

Topic Exploration Pack

Practitioners: Trestle Theatre Company

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This Topic Exploration Pack supports OCR AS and A Level Drama and Theatre.

Introduction

Trestle has toured mask and physical theatre performances and workshops across the world since 1981. Our home is Trestle Arts Base in St Albans, Hertfordshire, but much of our participation work happens nationally. Collaboration lies at the heart of everything we do and our masks enable us to engage with people and make performing accessible and playful anywhere.

Trestle runs a successful business in making and selling sets of masks; many communities across the UK have Trestle full masks, which are used to great effect with young people and adults within theatre, school and therapy contexts. Every year over 700 mask sets are purchased worldwide by a wide variety of customers. Furthermore, we run mask, half mask, physical theatre and bespoke workshops, projects and residencies nationally and internationally. We deliver over 250 workshops a year to more than 5,000 participants. Trestle also trains educationalists through INSET training, an MA in Drama Education and co-teaching on PGCE Drama pathways.

All of our work is influenced by full and half mask; however, over the past decade, collaborations with artists from India, Spain, Eastern Europe and Africa, along with our partners in the UK, have inspired the evolution of the work we create. As a consequence, Trestle is passionate about partnerships, particularly those that inspire and produce positive change within communities. We believe that theatre is entertainment, but also that it is an educational and social tool, supporting audiences and participants to challenge perspectives and learn through participation.

Common misconceptions

There are many common misconceptions relating to mask theatre. For us, the main ones are:

1. The use of mask in performance somehow limits expression...

In our experience, it is the opposite; due to the face being hidden, the audience depends on the expressions coming from the rest of the body to generate meaning. Mask theatre is a highly expressive form; it takes a committed performer to believe in the mask. They will need to portray the relevant expressions to ensure the work is successful and believable for audiences.

2. Putting on a mask is mask theatre...

Mask theatre is not just about 'putting on a mask'. Don't be fooled that due to the face being concealed, it is somehow easier. There are rights and wrongs to creating effective mask theatre, some of which we will identify in this pack.

3. Masks are for gifted and talented students...

We have visited schools that exercise this opinion. Mainly it is subconscious and due to budgets: 'we only have one set and want to look after them'. The consequence is that the gifted and talented students use the masks, but the others miss out. In our experience, masks liberate all children and if taught to do so, students will respect the masks and have fun working with them.

DRAMA AND THEATRE

Teacher Instructions

Furthermore, SEN and low ability students may find their confidence behind a mask and demonstrate characters and performance that no one would have believed they were capable of.

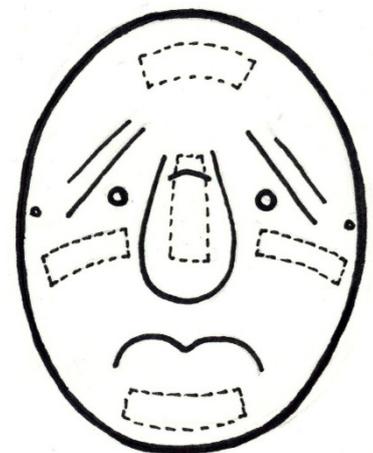
Additional teacher preparation

The exercises and tips outlined in this pack work well if you are using masks in class or in performance. It is not, however, the only way to use masks. We would encourage you to find your own ways of exploring masks in fun and inventive ways!

Trestle's Top Tips

Construction of the Mask Image

- The actor should turn upstage, or be offstage, when putting on the mask. Doing this away from the audience supports them to 'suspend their disbelief' and accept the illusion of the mask.
- Ensure that the mask covers as much of the face as possible. One way to do this is to use hair or hats and scarves to cover the sides of the face and the black elastic.
- Trestle masks are intended to fit all. However, sometimes a little padding inside can ensure the mask fits some users more comfortably. Trestle mask sets include small, rectangular pieces of foam. Do not mistake these for packaging as they are to be used for this very reason. The foam can be inserted in between the mask and the actor's forehead, cheeks, nose and chin.
- When using full masks any vocal sound heard by the audience from under the mask will break the illusion.
- Using music can add to the illusion, especially if the actor has had a particularly active scene, for the audience will not be able to hear the actor catching their breath.



