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### To Conceal or Reveal?

Interview with mask maker Zarco Guerrero

By Kat Avila | Web Published 6.4.2006



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I met Arizona-based mask maker and multi-media artist Zarco Guerrero in November 1992 at the TENAZ (Teatros Nacionales de Aztlan) XVI International Theatre Festival in San Antonio, Texas. At that time, collectors were already paying \$1,000 to \$3,000 for his masks. He honed his mask-carving skills in Asia and Mexico; this was in addition to art studies in Europe and New York. He lived in San Francisco during the Chicano mural movement in the early 1970s.

In my chat with him at TENAZ XVI, Guerrero had said, "I grew up in an artistic family. My father was a portrait painter and a surface archaeologist.... So I spent all my life growing up around the inn painting portraits of people and also exploring ancient desert cultures of Arizona, as well as the existing tribal ceremonies and rituals around Arizona. As I grew up, I also developed an interest in my Native American heritage, as well as skills in portraiture and painting...."

"I became an artist in Mexico.... I began to develop a style right away. While I was studying realism and sculpture--which were my two loves--I discovered the use of masks in Mexican dance and ritual. Of everything I had seen in Mexico and up to that point of my life, it was truly the mask that captivated me. Part of the reason it captivated me is because I was trained as a portrait painter, as a portrait sculptor, all my life I had been trained to paint faces."

For LatinoLA readers, I caught up with this fascinating artist before he left on a trip to Japan this month. He and his talented family, which includes producer/manager wife Carmen de Novais and their three children, provide positive role models for young people for their contributions to the community.

KAT AVILA for LatinoLA: Is the intent of most masks to conceal or to reveal? In contemporary society, it seems the word "mask" has negative connotations associated with trying to hide something, such as "He 'masked' his true intentions." Or the image of a masked bank robber or a hockey-masked Jason of "Friday the 13th" comes to mind.

ZARCO GUERRERO: The mask can both conceal and reveal. That is the power of the mask to transform the wearer and thus to transfix the viewer. The mask does have a stigma of negative force. But it is my intention to harness that force and give it a positive twist.

LLA: What have you done mostly since the documentary "The Mask of El Zarco" was broadcast by PBS in 1984?

ZG: Since 1986 when I lived and worked in Japan and Bali, my main focus has been woodcarving and performances.

I continue to carve in many styles, but my obsession has been the Japanese Noh mask. For the past 18 years I have dedicated a lot of work to this ancient esoteric art form.

LLA: Are there major differences in mask carving in the countries



where you've studied?

ZG: Mask styles and traditions vary greatly among the cultures that use them. Japan is very strict and precise. Mexico allows much more freedom in approach and style. The sanctity of the mask is what is truly universal.

LLA: You played with the Latin band Zum Zum Zum for a number of years, so maybe it's not too surprising that your oldest son is musical and he was playing professionally with the group at age 10.

ZG: Zum Zum Zum and Latin dance music was a large part of our family life. We toured extensively and had great fun. Now my performance art makes it hard to maintain a band. My family and I do special occasions such as festivals and museums, primarily in the Southwest.

Quetzal, our oldest son, and Tizoc, who is now 17, continue to perform and record. Quetzal is a Latin jazz violinist, as well as a talented visual artist and dancer. He continues to do theater and movies as well. [See Quetzal Guerrero's web site at: <http://www.qviolin.com> ]

Tizoc is a Capoeira [martial art] champion, and our daughter Zarina--just had her quincenara--is a high school cheerleader. Go figure!

LLA: You have an exhibition of over 150 of your masks called "Caras y Mascaras: Faces & Masks--Retrospective Exhibition" that is available to tour. Can you tell me more about that?

ZG: "Caras y Mascaras" represents over 30 years of making masks for theater and dance companies around the country. Most of the masks have been danced, so they represent the art and cultural expression of a vibrant community. I selected the masks and sculptures that represented the last 30 years of providing art as a social service.

LLA: Of all your masks, the Nagual masks are the most intriguing because they are new masks inspired by Mexican mask tradition and you see the overlaying of human and animal.

ZG: The Nagual mask finds its inspirations in the ancient dance masks of Mexico, particularly in the state of Guerrero. The blending of animal and human motif is typical of Mexican stylistic expression.

LLA: "Face to Face in a Frenzy" is a one-man play by you in which masks are extensively used.

ZG: I perform "Face to Face in a Frenzy" constantly in schools, colleges, and conferences. I average three shows a week. It keeps me on the road pretty regularly. The only drawback is I miss time in my studio. For that reason, I escape to places like Japan, Bali, or Mexico to carve with master maskers. It's too hot to carve outside in Arizona during the summer, plus I need the seclusion to concentrate on the difficult task of carving.

After every "Face to Face" performance, I also do a question/answer period. I get amazing questions, comments, and suggestions from the audiences, both young and old.

LLA: What do you and your family do for relaxation?

ZG: For relaxation, we eat. I wish I could say we play music to relax, but we usually play when we have a gig together! Otherwise, a 'comer'!!! Both my wife and I are gourmet cooks and love to impress each other and our kids with our delicious concoctions.

LLA: Zarco, thank you for your time!

For further information, please see Zarco Guerrero's web site at:

<http://www.zarkmask.com>

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