

Review

Masks and cultural contexts drama education and Anthropology

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In the developed 'western' society, masks are consistently used in Drama Education, though it is usually through the specific knowledge of Drama and Theatre practice that they are contextualised. Drawing upon cultural understandings of the past and present, anthropology offers a context for masks and drama demonstrating that the purpose for masks in society supports the wider educational benefits, beyond the academic, for child development in formal education. This paper explores many of the historical and present day occidental usages of masks beyond a pragmatic purpose, as well as the educational application of masks and reframes the potential for schools to engage with anthropological concepts in a crowded curriculum.

Key words: Masks, cultural identity, drama, education.

INTRODUCTION

There are few if any societies in the world which do not find references or images of masks and their application in their historical record to the current era (Edson, 2005). There is no definitive time of when masks can be seen to be first introduced, as they are ever present in visual records, but their purpose is and has always been to transport and transform the user and the observer (Foreman, 2000). Thus, masks have an audience, whether in entertainment or ritual. The difference between these two can cross boundaries (Schechner and Appel, 1990). Ritual, similar to entertainment performance is fascinating for the individuals who partake as they are actively engaged and yet able to glorify and observe the spectacle around them (Campbell, 1969). Through a critical analysis of key writings his paper presents some key cultural context of masks in society in a non-theatrical

context and questions the implications for drama and wider education.

Donald Pollock recognizes this wider purpose in the meaning of masks as an aspect of semiotic identity in society. 'Identity is displayed, revealed or hidden in any culture through conventional means, and that masks work by taking up these conventional means, iconically or indexically' (Pollock, 1995 p.582).

This is supported through the work of other anthropologists in that masks have several functions such as representational, emotive indexical and disguise (Lévi-Strauss, 1982; Urban and Hendriks, 1983). All these are observed in the multitude of modern usage of masks outside of the Drama and Theatre perspective, in modern religious festivals and events, children's play, religious attire and indeed in practical mask usage such

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as for health and medicine (Schechner, 1985). In all these forms, their functions have a visual linguistic association that has the potential to impact of how masks in the classroom are engaged, and needs to be explored if we are to understand not only the function of masks but also how the mask changes the user and audience .

MASKS IN TRADITION

Masks have remained prevalent through human society as a form of celebration and religion (Mack, 1994). Drama and religion and celebration have link in that they all communicate important societal thoughts, whether instructional, historical or educational (including questioning society which is a thematic purpose for Dramatic narrative). Symptomatic of these multitude of purposes for a modern context is the historical role masks played in Greek Theatre (Boardman et al., 1988). Ancient Greek Theatre is still the origin of the modern semiotic representation of Drama. Originating as a festival in celebration of the God Dionysus, the performance competition which was core to this the competition had two forms of performance, Tragedy and Comedy (Wiles, 1991). It is from these two elements that we now have the classic symbol of theatre with the two masks in conjunction, one tragic and sad, the other smiling in a comedic way though both are social constructs not truly representing the meaning of the concepts of comedy and tragedy from Greek times. (Napier, 1986; Wiles, 2007; Wilson and Goldfarb, 2008).

Masks were used in performance to exaggerate and accentuate the characters' features, as well as to make the actors more visible to the audience. Greek theatre was performed in the open air in large auditoriums with excellent acoustics that allowed all the audience to hear clearly, no matter how far away they were. However this necessitated the movements to be bold and highly stylised. Actors performed with full-face masks and with very little in the way of sets or props. One of the key reasons that masks were used was due to the size of the theatres and the distance the actors had to the audience. Mask usage was also applied to allow the three actors to adopt a variety of roles. Originally, it involved only one actor and the chorus, but over time it began to involve three actors and the chorus (Chrisp, 2000; Kitto, 1961)

MASKS, RELIGION AND RITUAL

Modern religious and traditional celebrations still have clear examples of mask at the heart of their basis and in particular the four functions as described by Urban and Hendriks (Urban and Hendriks, 1983). The modern western traditions of masked carnivals (based on Venice) and the 'supposed' ancient pagan celebration of Halloween, now most recognised as adopted by the

United States but harking back thousands of years to Northern Europe, demonstrate the current role of the function of masks clearly (Twycross and Carpenter, 2002).

The role of masks is thought to have a much deeper role in the spirituality of Celtic peoples at Halloween, a symbolic meaning that continues through today, though some might argue has been lost in the commercialisation of 'holiday' events (Napier, 1992). However, the role of masks in Halloween is not as urban myth might suggest. Halloween is the modern name for the ancient Celtic festival of Samhain linked to a celebration of the dead and popular myth suggests that the wearing of masks and 'guising' to defend from evil spirits stems from this (Kelley, 2008). Research of the the origins of this 'supposed' ancient celebration reveals that there is no mention of any druidic religious rites being held at Samhain. There is nothing in the ancient Celtic literature that even hints at the idea that Samhain was a 'Druid festival' as opposed to a time of year when a large feast was held for chieftains and warriors, along with their wives and families (Markale, 2001).

