

## FOIBLES, FABLES AND OTHER IMASKINATIONS A Teacher's Guide

In “Foibles, Fables and other Imaskinations” I re-tell old, even ancient stories. Each of these tales speaks to common struggles experienced by humans throughout history and across cultures. My hope is that you and your students will find meaning and delight in these stories.

In this production I have embraced some new concepts to move these stories of “Foibles” onto the stage. As I began working on these stories, I felt they needed to be more than just told. My theatre background called out for light, color, context, and character. So whenever possible, I have added sets, costumes, scenic paintings, puppets, and of course masks. You might say I have tried to illustrate these stories, much like a children's book.

As I searched for material for this show, I looked for stories that hearkened back to the very early purpose of story. I sought stories that teach, assure, and lend guidance to its listener in troubled times. The stories that form the core of “Foibles, Fables, and other Imaskinations” are old, even ancient stories from four diverse cultures and are influenced by four different religious traditions. What I have found in my search for stories is that each religion has built a body of stories that teach and lead its adherents into moral, ethical, and purposeful lives. These stories comprise some of humanity's greatest wisdom. It is from this body of work that I have chosen the stories.

### THE STORIES

The four stories that are the centerpiece of “Foibles, Fables, and other Imaskinations” originate on two different continents, Asia and Europe and in four different countries or areas, Korea, India, France and Eastern Europe. Each also bears the influence of the culture and the dominant religion at the time of its origination.

“A Simple Gift” is a classic story believed to have originated in medieval France. First appearing in print in the late 1800's, the story was recorded by Anatole France. Both book and film versions of this story have been made since then under the same title of his story, “The Juggler of Notre Dame.” In the late 1970's the story was popularized by Tomie de Paola as a children's book under the title “The Clown of God.” Various aspects of the story

change with each telling. An element that remains fairly consistent is the context. This particular story comes out of the Christian tradition and the climax of the story happens during the Christian celebration of Christmas, usually in a Cathedral or monastery. A poor juggler, sometimes old, sometimes young, finds himself in the midst of a giving of gifts celebration. Too poor to be able to afford a gift for the Madonna and Child, he realizes that he has one gift he can give, himself, through his juggling. After everyone leaves he offers his gift of juggling and a miracle occurs. I have titled my version of the story, "A Simple Gift." The story reveals to us that the most unlikely gift given from the heart is often the most meaningful.

"It Could Always Be Worse" is a humorous tale from Eastern Europe. This story comes out of the deep Rabbinic tradition of storytelling of the Jewish faith. This has also been called a "Yiddish" tale. Yiddish is a language derived from the German language with its own rules of grammar with a considerable amount of words loaned from Hebrew. In and around the 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> century many Jewish people migrated into Eastern Europe and developed a rich community and culture. Their teachers, or Rabbis, used stories and parables to illuminate the spirit of the law and to instill traditional values to help them with their daily lives. "It Could Always Be Worse" may have been a story told to help someone deal with a seemingly hopeless situation. A man seeks council from his Rabbi. He is living with his large family and in-laws in a small one-room shack. He is desperate for relief. His Rabbi prescribes a solution. Move all the barn animals into the house! It does not take long for the man to realize that it could always be worse.

"The Crocodile and the Monkey" is a story that comes from a body of work called the Jataka Tales. These tales originate in India and are widely accepted and used in the Buddhist religious tradition. In much the same style as Aesop's Fables, many of these stories are about anthropomorphic animals, which make wise or foolish choices, or find themselves in situations that call for moral or virtuous behavior. We, the listeners, are invited to learn life lessons from these situations and apply the lessons to our own living. In the "Crocodile and the Monkey," a crocodile lures a monkey onto his back to cross a river with the promise of juicy mangos and papayas on an island far from the monkey's reach. When mid stream, the crocodile reveals that he has tricked the monkey and intends to eat the monkey's heart. The quick-witted monkey explains to the crocodile that monkeys store their hearts in the trees and if returned to the shore, would gladly give it to the

crocodile. This story is a cautionary tale and reminds us to be wary of the crocodiles of the world.

