



Unmasked

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I've had a rather unplanned career of over 45 years working in puppet animation and theatre, and whilst I may not have been as prolific as I would have hoped(some feature films along the way would have been good) I have been lucky to have my collection of quirky short films take me to universities and festivals around the world, especially Italy and in particular Venice. I have, sometimes misguidedly, declined some festivals, but never those in Italy.

'Why puppets', with all this high tech around making imagery hard to tell from live action is a frequent question, answered simply by a wave of my hand. A puppet will always be a puppet, and should be celebrated and not apologized for - never be ashamed of a puppet's artifice, enjoy it, just as a drawing should be enjoyed and not be seen as lesser than photography because it doesn't copy real life.

Having been involved with several workshops in animation at the University, and been on the jury of the short film festival, I could talk about the generous hospitality I enjoyed there and I could talk about the wonderful short films I watched, and I could talk about the people from around the world I met, and I could talk about the great meals shared, and I could talk about the fading glory of the main venue, and the warm welcome from the volunteers, and frankly it's all a bit of a joyous blur, but I'd rather talk about the chance that these events have given me to deepen my love and understanding of the city of Venice, not as a tourist so frantically looking everywhere but seeing nothing, but as someone working there and even contributing as such - seeing Venice from the inside, as it were. Whenever I had visited Venice before I had felt the conflicting guilt of accelerating the decline of the city through being a tourist but then also bringing in the necessary money

to help save the city, only to, over the years, be actually working in the city, and thus to have seen it in a new light. My first encounter with the extraordinary city was in 1984, during a suitably misty November - I was hooked. And then there were many subsequent visits; one specifically for the Carnevale. There was one special day in 1989 where I had invited my mother to my home city to watch the first screening of my film *NEXT* on TV (which, ironically features references to *The Merchant of Venice* and *Othello*) - except I tricked her with a day trip to Venice. Before lengthy security such a treat was still possible, and we managed eight memorable hours in the city, and just made it back to watch my film. A day of days, crammed with the inevitable sightseeing, the meandering on the water buses, and much eating and many gelatos. Such a treat is not really possible these days, but oh how memorable was the water bus journey from Marco Polo to the island. It's the most beautiful journey regardless of the weather. It's thrilling in anticipation as more and more detail is teased. And then there she is. Wow. I tried a day trip again with a friend, but that, with unfortunate delays and such, went disastrously wrong and we barely had time in the city.

I'll confess that I wasn't sure about the Carnevale. Certainly I enjoyed the dressing up and the wonderfully bizarre spectacle of lavishly outfitted characters lurking at every street corner, posing in very loose Commedia related poses, whilst most people tried to carry on as normal, and here I am guilty of having been seen in a historically accurate green and gold brocaded costume that had previously been worn by the actor Bob Hoskins in a theatre production of *The Duchess of Malfi*. It still had his name sewn in. I fear some aspects of the Carnevale seem a bit too manufactured and perhaps it's grown and evolved away from its' traditional and historical source. It also felt unnecessarily competitive in its flamboyance. But I do also confess that with each visit I have bought a mask or two to add to an already pretty impressive

collection. I'm not so keen on the gaudy masks that are drowning in elaborate sequins and lace and diamond shapes. I much prefer the beautifully evocative and once functional Plague doctor and Bauta masks, combined with the distinct tri-cornered hat and cap and cloak which still thrill me, as do the papier mache masks that have faces evolving from images of the moon and sun. Their simplicity is wonderful. I laugh that nearly every shop selling masks claim to be the creators of the masks for Stanley Kubrick's *Eyes Wide Shut*. But masks most definitely strike a chord with me.

I'm not sure about my belief in reincarnation, but in 1986 I visited the Greek amphitheatre at Epidavros, and took an odd turn, as I knew every step and piece of architecture. Nothing surprised me. Maybe I had once been a member of the Greek chorus, which could certainly explain a few things.

Looking back with hindsight, masks have been an important part of the art and design of most of my films, and I'd love to write a whole book about their function, so it is thrilling to often be in the city where masks are so important and a casually integral part of everyday life, mainly thanks to the wonderful history of Commedia, where the designs of the mask are instantly associated with the performance of certain stock characters. The audience could read the masks as some sort of shorthand. Of course, masks are not exclusive to Venice, and their function, away from theatrical performances, was not always about wearing protective items necessarily full of pleasant-smelling herbs to ward off Venice's less savoury odours or as a device to allow certain, perhaps, rather immoral behaviour, lending such activity anonymity. In a mask, anything goes!