The only real connection between Samhain and Halloween is that both were celebrations that took place in the Northern hemisphere that used the excess food that could not be stored in preparation of the Winter coming and in celebration of the autumn harvest that had been (O'Donnell and Foley, 2009). Today's Halloween parties, like ancient Samhain celebrations, include 'games and amusements and entertainments and eating and feasting'. The linking of the festival of Samhain and a connection to a celebration of the dead is not there (Campbell, 1969). Thus, the role of Halloween customs such as 'guising' and mask usage can only be attributed to 15th century plus customs (Santino, 1994).

The element of masking and guising is thought to stem from the Catholic recognition of All Saints Day which originates from the Eleventh century as a feast day in February to pray for all the dead who have existed, that was later moved to November. As a Christian festival it was believed that the souls of anyone that had departed the living that year were left wandering the earth until All Saint's Day and that Halloween was a day that they were given a second chance to wreak vengeance upon their enemies in life. It is on the following day, All Saints' Day that those in purgatory are freed to move on to the full afterlife. Early Christians strated to wear masks (guises) in the 15th century, to allow themselves to be unrecognised by the angry, vengeful spirits of the dead, trapped in Purgatory. The masks were to protect the wearer from recognition, in much the same manner that the social activists cover their faces with masks and scarves. such as 'anonymous' wear the 'V' for Vendetta mask to hinder authorities from recognising them.

Shakespeare makes mention of the custom called 'souling' which had developed in England in which the poor would go from house to house asking for soul-cakes

(Twycross and Carpenter, 2002). The wealthy would exchange these foods for prayers for their dead relatives. Souling continued up until the twentieth century in some parts of Britain, though the ritual became increasingly secularised and was eventually relegated to children. Souling almost certainly forms the basis for American 'Trick or Treating'. Shakespeare uses the phrase 'to speak pulling like a beggar at Hallowmass' in 'The Two gentlemen of Verona' (Wells, 2002).

With the rise of Protestantism, whose beliefs disregard the previous held notion of purgatory, 'guising' and Halloween fell into disrepute in the UK except for the strong catholic communities in Ireland and Scotland. Such traditions were transferred to the new colonies of North America as Catholics escaped persecution and poverty. Thus, the idea of masking to hide ones identity from spirits grew as a festive custom, though it does hark back, inadvertently, to the spiritual origins of ancient man in rituals. Halloween is but now an excuse for children to assume an 'other' identity. It is creative play and drama without the formal educational element (Gupta, 2009). Children engage with adopting new roles through dress up and masing to explore new ideas as they consolidate their own about society and growing up. This is apparent in the multitude of children's dress-up costumes and toys where masks have become back to the forefront, due to the revival cinematic adaptations of 'masked superheroes' such as Batman and the Avengers. All forms of masks are used by 'superheoes in childrens comics (and adults) from full face and half mask to the domino mask of basic eye covering as represented by 'Green Lantern' (Reynolds, 1992). The superhero concept of being masked is to allow the individual to hold a dual identity, which the readership/audience accept in theory suspension of disbelief (Bongco, 2013).

In terms of masking and ritual, the tradition continues throughout Europe beyond Halloween and children's play but through Winter Solstice and Spring Celebrations. Such festivals may seem to be archaic in the context of the 21st Century but remain vibrant and relevant to the cultural groupings that engage with practices. The celebrations may relate to current Christian practices but originate from rituals that predate Christianity. Often men reenact animals such as bears or deer, or beast like men. The Austrian 'Krampus' is an animal-like wild man figure that frightens naughty children as a counterpart to St Nicholas/Santa Claus. He represented in France, Poland and Germany (Shea, 2013). As in other mask representations, he represents part of the other in humans, the part society does not want expressed in normal civil behavior. It is no different to masquerade of Venice in this respect and links to the ritual of the shaman.

MASKS IN SOCIETY

Masks and the masquerade was a shared practice of all

people in Venice, no matter the position or status of the individuals. The society would allow the mask wearer to be absolved of licentious restraint, thus allowing society to be freed from the trappings moral impositions. Purposefully, this created a release of societal tensions imposed by the Serenissima Republic (Johnson, 2011). By freeing the wearer to be 'other' than they were, a separation between public and private life without judgment in the close city conditions was allowed. Just as in modern day society where public figures are brought down by their private actions, Venice too had strict codes of behaviour and the mask allowed freedom from restrictive laws. The citizen found that by wearing a mask, they could act like a stranger.

