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Masks on Stage
A Covid Solo

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RESEARCH NOTE

Masks On Stage: a COVID solo

Sharon King-Campbell

Prologue

March 12th, 2020. I am in the D. F. Cooke Recital Hall in St. John's, striking after a concert performance of *Between Breaths*. I'm the assistant director and the show has just come home from Ontario. We're preparing for a tour to British Columbia, and I'm looking forward to seeing my parents, who are living there. My father calls.

"As you still coming?" he asks. The provincial government in BC has just issued an order to limit public gatherings to fifty people. Travel is limited. Public spaces are closing.

"As far as I know," I tell him.

March 13th, 2020. The Arts & Culture Centres cancel all performances at their venues across the province ("COVID-19 News" 2022).

March 15th, 2020. There is a company meeting for the cast and crew of *Between Breaths*. Our tour is postponed indefinitely.

March 18th, 2020. The Minister of Health and Community Services declares a public health emergency and special measures are introduced to contain the spread of COVID-19 in the province of Newfoundland

and Labrador. Performance spaces are ordered to close, and gatherings of more than 50 people are prohibited ("Special Measures" 2020).

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During the first COVID-19 shutdown, theatre artists produced digital work by Zoom or video,[1] but they were hungry to return to the live stage and to share physical space with their audience.[2] For many theatre artists, myself included, what is compelling about the art form is the exchange of energy between the performers and the audience, and exchange requires a shared space.[3] So it is not surprising that Newfoundland and Labrador theatre-makers enthusiastically returned to the stage as soon as they could do so within the provincial guidelines. Rising Tide Theatre was the first professional company to do this, opening a limited season in the summer of 2020 with strict precautions in place ("COVID-19 Precautions" 2020). By autumn, several other companies had come up with ways to share spaces with their audiences while adhering to public health guidelines and best practices. One of these strategies is to perform while wearing a mask.

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1 See, for example: "Tales of Dwipa," a series of webisodes adapted from a stage play; "Corona Chronicles," which was built by the students of Theatre Newfoundland and Labrador's youth theatre program in place of an in-person theatrical production; "From Our Kitchen to Yours," a podcast produced by Kitchen Party Theatre Festival as part of all-online 2020 programming; and "Goon River," a web series based on an improv game of the same name.

2 See Kushnir, Schwartz, and "This is Not Theatre."

3 Renowned theatre director and scholar Peter Brook begins his landmark 1968 book: "I can take any empty space and call it a bare stage. A man walks across this empty space whilst someone else is watching him, and this is all that is needed for an act of theatre to be engaged" (11). In *Space in Performance*, Gay McAuley agrees, suggesting that the aspect of theatre that makes it a unique art form is "the interaction between performers and spectators in a given space" (2003: 5).

"There is no such thing as a neutral activity for human beings," writes Richard Hornby in *The End of Acting: A Radical View*. "The human mind abhors a vacuum; we are constantly making, and taking, meanings from everything we experience" (1992: 223). The mask, though ubiquitous in the spectator's everyday life, is always going to *mean* something when it appears on stage. In fact, it will mean something slightly different to every spectator. Ethnomusicologist Harris M. Berger makes a detailed case for the idea that a spectator's ability to constitute the meaning of a performance is impacted by their cultural background, their prior knowledge about the performance and their attitude toward it (2010: 5). In other words, the meaning a spectator derives from a performance is influenced by that spectator's context — both the immediate context of attending the performance and the much wider context of their life in general. If you and I are watching the same performance, we will understand it differently from one another; the meanings we constitute will be specific to ourselves.

So please permit me to speak in the first person here, not as an anonymous researcher but as myself: a professional theatre artist and sometime academic in her late 30s, identifying as white and female, who has pre-existing professional and personal relationships with the creators and performers of the performances I analyze. In some cases, I worked on the shows in question. I offer this context because it has an impact on my stance on the performance. I will also contextualize each performance with the status of the pandemic — and my relationship to it — at the time and place in which I saw it.[4]

As I write this, it is the beginning of autumn 2022, and Newfoundland and Labrador theatre-makers have been putting work onto live stages in a world with COVID-19 for two years. Some of this work includes masks on the performers. I have been thinking for some

4 All COVID-19 status updates are drawn from my own notes and cross-referenced with the archive of press releases maintained by the Government of Newfoundland and Labrador ("COVID-19 News" 2022).

time about the way that masks on stage affect the story being told, and I've been keeping a journal. This is my experience, the only one I have to offer. If this were a play, it would be a solo.

Act 1: A history lesson

Masks, broadly speaking, are not new to the theatre. Centuries-old practices like ancient Greek theatre, Japanese Noh theatre, Balinese theatre and Commedia dell'Arte incorporate masks as a fundamental aspect of the dramatic world. The term 'dramatic world' is borrowed from Keir Elam and describes the setting of the production, which is constructed by the spectators in attendance (1991: 98-99). I use it here in juxtaposition to the 'real world' — the world as it is inhabited and experienced by performers and spectators in their day-to-day lives. Everything that happens on stage is part of a dramatic world, although there may be more than one such world in a single production.

Historically, masks were used to denote character, allowing a single actor to play multiple characters or multiple actors to play a single character. The characters were often archetypes, known and easily recognized by the audience. The mask, and not the actor, held the role (Hornby 1992: 229). While masks are no longer ubiquitous in European and North American theatre, many actors still train with them, and many contemporary theatre creators employ them in their work. Kristen Thomson used half-masks in her 2001 breakout solo show, *I, Claudia*, which allowed her to play all of the roles in the young title character's story. Character masks appeared on minor characters in Perchance Theatre's 2019 production of *Julius Caesar*, and Nova Scotian artist shalan joudry[5] uses character half-masks in her 2021 piece, *KOQM*.