There must be records of earlier masks, but they really became significant with the ancient Greeks and the performance of the new art form of 'Drama'. Masks were worn by the chorus, often to help the projection and amplification of voices in the wide open-air spaces of the

amphitheatres, but also to make the chorus performers anonymous, especially making the characters gender fluid when the performers were resolutely male. It's ironic that Greek drama was so full of strong female figures such as Medea and Iphigenia when females were not able to participate or even watch the dramas. This use of masks allowed them to become a unified body, or what was necessary to the drama - they could become citizens, avenging furies, women of Troy, clouds, abstract thoughts, or even birds, without any reprisal. The device of the mask allowed some artificiality, some distancing, that granted its' wearer license to speak unjudged. A great example of a lie, a theatricality, speaking the truth. These masks gave permission to be honest. Centuries later Oscar Wilde would say it so much more concisely than me - "Man is seldom himself when he speaks in his own voice, but give a man a mask and he will tell you the truth"- those sentiments have guided me through all my involvement with art and teaching and storytelling. I'm rather allergic to the literal, and am not sure it has any place in art and such, but I so warm to stylised masks that communicate through the knowledge that we know they are masks and avoid realism. The Greek theatre was full of tight choreography and music, and the very rigid conventions, contrasting chorus with scene then chorus again, with the drama becoming joyously artificial - but through all this artificiality they work and are able to speak directly of universal truths, offering the characters options, making sense of their world. And their masks were evidentially a thing of beauty. Interestingly, these artificial devices, and I'll chat about them in detail later, are never allowed to lie or get too involved. That's the rules. Imagine if Jiminy cricket, in essence an artificial, supernatural character, actually lied to Pinocchio and was a figure of action or Mary Poppins, whilst often oblique about the truth, suddenly telling lies. Mary's job is to come and heal the family, to let the family see themselves and learn.

But what about Mary herself - who can she talk to? Well, she has a talking umbrella, who at certain points, speaks the absolute truth about things. Such characters are enigmatic about their background, and often are invisible to the other characters. Shakespeare's King Lear is taunted continually by his Fool, offering advice and sly wisdom, basically telling Lear what a mess he is making. Once he has performed the task of opening Lear's eyes to his plight, he is gone, no longer having a function. None of the court ever acknowledge him, just as no humans see Jiminy Cricket. Apart from giving the fool a nice resonance, there is argument that the Fool and Cordelia were played by the same actor, making economic sense - we always have to be aware of practicalities. Guardian angels, and conscience made flesh perhaps, but they are a 'mask', a device through which the main characters see the truth. Another great example is the four ghosts that visit Dicken's Scrooge, telling him in no uncertain words, how to behave. Once Scrooge has taken this on board, they are gone, and no one else ever saw them. Did he ever see them, or did he make them up? Were they his conscience again.

The point of these ramblings is that my frequent visits to Venice, have increased my love and understanding, through masks, of art and how it works. A simple distancing device that allows the artist to speak their mind free from any judgement or blame. But these masks, these devices, can take any form; anything that, by changing the perspective, challenges the main character; anything outside of their usual experience, and from which he or she learns and is healed. A journey, of course. Most dramas have this device, enabling things to be seen from a different angle, and usually these devices have a theatricality, or a supernatural element - they certainly come from an environment alien to our hero's day to day life. The plane crash and isolation of the schoolboys in Lord of the Flies is in effect a mask where, free from rules, the boys act

without inhibition. Their real selves are revealed. There is a bizarre film called *Marquis*, set in Venice with the Marquis de Sade, an actor with a dog mask, sees his puppet genitals offering him advice. Rather different from Jiminy cricket and Pinocchio but the same idea. Sometimes a red nose is all that is required, or 'drag' or hiding behind a superhero persona, or a ventriloquist puppet - the disguise allows a freedom, a liberation. I love the irony that the verb of the word mask, can suggest to conceal, whereas it reveals. Such things are a way into the character. Find your 'mask' and let it speak. You are allowed who you want to be.

Masks are still a sometime surprising convention in the arts but in recent decades, full scale puppetry, essentially an extension of masks, have become common practice with such major productions as *The Lion King*, *The Life of Pi*, *War Horse* and *Avenue Q*, where both the puppets and the puppeteers are unashamedly on display. Puppetry and maskwork are probably courses at Drama schools, animation maybe less so.

