

The Making of Marley's Mask



The person to have their head cast (for the creation of the real mask used in Geva's production, this person is the actual actor who plays Jacob Marley, but for the making of the test mask used in these photographs, one of our costume shop staff members volunteered) is prepared for the casting with a well-secured bald cap or shower cap to fully cover and protect their hair, along with a sheet or tarp to keep their skin and clothes clean, and Vaseline to smear on their face to help moisturize the skin, as well as on the eyebrows, eyelashes, and any other facial hair so the alginate used in the casting, once dried, can dislodge easily from hair follicles.

The person creating the mold and the person having their head cast should also take a moment to establish hand signals or some other form of non-verbal communication so when the person's mouth is covered with alginate and plaster, they can communicate that they are safe and comfortable, or signal that something needs adjustment.

Slow-set alginate (a structural compound in the form of powder derived from seaweed cells; this is the same compound that a dentist or orthodontist uses if a dental casting or impression is made of your teeth) is mixed in a 1:1 ratio with water to form a thick, gel-like composition. Although the alginate is slow-set, it still dries very quickly and must be applied rapidly and immediately after mixing. The alginate is applied thickly and in all grooves of the face – including the eyelids and corners of the eyes, indentations of the lips, and the skin between the nostrils (being very

careful to make sure the nostrils remain clear). Before it sets, a layer of cheesecloth (a loose-woven, gauze-like cotton cloth used commonly in making cheese and for cooking), or some other form of fuzzy cotton, is imbedded in the alginate. When set, the alginate becomes slick and nothing will stick to it; adding cheesecloth atop the alginate so it imbeds itself before it sets gives the plaster bandages used in the next phase of casting something to stick to.



The plaster bandages are purchased as a roll, and then cut into strips of varying lengths and heights. When the strips are dipped in water to moisten them, rung



The Making of Marley's Mask

out, and applied to the cheesecloth overlay of the alginate, the plaster bandages provide form and a sturdy structure. Around 3-4 layers of bandages are applied to ensure a solid cast.

With a blow-dryer set to warm, the plaster is set until dry. The alginate can feel damp and cold, so moderate warmth from the blow dryer is not harmful or too hot for the person being cast. It can take up to 30 minutes for the plaster to set, so it's important to keep in contact with the person inside the mold to make sure they're comfortable, breathing freely, and aren't experiencing panic or claustrophobia.

When it's time for the cast to come off, the person inside can simply scrunch their nose and wiggle their face around; the preparatory application of Vaseline to the face and facial hair, along with the slimy quality of the alginate, make it easy for the person to detach from the alginate layer. The person doing the casting then uses snippers to create a rear incision in both the alginate and plaster layers from the nape of the neck to the crown so that the person inside can remove the mask from their head.



The next step is to create the positive plaster cast. To do this, take the head mold that was created in the first stage of the project and fill in any holes or incisions - such as the nostril holes and the seam that was cut up the back of the mold so the person could free their head - with mortician's wax or Roma Plastilina (an oil-based modeling clay), and then tape over the filled-in areas with duct tape. The goal is to close up any holes, cuts, or other areas that would allow a substance to leak through, and to create a bowl (with the top of the skull being the bottom of the bowl, and the neck opening being the top). The head mold is then placed opening-up in a box with rags, foam, newspaper, or other materials surrounding it so that it cannot move within its container.



Ultracal 30 (a low-dust gypsum cement plaster) is then mixed with water in a roughly 1:2/3 ratio (it should be the consistency of gravy and cling to a utensil, but also be pourable). In a steady stream, the cement mixture is poured into the head mold until it's flush with the top. Gently tap or rock the box containing the mold to release the air bubbles (which can create holes or make the final form structurally unsound) until no more bubbles rise to the surface. The mask will take 12-24 hours to cure, depending on temperature and humidity. The cement heats up as it cures, so if the mask is solid and cool to the touch, it's ready to be de-molded. This is done by cutting the plaster and alginate up the back seam again so that the cement face can be extracted.

The craftsman then uses Roma Plastilina clay to sculpt additional features onto the plaster mold. In our case, we need the mask to resemble a corpse who has been dead

The Making of Marley's Mask

for seven years, so adding a protruding brow, enlarged nose, and build up around the cheekbones will help give a gaunt look and make the eye sockets appear sunken in.

A sheet of Thermoplastic (a generic term for a plastic that comes in bead or sheet form and, when heated, becomes moldable like a clay, but cools back to a solid) is heated up with a heat gun or steam from an iron until it reaches the consistency of clay.



The thermoplastic is then stretched across the plaster face and pressed into all the grooves of the facial features to create the mask the actor will actually wear. Thermoplastic sets fairly quickly and, when hardened, is able to easily detach from the plaster face. If additional shaping is needed, it can be heated again and re-molded.



The thermoplastic face mask, after removal from the cement form used to shape it, is then manipulated with paint, tape, hair, clay, etc. to give it the texture, color, and look of a corpse, with skin peeling back from the bone and a detachable jaw. A painted mesh hood with a zipper up the back (for easy on and off access for the actor) snaps onto both the jaw and the mask. This mesh hood is the piece that comes in direct contact with the actor's skin during performances, so this piece - unlike the rest of the mask - is washable. The actor playing Jacob Marley is taken to the eye doctor and fit with white contact lenses that make his eyes appear to be just eye sockets with no eyes or pupils. When the mask is paired with

the contact lenses, the rest of Marley's costume, the chains and trunk, and sound effects that manipulate the actor's voice, the result is truly fresh from the crypt.