Eugenio Barba and Nicola Savarese describe the experience of watching a performer in mask like this: "It is as if their body has suddenly been decapitated. They give up all movement and expression of

5 joudry neither capitalizes her name nor the first-person singular pronoun, spelling it 'i' (Pickrem 2021).

facial musculature. The face's extraordinary richness disappears" (1991: 118). Yet according to Jacques Lecoq, whose school of performance incorporates mask, a performer who has "taken on" the mask will find a new freedom of bodily expression. By hiding the face, a mask exposes the entire performer more completely (2006: 105). Anthropologist Kirsten Hastrup agrees with this assessment of the 'hidden/exposed' paradox. "The point," she writes, "is that the mask is not only a concealment, but also a revelation" (1992: 388). Canadian director Ann-Marie Kerr describes the mask's power as "the magic thing that happens" when the spectator believes they understand a character based on the mask's fixed expression, and then their assumptions are subverted when the actor changes their physical movement to make the same mask convey a completely different emotion. "Mask unmasks the actor," she explains (Pickrem 2021).

But none of the masks described by Barba, Lecoq, Hastrup or Kerr are nose-to-chin coverings. In many cases theatrical masks conceal the whole face; in others only the forehead, nose and cheekbones are covered, leaving the mouth and chin exposed. In a 'half-mask' such as the latter, the mask itself is static, but the expression can be changed using the muscles in the lower half of the face. In their *Dictionary of Theatre Anthropology*, Barba and Savarese offer a table of facial expressions, credited to French anatomist Mathias Marie Duval, illustrating the facial muscles involved in the movement or position associated with certain emotions (1991: 115). Of the twelve expressions listed, only four (surprise, reflection, aggression and sorrow) are expressed entirely in the upper face. Six are expressed exclusively in the lower half of the face (extreme affliction, sensuality, pouting, scorn, disgust and anger), while two (laughter and discontent) require muscles in both the upper and the lower face. While this diagram is limited in its scope (it assumes a European spectator/interpreter, there are far more than twelve facial expressions, and the signals offered by the eyes are not acknowledged), it does help to illustrate how extensively the use of nose-to-chin masks can impact a performer's ability to express themself through their face.

It is also worth noting that, by obscuring the mouth, nose-to-chin masks can impact what a spectator hears. As most people who have tried to understand their masked waiter in a noisy restaurant can attest, what we see — or don't see — can limit or even change what we hear (Nierenberg 2017). Furthermore, unlike most theatrical masks, nose-to-chin masks often rest right up against the mouth and can, in some cases, muffle the sound or limit the performer's articulation.

Another major difference between theatrical masks and COVID-19-related face coverings is the purpose of the mask. In most cases, the masks that have appeared on stage in Newfoundland and Labrador since 2020 are not pure of purpose: they have been constructed for the function of limiting the spread of the virus, and their theatrical (narrative) function is secondary. They do not generally contain the character in their design like a character mask would do, nor do they "cancel the face"[6] and replace it with neutrality. Instead of belonging exclusively to the dramatic world as the masks of the ancient Greek dramatists did, they exist in both the dramatic and the real worlds and serve as a means of aligning the two.

Another means of covering the face that has appeared in response to the pandemic is the face shield, which has a different impact on the performance. While none of the face is completely obscured and articulation is never impacted, the entire face is distorted by the plastic barrier. The shield also has an impact on the quality of sound: the performer's speech can bounce back toward their face, rather than out towards the spectator.

As I mentioned earlier, there is no way to incorporate a mask or face shield into a performance without giving it a narrative function. I will constitute meaning from it, no matter how necessary it is for protective purposes. In some cases, the mask serves both a protective and narrative function, but its narrative function is always present. As long as I associate these face coverings with COVID-19, I will infer a dramatic world that includes the pandemic or, at a

6 Barba & Savarese's phrase (1991: 118).

minimum, the threat of contagion, in any production where they appear on stage.

Act 2: Alpha

September 20th, 2020. The world before March 2020 seems impossibly far away. However, Newfoundland and Labrador has extremely low case counts and holds steady at Alert Level 2. The 'Atlantic bubble' is in effect, allowing for some limited travel. There is one active case of COVID-19 in the province. Isolation requirements for rotational workers are beginning to ease up. Theatre buildings remain closed. Social distancing requirements are enforced both inside and outside, and outdoor gatherings are limited to one hundred people. Close contacts are limited to a 'double-bubble' (two paired households) plus six other individuals.

My best friend, her roommate, my partner and I drive into the parking lot behind the Arts & Administration building at Memorial University of Newfoundland. We are there for Under the Bridge Productions' *The Kraken & The Brass Button Man*. It's part of the 2020 St. John's Short Play Festival, which is happening entirely online except for this one in-person production: a drive-in puppet show.

I've seen *Brass Button Man* before, at the same festival in 2019, when I sat on the floor of the bar space at the LSPU Hall, surrounded by children who were shrieking and laughing. *The Kraken* is a new work. Both are shadow puppet plays, and I know that *Brass Button* was designed for a shadow box about the size of a television, with a colourful, rear-lit screen that scrolls from left to right to change the setting of the scene from house to shoreline to ocean. This compact design enhanced the intimate relationship between production and audience, and looking up at the show from the floor — especially in a room full of children — was reminiscent of watching TV as a child, except that the cartoon had magically come to life. We are directed into a parking spot by a masked member of the production team, roll down our windows, and turn off our engine. I have no idea what to expect.