Being in Venice and having time to wander round with no immediate purpose; the ideal way of course, also allowed me to gather detail for the best film I never made - a sad fact, as so many months and years have gone into this film. It started life as a feature call 'Murder on the Wing' with music by the Penguin Café orchestra, but they felt uncomfortable with the word 'Murder', and a subsequent title *Murder most fowl* (the bad pun does make sense) was too abandoned. The final name for the project became *Toucan Tango*, which is far more appropriate. The film is daringly wordless, and the plot suggests various Agatha Christie novels, mixed with the solo innocent man caught up in drama as familiar from Hitchcock. It's all set in Venice, at Carnevale, with our group of characters forever surrounded by masked figures busy being giddy. Our hero, Somerset Down, is a tour guide and is showing a seemingly random group around the city, where fog denies anyone the chance to

leave. One by one, each meets a grisly, venetian inspired demise, and the 'whodunnit' question changes every minute. A link, as inevitably it does, is slowly revealed and a revenge is acted out. But there is a twist - our characters may be the embodiment of Agatha Christie types, but here they have bird heads atop their fine clothes, and bird heads that are immediately appropriate to their character and dictate how they move, a bit like the afore mentioned Commedia masks. Every time I go to Venice, I grab a few more details and weave them into the film, hoping that one day it will get made. Best be quick, gents. Producers I have pitched the film to have naively resisted the idea of humans with animal heads, with some confusion, but hang on, just look around, such imagery is everywhere and has been since the ancient Egyptians, and certainly as far as I can research, there's never been a full blown animated 'whodunnit', and heck, so much work has gone into this to make it work, and make it respectful to Christie, Hitchcock and Venice, and yet somewhat innovative, all told almost as a ballet, with Venice seen as a place of enigmatic shadows and half glimpsed activity and simmering sexuality. Cliched but different... very different. And frustratingly just one of many scripts that remain unfilmed.

The word ballet is perfect for animation, so often stories told by movement alone, but it also suggests the inspiration for this film. Certainly the idea is original, but the choreographer David Bintley did a masterpiece of a one act ballet, in which smartly dressed, penguin headed waiters introduce various animal characters who dance their story. This ballet, *Still Life at the Penguin Café*, sees the mostly mask wearing animals slowly having a common link, of all being endangered. A storm threatens them and in a thrilling moment, they remove their masks and dance into a suggestion of an Ark - all save the Giant auk, who doesn't make it. It is a shattering, but vaguely hopeful piece, speaking volumes without words. I have seen this ballet live many times,

and each time there is an uncontrolled sobbing from me – yes for the message, the dazzling stage craft and design, but also for a sophisticated use of masks – masks that are able to show off the dancer’s magnificent bodies whilst at the same time suggesting an animal, such as a zebra. A double event.

