

Spring 2017

Masks: A new face for the theatre

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Masks: A New Face for the Theatre

An Honors Program Project Presented to
the Faculty of the Undergraduate
College of Theatre and Dance
James Madison University

by Alexi Michael Siegel

May 2017

Accepted by the faculty of the Department of Theatre and Dance, James Madison University, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Honors Program.

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PUBLIC PRESENTATION

This work is accepted for presentation, in part or in full, at Wayland Hall on March 19th, 2017.

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Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge Ingrid De Sanctis for her brilliant and loving guidance throughout this process as my faculty advisor. I would also like to thank Ben Lambert and

Zachary Dorsey for their support as my readers.

Thank you as well to Melissa Carter for helping me paint the masks and for taking photographs of rehearsal.

Additionally, thank you to the Theatre and Dance department for giving me four tremendous years of instruction in which I grew tremendously as a theatre artist.

Finally, thank you to the Honors department for this opportunity to further explore one of my passions.

I. Abstract

Masks: A New Face for the Theatre

This paper serves to synthesize and reflect upon the Creative Honors Capstone project entitled “Masks: A New Face for the Theatre.” This project sought to answer the questions:

1. What is the role of masks in theatre today? 2. How can a director use ancient mask traditions to inspire new work? The ancient mask traditions that were the primary focus of this study were Greek Theatre, Japanese Noh Theatre, and Egungun Masquerades of Yorubaland. The initial steps of the project included research into the historical context of these masked traditions as well as contemporary practices. This research was then used to inspire a masked performance of Charles Mee’s text *Life is a Dream*. The performance featured each of the ancient masking styles and a final section that explored masks in a contemporary theatrical style. The goal of the project was to pull masks out of their historical context in order to discuss their relevance to the contemporary theatre artist and to demonstrate how ancient traditions can inspire new work.

II. Introduction

Early man donned the first mask nearly 50,000 years ago and since then masks have held special reverence to human beings (Eldredge 3). From ancient religious rituals to the very beginnings of their theatrical presence, masks transformed humans inexplicably from their mere existence into something beyond. This mysterious transformation was the very reason why masks were an indispensable tool for the theatre. The process of covering up one's face, the center of one's identity, unleashed untold potential in the expression of the human experience. The famous American playwright Eugene O'Neil describes masks as being "more subtly, imaginatively, suggestively dramatic than any actor's face can ever be" and Peter Brook, a world-renowned director goes as far to say "what is called mask [in the West] should be called an anti mask. The traditional mask is an actual portrait, a soul portrait... an outer casting that is a complete and sensitive reflection of the inner life" (Johnson 22, 26). Masks were somehow able to uncover the inner secrets of humans while covering up the external expression of the literal face. Although many actors, directors, and playwrights have acknowledged the power of masks, their presence in theatre today has dwindled greatly. While some may say it is from a lack of resources, specialized training, or fear, masked theatre is a very rare form to find. Masks have been lost to the history books, relics of another time. The goal of my project was to reinvigorate and reimagine the modern theatre artist's relationship to mask work.

My journey began with research into Greek theatre, Japanese Noh theatre, and Egungun Masquerades of Yorubaland. I focused on determining the history of each form, the physical design and functionality of their masks, and the acting styles and conventions present in each masking tradition. Next, I examined how contemporary theatrical productions use masks so that I might gain insights from their experiences. I was then tasked with finding a text that was capable

of playing to the strengths of each mask tradition and a cast of actors willing to experiment. I then set to work on creating a structure for rehearsals and building the masks themselves. In the pages to come, I will discuss the steps of my process in further detail as well as share what I discovered at the end of my exploration into mask work.

