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Exploring the Expression and Interpretation of Emotions Through the Use of Full-Face Theatrical Masks

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Cover Page Footnote

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Abstract

This paper describes an activity making use of theatrical masks, which demonstrates the way in which the emotional response to the expression on a masked actor's face, is constructed by the interplay of at least three elements. Analysis of the activity suggests that the meaning of a masked actor's performance is co-created between the protagonist, the antagonist and the audience. The activity demonstrates that an observer may see and respond to expressions on another's face that are the projections of the observer alone. The interpretation of the inner emotional state, intention, and meaning of the emotions of others, therefore, has at least an element of projection. An understanding of this phenomenon may have important implications for the study of human facial expressions and their relationship to emotions and motivations. In leadership roles, title, status and power may act as a mask, the dialogues in which leaders engage may be witnessed, as an audience witnesses a masked performance, and the activity described here, may help those involved in leadership development, to understand some of the limitations to a leader's ability to control the impressions they seek to create.

Keywords: organisational theatre, theatre and performance, mask, leadership, acting

Exploring the Expression and Interpretation of Emotions Through the Use of Full-Face Theatrical Masks

This paper describes an activity making use of theatrical masks, which may demonstrate the way in which the emotional response to the expression on a masked actor's face, is constructed by the interplay of at least three elements: The intentions of the actor wearing the mask (the protagonist); the remarks of the "antagonist" addressing the masked actor; and the responses of the audience witnessing the dialogue. An analysis of this activity throws a light on the way in which the meaning of a masked actor's performance is co-created between the protagonist, the antagonist and the audience and that an understanding of this three-way relationship has important implications for the study of human facial expressions and their relationship to emotions and motivations in social interactions and may be of use in leadership training and development.

The activity can be regarded as a very simple theatrical performance – a dialogue between an antagonist and a protagonist that is witnessed by an audience and that takes place in a ritual space configured as a stage. In this case, the theatrical space comprises a curtain with a performance space defined by the seated audience arranged in a semi-circle in front of the curtain. The masked actor prepares behind the curtain and enters onto the performance area to engage in a dialogue.

The dialogue in which the protagonist and antagonist engage is improvised. There is no prepared script and the actors in the activity described here are not trained professional performers. The activity has been undertaken on at least five occasions using students and staff members from the University of Warwick Business School.

The activity makes use of a plastic mask, termed a full-face "naïve" mask with two eye-holes and an expression painted on it. The mask is one of a set of eight training masks produced by the Trestle Theatre Company, a British masked theatre company founded in 1981 by Sally Cook, Alan Riley and Toby Wilsher. The expression on each mask is created by differing forms of the eyebrows and mouth (fig. 1). The mask set is produced commercially by Trestle Theatre Company and is widely used in schools for the training of masked actors and the creation of masked performances.

When wearing the mask used in the activity, the actor is unable to speak but is able to express themselves through movement, posture and gesture.



Figure 1 - Full-face naïve masks produced by Trestle Theatre Company

The activity

A volunteer from the audience is invited to participate in the exercise. (On the occasion illustrated in the accompanying film clip there were four members of the audience.) The volunteers are advised that the mask will work best if they can keep the mask facing straight at the audience and to avoid turning to the side, as this undermines the illusion. Touching the mask with the hands also undermines the effect. Beyond that, they receive no instruction or preparatory training.

The volunteer is then invited to choose a mask from the set of eight laid out on the floor. They are then instructed to go behind the curtain and place the mask on their face. There is a full length mirror set up behind the curtain and the volunteer is instructed to look at the expression on the mask and copy that expression, then place the mask on their face. They are then advised to arrange their hair so that it covers the edges of the mask as much as possible, then to look in the mirror and see "who is there".

While they are preparing, the other participants arrange themselves in a seated semi-circle facing the curtain or screen and thus defining the performance area. The workshop leader takes up the role of antagonist and sits in the audience facing the curtain. The antagonist then instructs the masked protagonist to appear from behind the screen to meet the audience. The antagonist then engages the protagonist in a one-sided dialogue, in which the protagonist is only able to respond with movements of the head and body. The antagonist improvises questions and makes requests of the protagonist. While the antagonist's script is improvised, there is an intention to challenge the protagonist in order to compel the volunteer to attempt to express themselves, to overcome the limitations of the mask and to communicate their response to the antagonist's questions and demands.

There is an example of this interaction in the accompanying video clip.

