

Inspiration for masks

When I was about 16 I went to the Indonesian island of Bali, which was relatively under-developed at that time. There I witnessed a masked ritual that had a profound effect on me. The capital, Denpasar, had a clearly defined perimeter wall and on the track that separated the town from the rice fields and there we went after dark (no street lighting). Here we saw the Barong, a figure somewhat similar to the lion in Chinese dance drama, operated by two men inside a large costume. This beneficial deity was accompanied by a group of men, stripped to the waist, each wielding a long knife with a wavy blades, called a kris. They confronted Rangda, a female 'witch' deity, associated with darkness, with a white mask, big teeth, bulging eyes, long tongue and very long fingernails. I was told that Rangda entranced the men, who turned their weapons against themselves, straining every sinew as they thrust the points into the soft tissue of their necks, cheeks and eye sockets. The power of the Barong was said to prevent the skin breaking so the men were locked in this cosmic battle until they were touched by the priest or Barong and collapsed, exhausted. Although there were onlookers, they were actively engaged and talking excitedly. This was not a 'show', there were no seats, no obvious performance area, the only lighting was from burning torches and we (four or five) were the only Westerners watching.

When I returned to Bali, ten years later, the airport had been expanded to take large airliners and at the shoreline, where traditional homes with carved and painted doors and beams had once stood there were now modern multi-storey hotels. Tourists could attend daily performances of 'cultural events', such as the Ketchak dance, whose circular group chorus had been repositioned to open the view to a seated audience. However, I was pleased to be able to locate an authentic festival event in a little village, north of Ubud, which was for local people. After performances of shadow puppets and half-masked, comic warriors (reminiscent of the Capitano from the Commedia del Arte) Rangda appeared out of the dark, slowly advancing, threateningly. Women and children screamed, even the young men recoiled as it lunged forward, scattering the watching crowd until the village was a chaos of shouting and running. This was drama, but it was not a 'play' – to be touched by Rangda bestowed 'real' adverse consequences.

This was my way in to mask, which is the simplest and oldest 'theatrical' illusion, where a solid object, that is clearly artificial, appears to become alive, the inanimate becomes animate. The wearer, certainly in the Balinese tradition, is not pretend acting but 'being', entering into the spirit of the deity through a series of rituals and fasting lasting several days. In the Hindu tradition, as I understand it, a representation of a deity, is physically imbued with power. Like the figure of saints in some rural Catholic churches, physical contact with the image is believed to convey 'real' benefit. For Western students, this concept of 'entering into' the persona of a mask, of temporary transformation, is a useful formative experience for all kinds of theatrical acting.

Many Balinese masks have eyeballs on which the iris is painted in slightly different shades of concentric rings. When the wearer uses tense staccato movements, these have the effect of making the eyes appear to move. This interaction between design and movement is the other aspect of masks that I am interested in. The reason I went to Jacques Lecoq's school was primarily to study masks and mask-making (I marvelled at Amleto Sartori's leather masks and Lecoq's connection with them). When I arrived I was, at first, disappointed that making was not covered within the main course but this narrow objective was opened up by his supplementary course: the Laboratoire d'Etude du Mouvement. This dealt not only with the interactions between movement and shape but also those with space, colours and emotions. I became fascinated by Lecoq's demonstration of the way the shape can determine the movements that 'fit' with it. Later I explored how the expression of an immobile mask could appear to change, either because shapes could be revealed/concealed or because curved lines could be flattened. I developed this idea to create a mask that used lines on convex and concave surfaces to change its expression simply by lowering/raising the angle of the head.