mask making and mask performance, which also informed their performance without masks, enabling them to develop new skills in non-verbal expression, and making them more aware of their pacing and audience orientation. In addition, the use of masks enabled them to evolve complex characters, all the way through from the early stages of creating the mask, to its use in the finished performance. Their use also enabled the pupils to achieve stronger belief in the roles they undertook. Five to six year old children have been working with masks for a much shorter period, but their use has already led to significant developments in their ability to construct and enact a story.

The teacher observed that, once the children became used to working with masks, they were 'phenomenal' with them; if a child put on a mask, s/he was able to adopt a character and follow it through logically, whereas without masks, improvisation was on a much more superficial level, more like playing. The masks made pupils much less inhibited, more physical in their approach to performance and much more creative. The teacher also felt that the children approached mask performance without reserve because they had no preconceived ideas about how masks work, and were completely open to new ideas.

A number of children involved in mask projects tended to become attached to one mask in particular, which they regarded as exclusively theirs, becoming reluctant to use other masks. It was notable that these were pupils who struggled with other aspects of their work, or were unusually shy or withdrawn, but found new means of expression and communication through the use of masks, and clearly associated them with success.

In neither group was there any evidence of 'possession' by the mask in any frightening or ecstatic sense, but many of the quieter children were transformed by their use, as in the case of the two examples cited above.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

### THE MASK AND THE SELF - SOME CONCLUSIONS

#### A Self-image and the Mask

Perhaps the first concept to address when considering this issue should be that of the identity of the mask-wearer; who or what is that self which may or may not be capable of being 'taken over' or displaced in some way by an object made of wood, papier mache, plastics or other inanimate substances? This is not a study in psychology and the nature of personality, but it is important to consider the ways in which the individual may view him/herself, and how this may affect the experience of wearing a mask.

Bruce Wilshire's suggestion that 'The body is individual and conscious and hungers after an ever-sharper sense of its particular significance.'<sup>1</sup> expresses briefly and simply the human need for awareness and redefinition of each individual's unique characteristics. Individuals tend to categorise themselves in terms of their physical, intellectual and social attributes, and most people tend to display contrasting behavioural patterns in different circumstances, suggesting the existence of public and private 'selves'; contrasts may also arise between the individual's own ideal self-image and his or her more realistic perception of self but it is clear that the self - the essence of the individual - is an aggregate of these and many other factors. Part of a person's self-image will be determined by the life roles s/he undertakes, relationships with others and the image others are believed to have of him or her. The drive for individuality is tempered by the fear:

' .... that one will be excluded from the company of other persons, because one has become so unusual that one has ceased to be comprehensible to them and confirmable by them.'<sup>2</sup>

These contradictory desires, for individuality and for approval both others who are seen collectively to be more homogeneous, less individual than oneself, may

Eric Bentley, in *'The Life of the Drama'*, defines theatre cryptically as, 'A impersonates B for C.'<sup>3</sup> The very word 'impersonate' suggests the adoption of a persona other than one's own, which in itself involves an element of risk to the actors' self and identity; additionally, the acting process involves participants in lowering their emotional and physical barriers so that they can achieve closer bonds with other actors, and with the audience, who, by staying and watching the actor, authorise this 'impersonation'. The mask can facilitate the adoption of another 'self', helping the actor to set aside his or her own personality and attain a belief in this new identity.

## **B. Physical Self-image and Self-esteem**

Children at the Reay Primary School in Brixton worked on a number of mask projects, and their teacher expressed concern that the Trestle masks they were using, which are all pale yellow-tinted 'flesh' colour, did not reflect the ethnic background of the pupils at the school, which is in Brixton; the class includes children many of whom were born in London, but whose families originate from the Caribbean, Africa, Asia, and Scandinavia.

Casts of some of the masks were taken and painted in shades, ranging from tan, through light brown to a dark tone described by its manufacturers as African Flesh. and these were used in workshop sessions. Children in the original group, Year Four, were impressed with the concept of having 'black' masks, and, when working with the masks, didn't make any correlation between the colour of their own skin and that of the mask they selected for wear. Initially, children in Year One chose not to work with the 'black' masks, and their teacher was concerned that this might be because some of them are less comfortable with the colour of their own skin, for example, one small pupil who said 'I wish I was a white boy'; alternatively, their choice may simply have been influenced by the styles of mask available, as the smaller masks are at present only available in their original colour. During a later project, one child peered into the mask box and reported enthusiastically, "There are black ones in there!"<sup>4</sup>



Fig. 323 Choosing a mask



Fig. 324 Children performing in their chosen masks

The first three children to be chosen to perform were all black, and all three chose to wear brown painted masks, which was interesting in view of this group's previous reluctance to use 'black' masks. These masks may have been chosen to co-ordinate because the characters were a family, perhaps in response to the excitement expressed at first sight of the 'black' masks; perhaps because the pupils felt these masks were 'appropriate' in relation to their own skin colour, or because they felt that this choice was expected of them.

Individuals who are particularly quiet or withdrawn and lacking in self-confidence, may find new and communication when student who always work and tended to suffer became physically eloquent year old school pupil was Register because he was suffered from extremely unwilling to e.g. at assemblies, or show class drama projects. In participated without confidently in front of the pupil received speech



Fig. 325 The friendly smiley mask

avenues of self-expression masked. One dyslexic struggled with text-based from low self-esteem, behind the mask; a seven on the Special Needs exceptionally quiet and communication problems - talk or perform in public others what he had done in mask projects he inhibition, performing whole school. The same

therapy and, when

working with the speech therapist, was involved in a small-scale play using masks the pupils had made from paper, which seemed to enhance his confidence in speaking. When working with Trestle masks, he showed marked preference for one particular mask - the 'friendly smiley' one (fig. 325) which seemed to give him confidence. This may have been partly because of the positive response this particular response elicited from onlookers, or because of the first mask exercise he was involved in, when his initial instruction was 'everyone wants to be your friend', and the class responded accordingly. (See Chapter 6 and fig. 305)



Fig. 326 Masks give many pupils new confidence



Fig. 327 Enough confidence to 'tell off' the teacher!

Adult students with severe learning difficulties involved in a summer playscheme mask-making and performance project (*Appendix VII*) were clearly aware of changes in their identity when wearing masks, as the following comments reveal:

'I am not me anymore, I'm a new boy.' and 'I made this me. I like my new eyes and mouth better. Mum will as well.'<sup>5</sup>

These comments seem to suggest low self-esteem and the desire to replace their everyday, undervalued personae with something new and different, but for some, the shelter of the mask was not simply confined to their appearance:

'Nobody can see me crying, the mask makes me strong not frightened.'<sup>6</sup>

and it was reported by the playleader that the masks did indeed give the participants more confidence, and enabled them to express themselves in ways which were new to them.<sup>7</sup>

### **C. Masks and Expectations**

What predisposes wearers of masks to believe that the masks they wear actually condition their behaviour, even to the extent of over-riding their own personalities?

Part of the answer must lie in people's own perceptions of themselves, and the expectations which other people have of them. These expectations condition our behaviour in everyday life, and frequently in performance; we tend to conform to expectations, and a mask may provide the opportunity to escape those expectations.

A third year degree student describes her own experiences balanced against her natural scepticism in her Mask and Movement journal:

'I find the idea of mystical experiences while wearing masks fanciful, and there's a bit of me that absolutely detests it for some reason, and yet I can appreciate their use in ritual etc. .... I found that the mask either developed a personality of its own or... that it allowed my subconscious to roam. I recognised some of the character that appeared as feelings of my own alienation, and yet when I tried to impose some of my own feelings upon it, it felt wrong.'<sup>8</sup>

She describes her observation of this contradictory phenomenon in another student, and contrasts the wearer's interpretation of her experiences with her own, more acerbic analysis:

One person .... seemed to feel that their behaviour while masked was quite opposed to their normal self and yet .... it was as if the scales had fallen from my eyes and I actually saw a side to them that I knew was there but was never normally so clearly revealed. I wondered if perhaps I had projected what I felt about the person onto the mask ....'<sup>9</sup>



Others made similar observations of the same situation, bringing out the irony of a situation when a number of onlookers all felt they had a clearer idea of the nature of the experience than the individual who was wearing the mask, which leads to another possibility. Is the mask, long famed for its power to deceive the onlooker, equally able to deceive the wearer into believing that s/he is something which s/he in fact is not? Is what is revealed the true self, as the onlookers believe, or its opposite, as the wearers claim? One B.A. Performing Arts third year student at Gateshead College observed that:

'A couple of fellow students stated that their characters were the complete opposite to themselves, but I disagree with this .....'<sup>10</sup>

No evidence was cited for this disagreement, and indeed it is difficult to sustain an argument of this nature without reverting to the purely personal, but Henry Porter's description of the mask as a '... truth serum compulsively portraying the essence of the individual rather than fulfilling his fantasies.'<sup>11</sup> seems to support these instances of the mask appearing to deceive even the wearer, and B.A. student Lesley Hanns's journal offers a useful analysis of the mask experience, which could effectively support her earlier statement:

'... when we don a mask and feel as if the mask is moving through us creating its own persona, we are in fact just accessing all of the information we have stored but not on a conscious level.'<sup>12</sup>

Mask maker and practitioner Malcolm Knight also suggested in an interview that rather than creating character dislocation, masks become instruments of personality change. In considering the benefits and hazards of the use of masks, he puts forward the theory that 'Masks are the sounding boards of the deeper psyche - not just individual but collective.'<sup>13</sup> suggesting that this approach results in a society healthier than one where masks are just part of theatrical makeup and costume. He feels that an unhealthy society is one within which there are not enough masks and therefore not enough ability to change faces, so that society and the individuals within it, are less adaptable. He added that, 'Older societies understood this much better than we do.'<sup>14</sup> and pointed out that the traditional intermediary in ritual mask, the shaman, has been lost to contemporary users, because the folk traditions in many cultures have been

suppressed.