III. Literature or Performance Review

Greek Theatre

Greek Theatre was the beginning of the European theatrical cannon. Most research on Greek Theatre today commonly refers to fifth century theatrical practices, since that is where most of the surviving evidence comes from (“Greek Theatre”). A large majority of that remaining evidence consists of clay vases such as the Pronomos vase (Johnson 20). From this vase scholars know that performers wore masks and that Greek theatre arose, most likely, from sacred rituals that were held in honor of Dionysus, the god of wine, fertility, and the theatre (Berberović 31). Some cite the scale of the Athenian theatre as being the reason for the masks, since the crowds normally numbered up to 15,000 people and the furthest audience member could be nearly 100 meters away from the stage (“Greek Theatre Performance” 109). Those who follow in this theory believe that the masks were able to carry expression out to the far away spectators better than the human face could. Some also believe that the mask worked as a megaphone for the voice since it covered the whole head like a helmet (“Greek Theatre Performance” 151). Another reason often given for the masks was that since Greek theatre only used three male actors to play all the roles in a play, they needed masks in order to switch between characters (“Greek Theatre”). However, the most compelling reason explains the masks purpose as a dramatic device for the portrayal of tragedy onstage. Peter Hall argues “masks, like the formality of verse, create the detachment necessary if we are to contemplate horror... Mask keeps its eyes wide open when the axe blade falls, when the babies burn” (“Greek Theatre Performance” 149). The horrific events of Greek tragedies became palatable with the mask. The mask created a world in which the performers could speak about the unspeakable without falling into “hysterics”, a world in which the audience could sympathize with the plight of the

characters, but not fall into empathy (“The Oresteia at Epidaurus”). A degree of separation was formed between the audience and the atrocities occurring onstage.

The Greeks had a very close relationship to their masks, as the word for mask in Greek, *prosopon*, was also the word for face (Wiles 1). There are large misconceptions about the appearance of Greek masks however. The confusion stems from the common symbol for theatre: two masks, one happy and one sad. However, this “exaggerated and statuesque” kind of mask with dramatic facial expressions did not emerge until later in history during the Hellenistic era and was brought into common practice by the Romans. In actuality, Greek masks were “simple and naturalistic” (Johnson 20, 21). They were almost expressionless, made of light perishable linen, and glue made out of plaster or animal fat (Wiles 15). They were not built to last for a long time since performers would wear them for only one performance and then place them into Dionysus’ temple (Vervain and Wiles 255).

Taking into account the challenges inherent in the Greek theatre such as the masks, the distance from the audience, and the language of Greek plays, it is no surprise that the Greek style of acting was very different to most approaches today. The acting was formal and presentational, focusing on the shape of the body and how it could express emotion in an outward manner. The actors were concerned with how they could “amplify the external expression of emotion rather than draw the audience's attention toward the inner experience of a character” (Mathews). The Greeks were only interested in the audience’s understanding of the emotions of the characters as they pertained to the plot, rather than the psychology of individual characters themselves (“The Case of Greek New Comedy ” 165). The masks helped to define this style by serving to “remind us that the characters are elemental, not psychological beings” (Nightingale). The individual human experience fell short to the power of the mask. Another facet of Greek theatre that

enhanced this acting style was that “There were no side walls to reflect sound, and a frontal delivery was therefore essential” (“Greek Theatre Performance” 109). In order for the audience to hear what the actors were saying the actors had to face directly out, resulting in most of the monologues appearing as a public speech of sorts.

Vocal clarity and sharp body movements were integral parts of the Greek theatrical style as well. Once again the masks and the distance of the audience fed into a need for “simple, clear and bold” they relied heavily “upon the patterns which bodies made on the ground” with the chorus (“Greek Theatre Performance” 110). Distant audience members would be able to see these sharp movements as well as the patterns of bodies and be able to decipher the story. It was essential that, “The human figure becomes more indeed like a piece of sculpture, in which each line and curve complements the dominant emotion” (Walton 57). Using their entire body create different specific shapes, actors could communicate what their characters were feeling to the whole audience. There was no room for subtle gestures. Not only did their gestures have to be easily seen by all spectators, but they also had to be heard. Greek actors went through intensive vocal training. The plays called for the use of “stichomythia” or “passages of rapid-fire single line dialogue between two speakers” (Wrigley). Text was spoken in specific rhythmic patterns that were mirrored in the music. Actors needed to learn the correct rhythms of speech as well as how to create a resonating sound while wearing a mask. One actor, Demosthenes, is said to have “trained his voice by speaking with stones in his mouth or while running up-hill” (“Greek Theatre Performance” 151). Intensive breathing exercises such as this was a common training practice for actors so that the audience could hear them.

