



# Leather Masks

designed for  
a new adaptation of

*The Servant of  
Two Masters*

Creative Scholarship by  
Natalie Taylor Hart  
in collaboration with  
Kevin Otos





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designed for a new adaptation of  
Carlo Goldoni's  
*The Servant of Two Masters*

Presented at  
Elon University, April 2015

Written and Directed  
by Kevin Otos

Leather Masks Designed and Created  
by Natalie Taylor Hart  
based on the Sartori method

Scenic Design  
Natalie Taylor Hart

Costume Design  
Jack Smith

Lighting Design  
Bill Webb

## Background

This production of Carlo Goldoni's Commedia dell'Arte masterpiece, *A Servant of Two Masters*, is a new adaptation written and directed by Kevin Otos to address 21st century culture. It focuses on Truffaldino's efforts to get ahead in the cutthroat cultural politics of Venice by serving two masters simultaneously. Love, deception, mistaken identities, and the quest for some decent grub all contribute to this riotous masked comedy. This adaptation adds teeth and modern anachronism to Goldoni's script. The characters are capable of real cruelty and it heavily satirizes modern Capitalism.

Several years of general collaboration and planning laid the foundation for the new model of design collaboration that we experimented with in this project and that is described in this scholarship report. It was also my first mask design for a full cast, added to my primary focus in scenic design. This gave a new shape to my process: I was looking at the smallest and largest design features. I had the benefit of a history of working on masks with Otos and a longer period of time than usual to really work through initial responses as the adaptation took shape. Though the play was wacky and our inspirations eclectic, through an intentional process we achieved a tight cohesion between elements, time periods and ideas that were quite disconnected at first glance.







## Shaping a New Text

The director and I approached the design with more structure and intentionality than we may employ in our usual areas of expertise. We began with the text. Otos wrote a new adaptation of Goldoni's play with the purpose of holding up a (probably cracked) mirror to contemporary American society. He had a political statement for today's audience but wanted to use the voice of Commedia dell'Arte. We discussed draft versions of the script over the summer before the production. Interacting with the text as it developed gave me the opportunity to see deeper into the adaptor's intentions and to see the characters take shape. It also gave me a chance to give input on how the text translated to visual images.

## Creating a shared background and language

We viewed traditional Commedia performances to get a more complete understanding of the style and pacing of Commedia dell'Arte. This enabled us to talk about movement and tempo. We discussed the roughness of the form and the awareness of both the audience and performers that they were involved in a play rather than asking for suspension of disbelief.

Otos's initial charge to the designers was to work from the mask outward. Based on his text and many conversations, I assembled a packet of visual research that addressed his ideas. We created several visual solutions and then questioned them each in turn. For example, we explored Constructivism for its political messages but found it lacking in humor. Our next research exploration sought to find a bridge between humor and the visual components of Constructivism. I developed the masks and scenery from ideas that emerged from this collaboration: an overtly theatrical space; skewed and broken perspectives with radiating lines and broken planes; an unfinished quality like an incomplete coloring book; and the juxtaposing qualities of a party space that has been abandoned to the dirt and rain.