The show begins. Rather than adapt *Brass Button* to the new venue, the company has recorded it as a short film. The picture's frame matches the frame of the shadow box. Only the puppets are visible; we see nothing of the puppeteers. On the one hand, this echoes the TV-watching aesthetic of the 2019 production; on the other, it robs the experience of the magical living quality it used to have.

The Kraken is a new Newfoundland folktale, narrated by one of the characters in *The Brass Button Man* — a fisherman who survives his encounter with the title character — and illustrated by shadow puppets which are projected against the building's brick wall by flood lights. Unlike its colourful predecessor, *Kraken*'s dramatic world is in black and white. The fisherman-narrator — an actor clad in a black slicker, sou'wester and mask — appears in front of a flood light, casting a shadow almost as tall as the building. He is immense in comparison to the puppets, which are projected in three separate frames, lit one at a time, on the top third of the wall. As opposed to the crankie settings, each frame has a shadow-puppet outline that defines it as house, shop, shore, ocean or belly of the beast.

(Aside: This is when I realize how important the rest of the audience is to the theatre experience. There are other people watching the show in the car with me — all of them adults — and I theorize that there might be kids somewhere in this audience who are reacting out loud, but I can't hear them. They are in their own cars with their own families. Our car is extremely quiet.)

In a way, puppets are the ideal pandemic performers. In an atmosphere of anxiety about physical proximity, puppets can get as close to each other as is necessary to tell their story without risk of infection. They can touch, sing together, even hug and kiss; in the audience, I am not concerned about their health or the impact that their contact might have on the health of my community.

I realize partway through the performance that the sound we're hearing is pre-recorded, though the puppeteering is happening live.[7]

7 This raises questions about the boundary between recorded and live

The puppeteers have rehearsed alongside the recorded text, as a dancer might rehearse alongside a recorded piece of music. There are living and breathing performers here — if I strain to look through my windshield and through the back and front windshields of the car ahead of me, between the heads of the people inside, I can just make them out, running back and forth between frames clad in warm clothing, wearing radio headsets and, of course, masks. They wear their masks through curtain call as well, from what I can see from my strained vantage point.

And why wouldn't they? With pre-recorded audio, the potentially muffling effect of masks on speech is irrelevant. And in a puppet show, the characters are not portrayed by the puppeteers. Like theatrical masks, puppets can be manipulated by multiple puppeteers, or a single puppeteer can manipulate multiple puppets, and the cohesion of the character is never broken (this is especially true in circumstances where the actor lending their voice to the character remains consistent, as is the case with the pre-recorded audio track). In shadow puppetry, the gap between puppeteer and character is widened even further, since the character the audience sees is not the puppet itself, but the puppet's shadow. It is the shadow which holds the role, and none of the puppet shadows are masked. Their dramatic world does not contain a pandemic.

However, the narrator-puppet (a live actor) is wearing a mask. Unlike his puppeteer colleagues, he is deliberately lit from the front, casting an enormous shadow, and when he turns his face to the side, his shadow also appears to be wearing a mask. His mask is both protective and narrative in purpose: it marks him (the actor-puppet) as part of a team of masked artists working to make the performance happen, and it positions his shadow-character outside the dramatic world that takes place in the frames. It brings him closer to the real world. This interpretation is reinforced by a joke early in his text about responsible social distancing. I can see both players, actor and shadow, and this doubled appearance indicates that he lives in two dramatic

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performance. What makes a performance a *live* performance? These questions are beyond the scope of this piece, but they nag at me.

worlds: one that is similar to the real world, and an intermediate world that bridges the former with the fantastical world of the tall tale he is telling. He is masked because he and the puppeteers share a world where the pandemic is a reality; his shadow is masked because it doubles him in the intermediate world.

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October 7th, 2020. Newfoundland and Labrador has four active cases of COVID-19, and advisories about outbreaks at three out-of-province worksites have recently been published for the benefit of rotational workers. The Atlantic bubble is intact and the province continues at Alert Level 2.

I am the production manager of *The Fire Kedgys' Howl*, a multidisciplinary environmental performance in downtown St. John's. The production was devised with COVID-19 in mind. The team imagined a group of otherworldly 'kedgys' (in the Dictionary of Newfoundland English, a kedgy is the person on board ship who does all the odd jobs) who have come to our time and place to call us to do the work needed to steer the figurative ship through climate change, colonialism, racism and the global spread of disease. But they are also lit from within, offering hope. The production is billed as "a mythological intervention depicting the arrival of a luminescent, otherworldly community" ("Fire Kedgys" 2022). In the show, the kedgys travel down Water Street and Duckworth Street, gather together on the steps by the courthouse to speak, then travel again until they reach Harbourside Park, where they are met by more-human figures making ethereal music.

Pandemic safety has been considered from the inception of the project. The entire production takes place outdoors. Tickets are free, but spectators who plan to attend the final moment in the park are asked to register for contact tracing purposes and to allow the producers to limit the size of the gathering to 100 people. Signs encouraging spectators to remain socially distant are everywhere. Musicians are spaced well apart from one another. The crew (myself included) are

wearing masks. The kedgys' choreography keeps them spaced away from each other most of the time.

The kedgy costumes are made of cardboard, paper, plastic and fabric that has been scorched or melted. Each kedgy wears a headpiece containing a bright light that peeks through small holes and can be opened to point in any direction the performer chooses to face. A plastic face shield is built into the headpiece. Like the rest of the costume, the plastic of the shield is melted.