In an article in the journal 'Animations', Malcolm Knight responded to a similar question in further detail:

'The temptation to answer this question by adopting some seductively unifying psychological theory is great. Concealments of real drives within the personality or revelations of universal features? Clearly the mask takes away the person we know and invests the wearer with something new. Further to this, it does something which cannot be done unaided. It places a material object or covering, artificially produced, over the face (but sometimes extending over the head and sometimes the whole body) converting it into an animated and composite symbol. The act of masking is therefore concerned with expressing distinction between appearance and reality. Things are not as they seem. In the words of Oscar Wilde, 'Man is least himself...'<sup>15</sup>

What is the 'something new' with which the wearer is invested? The personality of the mask? A new, uninhibited version of the wearer's personality? An amalgam of the two? John Mack reminds us that '.... masks are paradoxical in their use .... they at once transform and fix personalities'<sup>16</sup> A mask does not necessarily release a raging extrovert from the frame of a timid individual, but it may enable a quiet person to find expression which would not come readily unmasked; this has been observed on numerous occasions, in mask workshops, performances and, more informally, at masked parties and carnival. This interpretation does not account for the differences in behaviour in the same individual wearing different masks; an unknown mask may 'transform' the individual, but different masks transform individuals in different ways. This sense of release has been observed by other mask wearers, noting student peers who

'.... become even fuller of energy and enthusiasm than normal when wearing certain masks'<sup>17</sup>

Individuals in all the groups involved in mask performance projects are affected in similar ways by wearing certain masks, for example the 'depressed' Trestle mask, which affects some people so acutely that they refuse to wear it, and the 'aggressive' one from the same group of basic masks, which transforms the quietest, shyest individual into a surly bully. These reactions may sometimes

have been conditioned by previous mask experience or seeing others work but they have frequently been observed in individuals working with masks for the first time.



Fig. 328 *The bully*



Fig. 329 *Depressed masks*

It is clear that some of these reactions are probably due to the strong character delineation of these 'character' masks, but one student describes her experiences in an exercise in 'growing a character' using neutral masks:

'I found the exercise when we had to grow from a baby, extremely liberating. The exercise was done with neutral masks, so the masks didn't impose any preconceived character onto us. ... I felt the mask take me over, and my subsequent thoughts developed naturally as this character, they were different to my own thoughts. ... I think that this character was probably a facet of my own personality. The side of myself I would like to see more of .....

.... the mask allows you to be less inhibited and for your innermost feeling to be exposed ..' <sup>18</sup>

and this may become a generalised phenomenon, not specific to any style or character inherent in the mask:

'... one of the quieter members of the class ... has become very outgoing when masked. Perhaps he loses some of his inhibitions because he feels that it is the mask, and not himself, who is dictating events: a thought which is allied to the belief that " Once you understand that you're no longer responsible for your actions, then there's no need to maintain a 'personality'<sup>19, 20</sup>

One unusual phenomenon sometimes associated with mask performance is the fact that actors who have been working with passion and commitment when

masked, may discover upon removing the mask that the work they have just completed is expunged from their memory as if it had never happened; as if they were awakening from a dream. This tends to fuel the notion that it was the mask which did the work and not the actor, whereas it could be argued that it is the very intensity of the experience that has a cathartic effect on the actor, purging him of the emotions he/she has expressed with such passion.

#### D. The Mask and Self-discovery

Sir Peter Hall comments on the mask as a route to self-knowledge, and the hazards encountered on that route:

'The mask is dangerous in the sense because it makes actors confront not only limitations in themselves but absolute psychic blocks which they ..... haven't recognised. It makes you know yourself and although we all say that we know ourselves and like to know ourselves, it's quite terrifying to know yourself and sometimes actors find it a terrible experience, the mask, as a consequence. .... when you start dealing with those areas of the mind and those areas of the psyche, you're aware that you're in dangerland.'<sup>21</sup>

He further suggests that the mask allows the wearer to experience vicariously the greatest traumas faced by mankind, and, as a result, may provide for the wearer some insights into their own responses as the mask

'..... allows us to explore emotions which none of us would like to have in life, but we will have; we will all die in agony, we will all suffer dreadful pain ..... and in a way it prepares our psyches to know ourselves a little better.'<sup>22</sup>

but he also stresses the positive aspects of mask work, and the inter-relationship which exists between the mask and the performer, in which each acts upon the other to achieve an outcome which is at once spiritual and creative:

'That which is in you which relates to the mask grows like a flower and that which is in the mask provokes that growth.'<sup>23</sup>

This statement by Peter Hall provides a clear and poetic picture of the way in

which mask and wearer each stimulate the other to produce a performance experience which can transcend the expectations of both audience and performer. This may, for some individuals and in some instances, achieve the intensity of a controlled trance, as described by Johnstone in 'Impro' (p 156);<sup>24</sup> for others it may be a sensation of heightened awareness and loss of inhibition, and it is important to remember that '... actors can be possessed by the character they play as they can be possessed by masks'.<sup>25</sup>

It is clear that the mask can be perceived as an instrument of self-revelation for the actor, capable of unleashing undiscovered creativity and originality, but also revealing weakness or lack of sincerity:

'... if you really do proper mask work, it confronts the actor with himself in the most inexorable way; if you lie as an actor, if you have falseness in you, the mask will tell you that you do. It's a terrible thing for an actor to face.'<sup>26</sup>

The 'terrible' aspect of this experience is the personal discovery of self-deception on the part of the actor, but, although this may be briefly painful, it should, in the long term, be highly beneficial to his/her performance. Discoveries of this nature, whether positive or negative, may be elicited by the mask in others who may benefit even more, as individuals rather than performers.

Malcolm Knight emphasises the value of masks in role play and simulation to aid socialisation and overcome aggression or timidity. He believes that

'In mental illness, where there is often a fundamental dislocation between a patient's sense of appearance and reality, the mask can play a healing role.'<sup>27</sup>

Masked improvisation can give those with psychological disorders opportunities to escape or confront themselves and their specific problems; to speak their minds without fear of self-revelation on the basis that 'it was the mask speaking'. Sue Jennings describes a project at Broadmoor Special Hospital involving staff and patients in making and wearing their own masks to create their own version

of 'A Midsummer Night's Dream', with the objectives of improving patients' self



*Figs. 330 and 331 Masks designed and worn by Broadmoor patient in 'Midsummer Night's Dream' Project; Egeus and Hermia*

image, and increasing communication and trust between staff and patients. In addition to the obvious creative outcomes of the project, a number of other positive findings were revealed by standard tests administered before and after the project, centred on each patient's perceptions of his current self-image, his self at the time of the crime for which he was convicted and his ideal self. <sup>28</sup>

Knight also advocates the use of mask-making in the fields of occupational therapy, psychiatry and psychotherapy, suggesting that it can,

*' .... in specialised hands, be used to spot the positive creative patterns in an individual or the negative self-defeating ones in order to shift the sense of identity.'*<sup>29</sup>

as in the case of the South Tyneside playscheme for adults with severe learning difficulties (*See Chapter Eight Section One above*).

## CONCLUSION

The mask can be used in an educational, creative or therapeutic context to encourage the development of a positive self-image on the part of each individual, enabling adults and children to gain confidence in interpersonal

communication and dramatic performance (*See Chapter7*), particularly in the case of individuals from minority groups or with learning or personal difficulties. Making masks can also be a valuable educational activity, not just because of the way in which it brings together practical and theoretical skills from the fields of art, crafts and theatre arts, but also because it enables children and adults to create for themselves images of an alternative identity or a persona through which they may express another self.



Fig. 332 *Choosing a mask 2*



Fig. 333 *"It's the mask that does it. It makes me frightening"*



# CONCLUSION

## A. Introduction

The unusual experiences undergone by some performers when using masks in workshops and performances have been examined, and compared with the trance states and spirit possession experienced as an integral part of mask ritual in many cultures. It has, however, clearly emerged that although some individuals strongly believe that they are 'taken over' by the mask they are wearing, others' claims to be affected suggest influences stemming from a combination of factors, both physical and psychological. Yet other performers strongly refute the possibility of any kind of changes in themselves when acting in a mask, and see the mask simply as a means of disguise, or tool for achieving a specific dramatic effect.

## B. Ritual and Theatre

Examples of these reactions have been reported both in mask ritual and in contemporary western theatre, but there are significant differences in both the nature of the experiences of the maskers, and the meanings which underpin them. Mask ritual dates back to pre-history in many societies; the spirits who are summoned are specific deities and ancestors whose roles and functions are known to members of that culture, and the ceremonials through which they are called upon are hallowed by tradition; nevertheless the specific nature of spirit possession varies from culture to culture. In some societies the mask itself is sacred; in others it is an intermediary between gods and man. Others believe that the wearer becomes god or ancestor when the mask is worn.

In the western theatre, the mask is a means of disguise or heightened expression rather than of communion with the gods, and it is argued that the concept of transformation or possession is one borrowed from other cultures without the beliefs and traditions which create the possession cults of ritual mask.

Nevertheless, performers, practitioners and directors who work with masks

seem to be in agreement that the wearing of a mask has a readily observable effect on the performance of the wearer, whether they are involved in studio exercises, improvisation or public performance. Opinions as to the causes of the changes which are created vary, but tend to have certain factors in common.

### **C. Factors which contribute to the sensation of transformation.**

It is clear that the effect of the mask is conditioned by the wearer's own perceptions of self, and the expectations which other people have of him or her. Some wearers are eager to give up their own identity and surrender to the unknown, experiencing the familiar completely anew through the eyes of the mask; some use the mask to confound the expectations of others, while other wearers reflect the expectations of the onlookers in their masked performance, using others' responses to stimulate and shape their performance.

Changes may take place in masked actors because masks enable them to lose their inhibitions, or because the fact that they are disguised affords them licence to behave uncharacteristically. Physical factors are clearly significant, too, in creating the sensation of 'otherness' commented on by so many performers. The sense of enclosedness, restrictions or alterations in speech and vision, amplification of the body's sounds, exclusion of sounds from outside the mask, and above all, restrictions in oxygen supply all contribute to the wearer's belief that s/he is being 'taken over' by the mask.

