

Mask and Character Development

by Teodoro Dragonieri, educator, artist

A mask tells us more than a face.

—Oscar Wilde

There are three masks: The one we think we are, the one we really are and the one we have in common.

—Jacques Lecoq

The power of the mask in education, therapy, and theatre is exceptional. Few inanimate objects are as universally successful in riveting attention, stimulating the imagination, and arousing deep emotions. The use of the mask as an element of theatre, of storytelling, and of carnivalesque transformation is wide-spread. The mask facilitates the exploration of characterization and engenders broader physicality. The mask gives depth and meaning to gestures, procures a voice for itself and its wearer, reminds us of the importance of silence and stillness. It influences the creation of complete, fully dimensional characters while discovering creativity, enriching intuition, encouraging risk-taking, and joyfully developing the inner clown.

When students are invited to explore masks, they are engaged in a discovery process, utilizing their bodies and voices, that draws upon their emotions, perceptions, experiences, and memories. The goal in introducing such work is to elicit immediate, intuitive, and instinctual responses to both mask and character. At the core of my work is a personal belief that *I am in all the masks and all the masks are in me.*

Working with masks is a challenging process: I don't begin with masks at all. Much of the early exploratory work is done with eyes closed or with a blindfold, so the students do not feel self-conscious. The exercises are done quickly and without a great deal of thinking to strengthen the participants' trust in their own intuition, to allow for risk-taking, and to eradicate the "critic" within.

Exploration Exercises

1. Being Neutral

- Stand in a circle and assume the "neutral" body position (one devoid of distinguishing characteristics/qualities).
- Establish rhythmical breathing; i.e., breathe in for three seconds, hold your breath for three seconds, and exhale for the same count.
- Draw on your memory and select a character from your life experiences. The character could be someone you know well, or a chance encounter.
- At the count of ten, starting from a neutral position, assume the physical attributes of the character. Act immediately, without thinking too much.

2. Adding Voice

Once you have established the physical persona, you will learn to breathe in character. The breathing will vary according to various factors like age, energy, emotional state, health, and posture. To develop the voice, do the following exercises (each are about one minute in duration): after each step, when asked, share.

- Create sounds/noises that your character would make.
- Choose a vowel that best connects to the spirit of your character. Create as many sound variations as you can. Experiment with volume, tempo, and rhythm.
- Repeat the preceding step, with one word.
- Repeat the preceding step, now with a full sentence.
- For a few minutes, in character, interact with others and enjoy the wonderful array of entities created.

3. Hello, Mask!

- In silence, choose one of the half masks provided.
- Sit on the floor and place the mask directly in front of you. Using the floor as support for the mask, close your eyes and feel the contours of the mask by rubbing your hands all over it. Rub, in isolation, individual features of the mask: i.e., the eyes, the upper mouth area, the nose.
- Proceed to sculpt the physical attributes of the mask to your face as if it were a chunk of clay. Hold the expression you have sculpted on your face. Open your eyes and place the actual mask on your face.
- Looking into the mirror provided, see if you have embodied the physical features of the mask. Ensure that a connection is made between the mask and the rest of your face.
- Wearing the mask, repeat all steps in exercise 2. Adding Voice.

4. Shaping Character

To refine your characterization and end up with a “body memory” of your masked character, do the following:

- Stand in a circle and turn to the outside.
- For ten seconds, assume your character’s physicality.
- Turn to the inside of the circle and reveal.
- Repeat these three steps, changing the count: from ten seconds, to five, to three, and finally at the sound of a clap.
- Enjoy seeing and feeling the transformation that occurs. Engage your fellow masked characters. For a few minutes admire the mask characters that come alive physically and vocally.

Core Principles of Mask Movement

Reveal

- The aim of the mask is both to reveal and to hide: you hide your face but you reveal your body. A “reveal” should last a minimum of three seconds.
- Revealing or presenting your mask character, by facing the audience and pausing, should occur every time you enter and exit.

Be Still

- Entrances and exits must be punctuated with a moment of stillness.
- Stillness should present specific aspects of the character, adding depth to the performance.

Report to the Audience

- Plot is character in action: periodic speech to the audience engages them in your story.
- Share each idea, every thought and discovery, by communicating directly with the audience. Make contact. Look at and confide in those who are witnessing the action.

Shape the Body to the Mask

Physicality keeps the mask alive. Without the support of the physicality, the mask and the character do not live.\

Embrace the Alternate or Opposite Feelings

- Portray, at times, the opposite of what the mask displays, by changing your physicality.
- The mask, by itself, does not determine the emotions that can be expressed: a happy mask can become sad by simply changing the deportment of the body.