Props

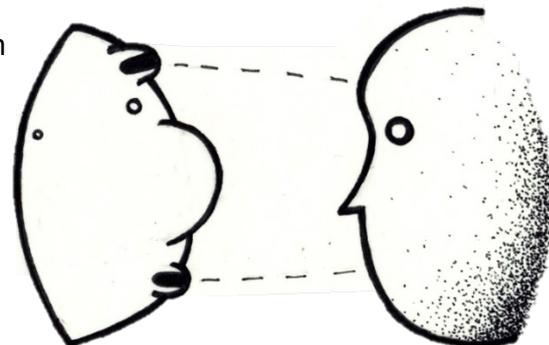
- When using mask, Trestle continues to use real props in both workshop and performance. However, the prop has to be essential to the narrative for it to be in the show.
- Miming props, when wearing a mask, is almost impossible. To create the illusion of an object in space an actor needs to focus his/her eyes very clearly on that object. If the audience cannot see the actor's eye, the illusion fails.
- A set is not necessary. The setting may be as minimal as an atmospheric soundtrack. However, it is also possible to employ many theatrical tricks and devices in the setting. Lighting is less flexible. To avoid horrible shadows on the mask, strong front lighting is required.

DRAMA AND THEATRE

Teacher Instructions

Clocking the audience

- 'Clocking' the audience is a way of addressing the audience, similar to giving an aside or talking to them directly. The 'fourth wall' is removed in Trestle workshops and performances so that the masked actor can look directly at the audience.
- Just as it is possible for masked actors to give themselves the focus by looking at the audience, the focus can be moved to another character or a prop. This can be achieved by the character who is holding the focus turning its attention to another character or object – handing on the action. If more than one character is on stage at a time it is important that all performers know where the focus should be at any one point.



Movement

- When watching a masked performance, the audience finds itself watching the complete movement of the actors, rather than the explanatory gestures which accompany speech. Moments of stillness punctuate the action and give the audience a chance to catch its breath.

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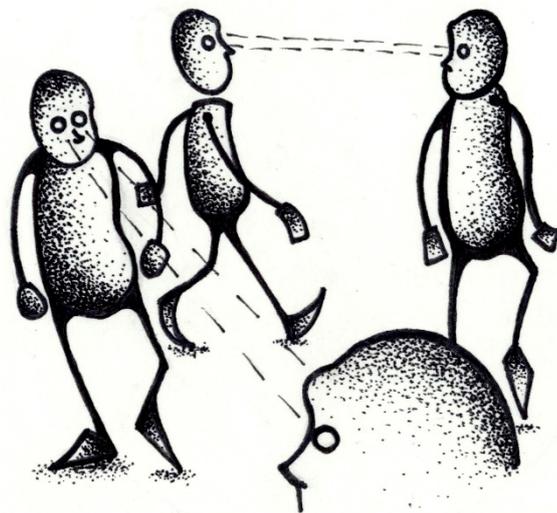
Teacher Instructions

Warm up/Icebreakers

Start, stop

Aim: warm up, acting as an ensemble, focusing the group, being aware of the space

- Ask the students to stand up and find a space. Explain to the class that the exercises should be done in silence.
- Students walk around the room in different directions, making eye contact with each person they pass. The class should aim to act as one, no one should look out of place – all should have the same pace/speed and rhythm. There should be no leaders.
- Ask the students to be aware of everyone, not just the person in front of or next to them.
- Ask the class to consider their speed and ensure they are moving at a similar pace. Slowly they should speed up so that they are jogging. Stress that no one should lead the class, but that they must all be sensitive to the rhythm and speed of group.
- Together the class should then slow their jog down, until they come to a complete stop. Again, all this should be done simultaneously as a group.
- Ask the class to think about where the stimulus has been coming from? What helped (for example, eye contact) and what didn't help?
- Give the group a sequence, e.g. sit down, stand up, start walking, stop, sit, lie, sit up, stand up, walk. Ask them to keep repeating this together, using breath and visual awareness of one another so to ensure the group moves simultaneously.



DRAMA AND THEATRE

Teacher Instructions

Opposites

Aim: reacting as an ensemble, focusing the group, building awareness, thinking differently.

- Explain to the class that when they hear 'Go' they should begin to walk around the room, working together to ensure the space is evenly covered. Ask the students to avoid walking with their friends or in a big circle... the aim is to weave amongst each other.
- Teacher should then shout 'Stop'. The class should aim to take this as an impulse and to freeze immediately. Try 'Go' and 'Stop' a few times.
- Teacher should then shout 'Jump*', and the students should try and jump as one. Try out 'Stop', 'Go' and 'Jump' a few times.
- Finally, teacher should add 'Crouch*', and the class should aim to crouch down together before standing back up again. Add in 'Stop', 'Go' and 'Jump'.
- After the class is running through the instructions confidently, tell the class that 'Stop' now means 'Go', 'Go' means 'Stop', 'Jump' means 'Crouch' and 'Crouch' means 'Jump'.
- As the class become increasingly confident, the teacher can begin to deliver instructions more frequently.
- Split the class into two, half of the class should continue to do the opposite of the teacher's instructions, whilst the other half should go back to doing the actions literally.

