Elizabethan Masques

The form of entertainment known as Masques first became popular at the court of King Henry VIII, the father of Queen Elizabeth. And this form of Renaissance Upper class entertainment continued into the Elizabethan era. A Masque was a lavish, dramatic entertainment often spoken in verse, usually performed by masked, disguised players representing mythological or allegorical figures.

The disguised players in the Elizabethan masques were usually members of the Elizabethan court. Elizabethan Masques were accompanied with music and dance at the beginning and end of the performances and during the interludes. Elizabethan masques had unusual names such as the 'Tinternell', 'Maske of Queens', 'The Earl of Essex's Measure', Lord Zouch's Maske and the 'Turkeylony' - many of these titles reflected the names of the patrons who employed Elizabethan dramatists and composers to produce new masque productions. Elizabethan Masques were performed at various festivals, celebrations such as Christmas, weddings and other revels. The Masques of the Renaissance fused music, dance, poetry and drama into one splendid entertainment.

History of Elizabethan Masques - the Mummers

The history of the Elizabethan masque dated back to the ancient custom and ritual of 'Mumming' which were performed by 'Mummers'. The first mummers performed mimes, plays without words re-enacting old stories, legends and myths particularly those about Saint George. The term Mummer therefore derives from the old Middle English word 'mum' meaning silent! All Mummers were disguised with vizards or masks and referred to as 'Guisers'. The important element of disguise was passed on to the Masques of the Renaissance. The mummers were various male members from the community - many played the same role for years. The Mummers were traditionally associated with Christmas and their torch light processions through the villages and appearance at the Manor House or Castle were greeted with great excitement. The Mummers entered the Great Halls with loud blasts from trumpets and drums and the blaze of many torches. Over the years dialogue was added to the mummer's plays - they became a forerunner of the theatre. The element of disguise continued and the identities of the Mummers were concealed.

When dialogue was added to the plays of the Mummers they also disguised their voices to conceal their identities. The Mummers introduced additional elements to the plays which became increasingly entertaining with the addition of jokes, jests, songs and dance.

The Staging and Scenery of Elizabethan Masques

The staging of the Renaissance Masques was extremely important. In later years even great architect Inigo Jones was employed to produce lavish sets accompanied by various mechanical devices for the Jacobean masques. Great attention was paid to the indoor sets and scenery used
for Elizabethan Masques. Expensive items of furniture and paintings were borrowed to embellish the scenery, sets and stage areas. The 'props' and accessories were even more fantastic and included items such as gilded chariots and fountains. Scenery was designed for temples and the facades of castles. Devices were developed to produce thunder & lightning effects. Elizabethan masques were also performed outdoors during the summer months.

**Costumes worn in Elizabethan Masques**

Elizabethan masque costumes were fantastic and lavish. No expense was spared in terms of costume design and the fabrics and materials used to make the masque costumes. Despite the attention paid to scenery and props the Courtiers who performed in the Elizabethan Masques took center stage. The Elizabethan masque costumes were opulent and fantastic. Unlike the costumes of the Elizabethan theatre many Elizabethan Masque costumes reflected the style, costume and fashion of the masque subject. Fantastic Costumes representing Greek Gods and Goddesses on Mount Olympus, fairies and mythical creatures were created. Wigs were used to add to the effect of the costume and the masques integral element of disguise. Elaborate and fantastic make-up was applied. To provide a contrast to the fashionable white make-up which was used by Elizabethan women an unusual black make-up was applied to the face - providing the only exception to the wearing of a mask.

**Women were permitted to perform in Elizabethan Masques**

A great deal of attention is paid the the fact that Lower Class women were not allowed to perform on the Elizabethan stage - it would have been considered to be lewd and highly immoral. This stance was not taken regarding the appearance of Upper Class women in court masques! The mother of Queen Elizabeth certainly performed in masques! The first recorded appearance of Anne Boleyn at the Tudor Court was on March 1, 1522 at a masque! Female members of the Elizabethan court were also permitted to take part in masques! Perhaps the element of disguise allowed for this - vizards or masks were always worn by the performers. But the more probable explanation was that these wealthy women of the court wanted to be included in such an exciting diversion as a masque. The masque provided the opportunity to wear fantastic and opulent costumes! The Elizabethan masque provided the opportunity to show-off their dancing and singing skills! All members of the court, both men and women could take part 'disguising' themselves in these lavish and exotic spectacles. It is therefore no real surprise that women of the Elizabethan court were allowed to perform in masques!

**More About Elizabethan Masques**

Additional details, facts and interesting information about the Elizabethan Theatre and Elizabethan Music can be accessed via the Elizabethan Era Sitemap.

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