Noh Theatre

Noh Theatre is often compared to Greek Theatre because both use choruses, masks, and music in performances. However, while there are many similarities, I was careful not to miss the major differences also present between these two art forms.

Noh theatre started in the fourteenth century, but by the end of the fifteenth century was highly regarded in aristocratic society (Hooas 82). The protagonist of the show was known as the *shite* and “the events have usually happened in the distant past -- indeed, in a former lifetime of the shite” (Mathews). The shite dies before the play starts and is suffering in the afterlife; through the retelling of their story they are able to find hope for “deliverance from the tortures he is suffering” (Keene 9). They are normally freed from their pain by the end of the play. The text of Noh plays is very distilled and minimal. It is similar to the Japanese haiku poem where “much is expressed by what is left out as well as by what is put in” creating a “complete observation about life is concentrated” (Devlin 59). Although long moments of silence occur onstage, a lot is revealed even when the characters do not speak.

As seen with the Greeks, the Japanese work for mask, *onote*, is the same word for face (Campbell 5). However, while the Greeks masks were used only once, Noh masks are made out of wood and are kept to use for multiple plays. As a result, their design is relatively “neutral and without any individualizing features” (Tamba 43). Even though the masks have a neutral expression, this does not mean that they are not highly expressive, rather, “The power of the Noh mask overall lies in its suggestiveness, hinting at the inner world of the character behind it” (Mathews). Their suggestiveness comes from the specific details of their carving. The way that the light hits the surface of the mask, changes the way it looks. By raising the mask upwards, it appears happy, and lowering the mask makes it appear sad (Johnson 26). While there are a few mask classifications, “old person, the woman, and the warrior – plus the demons”, there is a wide

variety of characters that use the masks in each classification (Keene 63). For example, an actor might wear the woman mask when they play a character of a young girl in one play and then use it again to be a mother in another. The female masks especially have very blank expressions (Keene 62). They also have high eyebrows and blackened teeth, as was the fashion of aristocratic ladies during the Heian period (Vollmann 29). Another likeness to Greek theatre is that the masks extended to cover the whole head with wigs (Keene 65).

The acting style of Noh theatre is the complete opposite of Greek theatre because it is about the internal experience of the character. The movement is slow and subtle, “The body is bound, restricted by inaction and the actor still must project the character’s feelings” (Brandon 202). Actors must keep their movement steady because quick movements are thought to be ugly. Often, “Long intervals pass virtually without motion onstage, to be succeeded by brief and violent action” (Keene 10). However, this does not deter the audience from experiencing a highly emotional piece of theatre. Rather, the restricted body movements communicate the vast inner life of the characters because those “Who appear to be still, inner turmoil is occurring” (Brandon 204). The body is restricted because it is feeling emotion so strongly. The Japanese believe that “Formal movement does not prevent the expression of emotion in Noh, but becomes an aid to its controlled release” (Johnson 24). The tension provided by the prolonged expression of emotion, creates an impactful experience for viewers.

Egungun Masquerades

In examining mask traditions I thought it pertinent to return to the roots of masks by examining a religious ritual. I chose the Egungun Masquerades of the Yoruba because while the masks are extremely different from the first two traditions, the basic structure of their performance is actually very similar. It should be noted however that since this tradition is a

sacred religious ritual, there is little scholarly research on it, so a lot of what is known is based on conjecture and my attempt at understanding a complicated and widespread cultural group.

Egungun Masquerades are performed by the Yoruba, who live on the west coast of Africa, and are “one of the largest cultural groups in Africa” (Mullen). The masquerades are a way for the living to honor their dead relatives, who “In exchange for being ritually remembered, the living dead watch over the family and can be contacted for advice and guidance” (Strong 2). The Yoruba do not believe that death is the end of life, instead people move into the spiritual world called Orsiras and watch over the living (Mullen). Performers are specially trained, but only if they are born in the Lineage of the Oje. They don their masks and inhabit the spirits of their ancestors “performers talk about the spirit of the dead literally inhabiting their bodies when masked” (Bell 42,43). Performers give advice to the living through storytelling, song, and dance. The festivals can last from seven to twenty one days (Strong 3). There is a strong sense of community during the festivals as the masquerade “supports community life, expresses local values, and contributes to its people’s worldview” (Cole 37). It is a time where the community can come together and reflect on their previous year.