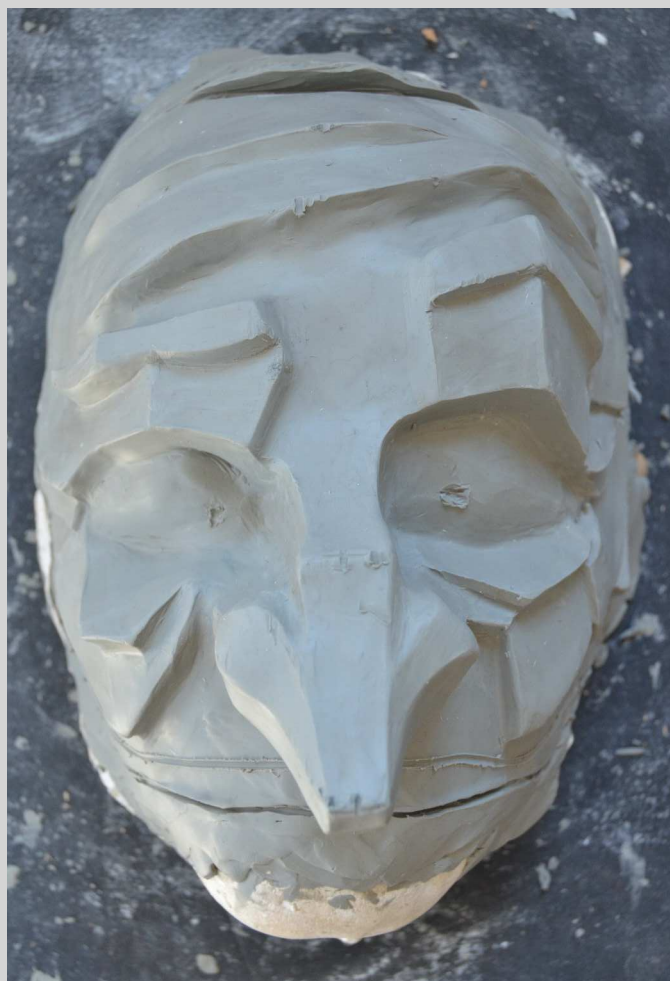
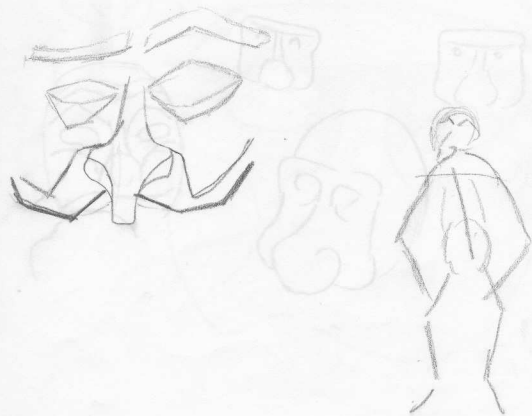
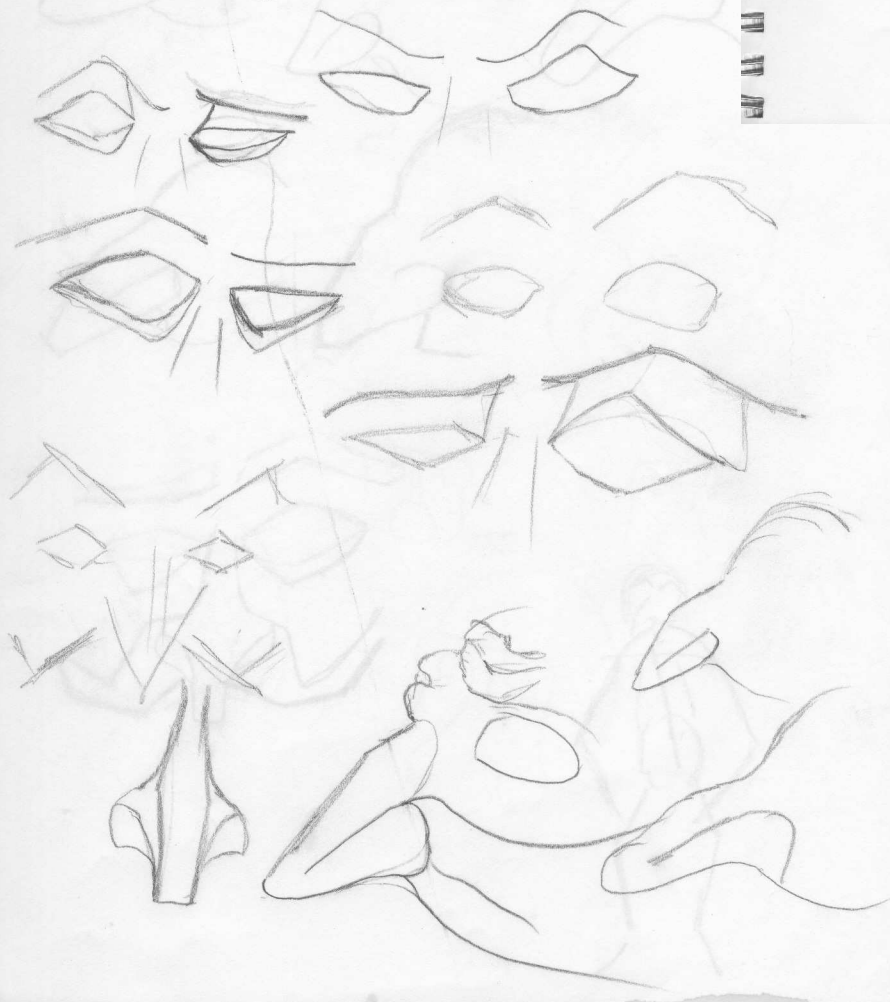