Physical factors do not, however, account for the contrasting changes brought about in the same actor when wearing different character masks; these may be largely accounted for by the customary process of the actor gazing at the mask for some time before putting it on; by the fact that in mask classes, actors are drawn to the use of masks which express overt or hidden aspects of their own personalities. Similar experiences by students wearing previously unseen character masks are probably linked to others' responses to their masked faces.

### **D. Masks and Identity**

Outside the bounds of theatrical practice, masks can be used as disguises by

celebrities, criminals, terrorists and fugitives, and can become icons symbolising an individual or a cause; secular equivalents of ritual deities, which in turn help to reinforce the disguised person's sense of an identity different from that with which they had previously been associated.

Masks can reveal to their wearers hitherto unknown aspects of their own personalities; the sense of isolation they can engender can confront an individual with his/her subconscious in such a way that hidden memories may not be recognised as such, but may be perceived as the experiences of the character 'created' by the mask. Closely linked to this belief is the wearer who is deceived into thinking that the mask portrays characteristics opposed to his or her own, while others perceive those characteristics as being typical of the individual concerned.

The duality of the mask experience which can both reveal the wearer's own personality and simultaneously create a new one makes it an invaluable tool for educationalists finding new paths into confidence and creativity with children and young people, and for therapists helping sufferers to repair the damages of trauma and find new forms of expression.

#### **E. Mask-makers and the Spirit of the Mask**

Few mask makers report sensations as extreme as those experienced by the wearers of masks, and yet in many cultures the makers of ritual masks are thought to be in contact with spirit guides, either direct or through the intercession of a shaman or priest. In some societies this is believed to bring the makers power; in others it is thought to endanger them.

Makers of masks for contemporary western theatre do not claim guidance of this nature, but after the initial principles of mask design have been observed, several have commented that the mask seemed to determine its own design, taking the initiative from its maker. Makers appear to feel a special relationship with the masks they make, different from that of the costume or set designer, perhaps because creating a face is rather like creating an alternative version of oneself, and partly because of the Pygmalion-like delight of seeing your own creation

brought to life.

## **F. The Mask Itself**

Yet the mask and its effects remain an enigma. Peter Hall, speaking from the standpoint of a 'cynical atheist', muses on its power;

'I think the mask is mysterious because they do mysterious things to us. What masks do, they always do .... in every exercise I've ever done, and they have a potency and a power, if you observe the rules, which is absolutely unquestionable, and I cannot explain it, and it is a mystery, and it's part of the mystery of the human psyche.'<sup>1</sup>

It is this mysterious quality which is at the centre of what attracts makers, performers and audiences to the mask, which is, when looked at dispassionately, simply a piece of sculpture, yet which can induce an experience more profound and intimate than any inanimate three dimensional artefact. Sculptures can inspire fine intellectual and emotional responses, but cannot inspire the physical and psychological changes which the mask creates in the wearer.

# **Masks and Metamorphosis**

## **APPENDICES**

**GATESHEAD COLLEGE  
B.A. PERFORMING ARTS YEAR TWO  
MASK DESIGN MODULE**

**Structure of the Course**

**Week**

1. Introduction  
Aims and Expectations  
Assessment methods:
  - Coursework practical  
A minimum of eight masks, made using a range of materials and methods  
Documentation demonstrating method used and evaluating the process and final artefact.  
Coursework seminar/essay  
Exploring mask traditions in a specific culture, or practitioner, or company.
  - Examination  
One mask for specific character in published play, made using any method and materials, over the course of six hours. Written description of process and rationaleHistorical background 1  
Examples of different types of mask  
Practical work  
Simple large-scale card headband masks  
  
Directed Study - work on card masks
2. Historical background 2  
Making a clay mould  
Completing and decorating card masks  
  
Directed study - work on card masks
3. Ritual masks 1  
Making a papier mache mask on the clay mould - first 2 layers  
Completing card masks  
  
Directed study - research into mask traditions
4. Ritual masks 2  
Making a papier mache mask on the clay mould - next 2 layers  
Making a portrait mask using Modroc

Directed study - research

5. Ritual masks 3  
Finishing a papier mache mask - edging, backing, sanding, undercoating  
Making a latex portrait mask from a Modroc mould

Directed study - painting the papier mache mask

6. Theatre masks 1  
Building up a neutral mould with Plasticene  
Making a buckram masks (coarse or fine) on a plasticene mould or clay mould  
Some materials useful for decorating masks

Directed study - research/ completing any unfinished masks

7. Theatre masks 2  
Making a felt mask on a mould  
Making a chickenwire maquette for a large scale mask  
Cutting or drilling eyeholes in masks

Covering the chickenwire form with papier mache

8. Theatre masks 3  
Carving or assembling a wooden mask  
Using a vacuum former with a clay or plaster mould (hard plastic)  
Paint finishes and their appropriateness for different mask materials

Directed study - decorating and painting masks

9. Making a mask with copper or tin sheeting  
Making a self-portrait mask from measurements  
Vacuum forming with soft plastic foam  
Ways of securing masks in wear - headband, elastic, wire ear hooks etc

Directed study - research/ finishing masks

10. Seminars, or submission date for essays

Directed study - research/ finishing masks

11. Leather masks on clay or plaster moulds  
Helmet masks in gum strip

Directed study - finishing masks

12. Whole head latex masks  
Laminated magazine photographs  
Finishing masks  
  
Directed study - finishing masks
13. Fabric masks - cloth mache  
Quilted masks  
Finishing masks  
  
Directed study - finishing masks
14. Finishing masks. Hand in masks and documentation.

### **Examination**

Mask for specific character in published play, to be completed in six hours.  
Brief written description of process and rationale, including analysis of play and character.



**GATESHEAD COLLEGE  
B.A. PERFORMING ARTS YEAR THREE  
MASK AND MOVEMENT MODULE**

**Structure of the Course**

**Week**

**1. Introduction**

Content of course

Aims and expectations

Assessment methods

Coursework Practical 1 Solo/duo piece

Coursework Practical 2 Group performance

Essay on mask practitioner or specific aspect of mask performance.

Examination

Duo/trio piece, followed by discussion

Historical background

Roots in ritual

Early theatre history 1

Pre-mask exercises

'Rubbish' masks

Directed Study - stocking mask impro- any topic except burglary or terrorism.

**2. History of mask in theatre 2**

Physical warmup

Using the Space' exercises

Orientation exercises

Whirligig

Face front

Crossing the room

'Shoeing' a mask

Selecting masks made in previous year's Mask Design module for performance

Animating masks made in previous year's Mask Design module under lights

Directed Study - improvisation with masks made by class members

**3. Introduction to Commedia dell'Arte**

Physical warmups

Commedia exercises

Directed study - Improvising with Commedia techniques

4. **Introduction to neutral masks**  
Physical warmup  
'Growing the mask' exercise  
Planning a performance piece 1

Directed study - devised work using neutral masks

5. **Masks in 20th Century Theatre**  
Physical Warmup  
Exercises in inter-relationships  
Character masks - Trestle basic  
Spontaneous improvisation

Directed study - plan/prepare for practical assignment 1

6. **Masks in 20th Century Theatre**  
Physical warmup  
Seven states of tension  
Spontaneous improvisation using tension states

Directed study - plan/prepare for practical assignment 1

7. **Practical Assignment 1**  
Solos and duos
8. **Masks in 20th Century Theatre**  
Physical Warmup  
Archetypes  
Practical work using archetypes

Directed study - improvisation using archetypes and counter-archetypes

9. **Physical warmups**  
Character masks - Trestle Intermediate  
Focus exercises  
Improvisation using focus work

Directed study - devised piece using Intermediate masks

10. **Physical warmup**  
Pre-mask exercises  
Character masks - Trestle Advanced  
Status exercises  
Improvisation using status work

Directed study - devised piece using Advanced masks

- 11. Introduction to half masks**
  - Physical warmup
  - Johnson half-mask exercise
  - Teaching the mask to speak
  - Planning a performance piece 2

Directed Study - Planning and devising Practical Assignment 2

- 12. Work on Assignment project**
  - Physical warmup
  - Work on Practical Assignment 2

Directed Study - Work on Practical Assignment 2

- 13. Work on Assignment project**
  - Physical warmup
  - Work on Practical Assignment 2

Directed Study - Work on Practical Assignment 2

- 14. Practical Assignment 2**
  - Group performance

### **Examination**

Small group devised piece  
Discussion

## APPENDIX III

### B.A. PERFORMING ARTS YEAR 1: BAUHAUS PROJECT

As the culmination of their studies of the effects of industrialization on the arts, students were given the option in their examination of undertaking a practical project in the style of either the Constructivists or the Bauhaus. They decided to present a series of individual performance pieces centred on the design principles and choreographic theories taught at the Bauhaus under the tutelage of Kandinsky, Itten, Moholy Nagy and Schlemmer. Over a period of two weeks, sets, props, masks and costumes, and, in the case of several students, puppets and automata, were designed and made.

Several used vivid coloured projections on the white cyclorama cloth; one performer was clothed entirely in white, with a white neutral mask, but was transformed to red, blue and yellow in turn as he moved through the geometric shapes projected on the backcloth and dancefloor.

Another student made a crested helmet mask reminiscent of some of Schlemmer's designs for the Triadic Ballet (Figs.), painted blue in acknowledgement of Kandinsky's colour theories.

A third student designed an enormous yellow triangular mask which formed an integral part of the set he had designed and constructed, and which he unclipped from its moorings to wear during one sequence during the performance.

Sets and stage props were impressive; all of the students had thought of original ways of interpreting and applying the aesthetic principles they had been introduced to as part of their module on Arts and Industrialisation. Much use was made of lighting and projections, and musical accompaniment included Stockhausen and Satie, but also some highly abstract contemporary pieces. The use of masks was integral to most of the pieces, and although only a few of the students had experience in mask performance, they were worn with panache.