“The Tiger’s Whisker” is a story that has its origin in Korea. This story reflects the values of the Chinese philosopher Confucius. Confucianism has been a powerful influence in Korea since the 14<sup>th</sup> century. Confucianism emphasizes human-heartedness, and encourages qualities such as self-discipline, self-restraint, and the value of learning. Many of the values of Confucian thought can be found in this story. “The Tiger’s Whisker” is a story of a young woman’s journey to find healing and wholeness for her husband who has been traumatized by war. A mountain healer sends her on a quest to find a special ingredient for a potion that will help her husband. What she learns from this quest, the search for the tiger’s whisker, is as relevant today as it was in ancient times.

### AFTER VIEWING THE PERFORMANCE

Here are a few questions you might use to start discussion.

- \* What did you experience in the performance pieces?
- \* How were the masks and puppets used to portray the characters?
- \* Identify specific elements of the performance and describe how they affected you.
- \* Identify the range of emotions you experienced in the performance.
- \* Did the masks influence the performance and how?
- \* What lessons did you learn from the stories?

### A POEM ABOUT THE IMPORTANCE OF STORY

#### NAKED TRUTH AND PARABLE

A poem by Heather Forest

Naked Truth walked down the street one day.  
People turned their eyes away.

Parable arrived, draped in decoration.  
People greeted Parable with celebration.

Naked Truth sat alone, sad and unattired.  
“Why are you so miserable?” Parable inquired.

Naked Truth replied, "I'm not welcome anymore.  
No one wants to see me. They chase me from the door."

"It's hard to look at Naked Truth," Parable explained.  
"Let me dress you up a bit. Your welcome will be gained."

Parable dressed Naked Truth in story's fine attire,  
with metaphor, poignant prose, and plots to inspire.

With laughter and tears and adventure to unveil,  
together they went forth to spin a tale.

People opened their doors and served them their best.  
Naked Truth dressed in story was a welcome guest.

A poem based on a tale told in Eastern Europe by the Maggid of Dubno, an 18<sup>th</sup> century rabbi. Found as introduction to, "Wisdom Tales From around the world", August House Publishers.

## READING AND DISCUSSION

Read aloud with your class the poem, "Naked Truth and Parable." Discuss together the poem and what they understand it to mean. Here is a list of possible questions to help with discussion.

- \*What does the term "naked truth" mean?
- \*What is a parable, a metaphor, poignant prose, and a plot?
- \*Why does dressing up "Naked Truth" change it into a welcome guest?
- \*After seeing these classic stories in, "Foibles, Fables, and other Imaskinations," are there parts of the stories that are "dressing up"?
- \*What "naked truths" might these stories contain for a contemporary audience?

## A THEATRE PRODUCTION APPROACH TO LEARNING

One of the things I enjoy most about theatre is the process of mounting a production. Not only is the creative process engaging, but also in theatre there is a job for anyone with almost any kind of interest. Simply stated, we will start with a writer, a playwright, a screenwriter, a storyteller. Often writers rely on researchers, people who enjoy the search for information. Once we have a script a director is needed. This is usually someone who is imaginative and can bring action to words on a page. This person also needs

to have great collaboration skills. The director presents a production concept to the designers who then research and develop the visual aspects of our play, costumes, and sets, make up, sound and light. Under the guidance of the designers you have people who paint, sew, build, wire and hang lights. There are also those who make the actual productions happen, stage managers, stage crew, sound and light operators, house manager and crew, publicity, sales, and oh yes... actors. They too, engage in the research process. Who is the character? How does she or he speak, move? What is motivating this character at any time in the story?