Research images above and opposite



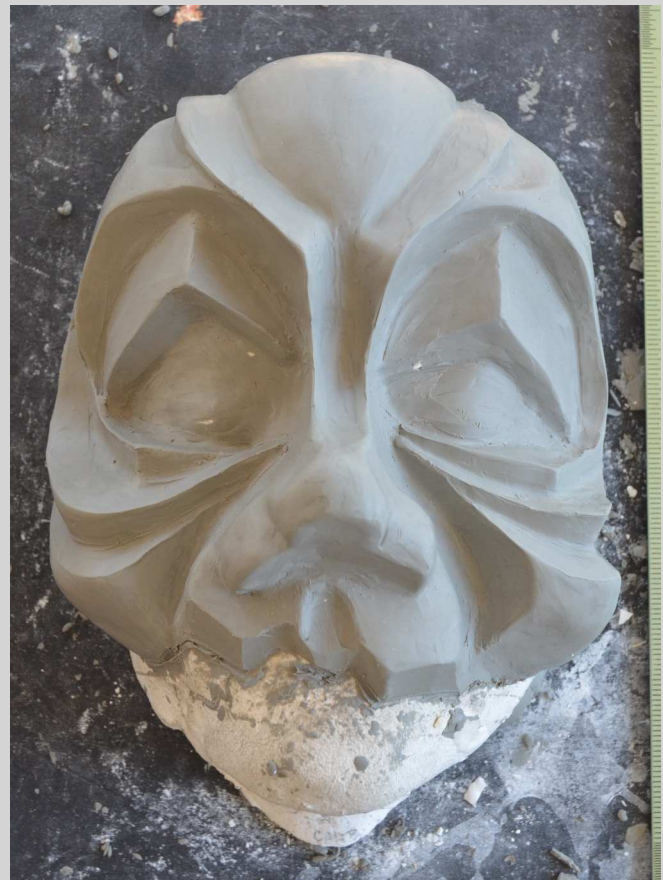
# PANTALONE

- triangles
- pulled down by gravity
- pointed ness
- fear
- wide eyes
- advancing
- greed; retreating-fear



Our analytical work built communication tools and constructed shared understanding as a starting place. During the fall, I sketched mask elements and referenced them to research images to center our dialogue on visual text. We wrote character descriptions and visual manifestations of those character traits. We also defined advancing and retreating traits for each character. For example, Pantalone's advancing trait is an appetite for power. This pulls him forward in terms of motivation and physicalization. His retreating traits are fear or skepticism. These pull him inward and backward. A good mask has flexibility to support opposing emotions without being too muddy in expression. It is important to define what is important to capture in the visual text.

My next step was designing the masks as clay sculptures. These were working drafts that were evaluated and revised many times. By holding the clay sculptures up with his hand, Otos acted with the masks as if they were puppets in order to see them work in three dimensional space. This was a step towards imagining them worn by actors. We paired masks together and watched them move in space as if they were conversing. This helped us see how each mask related to the others and to the whole of the cast. While I created the sculptures, I trusted that I had assimilated all the research and analysis so that my intentions flowed through my hands using my design expertise. Then I evaluated them and referenced my notes to make sure that no detail was overlooked or changed. The process was very much like writing and editing.