Figs 334 and 335 Jeanette Rutter



Fig. 336 Jeanette Rutter



Fig. 337 Tony Scandrett's set



Fig. 338 Tony Scandrett: the giant mask in use



Fig. 339 Tony Scandrett: balaclava mask

## APPENDIX IV

### **GATESHEAD COLLEGE BTEC FIRST DIPLOMA IN PERFORMING ARTS 1995/6 Trestle Mask Performance Workshops Lecturer: Rose Furlonger**

The BTEC First Diploma in Performing Arts is a full-time introductory vocational course covering drama, dance, music and stagecraft, offered to school leavers aged between sixteen and eighteen, who have achieved fewer than four passes in GCSE at grades C and above.

Students were given a four-week basic introduction to mask-work as part of their Understanding Drama module. During the first session, the whole two-hour class was devoted to pre-mask work. Students were involved in pre-mask exercises similar to those used with the third year B.A. Performing Arts students, including Face Masks, cardboard cylinder mask explorations and simple performance exercises using blank black masks. These exercises tended to proceed at a much faster pace, partly because of shortage of time, partly because of the students' comparatively short span of attention. Much less time was spent on reflection and discussion of outcomes. During the exercises involving the black masks and cylinders, one student kept tilting his masks to see where he was going, or gauge the effect of what he was doing - like a child cheating in a game. Other students' work was effective, and reactions to the work were positive..

During the second week, the group were prepared for the use of the Trestle Basic set of masks, using a mixture of familiar warmups and Trestle exercises

The students were then introduced to the masks, which were lying face up on a table. There was much excitement in the selection of the masks; each student was invited to take their mask and sit quietly contemplating it before putting it on. They were then instructed to 'shoe' their masks in the method prescribed by Keith Johnstone, and then invited to look at their masked selves in a mirror, which resulted in what seemed like a form of hypnosis - they were entranced by their reflections. (*Johnstone: 186*)

The rest of the session consisted of basic work on performing to front and

'clocking' the audience, which was entirely centred on technique rather than on work on character or belief. All this part of the class was structured around certain members of the group being asked to perform to the lecturer's instruction, while the rest of the class acted as audience and awaited their turn to 'perform'. Some individuals' work on these exercises was much appreciated by others in the group, who responded with gasps, applause and favourable comments. The class ended in an atmosphere of excitement and anticipation.

In week three, students were involved in character work using masks.

Warmups were brief and orientated towards exploring physicality; once again the masks were laid out, but this time face down, and students were encouraged to make their choice without looking upon the faces of the masks, and to shoe their chosen mask without being certain which one it was. They were then told that these were 'new-born masks' with no previous experience of the world, and that everything they saw would be entirely new to them. They were invited to choose an object from an adjacent table, on which were arranged a random selection including toys, percussion instruments, purses, feathers, ornaments. They were asked to explore their environment and the object they had chosen, at first in isolation, and then with the option of building relationships with others in the group. It was at this point that the prevailing social dynamic of this group surfaced for the first time since the beginning of the mask-work project, as the masks of the two girls in the group immediately struck up a relationship, and the boys either ignored them or teased them by attempting to take away their chosen objects. This tended to erode the belief which had been successfully developing for most students in the group; although it was protested that the teasing boys had simply been acting consistently with the characters they had created, the reactions provoked were uncomfortably similar to those commonly seen in non-dramatic interactions within the group. Students were asked to remove their masks and the exercise was discontinued.

The group were asked to retain their masks and sit in a semi-circle to take part in a masked 'hot-seating' session, to enable students to further develop and deepen the characters of their chosen masks. There was a very positive response to this exercise both in terms of questions asked and the responses given; although voices were necessarily muffled by the type of mask used, replies were well

considered, and the group continued to respond with delight to the appearance and demeanour of their masked fellow students.

The final exercise for that session was improvisation in pairs; each pair were given a situation to develop into a short devised piece involving interaction between two masks, for example, two secret agents exchanging information, or a hold-up in a shop or post office.

Week four involved students in physical warmups - walking, trotting and running - concentrating on feet, knees and hips. Other warmups, 'racing cars' and 'carpet', and variations on 'fishing line', focused on orientation and alignment of the head. The major part of the session had students working in groups on short improvised pieces which were to be the culmination of their assessment. The two girls worked on a piece involving a statue which comes to life - loosely based on an exercise described by Johnstone...the boys devised a piece based on a mediaeval tournament, which was a formalised piece centred on action piece rather than on character or feelings. The piece offered potential for an ironic ending, which unfortunately did not materialise in performance. In discussion, it transpired that this had been discussed but not resolved, largely because of the fact that devising and rehearsal time was very short.

Work carried out with this group made it clear that masks can be enjoyed on many levels; there was a strong element of discovery for all the students, and very pleasing performances were witnessed from all members of the group, without exception. What was particularly interesting was that some of these effective performances were based entirely on technique, while others were seeking to convey more depth of meaning, and for some members of the former group, improvisation was closely akin to play at times.



## **BTEC FIRST DIPLOMA STUDENTS 1996/7**

### **DANCE PERFORMANCE PROJECT**

**PERFORMANCE 6 JANUARY 1997**

**Dance Lecturer: Amanda Haggath**

**Performance Processes Lecturer: Carolyn Stackhouse**

Students were to perform a devised interpretation of the Ghost Dances by Christopher Bruce. For this purpose, in addition to their work on devising and rehearsing the piece during their dance classes, they would design and make masks as part of their work in designing props in Performance Processes. The making of the masks involved students in making life masks of some of the class in plaster of Paris bandage (Modroc); others used existing moulds, building up their designs in layers of Modroc.

The subject matter of the dance performance was perceived by the students as centred on war, famine, and the devastation of a country, with the masked dancers representing the ghosts of people who had suffered, and the unmasked, the people of the country going about their everyday lives. Masks were used to give character to the ghost figures. and to achieve this end by means of their fixed, ghoulish expressions.

It was planned that the students make the masks rather than use bought ones, because in that way 'each student would produce an individual mask which would carry its own characteristics through the dance work' (*Amanda Haggath, Dance lecturer*) and to involve students in the design of the piece. Stress was laid by the Design lecturer on the practicality of a good fit for movement in dance, the building of the characters, and the personal involvement in actually producing a mask. The students were happy with this because they 'Could make them how we wanted, to fit our own faces - 'comfortable, all different, our own interpretation'

Mandy Haggath hoped that the audience would gather from the use of masks that these roles were not of people but ghost-like creatures, and that they would give a feeling of death. The students agreed with this but added that they symbolised sadness and that the characters clearly had 'Only one thing on their

minds, their expression never changes.'

The students observed the masks/makeup of Ghost Dances on video - and were given a limited colour palette centred on green - ghostly flesh, which had been used on the original masks in the video.

The masks were constructed by means of plaster casting, papier mache, painting and collage. Students concentrated quite well - high spirits, enjoying the fun, the mess, and the new experience; they particularly enjoyed forming the moulds and decorating the masks. Their major areas of concern were the weight and practicality of the masks, also the painting sometimes made the masks soggy. The two students who had volunteered to be 'models' hated being subjects for casts, finding the experience 'horrible'

On the whole, the masks turned out as Mandy had hoped, although they were difficult to work with from a practical point of view. Heavy materials were used, and there was little ventilation and flexibility. They did not all fit comfortably. Carolyn, the Design lecturer, was aware of the weight problem, and acknowledged that they were too heavy for dance. She was, however, quite pleased with their overall appearance. The students were less enthusiastic and felt that they had not had enough time to paint the masks.

Each student wore the mask he or she had made, and when they first put them on, they appeared to their lecturer to be very enthusiastic and proud of them, despite the fact that some did not fit well, and students reported that they were uncomfortable, resulting in a 'squashed nose...my mouth was where the (mask's) nose was. I couldn't breathe' (*Claire Baptist*) Others found it strange performing with a 'big weight on my face' and one student complained that the mask was 'hot and stuffy', with 'plaster crumbling into my eyes' Overall, however, they were very pleased with the outcome and the effect it gave them as well as the anonymity?

The dance lecturer felt that the masks were very useful in helping students 'find' the character they were performing, giving them confidence and improving their focus. The students agreed and several added that 'with the mask on I

looked completely different' Mirrors were used only to look at the masks initially - after that the mirrors were there on the Dance Studio walls if the students wanted to use them but the lecturer did not encourage this.

Students and the class lecturer were asked their views on the reputed power of the mask to overcome the personality of the wearer and 'take him/her over'. Mandy Haggath observed some behaviour amongst the students which could be attributable to this phenomenon, although she described it as 'limited', and attributed it to loss of inhibitions due to the use of disguise. Students felt themselves affected by the masks for other reasons; 'It affected your movement because of the facial expression e.g. sad mask, sad movement.' suggesting a psychological influence rather than a specific 'power'.

Lecturers felt that the fact that students made the masks themselves meant that they treated them with pride and respect and that they worked hard on the performance to reach performance level. The sense of achievement about making the masks gave 'additional enthusiasm to the rehearsal process when fatigue was beginning to show.'*(Mandy Haggath)* The students felt that having made the mask did not lessen their belief - it helped to increase it. During the performance, the students had problems seeing and breathing; it was difficult for them to interact with and pick up cues from fellow actors because of loss of peripheral vision and reduced hearing - participants gave cues by squeezing one another's arms, and took other cues from lighting changes, and the shadows of other performers. They avoided bumping into people because they were well rehearsed, but when it did happen, they tried to make it look deliberate. They felt less nervous because they 'Couldn't see if the audience were laughing.'

Over all, the project was deemed a success, despite technical difficulties with the masks. They created a powerful image in performance, unifying a new group of students with very varied dance experience, and the fact that they had created the masks appeared to give the students a redoubled sense of ownership of their production.

