

Strange**face** theatre company

Strangeface** Mission Statement**

Strange**face** is a theatre company committed to producing an intimate fusion of mask, puppetry and live music. Its style arises from twin observations:

- that it is not in the interests of consumer culture to encourage imagination in its participants
- we live in an age where the individual is championed above the group

In response to this Strange**face**'s practice is to:

- create theatre in a variety of spaces, which makes its audience aware of it's own imaginative participation through various techniques
- elucidate the fact that identity is more transient than we would believe

In practice both of these aims can be deeply empowering. At the end of our performances we add time for audiences to come up on stage, to try on masks and play with puppets. We believe this helps them to see that the difference between the sum of the parts they are now having a close look at and the whole they have just experienced is their own imagination. To a great extent they are responsible for the experience they have just had. In the case of mask and puppet theatre, showing how the magic is created makes the magic stronger.

Strange**face**'s influences are diverse and growing. They include the mask cultures of Japan and Italy, the plays of Shakespeare and Brecht, the animation of Jan Svankmajer, Jirí Barta, Tim Burton and Nick Park, and contemporary companies such as Trestle, Faulty Optic, and Complicite. Our practice is also influenced by research into the application of Chaos Theory to semiotics and cognitive theory.

Strange**face** is experienced at creating theatre that is multilayered and as capable of engaging the young as the old. Theatre should be a gothic experience. It does not have to reveal itself fully to be enjoyed; there is a boredom that accompanies understanding; which leads to imaginative disengagement. Mask and puppet theatre reorders an audience's perception. In removing our most reliable guide in communication, the movement of the face, the audience is forced to use other clues. Mask theatre allows an adult to see with a child's eyes and imagination.

Strange**face** is committed to this inclusive theatre. In a culture where we are groomed to consume there is a tendency to see theatre as a product. It is marketed as such and it is consumed to the greater degree by strangers sitting in the dark in specially designed buildings. Marketing culture demands that a

demographic be identified and sold to. This in turn has affected the type of theatre that prevails in our arts centres – market friendly theatre. Strangeface has learnt much from performing nationally on the rural touring circuit where one has to appeal to as many as possible. If a village has a population of only 200, why aim a show at only the 20 to 30 year olds?

A rural show is an event not a product. Word of mouth is the major contributor to ticket sales and the show itself is the catalyst to a social gathering; which will be talked about in the community for days or weeks to come. Strangeface works hard to encourage this sense of event and has gained a strong reputation for supporting the other currencies in circulation here. Many of the transactions are to do with giving to one's community and the kudos a volunteer or group of volunteers receives for pulling off a successful event. This helps to create a sense of self-esteem in a community and a feeling that they can organize their own entertainment rather than relying on the nearest town's art centre. In the light of growing calls for localism and an awareness of environmental concerns, Strangeface feels this theatre is at its heart. Furthermore, we enjoy and exploit the paradox that in performing in multipurpose spaces that a community might associate with a Pilates class, toddler groups or a jumble sale, an audience will go on a far greater imaginative journey than in a purpose built theatre.

Strangeface is enjoying a growing reputation in arts centres and though it enjoys the technical support they offer it is mindful to bring the skills and style developed in more challenging venues to bear on arts centres. Ultimately Strangeface is committed to creating work that draws on the best of rural touring and arts centres combined.

The company is also committed to outreach work. Schools, colleges and universities use our mask and puppet workshops (both making and using) not only to develop specific drama skills but also to address and encourage so called 'soft skills'. Our workshops and residencies are ideal for building confidence within groups and individuals, encouraging team work, developing problem solving skills, imaginative engagement and extending emotional vocabulary. Strangeface is constantly developing its workshops and residencies to fit with changing educational requirements.

Strangeface is often contacted by groups who identify a role we might play in their development. In these cases workshops are developed as joint projects with a specific outcome in mind. The company has had particular success working with special needs groups and those concerned with mental health and depression. Though the company does not present itself as providing 'therapy', the imaginative and metaphorical engagement mask and puppet work inspires can be extraordinarily liberating to its participants. We will continue to develop this work, enhanced with live music, as we feel there is little or no difference between the energies at work in the 'therapeutic' context and those in a more formal theatrical setting. Each feeds the other.