

# Mask and Masking: A Survey of Their Universal Application to Theatre Practice

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## 1. Mask Characteristics and Attributes

Quite frankly, the mask is a charismatic device *sui generis*; whether in its magical, ritual, religious, artistic, or socio-political conception and application. Theatrically, it commands a cognitive ubiquitous presence that could be instantly felt in the auditorium. It possesses a cognitive form, a consciousness, and an essence. Therefore, whether the mask is native, commonplace, or exotic to the culture that uses it; whether it is beautiful, placid, and sublime in form, structure, and appearance; or whether it is simply ugly, fierce-looking, horrendous, grotesque, and bizarre (like most African masks), a mask is generally presumed to be imbued with strange metaphysical powers and attributes. These could be (and they have been) translated into adept theatrical and aesthetic advantages both for the actor wearing the mask and for his audience.

It is the peculiar combination of these attributes in the mask which ineluctably activate vibratory vectors that in turn create the strange feelings and atmosphere, characteristically native to the theatre – notably feelings of awe, wonder, admiration, and reverence which derive mostly from paradoxes, such as those innate to attraction

the mask has similarly been used for various geo-political, socio-cultural, and religious purposes, for example, warfare, divination, and *rites de passage*, even for exhibitions and tourist indulgences. It is virtually being used today in most cultures for the same or similar objectives.

Historically, the mask is synonymously presumed to date the human society. Even though its true origins may be shrouded in an enigmatic and mysterious whirlpool, yet it could be speculated with some certainty and accuracy that mask and mythology share common origins and ancestry: both are living conceptions of the human mind, with the one explaining the other, and designed principally to teach, amplify, and reinforce the religions, history, aspirations, hopes, fears, morality, etc., of the community. Masks are, in fact, concretized and emblematic actualizations of mythological abstractions, specifically contrived to amplify, reinforce, and codify the beliefs, metaphysics, and cosmology of the community, including their basic and essential philosophy of life and existence. Therefore, its enigmatic origin notwithstanding, there is a considerable degree of unanimity about its artistic, religious, social, and other roles or functions in nearly every culture that has used the idiom. For example, it is almost universally accepted that the diverse applications of the mask idiom have their origins and roots in the religions, rituals, and theatre crafts of the so-called "primitive," non-literate societies.

Similarly, the Greeks are universally acknowledged with scholarly accreditations for the "formal" and "conventional" use of the mask in the theatre. Later centuries have equally followed in the footsteps of ancient Greece. Medieval theatres, for instance, extensively used the various and repulsion, empathy and alienation, excitement and alarm, etc. Apart from its extensive use for the myriad forms of theatrical entertainment,

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