# BTEC FIRST DIPLOMA IN PERFORMING ARTS MASKED PERFORMANCES 1996/8



*Figs.340 (right) and 341 (below)  
Trestle masks used in improvised  
performances, 1996*



*Fig. 342 BTEC First Diploma students in Dance performance  
for which they made their own masks, 1997*



*Figs. 343 and 344 BTEC First Diploma students in a production of Animal Farm, wearing  
head-top masks made by the student performers, 1998*



## **BTEC FIRST DIPLOMA IN PERFORMING ARTS 1997/8**

### **ANIMAL FARM**

**11 February 1998**

**Drama lecturers: Brian Rapkin and Stephen Melville**

**Mask Design Lecturer: Rose Furlonger**

BTEC First Diploma students made simple masks out of stiff card for a production of 'Animal Farm'. Each student made his/her own mask, using basic templates, and building up layers of card, and masks were painted with acrylic craft paints.

It was decided that the masks should be worn on top of the actors' heads so that speech would be unimpeded. In repose, the 'animals' were to stand with their heads bowed and the round-eyed masks looking directly at the audience; when they spoke their heads were raised and the human faces became visible. All the students wore studio blacks and black 'beanie' hats. The simple, clear images were very effective when viewed from the audience, although the tendency of a few students to look round, turning their profiles to the audience and rendering the masks almost invisible, marred the overall effect. This was almost certainly due to lack of experience with mask work, and the fact that students rehearsed with masks for the first time only two days before the performance.

Students were intrigued with the idea of using masks, feeling that it would make it clear to the audience what kinds of animals they were depicting, which would otherwise have involved them in lengthy costume changes. Most were pleased with the masks they made, and most wore the masks they had made in the performance, finding them helpful in establishing their characters, and, on a more basic level in a production with substantial 'doubling', 'You knew if you had a pig mask on, you were a pig'!

**GATESHEAD COLLEGE  
BTEC NATIONAL DIPLOMA IN PERFORMING ARTS  
FOUR-WEEK MASK PROJECT  
SPRING TERM 1997  
Lecturer: Rose Furlonger**

**Discussion before workshop commenced**

The four-week project started with a discussion, during which the group sat in a circle with a number of neutral masks laid out on the floor in the middle. The students were not allowed to touch them, but were asked for their responses to the masks. They were sharply divided between fascination, dislike and fear. No-one was opposed to the idea of working with or wearing masks - they were simply bothered by the look of them.

Some of the reasons they gave for their reactions were; they were like death masks, ghosts or aliens, that they were blank, it was not possible to see their expression, that you couldn't tell what the wearer was thinking, that the masks had no gender, or changed the gender of the wearer, and that 'it takes the person away'.

A student who had been in the territorial army described wearing chemical masks during a four-day exercise on chemical/biological warfare. She described the experience as 'Dead depressing and degrading. Everyone looked the same. It was isolating - you didn't know who you were talking to.' (*Katherine Brash*)

Students were invited to try on the masks, to establish familiarity with them, and several found this disconcerting. Many found the 'male' neutral masks most disturbing. They tried wearing the masks on the backs of their heads instead of over their faces, and a Janus effect with masks front and back. The students were by this time very relaxed and matter of fact - the masks were treated as tools or effects. The masks were then put aside.

The students then participated in physical warmups, followed by a focussing exercise. The rest of the session was spent working on the 'seven states of

tension', from supine to catatonic. No masks were used, and concentration was well sustained on the part of all the students, with the exception of two.

## SESSION 2

The second session was held in an art studio because of a public examination in the hall, where the class would normally have taken place. This created severe space restrictions. Pre-mask work began with students working in pairs on finger-dancing, then hand-dancing gradually developing into a whole-body dance. Students were then asked to lie on the floor with neutral masks placed on their chests. They were asked to empty their minds and, when they were ready, put on their masks, then slowly rise, facing the wall at the back of the room, and, on a signal, turn their heads to look over their left shoulders, and slowly turn round to face front. Very slowly, they raised their arms to shoulder height, then stretched them above their heads, raising onto the balls of their feet and holding this position until the cue was given for them to let their arms move very slowly back to their sides. (*figs*)

The group were unable to continue with practical work because of the restrictions posed by the space, but this provided the opportunity to discuss their experiences. Some again found working with the neutral masks disturbing, and the slow pace of the exercise had produced for some a trance-like condition in which they felt distanced from everything around them.

## SESSION 3

The group worked on a number of pre-mask exercises including 'Paranoid tig' in which all participants compete to eliminate the rest, with one arm as 'sword', the other behind his/her back, guarding the heart; when a participant has been caught three times, s/he dies dramatically against the wall. This was followed by 'Character Statues', in which group members were asked to freeze as given characters - human and non-human, and Emotional Statue Freeze.

Neutral masks were then introduced to worn on audience orientation and the technique of 'clocking' the audience and registering events/responses through

directing the gaze from the focussed object or person to the audience. Students experimented with walking across acting space and clocking the audience, varying moods and circumstances, with the rest of group acting as audience.

The students retained the neutral masks for some exercises in improvisation centred on a bus stop and a park bench

#### **SESSION 4**

The fourth session centred on the use of the half mask, and at the beginning of the class, the masks were laid out in a row on front of stage, together with a selection of hats and wigs. A long mirror was provided.

Students were asked to select a mask, take it to a quiet place and look at it, attempting to construe its character from what they could see and simultaneously recreating the features of the mask in their own faces. They then went back into the circle and were asked to hide their masks and show the group their own re-creation of the face of the mask; then reveal the mask. Then they were asked to throw a face from one member of the group to another - like Concentration or Chinese Whispers.

They were then asked to put on their masks, and, in turn, look at their own masked face in mirror, adjusting their own lower face expression to that of the mask. Then they were requested to return to the front of the stage and select a hat or wig to complement the appearance of the mask - and to adopt the posture, then the movement of the masks they were wearing and walk around room, making contact with other masks when encountering them. They were asked to add first a sound, then a phrase, to communicate with other masks.

Next, students worked in small groups on making entrances and exits interesting, and a means of focusing the attention of the audience. Each group were required to show individuals' and group entrances into the acting space, and find a means of engaging the audience, and exit. Again the rest of group played audience.



The last exercise in this session was hot-seating; each character was asked in turn to take the chair to be hot-seated by the rest of group. Some very strong performances resulted, notably Helen Henderson in a tiny flesh-coloured mask covering only the area around her eyes and forehead, as a repressed spinster who had been sexually abused as a child - very powerful and disturbing. Equally disturbing was Jeanette Rutter, a sinister, witch-like character with a tendency to cackle, who claimed to be very fond of children, and denied any intention of harm to them.

## **CONCLUSION**

The four weeks of mask work produced some lively and original work from this small and very diverse group. Some disappointment was expressed by students that a high proportion of class time was devoted to pre-mask exercises rather than masked improvisation, but the majority of the group were impressed by the power of the mask in both exercises and performance.

## APPENDIX VI

### GATESHEAD COLLEGE HORIZONS YEAR 1 DANCE AND DRAMA 1996/7

**Lecturer: Claire Adams**

This was a very small group with initially only four students, all eighteen year old school leavers with severe learning difficulties, and a learning support assistant. Three of the original members were males, the fourth a young woman. The students were on their first year of a two-year full-time 'Horizons' programme at Gateshead College, which gives them experience of a wide range of practical and creative activities; the Dance and Drama module is offered in both first and second years of the course. The lecturer for this group was a recent graduate of the B.A. (Hons) Performing Arts at Gateshead College, whose area of particular interest is dance and who is taking this group for two hours per week while studying for the City and Guilds 401 Further Education (Special Needs) Teachers' Certificate.

The group had initially worked on a dance project based on interpreting Expressionist paintings through movement, and their second project of the year was to be centred on mask work.

#### WEEK ONE

Their initial class involved them in a number of warmup activities directly focused on faces; firstly the 'Face Mask' exercise in which students make their own faces into 'mask' shapes to express specific emotions nominated by the teacher. They elaborated this exercise by 'throwing' the imaginary mask from one member of the group to another on the teacher's command. They then extended the concept of facial freezes creating imaginary masks, into mood freezes involving the whole body and complementing the 'masks'.

Next they were introduced to a selection of Trestle Basic Masks which had been laid out face upwards on a table. After spending a few minutes looking at the masks, they were invited to mime putting on the mask of their choice, making their facial expression as close as possible to that of the mask. They then

returned to the table to select a mask to work with, and each individual took his or her chosen mask to a quiet place, to sit and look at the mask and think about its character.

The students were then invited to put on their chosen masks; all needed some help with this, and some prompting to adopt the characters they had previously identified. One of the group was frightened at the prospect of putting on a mask, and all of them had problems with breathing, but, thanks to the patience and support of the lecturer, and their own positive attitudes, they were soon walking round the Drama Studio in character. Three of the four students needed occasional prompting to sustain their characters, but one required none at all, and was quick to develop appropriate body language for his mask, which had a querulous expression, which was accentuated by his head-scratching and finger to face gestures.

Interaction between the characters was introduced, and this helped students to sustain their characters. This led to two spontaneous improvisation exercises; one set in a dentist's waiting room, the other in a restaurant. At the end of the two-hour class, the students' responses were "It was great" and "I really enjoyed it" and demands for more mask-work the following week.

## **WEEK TWO**

The Trestle masks were used again, the following week, and again the masks seemed to help the students' belief in their work. However, it quickly became apparent that although they brought exciting possibilities, there was a serious impediment to performance when using these masks; because the masks are poorly ventilated, with no holes around nose or mouth, the students were experiencing breathing problems.

## **SUBSEQUENT WEEKS**

The following week, soft foam half masks were used by the group; this solved the problems of ventilation and introduced a new factor into their performance; that of sound or speech. The half masks all portrayed old people of

**MASKS AND THE 'HORIZONS' GROUPS:  
STUDENTS WITH LEARNING DIFFICULTIES**



*Figs. 339 and 340 Commedia dell'arte exercise*



*Figs. 341 and 342 Improvisation using Trestle Basic masks*



*Fig. 343 Large card mask*



indeterminate sex. The students found these masks much easier to work with, although there were still problems with vision, as the masks have very small eyeholes, but the group enjoyed taking on the characters of old men and women. The lecturer reported that the half masks positively encouraged the students to speak and extend their language skills.