In *The Fire Kedgys' Howl*, the face covering was designed into the costume from the beginning. The clear plastic shield allows the face to be fully visible, if distorted by the shape of the plastic. The material is integrated into the rest of the costume; since the kedgys come from a time or place that has survived a moment like this, they too are living in a world full of plastic that does not degrade, and the material is so omnipresent that they include it in their clothing. In their world, pandemics are the norm and not the exception, so the need to protect themselves from infection is omnipresent. Everything is scorched and melted because the kedgys have literally been through fire. The distorting effect of the face shields when the kedgys speak is echoed by the electric distortion and dissonance of the music performed in the final moments in the park.

In this case, the public health function of the face shields is secondary to their narrative function. With social distancing and an outdoor venue, the barrier is a bonus precaution.[8] Some of the shields have holes melted into them, negating their value as protective equipment. However, their narrative function as markers of the characters' background and society is supported by the production as a whole.

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8 There is something to be gained from making the audience feel that every precaution is being taken. In my opinion, theatre is detrimentally impacted when the audience does not feel safe; the spectators' preoccupation with a potential source of danger distracts them from the intended meaning of the piece and does not allow them to immerse themselves fully in the performance.

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October 16th, 2020. There are twelve active cases of COVID-19 in the province, including three announced today which are connected to an outbreak at an out-of-province worksite. So far, the spread is contained. Elsewhere in Canada, the 'second wave' is just beginning.

I am the workshop actor for a living heritage project at the Cupids Legacy Centre. We have invited some colleagues and board members to see the work in progress. The production guides a small group of spectators through the main exhibition hall, referring to items on display and providing context from the perspective of one of the women who came to Cupids from Bristol in 1612. I am playing that woman. This is a staged reading, which means that some elements of the production are in place, but many are not. I am holding and referring to my script. I'm wearing a 17th-century-style gown and a plastic face shield.

There is no way for the audience to stay socially distanced in the hall; there is simply not enough space. The spectators — all masked — do their best to stay close to their families and leave a bit of space between 'bubbles.' We try to leave a wider radius around me, but it is often only about four feet, not the six of standard social distancing.

The face shield in this case is a stop-gap measure to allow the performance to go ahead. The plastic is, of course, anachronistic in the context of a 17th century colonist's wardrobe. A cloth mask might have been designed to match the costume, but protecting oneself from infection by covering one's face would still be anachronistic. Given the choice between the two, the director chose the option that would allow the audience to see my whole face. The shield's narrative effect is that it marks the performance as both a workshop (that is, incomplete in its design aesthetic), and a live performance in the time of COVID-19. As the actor, I was both Kathryn Guy in 1612 and Sharon King-Campbell in 2020.

Performing in a face shield has an impact not only on the audience as a sign to be read, but on the performance itself, and it is the

performer's perspective that I can offer here. The shield extends below my chin, so it bumps up against my sternum when I tilt my head downward, limiting my range to about forty-five degrees. It scrapes across my shoulders when I turn my head to the side. It reflects the sound of my voice back into my own ears. It fogs up in front of my mouth and nose with every breath, and lights reflect in it, causing continual distraction. When I attempt to read from my script, with my head tilted down as far as I can, I must either hold the pages up above the cloud of breath-fog or else hold my breath and wait for it to dissipate before I can see the words. Distracted and frustrated throughout the performance, trying my hardest to represent the intentions we had set throughout the workshop, I find the experience strangely solitary. Despite the conversational style of the script, my proximity to the audience and my ability to clearly see their eyes (often not the case in a conventional theatre with theatrical lighting design), I feel disconnected from them, unable to reach through the barriers between my face and theirs to sense any of their energy.

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November 1st, 2020. There are three active cases of COVID-19 in Newfoundland and Labrador. One presumptive case reported yesterday turned out to be negative.

The St. John's Arts & Culture Centre re-opened for performances in October, and I arrive here by myself and am seated alone with three seats left empty to either side and an empty row before and behind me, but there are plenty of people here, including several children. I'm here to see a remount of *The Kraken & The Brass Button Man*.

In this edition, the puppeteers are not visible to the audience; they are working behind the projection screen, which is downstage. The actor playing the narrator is also behind the screen. In this setting, the complex bridging of dramatic worlds from the September production is flattened. There is only the real world (the auditorium) and the dramatic world (the screen). The puppeteers are invisible until the curtain

call, when they come on stage wearing masks and holding the puppets to take a bow, and the dramatic world collapses into the real world.

Intermission

In response to an uncontrolled outbreak in New Brunswick, Newfoundland and Labrador pulled out of the 'Atlantic bubble' on November 23rd, effectively restricting travel into and out of the province. A playwrights' cabaret on November 25th moved online in response to the rising case numbers in Atlantic Canada. Kittiwake Dance Theatre offered *The Nutcracker*, which they have been producing for more than thirty years, as a video product. The first vaccines arrived in the province in mid-December. Although the case count in Newfoundland and Labrador remained low in relation to the rest of the country, it was high in comparison to the single-digit numbers enjoyed in the summer and fall (thirty-one cases as of December 18th). The LSPU Hall, a 178-seat theatre in downtown St. John's, finally re-opened for live performances and on December 20th, I attended the first show on its stage since the initial shutdown. The show did not involve masks on stage (and the audience could remove their masks as long as they were seated), so I won't go into fine detail here, but I will offer this passage from my journal:

> "Being in the room with other people matters. It matters that you can hear them and see them move. It matters that there is an immediacy to the performance, a build-up of a certain energy. It's emotional. At the same time, I kept wanting to pull my mask back up. Even with distancing in place, sharing space indoors with 35 other people… I was trying not to freak out."

