



## *Masks and Masked Movement Around the World*



Have you ever really looked at your face? Faces are one of the first thing newborn babies recognize! Take a look in the mirror, and watch your face change expressions. We use our faces to express our feelings and attitudes, but also to hide them! We may "mask" our feelings with our faces. While wearing masks, however, we may actually express ourselves more than ever! Masks are a vehicle for not only personal, but cultural expression worldwide.

In every culture around the globe, human beings create and dance with masks. Masks have a great power and ability to bring to life many different kinds of beings; spirits, clowns, animals, and ancestors. Masks are used in religious ceremonies, in parades, in theatrical productions and dance performances, as well as in social events such as Masquerade balls and Halloween. They are used for protection (gas masks, football masks, dust masks), for disguise, and for anonymity. In the world of dance and theater they can both hide and reveal; hiding the personality, the face, of the one wearing it, but revealing some inner truths of both the character and the actor/dancer, through movement.



In many cultures, such as Bali, the Mask maker holds a revered place in society. He works with the wood and lets the local spirits and gods speak to the community through his art. In that way the mask maker is supporting and reinforcing the community's strength, its well-being, and connection with its spirituality.



The masked dance performer can be transformed; in fact many cultures use masks in ritual because they put great importance in the masked dancer as a messenger to and from other worlds. For example, in many parts of Africa masked dancers embody ancestors, animals, or gods, and bring important messages to the local people about their way of life, their responsibilities to and relationship with the natural world, and the way to best maintain what is important in their culture.

Masks have been used for entertainment for centuries, too! Masks were used in ancient Egypt, and in ancient Greece and Rome, masks were an essential part of both comedies and dramas. Chinese

theatrical forms such as Peking Opera have used masks to tell stories for many centuries. Giant masks used in Lion dances and Dragon dances come to life each Lunar New Year not only in China but in big parades right here in the Bay Area too! Physical theater styles that are descendents of Italian Commedia dell'Arte, in both Western and Eastern Europe, use masks, or makeup that is mask-like, such as whiteface for mime, and painted clown faces. Even a small red nose is a mask!

Masks can be freeing, liberating the dancer or actor of any culture to express his or her own inner power, silliness, or emotions. Wearing a mask can be a transforming experience for you, too! Here's an exercise you can do yourself. Put on a mask, and keep your body still for a few moments. Then, in slow motion, allow your body to melt into a position which expresses the character of the mask. Move slowly from one position to another, like a silent moving sculpture. Come slowly back to standing still before taking off the mask. Take turns doing this with a friend, using the same mask or different masks. Then, try it facing a mirror. How did you feel each time? Was it more engaging for you with or without an audience? With or without a mirror? For more activities with masks, including making masks, see our movement activity section for 2002.

While the expression of a mask is fixed, when one performs with a mask, the expression seems to change with the movement the dancer/actor is doing! A slight tilt of the head or a gesture can make the meaning of the expression change altogether. In this way, a mask truly comes to life, and is perceived very differently depending on who is wearing it and what they are doing. Masks are magical, and you as the audience are part of that magic too. Let your imagination sail!