A student volunteer helper suggested the use of cardboard animals masks (which had been given away in a pet shop and brought in to college as evidence to B.A. students on the Mask module of the universality of masks) These were used with the group and were found to ease the problems of breathing and sight lines.

Mask work had to be abandoned when the dynamic of the group changed: the volunteer helper was no longer able to come to the class, and a student with very severe learning difficulties, who was very hyperactive, was transferred to this first year group from the second year of the course.

## **HORIZONS MASK WORKSHOP**

**Lecturer: Vicki Bain**

### **Horizons One**

A recent graduate undertook a one-off mask workshop, aiming to introduce the students to masks, as part of a drama course. She planned to make this a fun session, with the intention of achieving physical release, and started with a gentle physical warm-up, followed by discussing and handling the masks before trying them on. A wide variety of different types of masks were used, including Cardboard, Neutral, Commedia, Full-face papier mache 'character' masks, and Half-masks, as the workshop leader observed, ' - a real crash course in the variety of masks' (*Vicki Bain*)

It was felt that the 'happy' and 'sweet' mask characters gave the most positive response, ' - everyone co-operated and was supportive of each other', (*Vicki Bain*) whereas one particular 'bully' mask 'changed a normally quiet, timid chap into a school bully - he wanted to hit the others' (*Vicki Bain*) so that the lecturer had to be very firm with him

When they put on the masks for the first time, they reacted with GREAT excitement and wonderment, showing no fear at all, and the masks 'instantly' helped them find the characters they were portraying. Mirrors were used, because the class took place in a mirrored dance studio, so the workshop leader had no choice in the matter.

The leader felt that there were significant changes in the behaviour of the students when they were wearing the masks, as in the case of the 'bully' cited above and felt that this was largely ascribable to loss of inhibitions due to the use of disguise.

**PLAYSCHEME FOR YOUNG PEOPLE WITH SEVERE  
LEARNING DIFFICULTIES, SOUTH TYNESIDE  
MASK PROJECT**

A mature student, having completed the second year of the B.A. (Hons) Performing Arts at Gateshead College, undertook a summer holiday job helping to run a playscheme for school pupils with severe learning difficulties. A major part of her responsibilities was to involve some of the older participants in a drama project, which she decided to centre on the theme of holidays, travelling abroad and meeting new people, 'concentrating on their particular methods of enjoying themselves.' She decided to use masks because, in her words, 'masks can play an important part in transforming the wearer into whom they want to be.' and to involve the pupils in making the masks 'as a stimulus ..... we wanted the group to create everything we needed for the performance and the making of the masks was met with much enthusiasm!' It was felt that making the masks would give the participants satisfaction and a measure of self discovery. Most of the group, aged around sixteen to mid-twenties, were excited at the idea of using masks in their production, except for two of the more withdrawn members of the group; this was felt to be due to apprehension and fear of the unknown. Participants were briefed by giving them a theme to work on and allowing them to choose what characters were involved.

The students were very excited at the prospect of creating a new image for themselves, as the masks were constructed using a range of materials, predominantly buckram, cord and various other materials to enhance the masks, eg wool, velvet cork. .... They were all very keen to arrive at the completion stage, but they particularly enjoyed discovering that the buckram set into a rigid shape after it had dried on the mould, and 'the eye piercing created great excitement, they could not wait to put on their masks and perform!' Despite some rather over-enthusiastic decoration which

spoiled some of the early attempts, the masks turned out even better than the facilitator had hoped; she was pleased with the variety and individuality of the masks.

All the participants wore the masks they had made themselves. they were very excited when they put on the masks for the first time, and a few were a little frightened. They found the masks comfortable and easy to see and walk around in. 'One or two of the students said they felt strange ..... some began walking about and 'acting out' their feelings ..... some of the students said they felt like dancing and moving about making the tribal gestures we were working on'

When the group started working on their play, the masks were a great help in enabling the participants to 'find' the characters they were performing 'Physicality seemed easy for the students. They became more adaptable and far more co-operative.'

Work on the play commenced with improvisation from their own life experiences, and mask work was introduced by encouraging the children to look at pictures of other masks as well as the masks they themselves had made, leading on to choosing a character and moving about with masks on. The types of masks used were varied, including carnival and ritual masks, large body masks, half masks and cartoon characters. The children were allowed to choose the masks they wore, and they showed a marked preference for animal and cartoon characters. The masks did not retain their character when worn by several students; instead the characters varied with each performer.

The masks appeared to affect personality changes in some of the participants, while they were wearing them, and one boy is cited as making 'tribal noises'. The facilitator attributed that to loss of inhibitions due to the use of disguise, but also in part to 'The mystique of the mask, the power masks are known to have.' In performance, the masks made the actors less inhibited than they would have been without them, and 'Several students actually 'became' their characters.'



The performers were reluctant to take off their masks when told to do so, partly because they wanted to continue the activity and were reluctant to 'leave' their characters, and partly because they seemed to have difficulty in 'coming down' after the performance. They were extremely reluctant to part with their masks after the performance, so the playscheme organisers made them a gift of them which, in the words of the facilitator, 'really ended the week off magnificently for me because their obvious delight told me that they had certainly achieved maximum pleasure from the workshop.'

The fact that group made the masks themselves was definitely thought to have had an influence on their performance, in the words of the facilitator, 'they created another person, another dimension of themselves.'

The whole session was thoroughly enjoyed by everyone concerned. The students participated in a question and answer session after the dress rehearsal and some of the findings at this point were very revealing. Concentrating on feelings, the facilitator asked each student in turn to either tell her or show her what they had felt whilst the masks were worn during the performance. In their words:

1. 'I am not me anymore, I'm a new boy.'
2. 'Nobody can see me crying, the mask makes me strong not frightened.'
3. 'I made this me. I like my new eyes and mouth better. Mum will as well.'
4. 'Could we wear the masks every day? I can be like Rambo if I want to, or Mickey Mouse.'
5. 'How does the mask make me move? I don't dance at home, but I do here.'

The project was clearly a profound experience for both facilitator and

participants; much was gained in terms of art and performance skills, but even more in relation to personal development.

## APPENDIX VIII

### **MASK SESSIONS CONDUCTED WITH TEACHERS SPECIALIST AND NON-SPECIALIST**

#### **Presentation for the City and Guilds 401 Further Education (Special Needs) Teachers' Certificate.**

##### **Claire Adams**

A requirement of the course is that each student present a lecture-demonstration relevant to their particular subject discipline. Claire chose to demonstrate the use of masks in removing inhibitions and encouraging belief in students with learning difficulties undertaking dance and drama classes. In order to do this, she used three Trestle full-face masks, from the basic set, which have simple, almost cartoon-like facial shapes and features. After her preliminary introduction she demonstrated the power that the mask can have over an audience by wearing each mask in turn, and adopting appropriate movement and body language. The effect on the rest of the group was surprising as far as Claire was concerned. She had previously thought them to be sceptical about dance and drama, but they were keen to work with the masks. Although the nature of the exercise allowed only a very brief, exploratory exercise, the other members of the group were enthusiastic about their experience with the masks; commenting that '....the mask took over.' This group of experienced community education workers had proved highly receptive to an unusual experience.

#### **2 hour workshop for teachers of drama - St Petersburg, Florida**

##### **VickiBain**

The project was intended to instruct teachers in ways of introducing their students to basic mask work. The masks used were a mixture of commercially produced and hand-made ones, mainly Commedia characters. Pre-mask exercises and warmups were centred on physicality, which the workshop leader felt had been very beneficial when participants put on the masks for the first time. She commented on a mixture of excitement and a feeling of awkwardness,

tempered with fear at first, 'which soon went as inhibitions abated' (*Vicki Bain*)  
Participants found the masks helpful in developing characters more quickly and easily than they would have done without the masks, and, in the words of the workshop leader, ' .... the masks gradually lost physical inhibitions and were soon performing with truth'. (*Vicki Bain*)

It is interesting that in both these sessions, experienced Community Education workers and teachers were introduced to maskwork by either a new graduate or a third year undergraduate student, both of whom had recently studied mask-making and performance as part of their degree course. In both workshops, these mature people, some of whom were very experienced in the field of drama teaching, were very receptive to the ideas and practical exercises brought to them by much younger individuals.

## APPENDIX X

### **MASK WORKSHOPS IN BRUSSELS MAY 1997**

Two groups of third year B.A. Performing Arts students from Gateshead College undertook mask performance workshops with pupils at the British School of Brussels. One group worked with G.C.S.E. pupils in a general, introductory workshop centred on the use of Trestle studio masks; the other group led a session on the use of speech with half masks with A Level students. The workshop took place from 10 to 12 on a Sunday morning, so it was clear that the pupils who had volunteered to take part were eager to learn. Many of the pupils were British, although a wide range of nationalities were present; all spoke English.

#### **The G.C.S.E. Group**

The G.C.S.E. group's workshop started with simple icebreaking and warm-up activities, followed by pre-mask and mask exercises; then the pupils were introduced to the basic Trestle studio masks. They were invited to choose a mask, study it carefully, then, having been shown how to 'shoe' the mask, they put them on and clearly defined characters began to emerge. Exercises included status work, for example, 'Who is the prettiest?' lineup and status-giving lineup, and the Brussels pupils entered into all these activities with immense gusto. The Gateshead students had divided their responsibilities in such a way that, at any time, there would be one or two students leading the workshop and the rest participated on an equal footing with the Brussels pupils. It was interesting to observe the level of acceptance which resulted, with all the participants working together as if they had known one another for years; no barriers of any kind. The session culminated in the division of the group into two smaller subgroups to work on short improvised pieces, which they presented to one another at the end of the workshop.

