

## Introduction

David Wilson

The title of the conference held at the St Bride Institute, Fleet Street, London, on 25 February 2006, was **'Masks, masques and masquerades: a living tradition'**. The intention was to review the use of masks in drama and dance from antiquity to the present day and across the known world. Such an ambitious programme could never have been achieved in a fully comprehensive way, but the only major omission from our provisional list of topics proved to be Caribbean Carnival.

The most striking feature of the mask traditions studied was the variety displayed in their apparent motivation. There was no question of isolating a single tradition in the use of masks. Each place and period had its own tradition, rooted in its particular culture.

It is natural to start from our experience of eighteenth-century dancing and to assume that this experience is typical. Thus, we may have seen a theatrical dance featuring Circe in a smiling mask. At first, this mask represents the apparent welcome given by the enchantress to her visitors, but then her body language changes and the same smiling visage takes on a more sinister character. The mask itself does not change, but our understanding of it in context certainly does.

Masks in the Italian commedia are less subtly nuanced. Each expresses the essence of a particular character, with which it is closely identified. The shape of the mask (a beaky nose, for example) does not merely suggest a traditional commedia role; it controls the actual movements that the character makes (in profile or full face, for example). In a real sense the mask *is* the character.

These examples may seem typical of the use of masks in stage performance, but, as soon as you take a wider look encompassing other times and places, you find that every instance is different, and often markedly so.

In ancient Greece (Chapter 1) the citizens of many cities participated in spring festivals devoted to Dionysiac rites. Dressing up as satyrs allowed them to enjoy temporarily the hedonistic licence associated with this god. At the same time, dressing as a satyr was a rehearsal for becoming a satyr for all eternity in the retinue of Dionysus.

Roman pantomime (Chapter 2) also involved dramatic performance, but was otherwise strikingly different. The participants were not citizens, but slaves; not anonymous, but celebrities. The function of masks, if worn at all, was not to conceal identity but to reveal it. The use of masks, as of conventional garments, was entirely optional.

The use of masks in traditional folkloric manifestations (Chapter 3) is different again. Here the mask is truly a disguise, concealing the identity of young men, whose

wild antics bring an element of mystery and uncontrolled chaos to threaten sobriety and orderly behaviour amongst the populace.

With masquing vizards (Chapter 4) we are on more familiar ground. The wearing of a vizard in a court masque served to excuse the nobleman or noblewoman concerned from the impropriety of dancing and acting in public. In the same way, it became essential to propriety in the sixteenth century for a woman of quality, when walking abroad, to wear a mask (originally designed to preserve her complexion) in order to preserve her reputation. This practice continued into the eighteenth century, by which time it might also be used to preserve her anonymity.

This leads on naturally to the fashionable masquerade (Chapter 6), in which the adoption of fancy dress, complete with mask as disguise, was *de rigueur*, and even the sex of the masquerader would often be concealed. This was the world of Casanova.

In Italian art the presence of masks could be thought to refer to carnival, to the theatre and, by association with either, to deceit (Chapter 5).

In the world of traditional oriental dance (Chapter 7) there are yet other traditions. In the Japanese masked dance *kagura* the mask represents a god, who is thought to enter the dancer during the ritual. In the *nô* drama, masks are worn only for certain roles, in which they are remarkably expressive, yet unmasked actors are required to keep their faces utterly impassive.

Masked dances are also a feature of public performance in Bali. The mask and costume are so all-enveloping and cumbersome that the performer must perforce submit to its needs and can only express himself through the mask itself, to the extent that he feels that he is moved by the mask, rather than the reverse.

In every context there is a different tradition, sacred or profane, transcendental or mundane, theatrical or simply practical; but usually with an element of mystery arising from the fact of personal concealment.