*For children with additional needs, the teacher can change 'Crouch' for 'Clap' and 'Jump' for 'Turn'.

DRAMA AND THEATRE

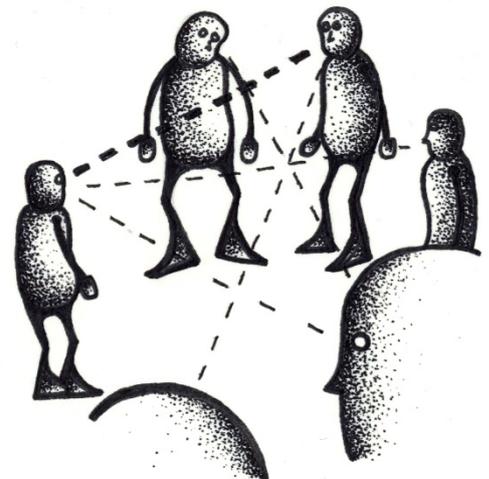
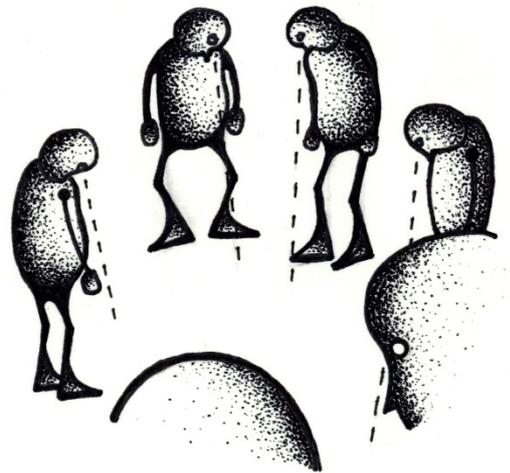
Teacher Instructions

Focus work

Eyes up, eyes down

Aim: direct address, group awareness, playfulness, honesty.

- Ask the class to stand in a close circle with their heads bowed, eyes down.
- Teacher should say 'Eyes up'. When told to look up, students should look directly into the eyes of someone else in the circle. Both students should feign a dramatic death if they find themselves looking at each other. Those who have looked at someone who hasn't looked back at them live on. Add the rule that the students should aim to look at a different person each time to avoid repetition.
- Teacher should say 'Eyes down' and the remaining students should bow their heads again.
- Repeat 'Eyes up'/'Eyes down' until there are only two students remaining.
- These two students should stand back to back and the rest of the class should select a particular category (for example, types of vegetable or country). Each time the teacher calls out a vegetable/country, the two students should take one step forward. At some point the teacher should state an object that is not related to the chosen category. When this happens the students should turn to face one another and fire their imaginary pistols at each other. The first person to shout 'Bang', and fire the imaginary pistol, is the winner.



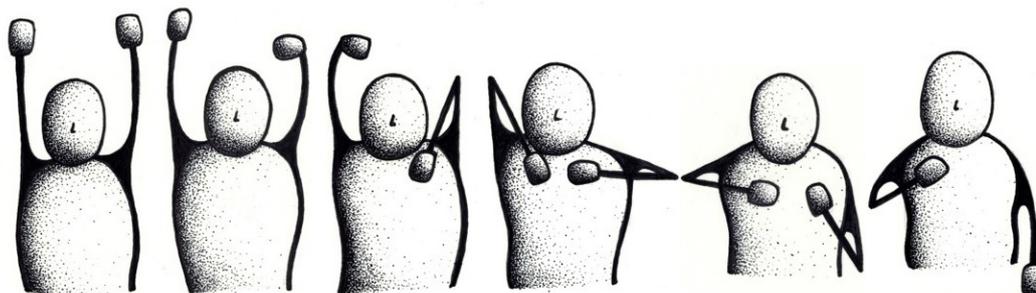
DRAMA AND THEATRE

Teacher Instructions

Puppet

Aim: body awareness, isolating parts of the body, characterisation.

