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Masks for dancing

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Methods for making masks

You want a mask for dancing: that fits your own facial features, that sits comfortably and securely whatever you need to do in it, in which you can see what you and the people around you are doing and which also looks terrific.

I am going to throw ideas out at you to stimulate your imaginations. I will describe one good method of making semi-permanent masks without the mess of papier maché and the smell of plasticine.

By the end of this talk you should have developed your own ideas on how to make a mask to suit one outfit you have or have thought about how a purchased mask may be improved.

Design decisions

a) Typical proportions of the face:

The eyes are two thirds of the way up from the chin; the ears are in a line with the nose.

b). How to fix mask to the face:

- add arms like those in the frame of a pair of spectacles;
- use loops around ears from one or two holes;
- tie around back of the head (purchased masks tend to have one hole and elastic as an afterthought);
- alternatively, attach your mask to a wand carried in the hand.

The fixing method is one of the first decisions to be made. It may depend upon whether the wearer puts it on and off in public by themselves (and, if so, how far can they lift their arms in costume?), or whether the wearer keeps it on all the time. Also, will the wearer use their own glasses underneath? – and do you want to disguise the glass?

If the wearer keeps the mask on all the time they are in costume, the mask can be integrated into the outfit. This is much more comfortable to wear and will stand so much less chance of falling off in the middle of La Volta. Methods you can employ to fix the mask on include adding wire hairclips to the mask base (held on with 2 crossed hair-clips) or putting a band over the top of the head, behind the ears and under the chin to which the mask can then be fixed. It may be desirable and appropriate to cover the back of the head to conceal this band. Other successful methods include attaching the mask to the hat/head-dress or to the wig or making a hat base to fit your head and making it have a very close fit to the head using velcro or press-studs.

c) Level of authenticity

Images of our ancestors wearing masks from medieval times to the 1920s often show a solid black or a plain white surface, with a shape that changes over time. I have not been able to find any masks used in Victorian times, and would be interested to know of any sources for masks in this era. There were many costume balls, but, it would seem, these no longer featured masks.

If you are interested in total authenticity, then these plain-surface shapes should be copied. In my view, in the 21st century, it is permissible to add a little interpretation.

When we design costumes to show to today's general audience, we must remember that the 21st century is highly image-conscious. The public are used to fancy designs everywhere they look. So if you have detailed costumes with a plain mask your audience may feel there is nothing to look at, or that you have made a mistake, or not done your research. So, sometimes you have to show what is expected by today's audience, rather than what actually happened in the relevant period.

d) Suggestions for embellishments

Create textured surfaces with a white on white design or black on black, mixing matt and glossy materials. Add gold or silver metallic threads or beads or plastic pearls. In the 18th century buttons had shiny metal behind the metal filigree to glint in the sun and candle-light. Maybe re-interpret this as shiny fabric behind lace on the mask.

When embellishing a historic design, the usual guideline is to only use colours and fabrics that might have been used at the time, such as bright purple and magenta after 1856 (when aniline dyes first became available due to advances in the chemical industries). The Elizabethans used tiny metal spangles, so we can use sequins. In the 18th century they learned how to cut diamonds so they sparkled. So, in my book, the use of plastic or glass 'diamonds' would be appropriate from the 18th century onwards. Before this, use only cabochons – there will always be someone in your audience who will know about these things.

What you can buy today

Commercial ready-made, high-volume production masks are easy to obtain. You can get them in Claire Accessories, the jewellery shop, in Covent Garden market, museums, fancy dress shops, through the internet, and so on.

Such masks are of fairly basic shape, or have a little braid, sequins and feather adornments. There are also plastic moulded masks in all sorts of shapes, mostly unadorned, such as the sun, a star or a full human face in white, brown or silver or gold. These are all fine for a few uses.

Commercially-made masks can be a bit flimsy, however, and bits are liable to fall off as you dance.

Also there is the problem of not being able to see as you move around. The eye-holes may not be the same distance apart as your own eyes. If the mask eye-holes are rimmed with sequins or gold braid you may have to dismantle parts prior to making the holes large enough to see out of. Bought masks can also be a bit insecure. The elastic that holds them on may be seen by the audience. It can easily break or pull through the holes if a bit tight. And in authenticity terms boil-proof elastic was not invented until 1920s by the Dunlop Rubber Company, and it was not masks they were thinking of at the time!

Make your own mask that fits perfectly

When you make your own mask it will fit perfectly and can be any interesting and complex shape, including having three-dimensional aspects.

A mask is made up from three layers: the base, a thin covering of fabric, and the surface decoration, which can include more fabric.

Frances then gave basic guidance on how to make a mask base and decorate it using methods that are semi-permanent. Such a mask can be re-embellished to suit each new event.

Inside the mask

Nothing is worse than wearing an itchy, scratchy, uncomfortable mask. Especially when the outside has had so much attention. Also, when you show off your work to someone they should not be able to see the sewing and different techniques you have used, but be properly impressed by the finished result.

Materials that can be used to line the inside include cotton fabric, flat sponge sheets (like spontex kitchen cloth), window draft excluder where there is more pressure, as around the eyes and the sides of the nose, and thin soft leather, such as a chamois car-cleaning cloth.

Behind the head

Your mask may look wonderful from the front; it should be matched by something equally wonderful at the back. When you turn round, a modern hair style crossed by a ribbon tie holding on the mask is such a let-down. It breaks into the suspension of disbelief with a giant thud.

At the same time, however, we all know how hot it can get dancing in a wig with your hat perched on top and a mask over the face. So, if you know you are going to get very hot in your outfit think up suitable alternatives appropriate to your character:

Alternatives such as a sequin wig on very open base, a knitted semicircle using fine natural fibre, on big needles, can have also look good and let the sweat out. You can experiment with covering your own hair with fine silk fabric that floats as you turn, or design something along the lines of a Tudor French Hood. If your role is humorous, then maybe arrange a matching motif on the back of your head as a joke.

Conclusion

What I have been saying is use your imagination and your creative skills. For an event in front of an audience, design the mask as part of the outfit, not as an afterthought. For a party, use your imagination and have fun. After all we are now in the 21st century and everything we do can only be an interpretation of the past. So where appropriate, use modern materials and techniques.