

How to use masks

It is important to remember that the wearing of a full-face mask can inhibit an actor because the face cannot be seen and the voice cannot easily be heard. So when you are deciding how masks should be used remember to consider whether the actors' performances will be adversely affected.

Full-face masks were worn by Ancient Greeks when performing their plays, but the masks had a small megaphone built into the mouth opening in order to magnify the voice. In medieval times, masks were worn to portray dragons, monsters and the devil. The most common half-face masks were those worn by *Commedia dell'Arte* actors. These are the type of masks which might be the most appropriate for your own performances, as they do not obstruct the mouth.

In your own performances, a mask can be anything which is worn, which either hides or changes an actor's face in some way. Make-up has the same effect.

Masks can be used sparingly in all sorts of ways:

- If more than one actor is playing a character then the passing of a mask from one actor to another can signify that the part has been taken over. Once this is established the mask can be removed.
- Plain, expressionless masks can be worn by actors during symbolic movement sections to distance the performers from their main roles.
- Masks, such as the highly exaggerated *Commedia* half-masks, can be worn to signify grotesque or stereotyped characters. For example the actor playing an unpleasant character could wear a pair of comic spectacles with eyebrows and a moustache attached. This is a simple mask but it makes the point that he is playing a comic grotesque character rather than a fully rounded believable character.

Making simple masks

There are many different ways to make masks using a *former* (mould) as a basis or by using the face of the person who is going to wear the mask.

Using a *former* means using an object, which represents the face. You can use something simple like a balloon or wig stand or you can make a base from clay. Once you have selected your *former* it can be overlaid with any material that will dry to a relatively hard consistency, Materials such as strips of glued paper, self-adhesive tape such as parcel tape or cotton tape, and *latex*. Before you lay on the tape, glued paper or *latex*, remember to smear a thin film of petroleum jelly over the *former* so that the mask can easily be removed once it is dry.

If you have the time and your actors have the patience, you can make a mask which fits the face of the wearer perfectly. This technique uses a plaster impregnated cotton scrim or bandage, which becomes very pliable when wet.

1. Ask the actor to lie on the floor and put a towel around their neck.
2. Smear the actor's face with petroleum jelly.
3. Cut the plaster-bandage into thin strips.
4. Take one strip at a time and dip into a bowl of water.
5. When the plaster-bandage has become pliable place it on the face of the actor.
6. Gradually lay strips of plaster on the face until the shape of the mask is complete.
7. Remember to leave holes for the eyes, the mouth and the nose.
8. After a few minutes the mask will be dry enough to remove from the face.
9. Leave the mask for 24 hours to dry out.
10. Extra strips of plaster-bandage can be added to change the shape of the mask.
11. Take a length of elastic and use a strip of plaster-bandage to fasten the two ends to the sides of the mask.
12. Paint the mask and add any extra pieces as required such as false hair.