The masks that the Egungun wear are essential to the embodiment of their ancestors. The masks are full body masks. While some may have a piece over their heads made out of wood, the most common practice is to cover the face with cloth (Strong 2). The cloth extends to cover the entire body, with the performers even wearing gloves and leggings to ensure that no part of the skin is seen (Bell 43). There are a few reasons for the full body coverage of the Egungun mask. The first, is that bodies are buried fully covered, so the Yoruba believe that their ancestral spirits are fully covered in Orsiras, and therefore their physical appearance on earth is the same (Strong 2). Another reasoning for the coverage is that it creates an otherworldly effect; essentially

“Because they are without the structure that shape human experience the representation of their reality-of their presence among the living” (Pemberton 43). Since the ancestors are not from this world anymore, they look different. The costumes created are “in no sense portraits, but rather generic symbols of the unnamed incarnate dead” (Cole 35). They are supposed to give the gesture of who the person was, rather than trying to recreate their physical appearance.

One of the most important aspects to Egungun masquerades is that the performers transform completely into their ancestors, which is accomplished, in part, by their change in physicality and vocal quality. In the mask, “all traces of individuality and of time fall away” (Pemberton 46). The performer should succumb completely to the new person that they are embodying. They are expected to even disguise their voice, so that no trace of themselves could be found and ruin the illusion (Strong 2). The vocal quality of performance is of high importance, since “Yoruba is a tonal language. Words must be pronounced in the appropriate tone (pitch) in order to understand speech in its correct meaning” (Mullen). There is a specific sound quality to each word that is essential to the understanding of the language. The music of the Yoruba is therefore inspired by these tonal patterns as well (Mullen). This is important to note because masquerades include singing, music, and dance (Cole 36). Music is an integral part of the Egungun, with their stories being told through song and dance.

IV. Project Design

Modern Productions

My initial goal with researching contemporary masked productions was to understand how they were using masks, so that I could borrow from some of their practices. However, I found that there were not many contemporary examples of mask work and even less explanation as to how exactly they structured their rehearsals. Instead, I was able to gain an understanding of different philosophies about how to use masks that I could apply to my own process.

I turned to Peter Hall and his production of Aeschylus' trilogy *The Oresteia* because it was performed not only at the National Theatre in London, but also in a Greek Amphitheatre. There was a lot of documentation surrounding these two performances since the first was filmed and televised, while the second was filmed for a documentary. While reading reviews on the production, it became clear that some felt that Hall's close adherence to the classical style came at the price of the emotional power of the story. Michael Billington, an author and an arts critic with the longest career in Britain, explained that he was "impressed rather than moved" because it seemed that "Hall's production sacrifices raw power to formal purity" (Billington). The story of these tragedies fell second to Hall's strict conformity to the rules of Greek theatre. On the other hand, Chris Vervain, a director with a PhD in Masks of Greek Tragedy from the University of London, discusses in relation to his staging of *The Bacchae* that he has "no intention of reconstructing ancient performance practices" yet he does "assume that a consideration of the ancient theatre, or rather what we understand of it, can inform our practice today" (Vervain). He believes that it is important to be inspired by ancient practices, but recreating them exactly how they were is impractical and ultimately harmful to the production. Rather, it is more important to lean into the principles of mask work, which "emphasizes the physical aspects of performance" as well as the text (Vervain).