The masks themselves focussed more on simplistic symbolic colours and designs, thus furthering the anonymity. They were not used as status symbols to represent any aspect of the wearer, but more to hide and create neutrality to the observer in a practical fashion. The simplicity in mask design simplicity meant that it was difficult to distinguish between the class systems of the wearers. (Johnson, 2011). In many aspects this very fact has always been the attraction of the mask in performance in that through adoption of mask usage, individuals are released from their fragile identities to explore knowledge and performance without fear of denigration by their peers or critics. There is evidential aspect to this with students's engagement with masks in the classroom (Jennings, 1998; Roy and Dock, 2014).

Reflecting modern day concerns and fears of individuals who cover their faces, Venetian authorities introduced restrictive laws throughout the 14th century to increasingly limit the usage of masks. In part to stop individuals from undertaking violent crime and also to protect victims (in particularly women) from sexual assaults 'multas inhonestates', masks were eventually banned from usage at certain times of the year, namely religious festivals and celebrations. Ironically, mask usage was encouraged around Easter, throughout to the start of the North hemisphere summer months, and the Venetian Carnival has its roots from this time. (Gardiner, 1967; Johnson, 2011; Nunley and McCarthy, 1999).

Our current society has concerns about individuals covering their faces in public, not only through the wearing of protective helmets but also through religious garments such as the adoption of the niqab and burqa by some Muslim followers. Western media has promulgated concerns about such garments (Kilic et al., 2008). The niqab, a covering of the face that still reveals the eyes is closest potentially to the performance styled mask and itself has created a new semiotic meaning for individuals, that meaning being widely different to each individual depending on their context.

The mask is political and as such has been adopted in the 21st century as part of grass roots political protest, whether through anti-capitalist marches in the west to democratic change protest in countries that are viewed

as lacking democratic elections are often have military control. In the 2010 to 2012 Arab spring (Dabashi, 2012), political protestors often wore a shared mask which was the face of 'V' from the graphic novel/movie *V* for Vendetta. Mass manufactured, the masks became an identifiable symbol of the Arab Spring, but more so had become the appropriated identity of both 'Occupy' and 'Anonymous' who are both anti-globalisation movement (Sheets, 2013). *V* for Vendetta is a graphic novel, set a dystopian future UK run by a totalitarian government who places minority groups in 'resettlement camps' and are subject to medical experiments and torture. The narrative is both an allegory of Nazi Germany practices of the Second World War but also an indictment of right wing governments and policies in current society. The main character, whom has been scarred through the experiments, escapes, dons a stylised Guy Fawkes masks and takes revenge. He brings down the government, leaving a suggestion that people will take back their lost freedoms (Moore and Lloyd, 1990). The mask worn by the lead character is highly stylised, with a fixed smile. Guy Fawkes was a Catholic sympathiser who attempted to blow up the British Houses of Parliament in 1605, and this even is celebrated with a burning of his effigy and fireworks though Britain every 5th of November, just after Halloween.

CONCLUSION

In Drama and Theatre, masks have been applied using the theories of a multitude of practitioners such as Meyerhold, Brecht, Grotowski, Lecoq, and Brook (Mackey and Cooper, 2000). They are mentioned as potential learning areas in curricula (BoS, 1999, 2003, 2008; QSA, 2007; VCAA, 2006a, 2006b). Masks have sections in the major Drama Teaching texts of Australia (Baines and O'Brien, 2006; Burton, 2011; Clausen, 2004). There is, however no requirement in Australia nor other western education systems (Ontario, 2000; SQA, 2002) for masks to be used either as a pedagogy or a knowledge. In contrast, there is a continued importance of masks as a training tool for performance by 20th/21st Century Theatre Practitioners (Gordon, 2006; Hodge, 2010), which helps to support the assumption they should be embedded in drama curricula. Too often the concepts of 'how' to apply masks are offered through theoretical, theatrical knowledge or specific contextual application of 'mask' units of work (Moreland and Cowie, 2007). Through offering a wider anthropological and cultural context to masks, with in the delivery of the curriculum, depth of understanding through student awareness of knowledge significance has the potential to improve achievement, by countering growing alienation to knowledge from students (Ladwig and King, 2003). There is therefore the potential for impact upon student engagement of mask through introducing anthropological knowledge through drama education and the presentation

of contemporary cultural contexts.

Masks in their multiple forms have been and continue to be, part of everyday society. They are challenging and political to the observer and the observed. In all contexts, they allow the wearer to act in a manner that frees them from the constraints and limits placed upon the individual by societal norms (Barba and Savarese, 2006). As a pedagogical tool, they have a potential important place to play in delivering an effective curriculum that not only meets the academic aspirations for children and society. Through recognising the historical and present anthropological applications of masks in the developed world, masks usage within the classroom can help shape our children to have secure identities (Roy and Ladwig, 2015).

Conflict of Interests

The authors have not declared any conflict of interests.

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