There was a high level of engagement and energy throughout the workshop. In the feedback discussion which followed, pupils revealed that they had enjoyed the warmups and activities, finding them a useful preparation for the

maskwork. The masks they found rewarding, although '... very claustrophobic and hot' and they found the sightlines very restrictive; however, one girl claimed that she '... found it easier to express my movements. I was more confident because I didn't feel so exposed' and another stated '... as people couldn't see your face it was like you were a different person'.

When asked whether they felt there was any truth in the theory that the individual can be taken over by the mask, they responded with enthusiasm that they believed that this was possible because '... no-one can see the 'real' you', because 'no-one can see your face and you can really forget who you are', and because 'the wearer really gets into what they think the mask is saying to them'. They justified these claims on the basis of their own experiences; 'I completely forgot who I was and felt really confident.' and '...all your inhibitions go and you can just do/be anything/anyone.'

The Gateshead College B.A. students who ran the workshop were very pleased with the outcome. They had perceived the session as fundamentally about loss of inhibition and development of confidence, and felt that pupils had found some physical freedom in using masks, 'Let go of all inhibitions and focused on the matter in hand.' (*Fiona Wyles, B.A. student*)

## **The A Level Group**

The workshop involving the A Level students was much more formal and conceptual; the Gateshead students were involved to a much greater extent in briefing and explanation, and much less, if at all, in practical work. The group did not carry out any warmups, but entered into pre-mask work immediately, by involving pupils in 'face mask' exercises and the complex exercise of making the body work against the face; the former entirely appropriate but rather exposing as a first exercise; the latter very difficult to explain, and really too advanced even for pupils with some prior experience.

Next volunteers were invited to work with cardboard 'tube' masks - with eyeholes - before being shown how to 'shoe' a Trestle mask. Like the G.C.S.E.

**MASK WORKSHOPS AT THE  
BRITISH SCHOOL OF  
BRUSSELS  
SUMMER 1997**

Plate 63



*Fig. 349. A Level group  
Cylinder masks exercise*



*Fig. 350. A Level group Trestle mask exercise*



*Fig. 351 A Level group text work.*



*Fig. 352. G.C.S.E. Group  
Character work with  
Trestle masks.*



*Fig 353. G.C.S.E. group. Setting out the masks.*

pupils, they were encouraged to study the masks in detail before putting them on, and encouraged to walk round the room, exploring the environment in their new personae, responding to questions asked by the student leader, designed to enhance their characters and relationships.

The second part of the workshop involved pupils in working in small groups on extracts from the play they had seen the previous night, 'Stone' by Edward Bond. In the version they had seen, all the characters had worn stylised half masks, and during the workshop, pupils were asked to wear simple half masks cut from neutral masks and painted flesh colour.

The work produced was of a very high standard; this was no doubt partly because the pupils concerned had taken part in a workshop on choric speech by the National Theatre the previous year, but they used the masks effectively orientating their performance towards the audience and using measured, expressive movement.

The pupils showed a high level of engagement throughout the workshop, but unfortunately there was no time for feedback as the session over-ran the expected time limit.



**MASK WORKSHOPS WITH A MIXED GROUP OF STUDENTS  
FROM SULINGEN GYMNASIUM, GERMANY, AND 2ND YEAR  
B.A. PERFORMING ARTS STUDENTS FROM GATESHEAD  
COLLEGE**

The German students were visiting Tyneside for five days, to take part in a series of performance workshops with Gateshead students leading to a production on the final night of their stay. Workshops had been planned in Drama, Dance and Mask Performance, and group members were to choose their preferred method of working and work in small groups to create a devised piece for the production.

None of the students from Sulingen had any experience of performance at all, in fact several had apparently vowed en route to Tyneside that they had no intention of performing in the project, but would instead 'help backstage'. The Gateshead students were all seasoned performers, but none had been involved in any mask performance classes.

All the students took part in the introductory 3 hour mask workshop, which began with an explanation centred on the fact that the session was about working with masks - about communicating through movement instead of words. It was pointed out that when an actor wears a full face mask, he/she cannot speak clearly - the actor can make noises, but most of the time he/she communicates through the way he stands, holds his head, walks and moves his hands and arms.

The session began with a name game and a series of energetic warmups, which were followed by a 'statues' exercise in which participants were asked not only to freeze as statues portraying names emotions, but on a scale of intensity from one to five. The next development was a variant of the same exercise in which the class were asked to become statues of specific characters e.g. policeman or teacher, then asked to bring the character to life. This in turn was followed by a brief explanation of the need to work towards the audience, which introduced the

'Face against the Body' exercise.

Participants were introduced to maskwork using first cardboard 'tube' masks, then simple black shield-shaped masks, playing out improvisations of different 'encounter' situations, before being introduced to Trestle masks. All participants were shown how to 'shoe' the mask after studying its facial characteristics and imbibing its character, then told that each was a 'new-born' mask and invited to explore the room and establish contact with other masks. The masks came to life vividly, and strong personalities were asserted and relationships established. Two students had chosen to wear identical 'sad' masks, and each cowered furtively in corners, shunning contact with others, shaking off the reassuring arms of other characters who attempted to reassure and integrate them into the group.

This exercise was followed by a break for discussion; a group of stunned faces emerged from behind the masks. It was clear that English and German students alike were taken aback by their power. Julie revealed that she had been crying under her 'sad' mask; all were keen to continue. Students were invited to change masks if they wished, and set to work on an exercise centred on exits and entrances. This was intended to get them used to orientated their work towards their audience, and included learning to 'clock' the audience, and develop strategies for directing the audience's attention to whatever they felt to be significant within the acting space.

The session ended with improvisation sessions centred on a park bench. The following day was the first in which students were working in the genre of their choice, either Drama, Dance or Mask. These sessions were to lead to the performance of a short piece or pieces for performance on the Thursday night. The morning began with exercises in concentration and focus, exploring the seven states of tension and using Trestle masks to create archetypes. In the afternoon, students were asked to choose a half mask from those laid out on the edge of the stage, and to select for it a wig or hat (several chose both) and a coat from a heap of long and rather old-fashioned looking garments. They were then allowed to see themselves in a long mirror, and almost all reacted in the way described by Johnstone, instinctively raising their hands to their faces when they

# FOUR DAY MASK PROJECT INVOLVING VISITING STUDENTS FROM SULINGEN GYMNASIUM AND GATESHEAD COLLEGE B.A. STUDENTS



Fig. 344 Props-based exercise.



Fig. 346 Restaurant improvisation, including visiting teacher on right of group



Fig. 345 Football supporters improvisation.



Fig. 347 Performance of 'Restaurant' piece

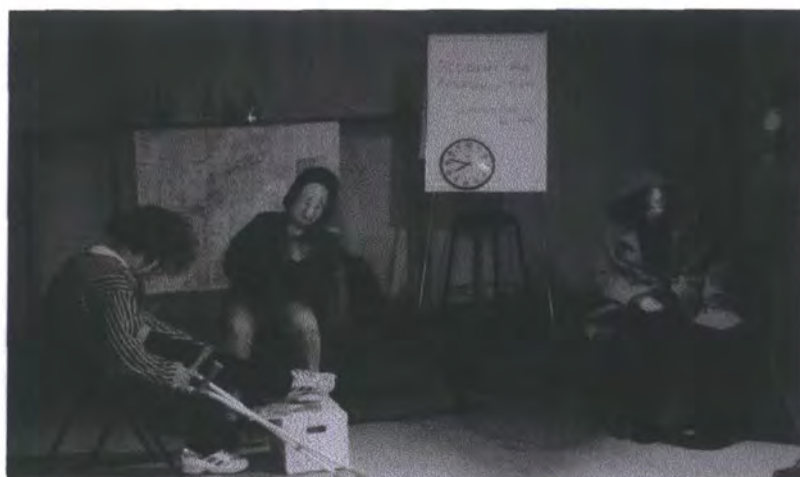


Fig. 348 Performance of 'Hospital' piece

saw the unfamiliar reflection. They were asked to choose objects from a table nearby and explore them, interacting with other masks - or not. Students displayed a very high level of concentration in this exercise.

There followed a discussion as to whether a performance piece should be based on objects linked to the identity of certain countries - no-one seemed committed to that idea. One student suggested looking at problems which were common to all countries, for example, vandalism and other forms of crime, homelessness, and deterioration in the public services, and this was greeted with some enthusiasm. It was also agreed that Trestle masks would be used in the performance. Ideas were brainstormed, and some improvisatory work was done on a scene based in a restaurant. The leader of the German party, a teacher from Sulingen Gymnasium, was watching the improvisation, and agreed to put on a mask and join in. To everyone's surprise, he was a very badly behaved restaurant guest, causing trouble for the waiter and finally throwing his food on the floor! He said afterwards that as soon as he put the mask on, he felt a change in himself, perhaps because of the mischievous smile of the mask.

The group agreed that they would develop the piece further the next day, and would also work on two other short pieces; one set at a football match, the other in a hospital.

After some brief physical warmups, most of the next day was spent working on all three pieces, beginning with improvisation and character work, but rapidly moving on to more structured material. It was clear that one of the German students was very shy and found performance a real challenge; masks offered an acceptable shield for her. At this point, it became important to enlarge performances, to make the implications of each action clearer for an audience, and the visiting students worked hard to overcome their inhibitions. A further, very short, ironic sketch on homelessness was added to the other three.

The pieces were performed as part of a showcase of work by all three groups, and it was agreed that the week had been highly productive for everyone involved.

**ANGLO-JAPANESE JOINT PRODUCTION,  
'YOKOBARI TENGU'  
(‘THE GREEDY GOBLIN’)  
GATESHEAD SEPTEMBER 1997**

A group of nine Japanese actors, together with their American-born director, travelled to Gateshead from Osugi Musical Theatre, near to Komatsu, Japan, to take part in a collaborative dramatic venture with second-year B.A. (Hons) Performing Arts students at Gateshead College. The two groups were to stage a joint workshop performance of a bilingual musical play in Japanese and English, after two days of rehearsals; apparently an impossible task, but in fact highly successful. Four of the principal roles were taken by Japanese visitors, two by Gateshead students, and the rest of the participants undertook chorus or backstage roles.