### STORY PRODUCTION MEETING

Choose a story from a collection of stories that have to do with a time period and a culture that is in your curriculum. Divide your students into small groups according to their interests. One group researches the geography, place, or setting of the story. Another group researches the culture during the time period of the story. Another group is responsible for reporting on costuming, what the people wore, what fabrics were used, fashions and hairstyles of the time. Other groups might explore the architecture of building in the story, arts and music that might be used to enrich the background of the story. And someone might research any other elements that might help your students to understand the story and its context.

When the students have had time to explore these ideas through online resources, libraries, or even interviewing local community groups, gather for a production meeting and share the information. Allow your students to take the information and design the elements of the story, costume, set, makeup, and music.

If time and resources allow, create what we call a storyboard. Make small drawings of the scenery and costumes for each scene of the story.

If time and resources allow, write a script for your story, make costumes and set and perform your story to a younger group of students or parents.

## MASKS AND PUPPETS, PUPPETS AND MASKS

At this writing, each of the stories in “Foibles...” uses masks and or puppets. My introduction to masks was as a twenty-something student at the Dell’Arte School of Physical Comedy in Blue Lake, CA. The assignment given was to make a papier mache mask and use it in a five-minute performance piece. Having no sculpting experience, I set to work and created a simple larval shaped character mask. As I began to work with it, I discovered something about myself and the world inside the mask. So began a lifelong journey into the world of masks.

For more information on the history of masks, see page 11 of my study guide, “Mime, Masks and Physical Theatre”. You may download a copy at the link below:

<http://www.loydartists.com/index.php?page=roster#!artist=6&module=about>

## POSTER BOARD MASKS

In his book, “Mask Improvisation,” Sears Eldredge includes a simple paper mask template that can be cut out and used to learn the basics of mask performance. I am including that template here. There are two parts. One is the face; the second page is the nose. Cut out the templates and trace them on poster board. Cut out the poster board shape. Next cut out the holes for the eyes and nose. Then cut out a nose template. Fold the nose piece on the dotted line. Gently bend and push the nose template through the nose hole and glue the edges to the back of the face template with a glue stick. Measure a length of elastic string and attach it to either side of the mask.

Start by making five masks. Draw a different expression on the face of each one. Make one neutral, one happy, one angry, one sad, and one surprised.

## MASK EXERCISES

When working with the masks ask your students to follow this process:

- 1) Observe the mask. Study the expression. Understand what the mask is expressing.

2) Imagine how this person might move. While holding the mask in one hand, move it around like a puppet. Try and make the movement match the expression on the mask.

3) Remember what that emotion feels like. Remember seeing someone expressing that emotion or attitude.

4) With their backs to the audience, pull the mask down over their face. Slowly let the body take on the attitude or emotion of the mask. When the wearer feels like their body attitude matches the emotion of the mask have them hold that position creating a statue. When they are satisfied with their statue, have them turn around and share the statue with the audience.

In these next exercises, our focus will be to discover how we communicate with our bodies. Not many will succeed right away, but after observing others and playing the masks, the students will begin to discover the play of the masks.

#### Exercise 1

Neutral mask: With a poster board mask with straight mouth, or neutral expression, have the students one at a time walk in the space and pick up an object and walk out. The goal is to try and walk without expressing any emotion, attitude, or character. What you will see is that it is almost impossible for the body not to express something. When each has finished have the others tell the student wearing the mask what expressions they saw. What they will learn from observing this exercise is how expressive the body is, even when we are trying not to be expressive. Also note that the mask expression seems to change with the body movement.

#### Exercise 2

Expressive mask: With a poster board mask that has a clear expression (happy, sad, angry, shy) have each student study the mask then turn and play the mask to the audience. At first holding the character in stillness, but then beginning to move and discover the walk for this character.

#### Exercise 3

Expressive mask: With a poster board mask that has a clear expression, have a student repeat the neutral mask exercise, this time as the character he/she finds in the mask. Ask the students to create a reason for how they feel and how they feel about the object.