• • •

In mid-February, an outbreak of the Delta variant at a public school sent the province back to Alert Level 5 overnight. Very tight

restrictions persisted through the winter, gradually stepping down over the next several weeks. Alert Level 2 (at which performance spaces are allowed to re-open in any capacity) was not restored until March 27th. Theatre was slower to come back this time than formal restrictions permitted; the messaging around personal responsibility for public health was pervasive in both traditional and social media, and audiences seemed reluctant to return to public spaces.

Act 3: Delta

May 3rd, 2021. A ship with a COVID-positive crew member anchors in Conception Bay and its crew is quarantined on board. There are fifty-six active cases, and the virus is in all parts of the province, but seems to be contained for now.

I am at the LSPU Hall for *Live Magazine*. It is my first time at the theatre in more than four months. This performance is part of a series produced by Resource Centre for the Arts and is curated by Vanessa Cardoso-Whelan, and it's about clowns.

The venue is the bar space, which is quite small, and once the staff (a performance company of five, three technicians and a bartender) is counted, the maximum audience capacity is limited to four patrons. We are each in an individual stacking chair spread across the width of the room. The rest of the audience is watching online, and a sixth clown is performing through digital means. This kind of hybrid in-person/livestreamed performance is still new, and technical difficulties delay the start of the performance.

All of the performers are wearing masks unless it's their turn to perform, and some choose to wear their masks throughout the show. Vanessa, our host as well as a clown, has a mask which is plain black on one side (the host side), but can be reversed to show a polka-dotted side with a red nose sewn on top. Another performer wears a mask with a nose affixed, but removes it — hilariously revealing a second red nose underneath — before teaching us how to make balloon animals. A third clown in a sequined mask wears a red nose over top.

In this case, the narrative use of masks is directly related to their function as protective equipment. We are sharing space indoors after a major outbreak. In such a small room, it would be impossible to enjoy myself if I was worried about contagion.

In many ways, clowns are among the performers best suited to wearing masks. In Pochinko clown, the style of clowning taught in Newfoundland and Labrador by Sara Tilley,[9] performers train and develop their clown characters using mask work. Through their mask training, they learn to express themselves with their entire body and not just their face ("Clown"). This practice can be traced back to L'École Jacques Lecoq, where Richard Pochinko received training. Lecoq's students work with a series of masks — neutral, larval, and half-masks — in their preparation for the final mask, the red clown nose, which Lecoq considered to reveal the performer's true and vulnerable self (Stankovic 2020: 51). Tilley's training program in clown begins with neutral mask, which, in her words, "teaches that every small movement contains meaning, taking focus away from the face/head/brain and redistributing it to the full organism… allow[ing] the body, the impulses, and the emotions to lead" (Henderson and Tilley 2020: 23). Once the performer has worked in neutral, they can apply the technique to any kind of performance, with or without the mask (21). As a result, clowns trained in this manner can bring this fully physicalized quality to their performance, and a nose-to-chin mask blocking the lower half of the face from view does not limit the audience's interpretation of what the clown is feeling or doing. Instead, the masks open up new opportunities for the clowns to make discoveries, and much of the joy of clown performance is being surprised by the mundane. In this case, removing a mask with a red nose on it to reveal another red nose beneath resulted in delight for both the clown and for me in the audience.

9 Sara is the online performer in this showcase, and I know that at least two of the red-nosed clowns performing in person — Vanessa and the clown with a second nose beneath the mask — have trained under her.

• • •

May 16th, 2021. There are eighty-five active cases in Newfoundland and Labrador, mostly related to travel. Among the general public, I perceive a desire to 'get back to normal.' However, Newfoundland and Labrador theatre workers are, on the whole, meticulous about masking, as well as other measures to prevent infection. We have seen — twice so far — how precarious our ability to practice our art form can be. Our work relies on people gathering, on an audience, and we are doing our best to prevent any theatre building from becoming the site of the next outbreak. Furthermore, a single artist being sick with *anything* can take a performance off the stage, so the push is not merely to prevent the transmission of COVID-19, but of all viruses. Handwashing is paramount.

I am back at the LSPU Hall for *Mom's Girls Gone Wild*, a sketch comedy show that has been rescheduled after the lockdown in February. Mom's Girls is a four-person comedy group, and the members have chosen to be each others' dedicated close contacts, which allows them to create and perform with no limitations around physical contact or masking.

For most of the show, the performers do not wear masks, but there is one sketch where this trend is broken. In the style of a mafia movie, the Boss and his cronies make plans to go to their enemy's masquerade party *unmasked*. They imagine and celebrate the chaos they'll cause by disrupting the event. When another mafioso enters in mask, he fearfully informs the Boss that he's immunocompromised. In a classic comedy twist, the others immediately don their own masks in support of their friend.

In this show, the mask is pure in function: it is a narrative device. The performers do not need the masks for protection — they have spent most of the show unmasked — but the story requires it.

• • •

July 10th, 2021. There are twenty active cases of COVID-19 in Newfoundland and Labrador, all in the Eastern region, and thirteen of those are on board a second vessel to drop anchor in Conception Bay while quarantined. Most residents of the province have received at least one dose of the vaccine and the provincial government has introduced a formal plan for reopening.

By now, mask-wearing — or choosing not to wear a mask unless specifically required — has adopted a political implication. Wearing a mask in low-risk situations can seem to signal that the wearer is prioritizing public safety over their own comfort, possibly in a passive-aggressive bid to see more people wearing masks and the continuation of government-mandated COVID protocols. Conversely, not wearing one can be inferred to mean carelessness or disregard for others' well-being. There is much public discussion about when, where, and under what circumstances mask-wearing is effective.