All the principal actors, except for the hero, Hachibei, were masked, as they were portraying fantastical animals; the masks were brought to Gateshead from Japan, but had their origins in California, where they had been made by a Finnish designer. They were half-masks, moulded from plastic foam, and were both light and strong. Importantly for the musical production, they stood proud of the actors' mouths with almost megaphone-like upper lip, thus making it easy for the audience to see and hear clearly both dialogue and songs.

Because the Japanese actors spoke little or no English, it was not possible to discuss the experience of wearing the masks with them in any detail, but it was possible to ascertain from each that their mask was comfortable and helped them to find their character.

The group's leader and director, Gert Westerhout, said that the actors had not had a great deal of time to rehearse wearing the masks, because of postal delays between Los Angeles and Japan, but he described the first rehearsals using mask, and the immediate change and development in the actors' physicality when they

were wearing them.

The two Gateshead students who undertook lead roles also wore masks; Suzanne, who played the part of an eccentric chicken, also wore a very elaborate costume and hat. She found her mask very uncomfortable; it was clearly designed for someone with a very differently shaped face. Despite the discomfort, she reported that the mask had been helpful in creating the character of the 'large, ungainly, clumsy, vain' character, so different from the serious, introspective roles she had undertaken as part of her B.A. course.

Another Gateshead B. A. student took on the character of Mr. Dream, a character similar to the Sandman, bringing dreams to each of the sleeping characters. He wore a grotesque half-mask with bulbous nose and cheeks, which he found helped his performance because it altered his stature, making it easier for him to become Mr Dream, because the mask was not naturalistic and neither was the character. Although the mask covered his top lip, it didn't hinder his singing and it is possible that the mask itself acted as a resonator, as cited by both Dario Fo and Thanos Vovolis.

Apart from the two grotesque masks for the Tengu (Goblin) and Mr Dream, these masks were essentially intended for disguise for the 'animal' characters, to differentiate them from the human characters of the villagers and Hachibei, the village hero. This they did very effectively and amusingly; they were not intended to be naturalistic, but rather symbolic of the animals they represented, and appeared, like the production itself, to be an interesting amalgam of the Japanese and the American traditions. At first sighting, the masks looked very American and rather cartoonlike in style, but during rehearsals and performance, the physicality of the performance was strongly based in the Japanese tradition, and the energy and grace of the wearers gave the masks a much more delicate, Japanese appearance.

The masks were worn during most of the Gateshead rehearsals, apart from the initial blocking sessions, but they were further enhanced during the dress rehearsal and performance by the vivid costumes which the Japanese actors had brought with them from Osugi. The use of scenery for the production was not

**YOKOBARI TENGU - THE GREEDY GOBLIN**  
JOINT PRODUCTION BY  
GATESHEAD COLLEGE AND OSUGI MUSICAL THEATRE  
SEPTEMBER 1997



*Fig. 354 The principal characters, masked (Japanese cast) . Photograph taken when the masks arrived in Osugi, Japan, from America.*



*Fig. 355 Scene from the production in Gateshead, featuring Japanese actors and students from Gateshead College, and combining masked animal characters and unmasked human characters.*

practical, but the masks and costumes created a heightened, theatrical effect and combined with the music and energetic performance to fill the large proscenium stage with colour and life.



**DANCE PROJECT****'WEEPING WOMAN'****RACHEL CRANMER GORDON**

As her final year dance assessment at Middlesex University, Rachel choreographed a dance piece based on the painting 'Weeping Woman' by Picasso; a solo piece in which the dancer wore a full face mask made of celastic made by fellow student Mark Bowden.

When asked why she had chosen that particular painting on which to base the piece, Rachel replied that she had previously been reading Satre's 'The Age of Reason', and that 'Weeping Woman' had been the cover illustration on the version she read. She found it a very evocative painting, and in creating the piece, she had attempted to keep the shape of the dance consonant with the style and subject of the painting, using the woman depicted as the emotive centre, and making the dance as two-dimensional as possible. It had been pointed out by a fellow student that the whole point of the Picasso painting was that it was two-dimensional - to make a three dimensional mask was to lose the sense of what the painting was about. Rachel was clearly not deterred by this judgement, but set out to create a two-dimensional effect by choreographing the dance on a flat plane, facing the audience. She found the dancer very responsive to her direction and sensitive in interpreting the character of the woman, who was given an essentially domestic motivation - a woman who had lost her first child during the second trimester of pregnancy.

The music for the piece was composed by two violinists, who wrote music in the style of Debussy from the rehearsal process. The piece was felt by the dancer to be hard to perform, because the movement was essentially angular and jerky, in the style of that period of Picasso's work.

**PIPPA FURLONGER AND RACHEL CRANMER GORDON  
DRAMA PRODUCTION 'THE LOVE OF THE NIGHTINGALE'**

A third year drama production of the play by Timberlake Wertenbaker, directed by Pippa Furlonger, and designed by Pippa Furlonger and Rachel Cranmer Gordon, who also performed in the production in the role of Procne.

Masks were used for the 'play within a play' sequence, essentially because the play itself is based on the Greek legend of Philomele. Although the production was not costumed in Ancient Greek garments, but rather in neutral, softly

draped unbleached fabric garments of no specific historical period, it was felt appropriate that the play sequence should be masked in deference to Greek tradition. The masks, which were made by Rachel Cranmer Gordon and painted by both Rachel and Pippa, were designed to be naturalistic, but to evoke Greek masks in the use of wide mouths and eye-hollows:



*Fig. 363 Tereus* they were intended to represent archetypes *Fig. 364 Procne* rather than individuals. The actors found it difficult to speak in the masks, yet the very hollowness of their voices added to the effectiveness of the sequence.

Rachel and Pippa were intrigued by the account of the disturbing experiences of a Gateshead College student when wearing the mask of Philomele's brother-in-law, Tereus, which seemed to drive every performer who wore it in improvisation to portray a sex-pest (in the play, Philomele is raped by Tereus). In the piece concerned, the Gateshead student, who knew nothing of the play or the provenance of the mask, improvised a scene of child sex abuse, which greatly disturbed her classmates, and which, she later revealed, reflected her own experience as a child. (*Chap 4, p. 82*) Expressing concern at the event described, the makers of the mask were none the less intrigued at this account of its apparent influence over the wearer, but eventually concluded that the source of that influence was almost certainly in the appearance of the mask, which is both sensuous and decadent, rather than in any other inherent powers.

## APPENDIX XIII

### **'DRAMATIC HEADS'**

#### **A MASK-MAKING PROJECT UNDERTAKEN BY HEXHAM BRANCH OF THE EMBROIDERERS' GUILD AND STUDENTS OF DILSTON COLLEGE OF FURTHER EDUCATION**

Members of the Hexham Embroiders' Guild worked for a month, two days a week, with a professional maker of theatrical masks to explore approaches to mask making, utilising embroidery and textile art. They used as their inspiration the Dilston College of Further Education Spring Festival, which is an annual event during which students at the college celebrate the coming of spring with music, dance and the 'drumming up' of a dragon. During the initial stage of the project Guild members made masks based on the essential elements of the celebration; birds, animals, Green Men, dragons and Spring Princesses.

The second phase of the project involved the Guild members in working with students from Dilston College, which is a residential college for students with learning difficulties, to create masks for the students to wear during the Spring Festival. Guild members prepared by cutting out templates in card and moulding simple shapes in buckram for students to use as the basis of their mask-making, and the students painted, glued and stitched, making simple or elaborate additions to create woodland creatures and spirits to enhance their festival performance. Some of the simplest masks, made from soft corrugated card wreathed in filmy tie-dyed muslin, were initially disliked by the students because they looked so simple and drab, but were found to be particularly effective in performance. Others, personifying butterflies and birds, were very colourful, and many were decorated with sequins.

Sheila Corfe, the chairman of the Hexham Branch of the Embroiders' Guild, reported that some members had not initially been attracted to the project, some finding masks disconcerting and too much of a departure from their usual activities; others clearly took to the project with gusto, exploring new materials and creating imaginative pieces with a high level of detail. All the members who were involved in working with the students from Dilston College found

# EMBROIDERERS' GUILD MASK PROJECT

*Fig. 365 (below) Work by members of the Hexham Embroiderers' Guild*



*Fig. 366 (right) Masks by Embroiderers' Guild members: Green Men*



*Fig. 367(above)*

*Figs.367-369 Work done by students at Dilston College of Further Education, with the support of Embroiderers' Guild members*



*Fig. 368*



*Fig. 369.*

the experience very rewarding, and were impressed with the work the students produced.

It was felt that the masks added greatly both to the spectacle of the Spring Festival, and to the performance of the participating students, and the project was deemed to be a great success. An exhibition of all the masks produced during the project was held at the Torch Centre, Hexham, in July 1998.

## APPENDIX XIV

### NEW YORK CONSOLIDATED LAWS SERVICE, Annotated Statutes with Forms, Penal Law

4. Being masked or in any manner disguised by unusual or unnatural attire or facial alteration, loiters, remains or congregates in a public place with other persons so masked or disguised, or knowingly permits or aids persons so masked or disguised to congregate in a public place; except that such conduct is not unlawful when it occurs in connection with a masquerade party or like entertainment...'(New York Consolidated Laws Service, Annotated Statutes with Forms, Penal Law)

From Bread and Puppet Theatre Vol 1

# MASKS AND METAMORPHOSIS

## FOOTNOTES

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Karen Lothian and David Wilkinson (Mask-making workshop at Heddon-  
on-the-Wall)

Lucia Wyles (Mask/Drama project for South Tyneside holiday  
playscheme)

Pupils of Sulingen Gymnasium, Sulingen, Germany

Pupils at Reay Primary School, Lambeth

Pupils from 17 primary schools in Newcastle upon Tyne (Greeks and Romans  
projects)

Members of Osugi Musical Theatre Company, Komatsu, Japan