#### Exercise 4

Expressive mask: Using four or five different expressive masks, have four or five students put them on. For the first minute each should focus on their character. When you feel they have a sense of who they are tell them they can start to notice and respond to one another. There should be no physical contact and no need to talk. Just see each other and react to one another.

#### Exercise 5

Expressive mask: Ask one student go to the center of your workshop space. Without letting that student see the expression of the mask, put it gently on their face. Have another student gently sculpt the person in the mask so that their body posture and attitude reflects the mask. When they are finished, ask the person in the mask what mask they are playing. The position of their body should help them feel the attitude.

#### Exercise 6

Any mask: As a student works in character in a mask, have someone else begin to tell a story about the character they are watching. The two should be watching and listening to each other to improvise a short scene.

#### Exercise 7

Any masks: Give you students a place and an action such as eating at a restaurant, or waiting for a bus. Have each student select a mask and create a tableau, one student at a time until all are involved. It is important that once they take a part in the tableau they are still as statues. It is sort of like a photograph.

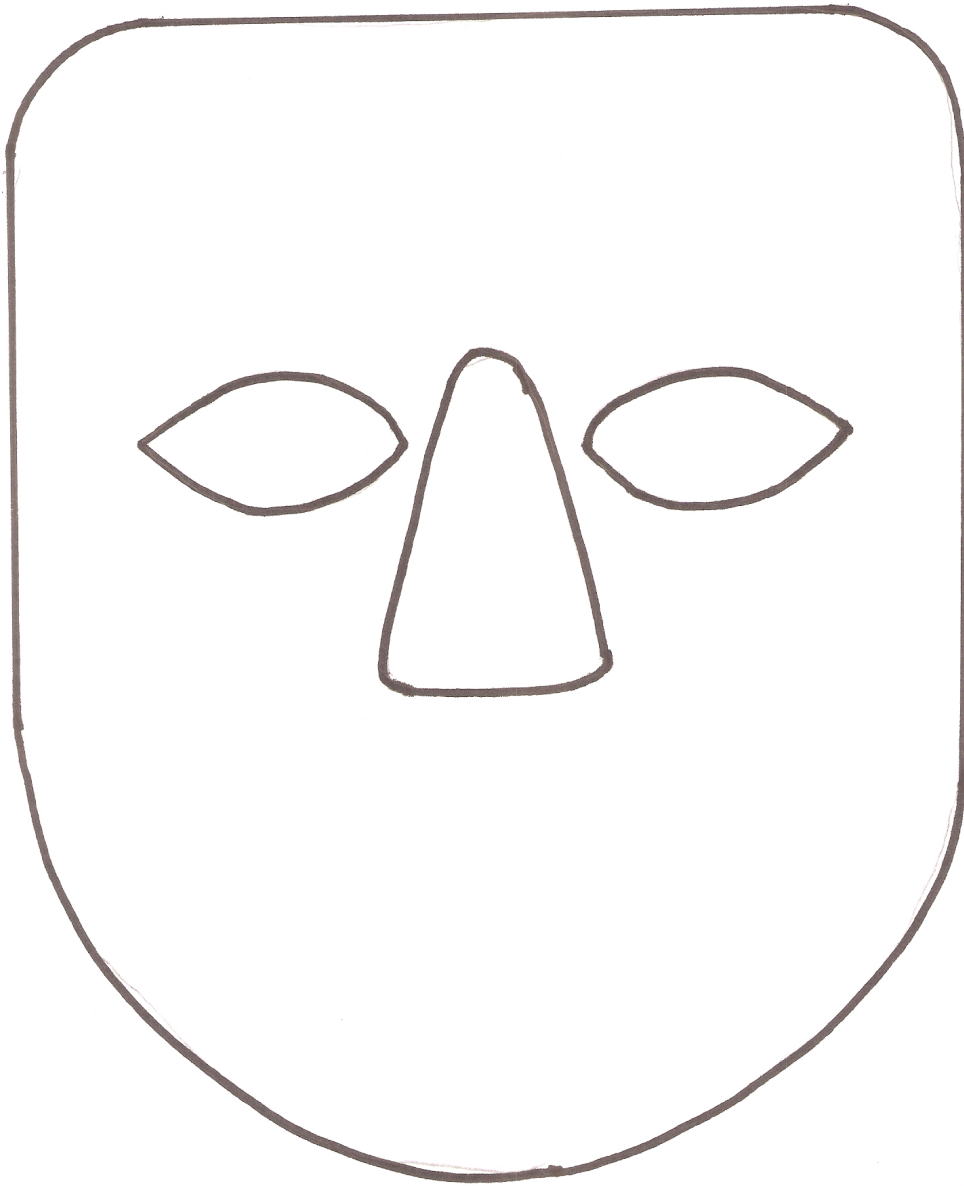
As you work with the masks you will come up with other ideas for exercises. Feel free to explore and discover.