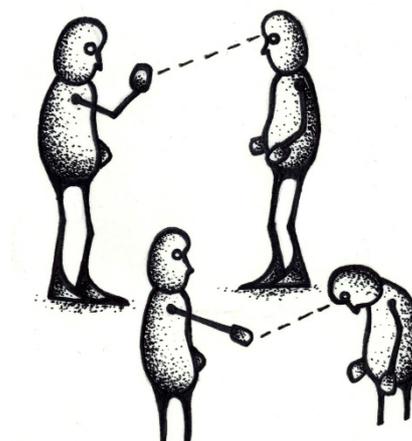
- The class should find a space facing the teacher, with both arms straight up in the air. The teacher will count to ten as follows.
- On the count of one, students should drop the right hand from the wrist as if a string holding up their hand has been cut. On the count of two, their left hand should drop.
- On the count of three, students should drop their right forearm to the elbow. On the count of four their other forearm should drop.
- On the count of five and six, their right and then left shoulders should drop, but leaving their elbows still pulled up.
- On the count of seven and eight, their right and then left elbows drop, but leaving their hands up.
- On the count of nine and ten, their hands should drop down to the sides.
- The class should repeat a few times, making sure that each move is a drop rather than a push. Once confident the class should speed up.
- The teacher can split the class in half and take turns to show the movement to one another.



Puppet and puppeteer

Aim: working in pairs, trust and focus physical theatre, activating parts of the body.

- The teacher should ask the class to find a partner and to label themselves 'A' and 'B'.
- 'A' will be the puppet, whereas 'B' will be the puppeteer.
- Ask 'A' to imagine that the palm of one of their hands is connected to the nose of 'B' by an invisible thread, which is the length of a 30 cm ruler.
- The teacher should request that this exercise is done in silence so to ensure students can focus completely on their partner's instructions. Music can help establish the right atmosphere.
- Slowly, 'A' should move their hand around and 'B' should follow. 'A' should take 'B' on a journey looking at levels, speeds, finding pauses etc.
- Swapping over, 'B' becomes the puppeteer and 'A' the puppet. They repeat the exercise.
- The teacher should split the class in half, allowing both groups to show back their explorations.



Character work

DRAMA AND THEATRE

Teacher Instructions

The tension states

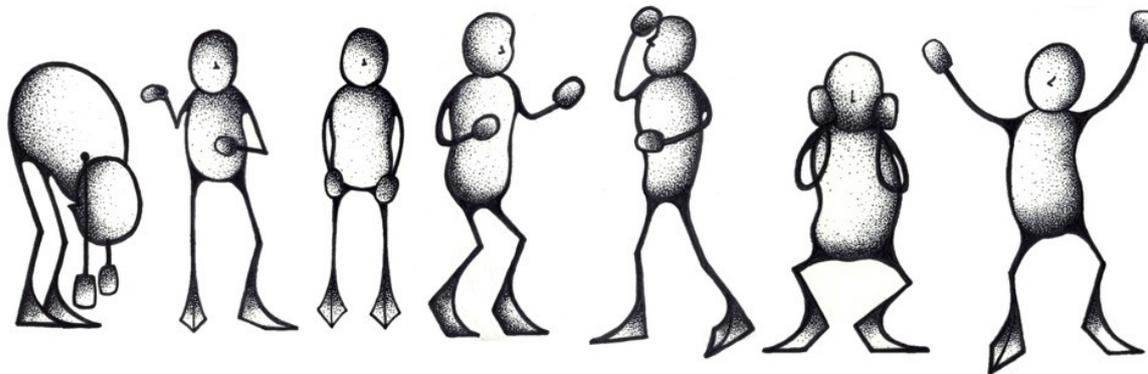
Aim: character work, improvisation, preparing for mask work and/or clowning, devising.

This is a particularly valuable section of Trestle work, which can be applied to any area of drama, including improvisation, script work, mask theatre, clowning and devising. The following description outlines the physical qualities of the 'seven states of tension'. It will be down to the students to explore who the characters become in these states. The teacher should provoke the improvisation by asking them:

- What are your character's intentions?
- How does your character feel about the other characters around you?
- Where is the tension being held in your body/muscles?
- What is your character's catchphrase/mantra?

These are the tension states:

1. **Melted:** no tension, inert, sloth.
2. **Fluid:** no problem, relaxed, content, smooth.
3. **Neutral:** living, straightforward, void of emotion, accepting.
4. **Watchful:** curious, indirect paranoid, playful.
5. **Indirect:** insincere, politician, flouncy.
6. **Pushy:** high status, legacy, authorial, iconic.
7. **Stuck:** immobile, tense, shock.