## Basis of the Design

Our goals in the Mask design were to create tools that serve the performers and that serve the goals of the script itself as a cohesive visual element. As I noted, an essential component of Mask is its ability to play opposing expressions by changing the body gesture. I designed the advancing and retreating drives for each character into the asymmetrical features of each mask and edited them to achieve the best blend of these features. It is difficult and ill advised to separate mask design from mask construction or from the performance. By sharing my intentions with actors and analyzing their physical performances, I bridged Design, Material and Performance.

In addition to looking at the traits of the individual character masks, Otos and I considered them as a cohesive whole. We created families of masks that shared blunt (for the lower classes) or sharp features (for the upper classes). This created various visual tensions between characters. All of this research was carefully synthesized to elevate the text and to provide inspiration and possibilities for the actors.





Three sets of research materials influenced the final design:

## **Commedia Traditions**

The purpose of this project was to create a new piece of theatre that is grounded in the traditional styles and techniques of Commedia dell'Arte. Some elements communicate to us today versus others that are somewhat lost in history or translation. An example is the Dottore's traditional mask, which covers only his forehead and nose. It didn't have any current meaning; therefore, it was a distraction. The new Doctor's mask departed significantly from its historical counterpart.

## **Aesthetic goals**

We drew from our research in cubism, Russian constructivism and other visual text to create a lexicon for the design. The masks are designed with flat planes and sharp angles echoing the broken planes and radiating lines found in these styles. We liked Constructivism's innate propaganda and felt that it was appropriate for the Venice that we were building.

## **Individual Characterizations**

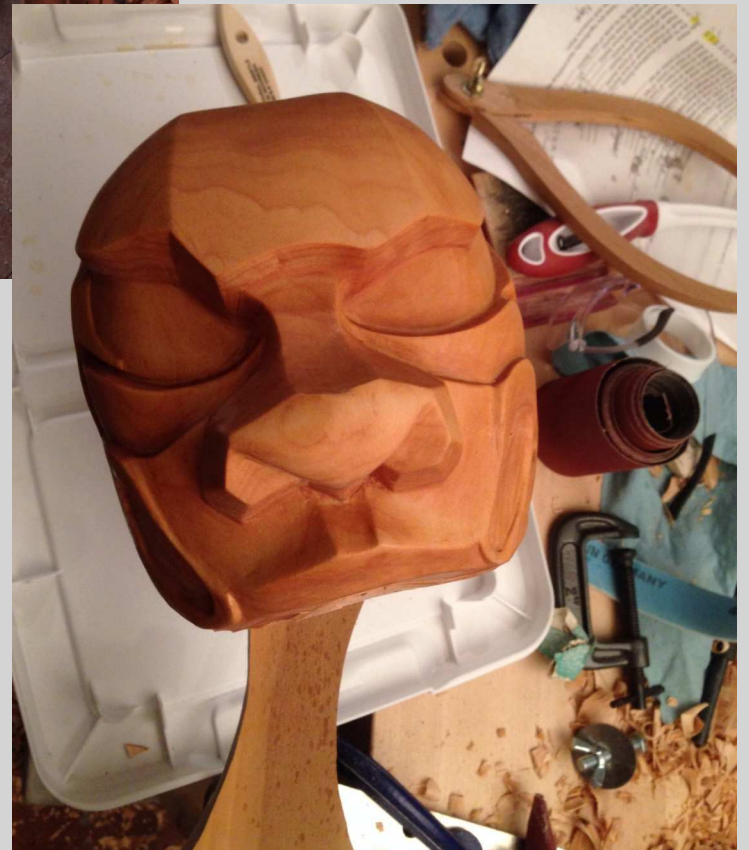
Lastly, our process considered the characters as they were written in the adaptation. We explored shapes and facial expressions that captured the personalities from the page in our satirical framework. All of the characters are both stupid and have the potential for cruelty so we wanted to avoid anything cute or overtly childish. The masked characters play alongside the four lovers in stylized makeup. The lovers are melodramatic narcissists consumed with the pursuit of shallow romantic love and provide the plot points that the masked characters respond to in their various ways.