<https://youtu.be/TEa6B4EPQoA>

(This was filmed at Warwick Business School as part of an online lesson for the Warwick Business School Distance Learning MBA Leadership Module. This iteration of the activity was hosted by the author with four participants who were members of staff and students and is used with their consent and the permission of Warwick Business School and may not be copied or reproduced. For a transcript of the antagonist/protagonist improvised dialogue in the video clip, see appendix.)

After the protagonist has left the performance space and removed the mask, the workshop facilitator encourages the mask wearer and the audience to describe their experience of the event. The mask wearers often struggle to articulate their experience, they sometimes describe anxiety and frustration and doubt about what is required of them. They do not describe a state in which they felt in charge and in control of their performance. They often describe the difficulty of making their intentions understood and occasionally report surprise at the response of the audience to their actions. The audience often report a moment in which the emotions they were seeing in the protagonist's expression were subtly different from the basic emotion painted on the mask. These debrief conversations have not been systematically structured and recorded and further research here is needed.

These improvisations have been conducted on a number of occasions and were often powerful experiences. The audience and the antagonist may be moved in some way or they may laugh. They are effective and engaging pieces of theatre in which surprisingly complex and nuanced emotions are experienced by the audience. During the course of the activity the audience seems to experience a whole range of emotional states that are invoked by the

unfolding small drama. At times this experience is so intense that the expression painted on the mask seems to change. The angle of the head, the body movements and the context provided by the improvised dialogue, contribute to the phenomenon which evokes an emotional response in the audience that can be unequivocally strong.

This activity is used extensively in the training of masked actors. In the jargon of the professional performer, the exercise can be used to elicit the "counter mask", a context in which the performer is able to evoke in the audience, an emotional state that is at the other end of the emotional spectrum to the expression painted on the mask. The happy mask seems sad, or the angry mask appears surprised.

The expressions on the full-face naïve masks (see figure 1.) are simply drawn and bear a general resemblance to the six basic emotions (anger, disgust, fear, happiness, sadness, surprise) identified by Ekman and Friesen (1971) in their ground-breaking cross-cultural studies of facial expressions, yet in these brief, improvised scenes, the audience members may experience a range of emotions in response to the drama they are witnessing, which may be fleeting or subtle but are authentically felt and are different to the expressions painted on the masks.

Participating in these short improvisations in the role of the antagonist, engaged in the improvisation, it is easy to forget the volunteer behind the mask and engage with the masked protagonist as if they were a different person. The cues provided by mask, body, gesture and movement are enough to create the illusion that you are addressing a person, a character, who has an inner life, which is authentic and discoverable. As the antagonist, with the opportunity to interrogate the masked actor, it is possible to evoke responses by deploying challenging questions or tasks, which have the effect of forcing the masked actor to attempt to communicate emotional states that are contrary to those painted on the mask. This can be an uncomfortable experience for the volunteer and they may experience insecurity and loss of confidence. It is often in these moments that the audience will then "see" a change of expression in the mask.

When working with professional actors in training, there is an explicit understanding that they might be obliged to experience personal discomfort and loss of confidence, so care must be taken when using the activity with students or others, to manage the situation carefully. The task and the context are made clear to the volunteers before they choose to step forward and it is assumed that only those with a robust level of self-confidence will choose to do so.

Discussion

This activity suggests that there are a number of factors at work that together create the conditions in which an emotion is felt by someone in response to what they see and hear of another actor. In this activity the elements are the audience, the antagonist's utterances, the image on the mask and the intentions and actions of the masked protagonist. The experience of the activity makes it clear that some subtle emotional states can be perceived in the masked actor that are not intentionally created by the mask wearer. They seem to be co-created by the audience, the antagonist, and the protagonist as they strive to make sense of what may be occurring in the dialogue that is unfolding.

The activity described above suggests that the interpretation of facial expressions in everyday life, is a complex, dynamic process. In social settings, there is also a strong element of projection. An audience witnessing a dialogue will project an expression onto the face of another that must be there if the audience member is to make sense of the social

drama they are witnessing. In this exercise both the audience and the antagonist interacting with the mask can “see” these expressions even though they are manifestly not there. The mask’s expression remains the same. The masked actor, meanwhile has little or no control over these projections. They may be trying to express “indignation” but what is being read on their mask by the audience, may be something subtly or significantly different. What the audience sees, evokes an emotion in them that they might vocalise, or that the masked actor might be able to sense in some other way, and that will in turn affect the emotional state of the actor who may lose confidence in their attempt. This dynamic complexity might be important to understand as the technology to “read” human faces advances.

