

## Masquerade

By Alan Bennett Ilagan

*“Mikhail Bakhtin... noted that the mask in romanticism was terrifying because it deceived, it hid the “real” subject, it distorted and concealed identity: but the mask in ancient folklore represented play, the recognition of changeability and nonfixity of the subject.” – E. Ann Kaplan*

Halloween has long been a favorite holiday for many a gay man and woman. It's a time to be someone else for a day ~ cloaked in a new identity and hidden by a socially sanctioned costume. Everyone gets to be a freak and no one is judged or condemned for it. Yet it's not only Halloween that finds us shrouded in such assorted attire. We wear masks and costumes every day – for work or play and everything in-between.

There are myriad images we project through our appearance, and all constitute a costume or mask of some sort. Drag, butch, femme, preppy ~ the ubiquitous Abercrombie frat boy ~ raver, club kid, skater boy ~ even the Chelsea/Castro gym clone (both revered and reviled for making his naked body his own mask) ~ all of these looks are costumes.

The submissive office worker during the day pulls a leather hood on, peers menacingly through slits, and commands power at night. The quiet woman who sits next to you in class slips into a G-string and transforms into a stripper ~ her tan body and disheveled hair just another uniform to garner better pay. These are the more extreme cases of the masks we adopt and the role-playing that exists.

Then there are the masks that we wear which aren't so obvious: the extensive system of lies and evasions that make up the mask of the closet – an all-encompassing costume that isn't so much constructed out of sequins or capes or face paint, but through a set of internalized rules and regulations; the mask of cocky arrogance and overconfidence – used to cover up for raging insecurity; and the mask of bitchiness – to hide the pain or cut off vulnerability at the pass.

We utilize layers and layers of masks as protection ~ a defense against a dark world. To frighten before we are frightened. It's easier to be scary than scared, and often safer too. For many it can be disturbing to be known, and eerie to be understood. Masks allow us to operate as someone other than our true selves, enabling actions and performances we would not normally make, permitting us a safe distance from our behavior.

A mask can bring about courage. Gladiator armor, fencing masks, army fatigues: they equip us with a sense of invulnerability and indestructible fortitude. Masks can also be cowardly: a robber's stocking, a killer's ski mask, or the gloves of a thief. Most masks are illusory ~ fragments of fantasy and falsity that cloud and distort reality ~ the mask of drinking, of drugs ~ masks that manage to hide us even from our own selves.

We hold up varying masks to see what is reflected, in the hope of finding who we really are, or who we want to be. We don a wide array of images over the years, searching for the one that best presents or conceals us. Eventually we must confront our own costumes ~ Are you a good mask or a bad mask? Do you hinder who I am, disguise or distort me to fit in better or to feel safe or to fade into the crowd? Do you enhance me, bring out my best qualities, and represent who I most want to be?

Either way, we are enthralled to our masks. They are an extension of ourselves. Even if the mask you wear is a lie, it is a telling lie, as you are the one who has chosen it. In the end our masks actually *become* who we are, their function dissolving from elusive play and evasiveness to transparent reality. That may be more terrifying than any Halloween fright.