The History of Masks in Theatre

The two most important functions for masks, entertainment purposes or not, are to DISGUISE or to PROTECT.

The earliest recollection of the use/s of masks dates back to prehistoric times in relation to the hunting of wild animals. It is assumed that in the Early Stone Age, the hunters wore animal like masks in order to disguise themselves, making the hunt more cunning and easier.

MASKS FOR PROTECTION

Masks in War – the invention that saved a small fraction of the soldiers who went to war was that of the gas mask. This mask was invented in 1874, through many stages of previous inventions; primarily for firemen or sea-divers. The gas mask was worn by soldiers and horses to prevent noxious vapours from harming their lungs. The first use of this mask in war was in World War 1 (1914 – 1945).

Sporting Masks – in baseball, fencing, and snow sports, masks are used to protect the face from injury prone to sporting events.

Surgery Masks – Doctors and Nurses wear protective clothes over their mouths to prevent their germs from entering a patient who they may be operating on, and the stop germs from their patient entering their mouth. This piece of equipment has become almost stereotypical for doctors.

MASKS IN THEATRE

Since theatrical masks are physical, they are able to impress us (ie the audience) by making things come out of the dream, the fantasy – and allow it to become a reality, a fantastical spectacle for our eyes to lap up in splendidus stupor and our minds to devour in thought and feeling.

Ancient Greeks - Ancient Greeks turned ritual into ritual-drama and so The masks that were famously used in Ancient Greece were employed to honour, worship and depict their mythological gods. The masks were oversized and exaggerated. They were fitted about the mouth of the actor, and assisted the actors with projecting their voices over such a vast amount of space. The Greeks bought the making of theatrical masks to the height of their development, and in a way, laid the path for the making of masks within the theatrical world.

Middle Age – during the mystery plays era of the 12th 13th Centuries, masks were worn to dramatise the character to the extreme. Mystery plays were written (often by church clerics, priests or ministers) to show the public how bad sin was and what they should do in order to redeem themselves. The messages in these plays were blunt and straightforward, not unlike the masks used. The masks were grotesque, usually depicting Satan or one of his monstrous minions. It is said that these masks were marvels to look at, despite the fact that they were constructed out of papier mache.

Renaissance Italy – in 15th Century Venice, the revolutionary art form commedia dell’arte was invented. This was an improvisational comedy consisting of characters so ridiculous in moral, that it was fundamental that the masks be ridiculous. It is said that the masks in commedia dell’arte are both concealing and revealing – to what this means, you would have to few some of the masks that were used.

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