Don't be concerned about remembering the exact terminology for the seven tensions. It is more about the feeling.

DRAMA AND THEATRE

Teacher Instructions

- Ask the class to lie in a space on the floor and then explain that the next exercise is going to focus on the physical tension in the body and how that affects movement, rhythm and quality. Say that they will look at a whole range of tension states from immobility, through having no muscle tension at all, to being incapable of movement because there is so much tension.
- The teacher should state the first tension, which is 'melted'. The teacher should ask them to release all the tension from the body; slow their breathing down. Ensure they are the most relaxed that they can be. Ask them to think about who these characters they have created physically are? Where are they? What can they do in this state?
- The teacher should then imply that a tension is building up in their bodies.... They are moving into the second state, which is 'fluid'. This character has more tension than melted, they are more aware, but they are relaxed... they move in a smooth manner, but are a little unstable. They can sit, and at some point might stand. When stood, their weight pushes their pelvis forward slightly.
- The third state builds the students up to find their 'neutral' state. It must be emphasised by the teacher that neutral is still living, breathing and thinking. They can see what is going on around them, but they choose to react in a neutral way (as we see in the real world). How do they walk? Is it direct, or indirect? Do they pause? How do they greet other characters?
- The fourth is 'watchful'. This character's tension is built up into their diaphragm and chest – they are more curious, with a deeper awareness of the space around them. They may find it uncomfortable or distracting to be in the centre of the room, instead the character may prefer the edges of the space. Their movement is indirect and sporadic. Their feeling can either be played as paranoid or playful.
- The teacher should then imply that the tension moves from their chest and up to their shoulders. Here the students will find the 'indirect' tension. These characters have a sense of grandeur; they are insincere and their movement is flouncy. Their focus is on the relationships between other characters, gossip may appear in conversations. Their character may come across as the politician or the well-connected mother in the playground. Ask the characters 'what is your catchphrase or mantra?'
- The sixth state is 'pushy', where the tension is felt in their upper bodies, pushing up/out their elbows and wrists. Their bodies take up more space as they reveal their high status. They want to achieve a legacy and will be less interested in the politics between the characters. They play their role out into the space in a way that is iconic/authorial; perhaps they are famous. They want to have the most power in the space and will compete with others to be the most noticed.
- The final state is 'stuck', where the tension has built so high that the character becomes immobile; perhaps through shock, tragedy, fear, or breakdown. Their apprehension is fully tangible, jittery or rigid. The tension slowly crumbles and the character may find themselves sliding down a wall, crouching, sitting down, laying.

DRAMA AND THEATRE

Teacher Instructions

Using the states of tension

Aim: improvisation, multi-roling, utilising the tension states.

- Ask the students to get into pairs, labelling themselves 'A' and 'B'. 'A' will be calling out different states of tension. The teacher can ask them to use the numbers rather than the words, so that it becomes a separate exercise to the group exploration. 'B' should work to become the different states as 'A' names them. Perhaps 'B' will look to develop one character, but consider how their different states affect the character's intentions or movements. Alternatively, it can be used as a means to switch characters quickly and successfully (a useful skill to have for mask multi-roling).
- As a whole group, the students practice chorus work using one state at a time. Ask the students to find one gesture and ask them to repeat it in the state, then slowly the teacher can add in different tensions for the students to try out, seeing how it changes the dynamic of the chorus work.

Paranoia Club

The group are at a party for 'Phobiacs Anonymous'.

- Ask the students to think of a particular body part, for example; ears, tummy buttons, little fingers, noses. Once they have decided on a body part, tell them that their character has a phobia about this particular part of the body (if, for example, their phobia is belly buttons then even if someone is wearing a shirt or jumper, knowing there is a belly button underneath will affect them!)
- Each character has a slightly curious and sadistic streak; they are curious to find out what other people's phobias are and are not averse to tormenting people if they discover their weaknesses.
- Let them start off being able, for the most part, to keep their phobia under control but, as others start to torment them, they should get more paranoid.
- The character's objective should be to discover what everyone else's phobias are without suffering too much discomfort themselves. This exercise can be used on its own or in conjunction with the states of tension.
- If the exercise has been successful, split the class into half and allow each group to share the improvisation back to one another. Giving the students the chance to witness this as an audience member will provoke ideas for devising. Ensure that the groups swap over so that all students have the opportunity to spectate. Also, practising exercises with half the group as the audience will prepare the class for mask techniques. Trestle mask exercises are usually completed in this manner of watching and being watched.

