

MASKS is a story made up of true experiences embodied by two fictional characters, performed by two actors. We take you on a thirty year journey of these two young men lives as they struggle with manhood, while battling with their past to shed their masks. The play was inspired by real young people's experiences that I along with my writing partner Mann Alfonso have witnessed working in the group home system as residential counselors. As the creators of MASKS we're honored to say that these experiences have helped us write an award winning play.

Mann and I have a couple of things in common; we're from the North East, we have a background in theatre and we moved to LA to pursue our dream as actors. It was quite ironic that we both moved to LA, met while working at a group home and the love of theatre was the beginning foundation to our partnership that has blossomed into true friendship. The universe has a way of working things out, everything's come full circle.

My love of performing starting back in high school, performing at talent shows and other high school productions. It wasn't until I walked into the well renowned Negro Ensemble Company when I really fell in love with the stage. I can remember walking through those doors, being mesmerized by the pictures on the walls of all the famous actors that performed with the Negro Ensemble Company. This place has produced some of the greatest thespians of our time like; Angela Bassett, Samuel L. Jackson , Lou Gossett Jr., Phylicia Rashad, the list goes on. The one picture that really stood out to me was a picture of my favorite actor Denzel Washington in the production of Soldier Play in which he shared a 1982 Distinguished Ensemble Performance Obie Award for his role as Private First Class Melvin Peterson.

At the time I was fresh out of high school, I didn't have any real theatre credits but I knew that I wanted to be apart of N.E.C. I walked into the office, without an appointment and I asked the young lady at the desk, "Can I audition to be apart of the N.E.C.?" She looked at me like, "Really kid" and stated that they weren't auditioning right now and when they do I would need an appointment. Persistent as always, I didn't let this stop me. I then volunteered my services free of charge to help sweep the stage, be a gofer, anything. The young woman hesitated for a moment, looked me in my eyes, saw the determination and said, "You know what, I have something for you to do." She happened to be the stage manager and she offered me an internship as a stage hand. I was ecstatic! I met the cast, the crew, the director and after some time they gave me a shot at understudying. Then, the day came for me to hit the stage with the N.E.C. and I was hooked ever since.

Let's fast forward, let's say, some... many years later, without giving a way my age. I moved to LA to chase my dream to become an established actor and writer. I took a job working the graveyard shift as a residential counselor for a group home facility. I've worked in this field before moving to LA and I needed a job because we all know that every actor in LA has to have a job to pay the bills. This also gave me the opportunity to write while working the graveyard and auditioning during the day.

A couple of months have past after trying to get auditions and book work and I realized that I have to create my own work. I decided on writing a one man play about the very thing that I knew a lot about and that was demographic that I worked with. I was in the beginning stages of my writing process when I attended a weekly in service meeting at our job where they had us all screen a documentary on kids

growing up in the system. The stories were heavy and draining. If it wasn't for Mann Alfonso's humor throughout the meeting everyone would've left depressed needing some Prozac. That's when a light bulb went off in my head. I needed a comedy aspect to add a perfect balance to such a heavy subject matter and he was the perfect person to bring on. I needed tragedy and comedy, the formula that dates back to Ancient Greek Theatre.

I approached Mann with this proposition and he accepted the offer full heartedly. Together we embarked on this life changing writing experience. We came up with the concept of telling the stories of these two characters, who grew up in the system, become friends and both figuratively wear masks to hide their pain. We shared our experiences of the young people that we've worked with over time. We would get together during the day to develop the characters, flush out the structure and write the play during our graveyard shift. The writing process was nostalgic. We would be writing scenes about things that just happened while working our shift. The experience was cathartic. The play wrote itself.

After two months of writing, it was time to showcase our work. Some said, "There is no way you could write a play and put it up in two months time." They even doubted the fact that we could direct ourselves. Well, we did. We produced and directed it on a very, very, tight residential counselor budget. We went out and purchased our wardrobe, props, built our set, designed the lighting, the sound, found a crew, found a theatre, rehearsed the play, loaded in and performed to a packed house at NoHo Art's District, Secret Rose Theatre in the fall of 2007. The audience consisted of group home residents and staff, friends, avid theatre goers and the NAACP Theatre Award Nominating Committee. The constant laughter from the audience and the talking to the characters on stage by the group home kids validated that our work was authentic.

Since then MASKS was nominated and won an NAACP Theatre Award for Best Playwright – Local at a star studded event at the Kodak Theater in August of 2008. We went on to perform throughout theatre's in LA, for group homes and we made our East Coast premiere as selected participants of the largest theatre festival in North America the NYC International Fringe Festival in the summer of 2010.

We'd like to invite anyone who is willing to jump aboard and take this emotional roller coaster ride into the world of MASKS.

MASKS, presented by Masks Productions in association with J.E.T. Studio's, opens January 20 – February 21; Tuesday, February 7 and 21 at 7:30 pm; Fridays at 8 pm; Saturdays at 7 pm; Sunday, January 22 at 3pm; Tickets: \$20; Seniors/Students: \$15; Groups 10 +: \$12; J.E.T. Studios, 5216 Lankershim Blvd., North Hollywood; 818-358-3453 or masksplay.eventbrite.com.