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'Unexpected things happen' in masks class

Ken Keuffel, Winston-Salem Journal

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Megan Stanke works with other students during Bob Francesconi's acting and movement class at UNC School of the Arts. Photo by Lauren Carroll/Journal

Ken Keuffel, Winston-Salem Journal

Megan Stanke, a college junior studying acting, will likely never play the mischievous

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But as part of her training in acting at the school, she recently improvised her way through the next best thing. Her inspiration came from a mask in a theater-movement class taught by Robert Francesconi, taken by many drama majors.

The mask, entirely in white, reminded Stanke of a bear but made her think of a boy who is always getting in trouble. It had puckered lips; a round, protruding nose; and gigantic cheeks.

When Stanke put the mask on, she went to an imaginary "well" of ideas, namely a four-legged stool turned upside down in the middle of the studio. In mime-like fashion, she pulled out a book of matches and set trash on fire.

"Unexpected things happen," Stanke said of a mask's mystical powers.

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"You can do things that you can't do in normal life. You're not limited to anything. It's carefree and I get to have fun and play."

The class that Stanke said "brought out the little boy in me" happens twice a week in a spacious studio at UNCSA's School of Drama, where Francesconi, 64, started teaching in 1978. He also serves as an assistant drama dean and has directed several productions. His background in performing includes a stint in mime theater.

The history of masks in theater is about as old as the history of theater itself. Masks were worn by actors who performed in the dramas of the ancient Greeks, for example. But in more recent times, they've also begun figuring in an actor's training.

Wearing a mask "frees the imagination" of actors, Francesconi said in a recent YouTube video about UNCSA's School of Drama.

"It protects them and they feel that that they can go to places that they can't ordinarily go when they're exposed with their normal face," he said. "It's an interesting chemistry, the chemistry of the mask: By hiding you, it reveals you."

Francesconi's theater-movement class has at least two major aims, and the wearing of masks, including a round and reddish nose often used by clowns, plays an integral role in fulfilling each.

One aim is to develop in fledgling performers those nonverbal physical skills that will help them bring roles to life. Francesconi mentioned two UNCSA alumni who excel in this area: Mary-Louise Parker ("Weeds") and Dane DeHaan, who plays Jesse in "In Treatment," the HBO series that strives to bring "dynamic focus to a staple of modern society — the psychotherapy session."

Another aim of Francesconi's theater-movement class is to show students how improvisation can help them develop characters.

Improvisation "makes them extremely flexible in an imaginative way," Francesconi said. "Out of improvisation, oftentimes one's organic instincts are sharpened... When you're not pre-planning a moment, oftentimes it is much more interesting."

Or to put it another way: When you plan or pre-conceive responses to what is said or happens around you, "you deny the truth of behavior," Francesconi said.

To be sure, during rehearsals of a show, an actor establishes patterns of behavior.

"But if you are not open to what your partner gives you, meaning what they say to you, and if you're only thinking about what you're going to do, it becomes very stiff and stilted."

Francesconi said that when you wear a mask, "you feel free to do and say anything." A recent class certainly bore this out. The students, all juniors, transformed into everything imaginable, including a maker of bacon and a beauty queen. Allan K. Washington, one of the students, used the mask while playing an old man who took a magic potion to make himself younger.

This is not to suggest, however, that Francesconi simply stands back and lets everything unfold willy-nilly. On the contrary, he uses a variety of gestures and hand signals (including clapping) to inspire certain responses. Or he asks questions.

In a recent theater-movement class, attended by Washington and Stanke, Francesconi didn't speak when students wore "full" masks. He spoke when they put on half-masks. The speaking took the form of such provocative questions as: "Have you ever been arrested?" or "Have you ever kissed someone?"

So how do the improvisation and movement that Francesconi teaches fit into the larger picture? The answer is simple: they belong in a rather large tool box of skills that UNCSA students will need to compete for acting jobs in the world of stage and screen.

The skills include singing, dancing, combat skills, a familiarity with different acting styles for different media (e.g., film vs. Shakespearean stage classics) as well as the ability to make a voice resonate in a large space or speak in different accents.

Washington has already begun using Francesconi-taught skills in the preparation of roles he'll play on stage. He said he has used a mask to develop Crooks, the role he'll play in a dramatized version of John Steinbeck's novel "Of Mice and Men," which UNCSA will present beginning Feb. 23 in Patrons Theatre on campus.

"I should be able to apply all of this ... to a character that's all fleshed out," he said.



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