

How I approach Mask Design, and How Custom Masks Aid a Production

By Tara Carioso

I find that designing masks is a job that requires a good dose of dramaturgy, immense amounts of collaboration, and many still moments with clay in hair thinking, “No, that doesn’t work at all- what was I thinking?”

My work as mask designer relies heavily on the vision brought by the director, yes, but I feel too that it is strongly through the work that the director and the mask maker do together that the characters more significantly develop relationship to one another and to the greater arc of the show.

Specifically, in creating the masks for OEDIPUS, I worked closely with both Director Orion Jones and costume designer extraordinaire, Gail Beach at Catholic University’s Drama Department. We generated dozens upon dozens of images towards the final image depiction of our four primary characters. The reason we had so many images is that the spectrum really is THAT broad when looking at how a character is portrayed.

Remember, we’re not talking about starting with the actor and what he or she brings. We’re using our imaginations to construct facial features. And to do that, I like to have lots of reference materials about people from the real world, their lives, what they make happen and how that shows up in their faces.

Imagine getting a map that emphasized how to get from point A to point B, but also pointed out landmarks along the way so that you knew you were going the right way. You’d feel more confident, right? Now imagine that the map you’re using was made by your host, and that the host had actually made those roads you were traveling just for you, for your personal travel experience to your destination.

That’s how it feels to have a mask made for you in a production. The benefits are numerous- and yet it’s not at all common for an actor to feel that all this direction is stifling. I find that part the most revelatory, because it might seem that TOO MUCH DIRECTION would stifle the actor’s creative process. In fact, the mask doesn’t do that. Instead, it opens the door to many more destinations that are close by and inform the primary feature points of the mask’s map. It opens up the territory, but provides clear boundaries, and in that way, custom masks help amplify the character’s journey so that the actor can be present to experience it.