

Making the Masks for the Future (feat. Indigenous Futurism)

by David Geary (PHOENIX CHALLENGE for LMDA)

I was in the Chat on ZOOM with some theatre people and glibly predicted the future would be more mask work 😊. It was a joke but makes sense. If the performers wear masks they can ensure they're safe on stage. Plus, they mirror the indoor theatre audience that will also have to wear masks. The wearing masks will be part of the show and very meta 😊.

It will take us back to the Greeks, but we can go back further. I've always been inspired by the traditional masks of the Indigenous Peoples of the West Coast of Turtle Island/North America. Their ritual performances on this land were the original theatre. To look forward we should look to Indigenous performance to guide us. Let us remember that while many non-Indigenous artists have created work (and made a ton of money) fantasizing about post-apocalyptic worlds, for Indigenous people they've lived in a post-apocalyptic world ever since the Colonizers arrived. Despite the pandemics of smallpox, TB, measles, mumps and influenza; despite erasure, genocide and assimilation, the First Peoples have used their art to keep them and their cultures alive.

So let's learn from the mask, dance and song work of the likes of Gits Hayetsk <http://www.githayetsk.com/about/> and Raven Spirit Dance <https://ravenspiritdance.com/>. They've adapted and their work is vital. It's of the land and connected to communities. We need to ensure our future theatre can say this too.

We should pay particular attention to the traditional transformation masks. You are one creature, pull a string and are transformed into another. How can we all be the theatrical Shapeshifters of the future and transform like that?

<https://www.google.com/search?source=univ&tbm=isch&q=transformation+masks&sa=X&ved=2ahUKEwio9fealaDpAhVgHzQIHWXSBhYQsAR6BAGIEAE&biw=1920&bih=969>

Beau Dick (Kwakwaka'wakw) was one of the great modern mask makers and activists. You can experience his genius in the LaTiesha Fazakas and Natalia Tudge 2017 documentary *Maker of Monsters: The Extraordinary Life of Beau Dick*.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rh-nNSI12A>

Sadly, Beau is no longer with us, but we can still learn from him, especially his commitment to activism and honouring his community. He dares us to make art that is not just entertainment but always has a political purpose.

Another touchstone is Dane-Zaa Indigenous artist Brian Jungen, who famously transformed Nike Air Jordans into First Nations masks. He also made totem poles out of golf bags and a whale out of plastic picnic chairs, thus reprising the role of the Trickster artist remaking western products into Indigenous futurism.

<https://www.bing.com/images/search?q=brian+jungen+nike+masks&qpv=Brian+Jungen+nike+masks&FORM=IGRE>

The other masks to reconsider are the rectangular screens we're all expressing ourselves through: the glowing masks that can switch facades, show worlds in motion, swipe and reveal us. We can hide and mute or let others into our most private places. All while making glib asides in the Chat.

The gaming community has been onto this for a long time with Twitch <https://www.twitch.tv/> and its commentary. We would do well to embrace this form of community engagement. So as much as we want to start performances declaring, "Please turn off your mobile devices", in the future there should be more: "Please turn on your devices, log on to our channel, and let's begin the journey together".

Let's face it, the Battle for the Second Screen was lost a long time ago. Now we fancy ourselves as multi-taskers, so let's make space in our theatre for others to use their personal devices to comment and create community. I was involved in such an experiment with *Julius Caesar* in Vancouver, Canada -- a 2015 collaboration between Western Gold Theatre http://westerngoldtheatre.org/about_us.html, the Cultch Youth program <https://thecultch.com/youthprogram/> and PTC Playwrights Theatre Centre <https://www.playwrightstheatre.com/>. The Roman masses/Audience were invited to comment in a projected stream and vote for outcomes. They could be persuaded to help assassinate Caesar or pick a different path. This form of theatre isn't new, but Covid-19 has forced us to further embrace our technology, and in the future we need to deepen the hug and not shrink back.

Another example of this would be the recent 24 Hour Challenge I was involved with where Centrepont Theatre in New Zealand commissioned 10 playwrights to write 5 minute monologues over a 12 hour period. These were then passed on to 10 actors who had 12 hours to learn, record and upload the performance. <http://centrepont.co.nz/centrepont24> It was fast and furious, rough and raw, but a lot of great new theatre was created and put out there. As a punk rocker from way back, I love this vital desire to just make and not over produce.

In a similar spirit, last night writer/actors in isolation improvised new scenes for my PTC Block A playwrights class. One person gave provocations to the others on how to play a scene where famous Canadian Group of Seven painter Tom Thomson is told by his lover Winnie that she's pregnant. I recorded the different improvisations on ZOOM, and now the playwright has great new resources for their re-writes. In the old days, we might have waited til we were all in a room, but this was much better to just bang it out and get 'er done!.

Perhaps the big takeaway from the Covid19 Lockdowns has been that 'the theatre' has been too precious about the live, "in the theatre", experience, and needs to embrace the

tech, and other forms of aliveness. And that we don't need to wait for the perfect room or the big show to create.

On my twitter: <https://twitter.com/gearsgear> , I wrote about teaching: *Might be heresy, but I didn't miss teaching in a classroom after a while. I rolled out of bed, taught, had a cuppa, muted peeps I didn't like. It was #sustainable less noisy, I saw my wife & kids. I learnt new skills. It was almost the Utopia the internet once promised.*

So maybe 'remote' becomes the new normal, and being in the same room or theatre is saved for something special, and worth the CO2 emissions to get there? Yes, perhaps we've had a glimpse of how we can save the planet. It's as if *Arrival*, the 2016 film by Denis Villeneuve, has a sequel where Covid-19 is our last warning: change your ways, change your relationships to land, animals, fish, each other, and change your theatre...or else.

When the old rituals are lost or lose their meaning, then we must create new rituals. So my final prophecy is that the future will be more street theatre. I love seeing kids in our neighbourhood having drive-by birthday parties, and I love how at 7pm on our balconies and decks we come together to cheer our frontline workers, especially those at our local Lionsgate Hospital. This has giving us license to connect more closely with our neighbours, and the challenge is to keep that community vibe going. Let's put on a mask and get those street parties started.

Arohanui / Big love – David Geary