When looking for examples of contemporary Noh theatre, I discovered a theatre company that is dedicated to creating theatrical experiences inspired by Japanese theatrical styles called Theatre of Yugen that is based in San Francisco, California. Similar to Vervain, the Theatre of Yugen believes in “the evolution of live performance” and that “artistic hybridity... stimulates intercultural understanding” (“Home to Yugen”). According to their company, there is a large benefit to adjusting ancient forms for modern audiences, since it allows for a greater cultural exchange as opposed to creating alienation. One their productions that was Noh inspired was called *Emmett Till, A River*, based on the story of Emmett Till, a young African American boy who was killed in a hate crime (Bullock). According to one review they were able to capture the “overtones and undertones of the story of Emmett Till” by “concentrating on the stillness of the stage, the voices of actors and chorus, the sounds of musical instruments, the company recreates the poetic echo chamber of a Noh play” (Bullock). The form bolstered the story and vice versa, creating an experience for the audience that both communicated a tragic story and introduced them to the Noh form.

When it came to Egungun masquerades, I was curious to see how much the ritual had changed over time and if there were any instances of their performers practicing their craft outside of the religious ceremony. I was able to find some information about a man named Ojetunji Ojeyemi who has performed at conferences such as the 2005 Internal Mask Conference at Southern Illinois University of Carbondale because he believes the “sense of community found in live masked performance” is important to share (Bell). However, this was only one instance I could find of the Egungun in this kind of setting. I did find an article that discussed the changes occurring in modern Yoruba society in relation to the masquerades. A large change was that religious items that used to decorate the fabric of the mask costume have been replaced in

favor of more aesthetically pleasing design elements (Aremu, P. S. O., et al.). It is still unclear though if this progression away from the religious aspect of the masquerade was seen as positive or negative to the community. Ultimately, I decided that the most important element of Egungun masquerades that I needed to maintain in my mask work was the community created and that the religious aspect could be avoided.

My Production

The first challenge I faced in creating a masked performance was choosing a text that would work for all three mask traditions, since the structure of their original texts differ greatly. My instinct was to search through the work of the playwright Charles Mee because he allows people using his texts to “pillage the structures and contents of the plays” and he also writes poetically (*the (re)making project*). Essentially, I could make any modifications or adjustments that I needed to in order for the text to fit the mask work. Furthermore, he borrows the content for his plays from other writers as well so that “His plays are collage-like blends of theatrical styles and genres encompassing tragedy, romance, and farce, and incorporating music, dance, and video” (“Getting to Know Mee”). It was this blend of styles in combination with song and dance being inherent in his text that made this play perfect for my project. I discovered *Life is a Dream* blended prose, verse, and stories beautifully. I was able to separate the text out into four sections that each played into the strengths of the different mask traditions. The Greek section spoke of horrific tragedies and some verse. The Noh section was the more reflective stories, where the actors could luxuriate in the subtlety of the words and movement. The Egungun section was filled with cautionary tales that could be told in a very active, dance-like manner. The last section, was where I truly experimented with how masks could function using some contemporary theatrical acting conventions was simply a list of words that we were free to experiment with as we saw fit.

I originally planned on only using one actress for the performance. I thought this would be ideal because then I could work intensively on each mask form and rehearsals could be collaboration between the two of us. However, while doing my research, it became clear that more performers were needed in order for a sense of community to be created. This was also heightened by the practicality that in masked theatre, “the collective gaze of the chorus, directs the audience and tells them where to look” (Vervain and Wiles 262). The power of a group of masks to focus attention for the audience was too much of a dramatic convention to ignore. I also wanted to play with music underscoring text, which inherently required more people. Lastly, I was adamant that all three of my performers should be females, since in all three mask traditions women were banned from the practice. In the past, some Yoruba have gone as far as to put women to death for touching the Egungun, since they were thought to have “secret and destructive power which expresses itself in witchcraft” (Bell 42). The ban against female performers seemed to stem from cultural bias rather than an actual inability for the women to do the work, so I did not feel like I was going against the masks by casting women. Finally, *Life is a Dream* deals largely with the experience of women. The performance quickly became about the experience of women as the world’s empathizers.