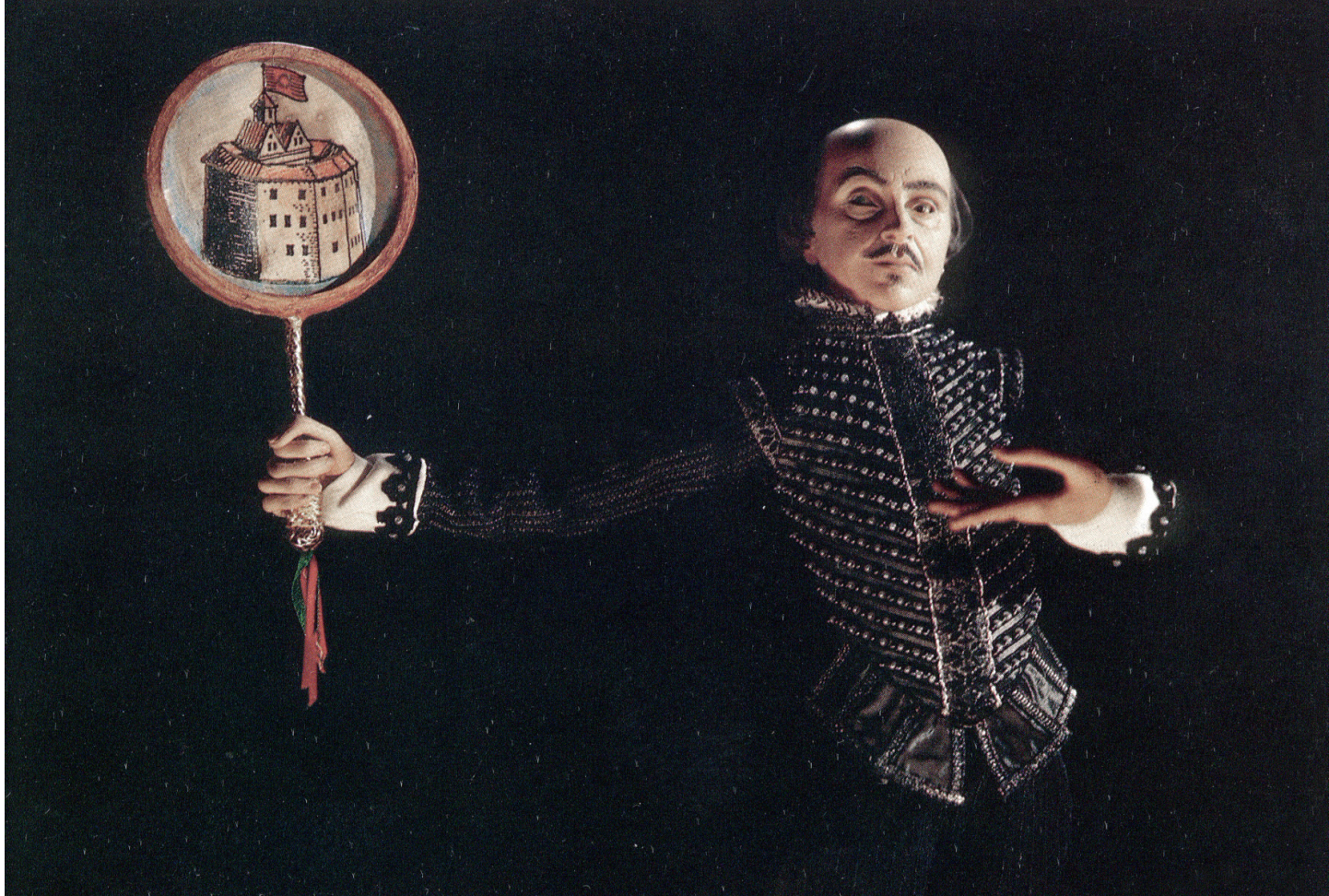
Whilst my film, so inspired by Venice, has yet to be made, there are several short films of mine out there in which masks are an essential element, mainly a solution to helping suggest characters that the budgets deny fully fledged appearances. In the previously mentioned *Next*, a double split mask suggests both Othello and Iago at the same time, maybe suggesting they are two sides of the same character – an idea most definitely inspired by Venetian masks, and by Shakespeare. Other masks, more figurative this time, indicate the confusing gender swaps of Rosalind in *As You Like It*.