I am the production manager of Kittiwake Dance Theatre's *Ballet at Bowring*, playing at the Cabot 500 Amphitheatre at Bowring Park. The performance is cabaret-style, consisting of several short dances including three pieces accompanied live by two cellists, and an excerpt from Kittiwake's 2018 original ballet, *Alice*.

The dance company is not masked. They are operating as a working cohort and have been in regular contact with each other for weeks. The cellists, however, wear masks during the performance. Dressed in black with black masks, they sit off to the side, out of the way of the dancers. For these pieces, the musicians clearly occupy a different dramatic world than the dancers. They are physically separate, sitting down, and dressed in black (in contrast to the white and blue dresses on the dancers). Their appearance on stage, including their masks, marks them as vital to the performance but also outside of the dramatic world of the dancers.

In the excerpt from *Alice*, the White Rabbit appears with a white nose-to-chin face mask with a nose and whiskers on it. The same dancer has appeared in the other pieces without a mask, so there is no implication that this mask is serving to protect her or to protect the other

dancers from her. Instead, it is solving a practical issue — in a full production of *Alice*, the dancer would wear makeup to make her face whiter and to indicate a rabbit nose and whiskers, but in this cabaret context there is no time to apply or remove makeup that detailed — while simultaneously indicating that the White Rabbit is from a different world than Alice (Wonderland, to be exact). Interestingly, because the White Rabbit is the one in a nose-to-chin, COVID-19-style mask, it is the dramatic world of Wonderland that is brought closer to the real world — or to the in-between world previously occupied by the cellists — and not Alice's not-yet-down-the-rabbit-hole reality.

But there are other possible interpretations. Considering the outdoor setting in July and the fact that very few audience members are wearing masks in the physically-distanced seating area, another reading might be that Alice is outdoors and alone, and has therefore removed her mask. The White Rabbit appears and rushes through the scene, wearing a mask and stressing about the time. In this case the mask tells us something about the Rabbit's character: that he is meticulous about safety, perhaps, or concerned about how he will be received by others. This reading implies that the pandemic is pervasive in all of the dramatic worlds at play here: the cellists' world, Alice's reality, and Wonderland.

But both of these interpretations assume that the White Rabbit is wearing a mask; what if the mask is just part of his face? That would bring the use of the nose-to-chin mask in line with the function of theatrical half-masks: the mask (in combination with the ears and top hat of this particular character) contains the role, and the performer wearing it is only bringing it to life. The rest of the performer's body takes on the task of expressing the character without the use of the lower face. This is certainly possible: the dancer is expressing the Rabbit's agitation through choreography that involves the full body in a tense and quick-stepped dance. This reading is particularly interesting, as it is the only example I have seen so far of a nose-to-chin half-mask used in the tradition of theatrical half-masks.

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August 22nd, 2021. There are fourteen active cases of COVID-19 in Newfoundland and Labrador, and the spread is contained. Public Health has lifted the requirement to wear a mask in all public indoor spaces. It's been a beautiful summer and spirits are high.

I arrive at the Bowring Park Amphitheatre for *How Do You Get to Jellybean Row?*, a musical with a cast of children and teenagers. It's their closing performance and they are oversold. The volunteers at the folding table ask me to try to maintain social distancing while lifting an ironic eyebrow and glancing toward the throng of people stuffed into the outdoor amphitheatre. Very few audience members are wearing masks. I put mine on and find a patch of grass with a good radius of space around it to sit on.

In the play, protagonist Molly Fodge spends her summers in Jellybean Row, a magical-yet-St. John's-like place inhabited by dancing puffins and singing seagulls. When she is tricked into speaking an incantation that enacts a five-hundred-year-old curse, Jellybean Row disappears into the fog, and Molly and her friends and family must work out how to correct her mistake.

None of the characters are masked for the better part of the musical, but when the fog curse rolls in, the performers put on masks and wear them until the curse is lifted. As is the case in *Mom's Girls Go Wild*, the narrative function of the mask is primary, as the outdoor youth company do not wear masks throughout the show as they would do for protective purposes. By masking for the duration of the curse, the production implies a parallel between the fog curse and the COVID-19 pandemic. This analogy is imperfect on several points (the pandemic was not caused by malice, for instance, nor will it be ended by solving a magic riddle), but in the alignment of the fictional curse with the real one, I interpret an emotional parallel: the curse is as devastating to the characters' way of life as the pandemic has been to ours.

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August 29th, 2021. Case count updates are no longer issued daily, but there are between fourteen and twenty-one active cases in the province. My parents are visiting from Ontario — it is our first time seeing each other in person in almost two years — and they have agreed to come with me to the theatre.

We arrive at Perchance Theatre at Cupids, an outdoor venue modelled after Shakespeare's Globe: a three-quarter thrust stage surrounded by a loop of raised seating, or 'stalls.' The province has lifted its mask mandate but there is still one in effect at Perchance, so we wear our masks whenever we are 'inside' the theatre. Our seats have been assigned to us to allow for some space between groups of patrons. We see *As You Like It* in the afternoon and *Hamlet* in the evening.

Based on the design elements, both productions are set in a mythologized past. In *As You Like It*, Touchstone wears motley, while the rest of the company's wardrobe and the few set pieces are reminiscent of the early 1900s. *Hamlet* has a more medieval ilk, with tunics, tights, breaches, and a prevalence of Celtic knot patterns on both costumes and set décor that seems to cross Denmark with Ireland.

Since both dramatic worlds are distanced from any current or historical reality, it would be reasonable for the characters to wear masks for either protective or aesthetic reasons. Still, they mostly do not. In both productions, the company is generally unmasked, but wear nose-to-chin face coverings in specific circumstances. In *As You Like It*, the only appearance of masks is during the wrestling match between Orlando and Charles. In *Hamlet*, the gravediggers wear masks, and the first gravedigger steps away from Hamlet and then removes his mask to speak to them.