This ability to “see” an expression on another’s face that is not there, is probably ubiquitous. Regardless of the actual emotional state of an individual, their facial expression may be a poor guide to others of what they are feeling. In addition to conscious deception, acts of restraint to “mask” one’s true feeling, or concern to express an emotion that will elicit some specific response in another, there is this additional factor that all the parties to the social moment may be seeing on the protagonist’s face, nuances of emotion that are projections. Nuances of emotion that they need, or expect to see, in order to make their own sense of the social moment and that are completely independent of the protagonist’s intentions or desires. In spite of many years of scholarship and debate about the relationship between human emotions and how they are expressed and understood, this commonplace phenomenon seems to have been overlooked. As Shakespeare knew very well: “There is no art to find the mind’s construction in the face.”

In summary, when we use facial expressions to interpret the emotions of others in everyday life, we are engaged in a complex sense-making process. The relationship between the inner emotional state, intention, and interpretation of the emotions of others, therefore, has at least an element of projection. The observer may see and respond to expressions on another’s face that are the projections of the observer alone. Similarly, when communicating our emotions through facial expressions we may find ourselves being misinterpreted by others who are in part controlling what we are able to express by the projections they make. In leadership roles, title, status and power may act as a mask, the dialogues in which leaders engage may be witnessed and the activity described here, may be helpful for those involved in leadership training and development, to understand some of the limitations to a leader’s ability to control the impressions they seek to create.

References

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Appendix

Transcript of improvised scene in the accompanying video clip.
The mask worn in this improvisation is illustrated here:



It is one of the Trestle Theatre Company Basic Mask Set, available to buy on the company website.

Enter Mask

So. You look like you've had a really bad day?
I'm sorry – Has something horrible happened?

Mask nods head

Well perhaps a bit of a dance would cheer you up?

Mask slightly raises then drops arms

OK.
Why don't you give it a go? See if that cheers you up?

Mask sways slowly from side to side.

Is it helping?
What about a trick? A magic trick? - Do you have a magic trick you can do?
No?
Oh. I'm really sorry.
Well, look. I'll tell you what.
I've got something that might cheer you up. Would you like to hear it?

Mask nods

A little piece of news. A piece of gossip actually.
Oh, I don't know if I should tell you really. Should I tell you? – Do you want to hear? It might cheer you up.
OK – Somebody here is in love with you.

Mask gestures to self

Yup!
Yes with you, yes, yes they are. Do you want me to tell you who it is?

Mask nods

Are you sure? Yes?
Oh I don't think I should really.

Mask clasps hands leans slightly forward

No, No I can't. It wouldn't be fair. It wouldn't be fair.

Mask looks down

You'll have to go.

Exit Mask

About the Author

Piers D. Ibbotson joined Warwick Business School in 2015 as a Senior Teaching Fellow after a career as a consultant and trainer in business. Initially part of the WBS create group, he was engaged with creating innovative teaching and learning across the business school curriculum. Since 2018 he has been an Associate Professor in the Department of Entrepreneurship and Innovation, teaching leadership and communication for online and Master's students. He continues to work in the teaching and learning field, developing innovative teaching approaches and supporting the development of teaching skills for WBS faculty.

In 1990 he became an Assistant Director with the Royal Shakespeare Company working alongside some of the best directing talent in the British theatre. It was this experience, observing the techniques and approaches of directors, working to tight deadlines with dynamic creative groups that began his interest in the transfer of skills from the Arts to Business. He set up his own training and development consultancy in 1998 and became a regular contributor to senior management programmes in the UK and around the world, introducing leaders and senior managers to concepts and techniques from the creative arts. He worked with the leading management consultancies and with CEO's and senior management teams from companies such as, Adidas, WPP group, BP, Allen and Overy, Severstal, Mastercard, and many others. He has been a regular contributor to courses at the London Business School and the Saïd Business School University of Oxford. In 2008 he published *The Illusion of leadership - Directing Creativity in Business and the Arts* (Palgrave Macmillan). He trained originally as a geologist and worked in the oil industry for a number of years before entering the theatre in 1980 where he had a successful career as a performer, working at the Royal National Theatre and the Royal Shakespeare Company as well as making appearances in TV and film.