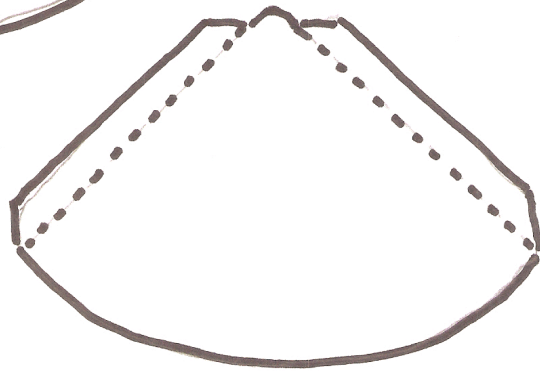
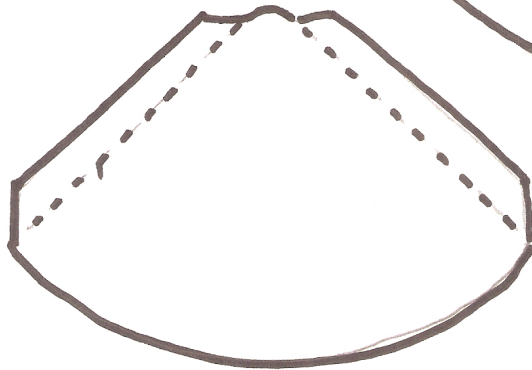
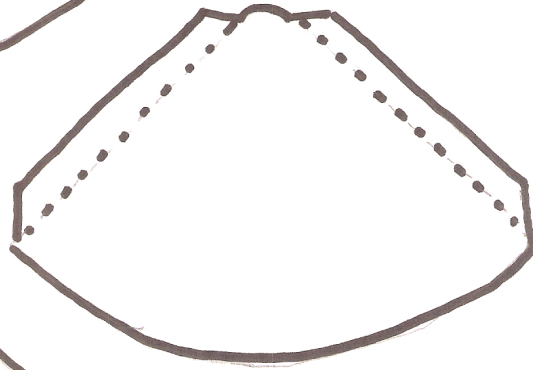
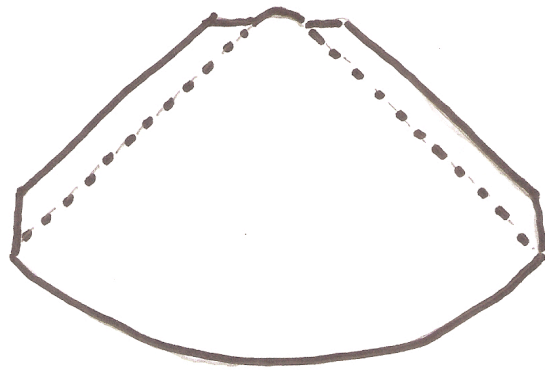
Information about making masks with papier mache, and other resources can be found at:

<http://www.loydartists.com/index.php?page=roster#!artist=6&module=about>



Paper Mask Template





Nose  
TEMPLATE