What purpose do they serve? In *As You Like It*, the wrestling match happens relatively early in the show and is the first very close contact between characters. My first instinct is to interpret the wrestlers' masks as protective in function: protecting the actors from each other.

However, this logic doesn't hold as the show continues and one of the masked characters, Orlando, comes into similarly close contact (in a more romantic context) with Rosalind with neither of them masked. A wrestling match close to the audience might have required masks to protect spectators from droplets in the actor/athletes' heavy breathing, but the match takes place on the stage, leaving the pit (a playing space at ground level that surrounds the stage) between any such droplets and the audience — a distance of at least six feet. I can't think of any other protective function the masks might have, so I can only conclude that they are purely narrative in purpose. What story do they tell?

In *Hamlet*, the masks appear to have both a protective and a narrative function. The gravediggers' scene takes place in the pit, much closer to the audience. It is by no means the only action to take place on the ground, but it is the only scene where the actors come close enough to touch the audience. In fact, one gravedigger hands a skull to a spectator to hold.

On a narrative level, the masks seem to mark the gravediggers as being of a lower class than the rest of the company. All of the other characters are members of the court (or they are the players, who enter the court setting and abide by the social rules in effect there) and never wear a mask, but the gravediggers are manual labourers. In the vocabulary of 2021 Newfoundland and Labrador, they are 'essential workers.' How many of the corpses they bury have died of diseases and may still be infectious? The masks align the gravediggers with the frontline and essential workers who have been working throughout the pandemic in volatile and dangerous conditions. And since we in the audience are watching with our masks on, the gravediggers are also aligned with us. They are living out in their world, exposed to its hazards, making darkly funny comments about mortality, just as so many of us have been doing in our world since March 2020.

Returning to the question of the wrestlers in *As You Like It*, perhaps the masks serve a similar narrative function. Charles, the prized court wrestler, is certainly of a very low status in comparison to the people around him, and Orlando is the impoverished youngest son of

a knight. Do the masks mark their lower class in the context of the Duke's court? They wear them exclusively while they wrestle, which they do in the hopes of raising their social standing; none of the high-status onlookers would ever do such a thing. If so, the labour — physical labour, as with the gravediggers — exposes them to risk, and the nose-to-chin face mask stands in for more conventional wrestling headgear, connecting their work in the dramatic world to that of the working class in the real world.

Second Intermission

On December 3rd, I saw a performance of *Supper Club*, a script I have been excited about since before it went into production. The show was very funny and the theatre had just lifted its social distancing restrictions, so for the first time in quite a while, I was sitting very close to someone I didn't know. When they laughed, I felt it, and it made me want to laugh even harder. The experience was electrifying: it felt like the way theatre used to be, the art form as I first fell in love with it.

Later that month, I spoke to an acquaintance who had gone to see the show but had left at intermission, feeling that being so close to so many people in a closed space wasn't safe, even with the audience in masks.

The first case of the Omicron variant in the province was reported on December 15th. The province moved into Alert Level 3 on December 23rd, closing theatres for the third time, and shifted to Alert Level 4 on January 10th as active case counts neared six thousand.[10] Theatres were allowed to reopen again at 25% capacity beginning February 7th and 50% capacity beginning February 14th. Public Health could no

10 In the interest of contextualizing my stance on the pandemic, I offer that I had COVID-19 in late January. Despite being fully vaccinated and in otherwise good health, I found the virus to be debilitating, and continued to experience fatigue and brain fog for weeks after I was otherwise well.

longer keep up with testing, so case numbers became less reliable. Omicron spread widely through the population and the COVID-19-related death toll continued to rise, reaching sixty by February 16th. Nevertheless, the province phased out restrictions, allowing 75% capacity in theatre venues beginning February 28th, with a promise to lift all COVID-19 restrictions — including masking in public indoor spaces — on March 14th, almost two years after the first shutdown began.

Act 4: Omicron

March 6th, 2022. There is a rising tension between the desire to 'get back to normal' and the apparent danger of going out in public. This tension plays out in arguments between friends, and I find that it is also present internally. I wrestle with it regularly.

I arrive at the LSPU Hall to watch *The Kraken & The Brass Button Man* for the third time since the beginning of the pandemic. I have brought a friend and his twelve- and ten-year-old children. We take our seats and take in the set: a white projection screen serves as the upstage wall. There is a line of black masking about six feet high across the middle of the stage, and the three shadow frames are embedded into it. A large swatch of white fabric hangs from the grid to the floor on the stage left side. There are lamps on the floor downstage of the frames and fabric. The shadow puppets are organized next to each frame, and two marionettes hang from the masking. The *Brass Button Man*'s crankie shadow-box theatre is set up downstage. A video camera, stationed far downstage centre, points at the frame of the crankie box.

As opposed to the previous two editions of this production, *The Brass Button Man* is performed live. The two puppeteers, dressed all in black, enter as clowns, wearing black hooked noses over black KN95 masks. The clowns have been drinking — one of them is holding a shadow-puppet jug with three Xs on it — and they ask the audience if anyone has any brass buttons to share. One clown produces a button as if by magic, and then they take their places behind the shadow theatre. Live video of the puppet show is displayed on the large screen

upstage, providing better visibility for the spectators sitting farther away. However, the video is interrupted in one important moment.

