

# THE MASK MESSENGER

## *Faustwork Mask Theatre*

**Art Form:** Theatre

**Style:** Contemporary

**Culture:** Western European

### MEET THE ARTIST:

**Faustwork Mask Theatre** was founded in 1983 by Artistic Director Rob Faust, actor, athlete, dancer, choreographer and mask-maker. Faust's extensive professional credits include work with leading companies such as Pilobolus Dance Theatre. He has performed worldwide in venues such as The Sydney Opera House, The Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts in Washington, D.C. and The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. In 1999, Music Center Education commissioned Rob Faust and cellist Eugene Friesen to create a play with masks and music entitled *Voice of the Wood*. Faustwork Mask Theatre is based in Toronto, Canada and the company's talented performers tour *The Mask Messenger* throughout the United States. *Russell Edge* - current performer of *The Masked Messenger* - is an actor currently living in Los Angeles. As a member of Critical Mass Performance Group, he creates movement-based ensemble pieces, extending the boundaries of traditional theatre by focusing on a visceral union of text, idea, image, music and physicality. Russell has his MFA from the Old Globe Theatre's program at the University of San Diego. His television credits include ER, Numbers, Boomtown, JAG, Charmed and The West Wing.

### ABOUT THE PERFORMANCE:

*The Mask Messenger* is a solo performance about masks, that simultaneously entertains and educates. The set is a wall of masks exhibited at the center of the stage. After a brief introduction about masks throughout the world, the performer begins to demonstrate their power by removing the masks from the wall one by one, and assuming the character expressed in each face. A variety of characters spring to life, including some who speak, wearing *commedia dell'arte* style half-masks. Full masks are sometimes worn on the top or back of the head, transforming the performer into creatures on all fours, or creating distortions that baffle the eyes and tickle the funny bone. Through the parade of almost twenty characters, the audience will glimpse human nature at its silliest and most poignant.



### PREPARING FOR THE EXPERIENCE:

Masks have been an important aspect of the religious and social life in cultures all over the world. In Africa a mask is far more than a facial covering. It includes the costume and adornments worn on the body as a bond between a group of people and their ancestors. The tradition of using masks goes back to time immemorial, according to scholars, but since most masks were made of perishable materials, only those which were made of bronze and terra-cotta date back several centuries. Across the African continent, every tribe had a mask-making history which served some function or ceremony. In current traditions in the West African tribes of the Dan, Guere and Wobe, masks are worn only by men - and are passed down after death so the power of several generations may accumulate in an old mask. Supernatural powers are given form in the mask, and consequently, when the mask is worn, the wearer, too, is seen as a supernatural being.

The American continents are also rich areas for masks. The Inuits and the Indians of the Northwest coast of the United States made masks of extremely high artistic quality. Masks often took the form of animals, sometimes representing a totemic ancestor or the 'spirit helper' of a shaman (a type of medicine man). In the ancient civilizations of Mexico and Peru, death-masks were fastened to the mummies of the dead. The gods, too, were often depicted as masked figures.

As a device for theatre, masks evolved from religious practices of ancient Greece. The first masks were used to impersonate a god and were made primarily of animal skins. As these ceremonies became more theatrical, the masks became more elaborate. The traditional masks depicting Tragedy and Comedy are derived from Greek theatrical traditions.

Masks today still hold enchantment and fascination. In some parts of the world, the mask retains a deep and complex meaning in tribal cultures. We, too, may experience the thrill of masquerading on Halloween, Mardi Gras, or by simply playing "dress up" and stepping into another role or identity. Faustwork Mask Theatre celebrates the ancient art of the mask and its roots in theatre by taking it to any entirely different, almost startling dimension.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- Have you ever watched or participated in a mask performance? (Halloween, Mardi Gras, "El Dia de los Muertos," Chinese New Year, etc.)
- What masked characters in Faustwork Mask Theater's performance did you like best? Why?
- Did any of the masks astonish or surprise you? Did any of the masks frighten or alarm you?
- How did the performer change his or her body movement, gestures or posture for the various mask characters?
- Which mask would you like to put on and bring to life? Why?

## FRAMEWORK FOCUS - LANGUAGE ARTS:

The ancient Greeks had many different gods and goddesses. The twelve most important were thought to live on Mount Olympus, the highest mountain in Greece. Each god or goddess had his or her own special symbols or attributes.

Example: Apollo, god of light, music and healing carries a lyre; Athena, warrior goddess, wears a helmet and carries a spear and shield.

Read a selection of Greek myths exploring their stories and journeys. What kind of characters are they? What do their symbols visually communicate about them? Have students choose a particular god or goddess and write a brief character analysis. Then have them construct a mask which seems to embody the character's personality using a variety of materials (fabric scraps, paper, foil, plastic, etc.).

Wear the masks to enact various myths in a choral reading style presentation.

- Legend:
- 🌀 Artistic perception
  - ❖ Creative expression
  - ▶ Historical & cultural context
  - 👁️ Aesthetic valuing
  - \* Connections, Relations, Applications

## ACTIVITIES TO ENHANCE THE EXPERIENCE:

- 🌀 Practice communicating nonverbally using body language and facial expressions to project emotions such as fear, anger, love, hate and sorrow.
- 🌀 Learn how to operate from a neutral base to explore different body shapes and poses: tight, loose, open and closed. Also from a neutral base, practice projecting "everyone" or "no one" using a neutral mask.
- ❖ Make a two-sided mask which shows contrasting feelings on each side (happy/sad, good/evil). Use simple materials such as paper plates, construction paper, yarn, etc. Create character movement to bring the mask to life!
- ▶ Look at pictures of masks from cultures around the world: Greek and Roman masks; African masks; Egyptian masks; Native American masks and totems; Oriental masks; Mexican, Central American and South American masks. Compare and contrast the masks' similarities and differences noting shape, size, material, color, or other distinguishing characteristics.



- ❖ Choose literature with animal characters such as Aesop's Fables, Wind in the Willows, Babar, Miss Spider's Tea Party, etc. Construct animal masks to use for story theatre productions.
- 👁️ Write an essay about a situation you have been in when you've had to mask your true feelings. Can "wearing" a mask be a helpful thing? A harmful thing? Describe.
- \* Make masks which identify people in a number of different occupations. Students may also add hats, scarves, eyeglasses or jewelry to complete the portraits. Then have them perform the actions of their characters' various occupations using body language, movement and pantomime.

## SUGGESTED RESOURCES:

- Earl, Amanda and Sensier, Danielle. *Traditions Around the World: Masks*. Thompson Learning, New York, NY: 1995.
- Tuchman, Maurice. *Masquerade*. Chronicle Books, San Francisco, CA: 1993.