My rehearsal process was a month-long intensive. The first week was dedicated to bookwork and text analysis, the second week to playing with the masks themselves, the third week was to memorizing the text (Spring Break), and the fourth combining text and mask work to create the piece itself. I decided to split up the text and mask work in the initial phase of rehearsals because of Peter Hall’s advice. He warned, “You can’t, however, short-circuit the time needed for the mask to grow up... therefore mask work and text work have to be done independently until a point is reached when the actors know the form and the rhythm” (Brown).

Not only is learning how to move with a mask difficult, but it is even more challenging while simultaneously learning how to speak poetic texts in rhythm. Therefore, I found it necessary to split up the work until the actresses were comfortable enough with both skills. Determining how to teach my actresses how to use masks was a definite challenge, as I have never been formally trained in mask work either. I pulled from a combination of sources (namely Sears Eldredge's book *Mask Improvisation for Actor Training & Performance*), previous experiences (my work with Neutral mask during a play I directed in the Fall), as well as the training style of the neutral mask formalized by Jacques Lecoq in order to formulate exercises that I felt would work towards building the skills necessary for each mask tradition.

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

another. During this week, I was also building the masks alongside rehearsals. Everyday we made adjustments to the masks based on what we discovered was working best with our temporary rehearsal masks.

I was excited, but also terrified to try and make my own masks for the piece. I felt it important that the masks be very specific to the work we were doing, since the masks were at the heart of it all. However, I had no idea how to make them and have limited visual art experience. I found a material called plaster cloth, which is similar to the linen and glue method of the Greeks, which allowed us to mold the masks to the shape of the actress's faces. Keeping in mind that Greek and Noh masks always had wig pieces attached to them and that fabric was an essential part of Egungun masquerades, I decided that each mask would have a fabric veil attached to its forehead that could serve multiple functions. We also determined in rehearsal that leaving the mouthpart open and cutting out the chin would allow for the best sound quality and ease of speaking for the performers. The tricky part was figuring what to paint on the masks. I had my friend Melissa Carter assist me with painting the masks. In our first attempt, I wanted to experiment with color and texture. Each woman in my cast had made a collage of images that they felt represented their character, which we used to inspire their mask design. We soon discovered however, that these masks were too busy visually and we were losing the facial structure of the mask itself. In our second attempt, I decided to lean into the simple subtlety of Greek and Noh masks. The masks were painted with a light grey background and then dry brushed with pink, red, white, and copper paint in order to enhance their features. We still wanted each mask to have a bit of individuality, so the colors were placed with different emphasis on each. The women wore simple leotards and tights so that they could move without

restriction, and we painted their bodies with grey streaks in order to tie the lower half of them in to the masks.

The performance itself was held in the Wayland Hall performance space on March 19th at 7:15 PM. I gave an introductory speech on the scope and purpose of project in order to give my audience some context, although this was all also stated in the program. Then, the actresses took to the stage and performed *Life is a Dream*. My actresses entered and took a few moments to study their masks, put them on in front the audience, and then discover the world through the eyes of their mask. The ritual of putting on a mask is extremely tender and transformative. There is also a sense that you are discovering the world for the first time as a completely different being as you begin to look around in the mask. I wanted the audience to see this transformation. It was something I was privy to multiple times in rehearsal and is one of the most magical moments of mask work. It also gave the audience a chance to slowly enter the world of mask work with us and get adjusted to the masked face. Then the Noh inspired section began, followed by Greek, then Egungun, and then finally the more modern approach. Afterwards, I held a talkback with the audience in order to get feedback on the performance itself as well as start a discussion about the role of masks in modern theatre. I will delve further into the conversation that followed in my section on “Discussion and Analysis of Findings.” The performance itself lasted about fifteen minutes.

V. Discussion and Analysis of Findings

In this section, I will discuss the responses I received from my audience, my performers, and my reflection on the process as a whole. The specific questions I asked my audience and performers in order to prompt these responses are stated below as well for reference.