DRAMA AND THEATRE

Teacher Instructions

Basic pre-mask exercises

Face front

Aim: direct address, physical theatre, using levels, improvisation.

- The teacher should explain that it is important when wearing a mask to let the audience see it. Ask the class to stand by themselves in a space, facing a particular wall and get the students to twist and turn their bodies as much as they can without losing sight of the wall.
- Ask them to explore height, crouching, lying on the floor, looking through their legs or other positions.
- Ask them to start walking around the room, slowly at first, still looking at the wall.
- They must work around each other, sensing when someone is close.
- Using music can help develop this physical exploration.

Imitating the mask

- The teacher should place the mask set on the floor or a table and ask the students to gather around. Go through the main mask tips, which are:
 - turn upstage when donning the mask
 - to not speak in full mask
 - look directly at the audience
 - try not to touch the mask too much.

Remember the mantra 'face, body, walk' (I look at something, I react to something using my body, I walk towards/away from something). This mantra will help the intention read non-verbally.

- The teacher should lift up a mask and show it to the students. Ask them to pull the same face as the mask, then ask them to replicate the expression using their bodies, asking them to 'make it bigger'. Finally, ask the students to remove the expression from their faces, but to keep it in their bodies. The latter element reminds the students that, in mask, their faces are hidden and that it will be their bodies which audiences will rely on for meaning.
- Repeat this with different masks to ensure that the students can relate to each one of the masks.
- Ask the students to consider which tension states would be relevant to each mask. Linking the states will support all students to see character options in the masks.

DRAMA AND THEATRE

Teacher Instructions

Basic mask exercises

Putting on the mask

The teacher should choose up to eight students to stand in the space, whilst the rest of the students take a seat downstage. Ask them to choose a mask, ensuring that once they have selected their choice they look at the mask and try to read the expression. Ask them to think about the character work they have previously done.

The students with masks should stand in a horizontal line across the space, facing upstage and with their backs to the other students. From here they should put on the masks. The teacher should check to see if the masks fit well. If they can see eyelashes peering through the mask then the student needs to have little bits of foam in the mask to push it out slightly.

Provoking the mask

Aim: mask work, improvisation, characterisation, student-led work.

Once all the students are in a mask, the teacher should return downstage with the remaining students. One at a time, the students should turn around to face downstage and the spectators (including the teacher) should ask the character questions. Remind the students that as the masks cannot talk they will need answers that they can either nod or shake head to (closed questions) or questions that they can clearly mime the answers to (open questions). This exercise is called 'provoking the mask' as the spectators are provoking the mask to find their own character through improvisation and dialogue.

More than one mask can turn around at one time, and masks can stay turned around after they have done their reveal. Slowly as more masks face downstage, the provoking should turn to helping the characters find out their relationships with one another. For example, 'Why are you sad?' 'Hasn't [character] been very kind to you?'

Once all the masks have turned around, the class should have a group discussion about what worked and what could be developed. After this conversation, the students should swap over so that all get a chance in in mask.

Grandmother's footsteps

Aim: improvisation, play, devising, characterisation, comedy.

- Split the class in half, one group will become the audience and the other group will be the performers. Ask the audience to sit in a line downstage, facing upstage. In the same vein as 'Provoking the Mask', ask the performing students to choose a mask to wear and go to stand upstage, facing away from the audience.
- Teacher should choose one student from the audience group to be 'Grandmother'. They will stand downstage facing the audience.
- Teacher should go upstage and help the performers into their masks. Once they have all donned their masks they should turn to face downstage, remaining stood up upstage.
- The masks are the 'grandchildren', who must try to sneak up on 'Grandmother'. 'Grandmother' can turn around every few seconds and if they spot anyone moving, they can send them back to the beginning to start their descent again.
- The first person to tap 'Grandmother' on the shoulder is the winner and can replace 'Grandmother' at the front.
- Ask the groups to swap over so the audience gets a chance to become the mask performers.

**Extension exercise**

- The teacher should put items of clothing (we usually use hats) on the floor, halfway between 'grandchildren' and 'Grandmother'. Before they tap 'Grandmother' they should put a piece of clothing on another performer.
- The teacher should add objects and tasks, making the route to 'Grandmother' more of an obstacle course. If working towards devising, students from the audience can shout 'Pause!' at any point, if they feel the image on stage has potential for expanding upon. This image can either be photographed or roughly sketched, before the activity continues.

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