In the story, the title character's father dies when his ship is torpedoed, and his death coincides with the birth of his son. To accomplish this, a submarine puppet 'launches' a torpedo puppet, which travels to a ship puppet made of two parts. When the torpedo strikes the ship, the two parts split, and the ship sinks. The father puppet sinks through the ocean. The puppeteers achieve a 'blackout' by using their hands to block the light, then open their hands to reveal a crying baby. In the film rendition, all of this took place inside the crankie box frame. But in this theatre setting, the submarine in the crankie box launches a torpedo, which travels up out of its frame, and the video projection is interrupted. Lit by a flashlight, the torpedo appears on the white screen on the upstage wall. It is on that screen that the ship is torpedoed and sinks, the father drowns and the baby is born. The action of the *Brass Button Man* then returns to the crankie box, and stays there for the most part, though in a particularly supernatural moment, a character is hung up by his ankles and brass buttons fall from his pockets. The character is a shadow puppet, but the buttons are props, and a puppeteer drops a handful of them from the frame near the puppet's ankles. The buttons fall onto the floor and stay there, connecting the dramatic world inside the shadow box theatre with the onstage world inhabited by the clowns and puppeteers. And by expanding the reach of the dramatic world of the *Brass Button Man* to the large back screen where the video is displayed and the ship is sunk, the *Brass Button* dramatic world is linked to the dramatic world of *The Kraken*, which will appear mostly on that larger screen.

In between the two plays, the two feature puppeteers (the same ones who were clowns at the beginning; they have shed their noses but their masks remain) employ the marionettes in a sideshow designed, in their own words, "to distract you from the obvious changeover going on behind [them]." One marionette is Mr. Fanzypantz, who acts as a Master of Ceremonies, introducing the other marionette: a dancing ape. The ape twerks to a remix of Sir Mix-a-lot's "Big Butts" while the

rest of the puppeteers — dressed in black with black masks — remove the crankie theatre and lamp. They leave the brass buttons on the floor.

The Kraken is introduced by a title card from the projector. It is in colour: the text is red and reminiscent of the font used for *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*. Although the projector is not used again until the curtain call, its use to introduce *The Kraken* serves as another link between the dramatic worlds of the two stories. The narrator of *The Kraken* takes his place in front of the white sheet. Unlike his appearance against the wall of the Arts & Administration building eighteen months ago, his shadow is not much taller than the actor himself. The shadow is therefore even more his double than before, and his mask is doubled as well. His role as the bridge character between worlds is further reinforced by the fact that he has his own projection surface. The actor-puppet is in the onstage dramatic world with the clowns and marionettes, the brass buttons on the stage floor, and the puppeteers (who are clearly visible in this rendition, working downstage of the screen and being occasionally illuminated by flashes of lightning). His shadow-double is in an intermediate world between the onstage world and the dramatic world of the story he tells, taking place on the upstage screen.

The masks on stage in this production serve a simple protective function, but their narrative function is complex. The clowns, the puppeteers, and the narrator-actor-puppet all exist in a world with COVID-19: a dramatic world that, if not exactly the "real world," is certainly adjacent to it. The characters in the two shadow plays are in a separate dramatic world (or two linked dramatic worlds) where there is no pandemic. The narrator-shadow occupies a world in between that bridges them all. Throughout the performance, the lines between these worlds are blurred, links are formed between them, and characters reach from one into the next, enhancing the sense of the fantastic in the show and extending it into the audience.

Epilogue

September 23rd, 2022. We no longer have any idea how many cases of COVID-19 are active in Newfoundland and Labrador. Rapid antigen tests are in regular use, and wastewater is being monitored as a means of gauging infection rates. All formal restrictions have been lifted; masks are no longer required indoors or outdoors, and theatres can operate at full capacity.

It is becoming relatively rare to see masks on stage.

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Since the pandemic began, I have seen many health precautions at work in the theatre. As information about the virus and its spread has changed and developed, and the spread of COVID-19 within the province has ebbed and flowed, theatre-makers have adapted to mitigate the risks, and to make their audiences feel safe in their theatre spaces. Throughout this period, they experimented with ways to incorporate the health protocol into the stories that they tell, including the examples of masks on performers that I've discussed here.

In my experience, the most effective mask-wearing is done in productions that take place — at least in some way — in a world that knows and understands the COVID-19 pandemic. The more similar the dramatic world is to the real world, the more cohesive the inclusion of face coverings on performers became. The harder it is to discern the way that the mask affected the story, the more distracted I am from the piece of theatre I'm experiencing. Since there is no way to put a mask on a performer without giving it a narrative function, the most successful instances of masks on stage are the ones in which that function has been clearly considered.

As we continue to live and make works of theatre in a world with COVID-19, we continue to see masks on stage in specific contexts, almost always where there is no desire to build a dramatic world that differs significantly from the real world. Theatre workers continue to

wear masks in rehearsal environments at their own discretion, especially when a member of the company is feeling unwell or run down. However, the perceived risks of COVID-19 seem to have faded, whether accurately or no, shortly after the end of precautions mandated by Public Health, and the priorities of production companies and artists have drifted back toward the realisation of artistic goals. It is still fairly common practice to ask backstage and stage management personnel to mask up at work. Many theatre venues still post signage recommending masks to their patrons, although these have now been up for so long, and become so commonplace, that they may go unnoticed by audiences. But in most cases, theatre-makers have rejected the nose-to-chin mask as a piece of theatrical design, privileging the expressive capacity of the face and the integrity of the dramatic world over protecting actors and audiences from a virus which has, by now, infected most of us and against which many of us are immunized. While other practices to prevent infection may prove more durable, it seems to me that COVID-era masks on actors will soon appear only to situate a dramatic world firmly in the two years following the first shutdown in March 2020.

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