Audience Response

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

Overall, the audience was most excited by the transformation of the performer's bodies. The first few minutes of the performance were apparently the most difficult for the audience because they were still adjusting to the masks. However, the masks soon melted into the body and were no longer distracting. A similar experience was had with the fabric veils. Once the audience saw the performers interact with the veils a few times, they became an extension of their bodies. Furthermore, the audience was moved by the sense of unity between the three performers. The performers were able to speak and move as if they were one body. All three actresses worked together so well that they appeared to become one character. It seemed like they would have been able to switch places at any time and still continue the story. They were clearly in tune with one another's bodies. Building an ensemble is an important part of theatre today and the masks appeared to be critical in bonding the performers, so that they were able to react honestly to one another. Throughout their entire performance, their physicality was highly detailed, with the performers using every inch of their body to communicate. The story was being told with the whole body of the performers. Another observation was that the performers were more

physically live and present even after they took off their masks. The mask work seemed to awaken their sensibilities.

Performer Response

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

The actresses found that their bodies reacted strongly to the masks. They felt a need to push beyond the mask that covered their face, to bring all expression and meaning into their delivery of words and movement of their bodies. This forced them to find more meaning and connection to the text itself. It really unlocked their bodies to move in new ways that could teach them more about the text and themselves. It separated the actors from the character. Their faces were covered so they were detached from the situation, making it easier to step into someone else's shoes. They felt that it was an amazing rehearsal tool; a leeway between exploration and performance of a text.

Working together was clearly their favorite part of the process. Being able to looking at one another was a very unifying experience. The masks joined them together to almost create

one body, one woman, telling a story. It became less about the individual and more about what story they were telling and how they could use each other to convey it.

Masks took the mind away from who they were as humans or “should be” and freed them to do whatever they felt. Getting to see another person in a mask created a world where any movement was acceptable and that really opened them up physically.

My Response

I still have much to learn when it comes to masks, but I felt as if this was a step in the right direction. Not only was I able to explore three different styles of acting with masks at once, but I also was able to experiment briefly with how masks might be used in tangent with contemporary acting styles. By the last week of rehearsals I felt like I had gained a much larger understanding of the strengths and weakness of the masks. For example, we learned quickly that tilting the chin too far up or down would break the illusion of the mask. Such a simple thing like this I would never have been found in any textbooks or articles about masks. We had to uncover it ourselves by actively working with masks. I loved testing my way through mask work with these performers. Rehearsals were an exciting time of trial and error. I could lead my actresses through multiple activities I had prepared and then we could discuss at the end of that rehearsal what helped them learn in the mask and what was confusing. I was therefore able to adjust rehearsal plans as I went.

In performance, the part that I felt was truly unsuccessful was the Noh inspired section. We simply were not able to achieve the necessary clarity of movement and tension in the body. When each movement is so small and slow they must be perfectly defined, and if they are not, their meaning becomes muddled. I think that since we did not have a lot of time to train and practice moving economically while also keeping tension in the body, we were not able to use

Noh effectively. I believe that there is no reason that Noh theatre cannot work as successfully as the other two forms with a contemporary audience. We simply could not truly master its subtle techniques in the time we had.

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

VI. Conclusions

I began this project hoping to answer the questions: 1. What is the role of masks in theatre today? 2. How can a director use ancient mask traditions to inspire new work? I discovered that there are three major benefits to using mask work, which I have stated below. I also found that there was one general guideline for directors that I felt necessary to share as well.

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

The human body is capable of unbelievable expression when it uses all of its capacities. Masks facilitate that by removing the ego of performers and allowing them to transform completely into a different type of being. Masks are clearly a benefit to modern theatrical practice, as they serve to help us to become present in our bodies and comment on the human experience. Moving forward, I think it is important for theatre artists to continue to bring masks out of antiquity. However, adhering too strictly to the ways artists used masks in the past would be a detriment to modern theatre and the masks themselves. Masks are an unbelievably powerful tool for the contemporary theatre artists. They strip us down to the raw expression of the human body. In this state, we are able to communicate truths not just specific to the performer or character, but to the human experience itself.

VII. Appendix

Attached below are two links to the documentation of my creative work. The first link is to a video recording of the performance “Life is a Dream”. The second link is to a photo gallery of images taken during rehearsals, mask building, and the performance.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LjDq0Gqopvc&feature=youtu.be>

<https://www.flickr.com/gp/149465887@N08/B38536>

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