## Construction

When the rough designs in clay were finalized near the end of the fall, I shifted into constructing the leather masks according to the methods used in the sixteenth century. Leather masks remain more actor-friendly than synthetic counterparts since they move with the actor and let the skin breathe. I adapted a process from my study with the late Donato Sartori of the Centro Maschere e Strutture Gestuali in Italy. I recreated the clay designs as matrices (hard positive molds)—some by hand carving basswood and others by casting in plaster. The leather is worked over the matrix with a series of hammers and rubbing tools. Each mask was wired, sealed, fit to the actor and highlighted with paint to reinforce the design. Each mask takes about a week to build after the design is finalized. My main adaptations to the Sartori process relate to sourcing similar materials available in the USA such as leather glues and carving woods. Also, I have made changes to increase chemical safety by using water-based, eco-friendly or less toxic materials.

Due to our timeline, the masks were designed before the actors were chosen. This required a little more planning and fitting. I left most of the eyes fairly flat rather than sculpted so that I had room to position the cut out areas appropriately for each actor. The Doctor's mask was more cavernous than the others and it drew the actor's voice into the mask. I refit the mask and then stuffed the cavities with foam rubber in order to push the sound outward.







## Adding more collaborators

Due to the nature of that production season, Otos and I started working together long before the other designers joined us near the end of the fall term. All of our initial work was about general style. I assembled a packet of key research and a summary of our discussions to give everyone a view into the shared background that Otos and I had developed. Our collaborators had the adapted script, the rough mask designs as texts and the research packet to kickstart their own processes. At that point, I also started designing the scenery for the play.

The costumes, designed with heavy modern anachronism by Jack Smith, used 18th Century silhouettes cut from modern materials like fleece and paired with modern accessories. All the characters wore some version of Chuck Taylor shoes. The young lovers were not masked but wore stylized makeup and more elaborate costume detail than the masked characters.





The scenery was a drawing of Venice that was fractured and reassembled with radiating seams. The image was painted like an etching on several panels of muslin. The scenic elements all look rustically handmade, referencing the fact that the audience should feel that they are in a theatre and being presented with a play. The set was mostly made of natural colored muslin that was painted with black line work and faded colors. My inspiration came from fashion research with ombré dye work and from the idea of a partially colored coloring book. One of Otos's ideas was that party decorations were left up and got rained on, sun bleached and dirty. This was a metaphor for the societal decay caused by overconsumption and selfishness that was the basis for his setting. I interpreted this metaphor as muslin streamers that masked the wings and draped from the proscenium into the pit. A gradient of blue rises up the streamers from the pit suggesting water.

## The Masks



**Truffaldino**  
a hungry servant

As a servant, Truffaldino has blunt features. His prominent brow is based on gorilla research in order to give him a grunting appetite and instinct. Similarly, his broad nose is meant to echo an animal that relies on smell to find food and avoid danger. His drives are biological and autonomic. In contrast, his cheeks point upward to reinforce his moments of excitement or glee.







Pantalone  
a shrewd capitalist

The Pantalone character is one of the most recognizable Commedia characters. In our play, he is calculating and shrewd with a giddy sense of glee when things go his way. I packed this mask full of "text" for the actor to explore. One eye is narrowed in skepticism; the other more open in surprise. The eyebrows are asymmetrical





allowing the actor to play different sides of his face in retreating and advancing emotions. The planes pulled down by gravity on each side of the face and forehead convey age and a sharp, biting character. The nose, which is so important to Pantalone, points downward at his scene partners and can be used like shaking a bony accusatory finger.





**Doctor Hume**  
a pompous intellectual

The Doctor, who vacillates between planning his son's ascent into society and getting anxious to the point of explosion, was based on an owl. The concentric bags around his eyes allowed the actor to play surprise and the puffed up braininess that is his trademark. The crooked mouth and asymmetrical eyes break up the owl features so that they are not cute or predictable.



**The Doge**  
a giddy politician

The Doge is based on a real person and takes traits from his face. His narrowed eyes are both dishonest, gleeful and fail to hide his stupidity. His crooked nose bends to the right, just like his politics. His sharp features admit him to the upper echelon, but the wart on his nose reminds us that he is flawed.