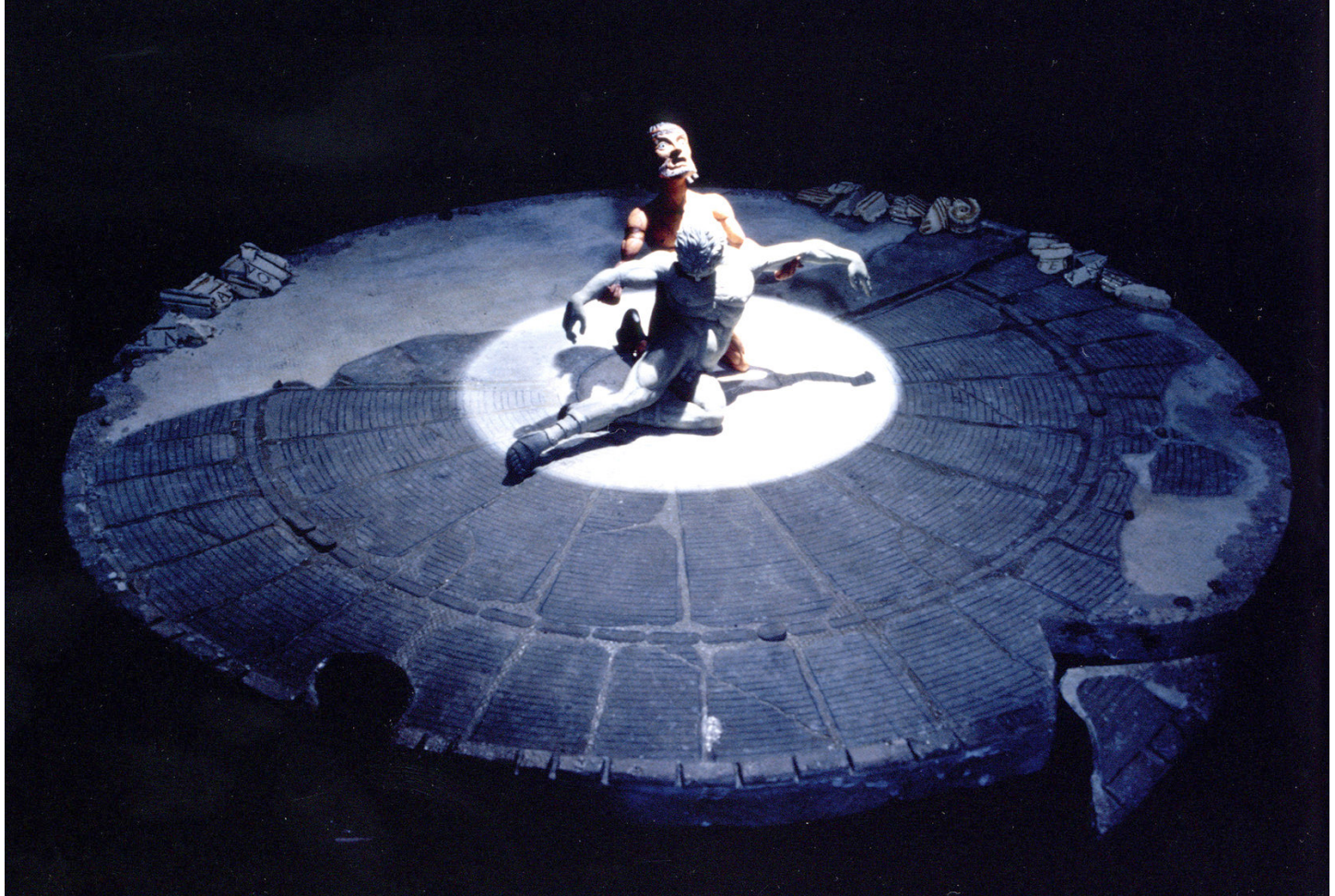
After next came *Screen Play*, a kabuki inspired short film full of masks, with characters using them defiantly and obviously, and perhaps nodding towards the face changing masks of China. Apologies for mixing cultures there! This being animation such effects are easily achieved, but I think the audience were surprised to see animated puppets playing with masks. Again, an audience brought up on such masks, would have immediately recognised the characters implied.

Screen Play was followed by a half hour adaptation of Verdi’s dark, dark opera *Rigoletto*. People scoffed at the idea of mixing puppet animation and opera, but I suspect as the last note fades, and *Rigoletto* screams heartbroken over the limp body of his daughter, we won them over. And it’s a film of which I am very proud. Verdi’s opera may be set in Mantua, but our film was a bit more vague, though there are references to Venice with a gondola carrying the dead Gilda, and the gondola poles, and the houses bear some resemblance to Venetian houses. I can’t stop my love of Venice. It creeps in to everything, but then the city itself is a metaphor of sorts,

juggling truth and fantasy. Verdi had nearly three hours to set up the hierarchy of his sordid society and court – I didn’t have that time but, fortunately, the piece starts with a debauched masked orgy, and it was convenient to use these masks to reveal instantly who was who and where they fitted in. I’m sure the savvy audience caught the all-powerful Duke wearing a golden eagle mask, then right down at the bottom of society was *Rigoletto*, the tragic court jester and pimp, wearing a cockerel head, with the courtiers wearing birds of prey, and the females wearing swan masks and such. In this scheme of things, the two assassins, Sparafucile and his girlfriend, Maddelena, are wearing cold bird skeleton masks. If you get a chance to see the film, watching for who is wearing what – I love little visual clues like this. It sets the scene without wasting precious time, whilst still telling the story. And technically, it’s quicker to animate masked figures deprived of facial expression which leads to an interesting emphasis on body language.

