

MASKS AND FINDING TRUTH IN REALITY: A recollection of a bewitching creative process

In process for the highly demanding production, WITCHES VANISH by Claudia Barnett at Venus Theatre, and I am tasked with finding a vision for Deborah Randall's inspired concept of "shadow witches".

As the mask maker of a highly surrealistic play that winds its way through space and time and subject with abandon and sometimes a measure of cruelty, I went through many layers of what I'll call, "removing the protective fluff" from my idea of the play to in fact connect with the cold facts of the play.

This piece, a form of feminist activist theatre in my way (that's my opinion), tells 8 different women's real life stories, at once theatricalizing and documenting their moment of "vanish" at the same time. These are real stories of women who died for terrible reasons.

That said, as the creator of masks for the production, I wanted to connect to the lighthearted play possible in these pieces to amplify the real impact of joy and optimism in the face of a grim reality. Barnett had included a great number of puppets in WITCHES VANISH, and after each read of the play on my own at home, I came up with the same image---- Grandmothers. Grandmothers who are searching for their lost children.

But in the case of the "shadow witches", who were so other-worldly that they had neither names nor lines nor point of view, there was a need to connect them to something actual. Something complex. Something timeless. I had intended to explore the shadow witches as a whimsical counterpoint, something Henson-esque and playful like the old beggar woman with all her belongings on her back, from "Labyrinth". I thought of elements that bespoke their existence out of time; stone kept coming back to me. Women who had eventually turned to stone.

And then I heard *the names*.

The playwright, Claudia Barnett was inspired to write, WITCHES VANISH after learning about the missing women of Juarez, Mexico. So many women taken in one city for so many years and, at the time, no justice for the loss of their lives. She included between each scene a series of names to be spoken, and these names are names of real women whose lives were lost or vanished, where they were when they disappeared and in what year.

I was a performer in this production. The names haunted and beguiled us as a cast. As a mask maker, though, the names stuck. The names were real, and the shadow witches were abstractions of those women's energy in eternity- searching for resolve, endlessly building towards finding rest. The names became the foundation for the 2 masks I made.

One shadow witch mask was inspired by the women of Juarez, and one shadow witch mask was inspired by the Nigerian disappearances of women and children. The "stone" element inspiration remained. I tried to capture features that related the mask to its inspiration's cultural origin, and to let these features rise out of the darkness like stone out of water.

In the end, I discovered that my process in finding a mask design is as magical as the beings they represent. Sometimes these creatures rise completely self-defined from the text, and sometimes they seek their identity step by painstaking step.