**Smeraldina**  
a witty lady's maid

Smeraldina has an awareness of the social game that surrounds her. She is better at coping with her circumstances than the other servants. She has desires for a husband and a better life but is careful about how she navigates her place in the pecking order. Her face is open and cheerful but her eyes have a sharp quality. Her eyebrows are asymmetrical, giving her a touch of skepticism.





**Brighella**  
a pandering hôtelier

A wide moustache that curls upward into a sinister grin frames Brighella's mouth. One eyebrow is crossed with a scar; a remnant of his shadier past. The other is raised as if he just heard a scintillating piece of gossip. His features blend sharp and blunt elements as he is a social climber. He has the sharpness to gain access to the world of the rich and powerful but other traits prevent him from truly belonging.



### **Decrepelino**

a servant who should be retired

Decrepelino is past his prime and then some. His eyes are framed by bags and his whole face seems deflated. His nose is blunt, like the other servants, in a chopped off way. There is a sad quality with lines pulling his face down on the edges but, in contrast, the lines rise in the middle in a hopeful fantasy of his life improving.





### **Sceptilino**

a servant resigned to his lot

The bags under Sceptilino's eyes give away his fatigue with his situation but his brow reveals his interested awareness. His wrinkled brow is slightly asymmetrical just throwing him off balance. He is not as intense as Truffaldino nor as blunt as Gruffalino. The up and then down of his face is the equivalent of a shrug.





**Gruffalino**  
a Union servant

Gruffalino is as blunt as it gets both in his face and in his personality. He knows his job, does his job and tries to think about it as little as possible. His face bears the marks of age, but probably looked similarly disaffected in his youth. His lip pulls to one side in a sneer and his eyes are hollow under his deep brow. He goes through the motions to survive and isn't interested in putting effort into anything else.



## Conclusion

This experiment sought to combine new styles of collaboration, new processes of design, historical mask construction and a less familiar style of drama into a cohesive whole. We teetered on a wire over utter dramatic chaos because we attempted to connect so many time periods, references, artistic styles, cultures and visual cues and then wrap them up in masks and appealing characters to make it all funny. Any one of those tasks is difficult by itself. The production team achieved an astounding feat in delivering a cohesive, funny play that is grounded in the histories and traditions that we researched; but the play transcends them to feel light, quick and spontaneous to the audience. In brief, our goal in theatre is always communication and it was thrilling to see years of groundwork realized in a design that animated our characters for the audience.





## Acknowledgments

This work was generously supported by Elon University Faculty Research and Development grants and Summer Fellowships and by Associate Provost Special Grants approved by Associate Provost Tim Peebles.

My process is derived from my workshop experience with the late Donato Sartori of the Centro Maschere e Strutture Gestuali.

I was assisted by talented students: Assistant Mask Maker Jessica Edwards and Assistant Scenic Designer Nick Cook

All photos are the property of Eric and Natalie Hart unless noted.





Natalie Taylor Hart is an Assistant Professor at Elon University and one of the resident Scenic Designers. She also freelances in Scenic Design, Mask and Props Crafts. Design: New York: *Slave Shack* (Algonquin Theatre); Associate Designer: *The Wiz* (Tour, The Netherlands); Regional: *Life in the Fat Lane* (Cincinnati Playhouse in the Park); Local: *Fences* (Triad Stage); *Having Our Say* (Triad Stage); *As You Like It* (Burning Coal Theatre); *Oldfriends.com*, *Blithe Spirit*, *Kind Lady* (Monomoy Theatre, Cape Cod); Educational: *The Crucible* (Columbia University), *Best Little Whorehouse in Texas* (The Hartt School); Exhibitions: USITT Design Expo, Prague Quadrennial, World Stage Design Catalog. Props and Craft Work: Assistant Properties Director, The Santa Fe Opera; New York Craft Work: The Public Theater/New York Shakespeare Festival, The Juilliard School, New York University Tisch School of the Arts, Second Stage. [natalietaylorhart.com](http://natalietaylorhart.com)