And the last of my mask films is *Achilles*, and there are plenty of masks here, and all playing a significant part. The film is my nod to my love of Greek art and drama and much research went into the look of the film (I studied Drama and Greek civilisation at university). Again, a short film, but a lot of characters that needed mentioning to help the plot – to have fully represented everyone involved would have been distracting when the focus was essentially on Achilles and Patroclus. How to distinguish between leading characters and minor characters? Achilles and Patroclus were treated as pale marble statues, complete with cracks and weathering, reminding us that they were not real, but with just enough facial movement to bring them alive. The numerous other characters were realised by looking similar to earthy red figure vase paintings, complete with masks and dead eyes. This prevented the audience from being too involved with them. These were visual clues to what I wanted to be important. I did have fun





with the masks, turning them into different genders, bull heads, and horses. Just making these miniature masks for the twelve-inch puppets made me ponder on the intricacy of the original's construction.

Other short films followed; Gilbert and Sullivan, Hamilton Mattress, Plume, Tchaikovsky - an Elegy, and No Ordinary Joe, and whilst masks don't feature, they all contain a device, something vaguely supernatural or distancing, that allows the main character an enlightening change of perspective. The playwright and composers, Gilbert and Sullivan, were in real life brought together, slightly against their will, by the theatre manager D'Oyly Carte. In the film, he worries if he did the right thing - again the budget did not allow for big sets and puppets of other characters, but by making Gilbert and Sullivan look like living illustrations, they didn't need to follow the rules of physics and could represent things however they liked. I'm happy solving scenarios like that. In the film about Tchaikovsky, he is seen reflecting on his life (which seems to be a common theme with me - but then animation is my device to make sense of my world), and thanks to a music score continually turning its pages, suggesting different moments in his life, he can weigh up and gauge his life accordingly. You really need to find this device in your narratives. It's there in all the great works of art - everywhere. My last film, No Ordinary Joe, based on a real life eccentric, features a woman at the end of her long life, trying to evaluate the good, or bad, that she did. She does this through an encounter with a ten-inch doll/puppet given to her by one of her many lovers who talks with absolute clarity of her achievements. Often, whilst filming the live action actress talking to the puppet, I was reminded of Hamlet talking to the skull of Yorick - this very familiar trick of needing something to allow the protagonist to explore his psyche. Hamlet is such an astute, psychologically complex play, and yet it is studded with unashamedly tricky devices to

let us know what's happening to the characters. There are monologues, songs, drunken behaviour, ghosts, witty sayings, and best of all, a play within a play. As always with such things, the embedded play, such an artificial trick and so common, very deliberately echoes succinctly the plot of the main narrative, without being literal. Ha, the names have been changed to protect the innocent. Indeed. With Hamlet, the play within a play, confirms exactly what Hamlet has been fearful of for the last few hours, in a wonderful way that is so much more interesting than just stating the facts. Literature, film, myths, drama all play with nested stories, reflecting each other and adding nuance or new information and invariably these internal stories are done with different techniques and shorthand - and we are back to masks again.

Being in Venice, you become aware that every street corner has been a film location at some point, even if you see that the editing has played very loose with geography. As plays within plays can succinctly sum up a plot so the addition of songs and music can do the same. In my various trips I always endeavour to hear some live music, not just the inevitable Vivaldi played on a variety of instruments, ranging from water filled glasses to full orchestras. One lunchtime concert I heard a beautiful, but bored looking soprano - she must have done this concert so often, in front of tourists ticking off the boxes and I feared the worst, but then she sang, and the voice soared thrillingly. Tears filled my eyes, and then she probably went back to her daily routine, but you can't fake the emotion of some music. Through the University I was lucky enough to be taken to see the Magic Flute at La Fenice - now I'm a believer that you don't need to dress up to enjoy opera, and the opera productions I have directed have defiantly been low key and accessible, but the glittering spectacle of La Fenice and it's glamorous audience won me over and the whole experience was transformative and sublime - and, yes both animation and masks were

involved. La Fenice, echoing the bird theme, now features in the climax to my ill-fated animated film, and it fits in totally appropriately. The script has evolved as I become more and more familiar with Venice. I just need to get the film made, and made whilst I am still able to rise to the challenge. Is it odd that a city, and its association with

masks, is so ingrained, whether obliquely or obviously, in how I think about art and storytelling. Well, who knows, but I am eternally grateful for the chances given to me, essentially by the University and short film festival, to explore the city. Unlike anywhere else, it's forever in my blood and my work.