

# **The Masque of Leonardo**

**by Jon Lipsky  
For The Boston Science Museum's Leonardo Exhibit**

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(The set is a replica of Leonardo's study. Stage left is the Mona Lisa. Stage right is a model of the flying machine.)

ACTOR is dressed as Leonardo might have dressed at court.  
MASK MAKER is dressed as Leonardo might have dressed in his workshop.

A sign on the set reads: "The Last Days of Leonardo -- A Play"

As the audience gathers, ACTOR is telling them that the play will start momentarily, while MASK MAKER works busily on a mask.)

ACTOR

Come on, come on. These people are waiting.

MASK MAKER

One moment. I am just putting the finishing touches on. There.

ACTOR

Good.

(Fanfare, then, grandly, to the audience)

Signore e signori, ladies and gentlemen -- allow me to present to you "The Last Days of Leonardo" starring...me. With technical help from the mask maker here.

(He puts the mask on, nods to MASK MAKER.)

MASK MAKER

(reading in declamatory style) The maestro goes to Rome!

(ACTOR sets off)

Still searching for a reliable patron, Leonardo Da Vinci, now in his sixties, is called to Rome, to the court of the new Pope, Leo the X.

(Church music. MASK MAKER plays the Pope. ACTOR kisses his ring.)

ACTOR

(to the audience) Only 33 ducats a month they pay me? Can you believe it?

(MASK MAKER lays on the table like Michaelangelo painting a ceiling)

MASK MAKER

He spends his nights in the hospitals dissecting corpses until he's accused of practicing... The

Black Arts and forced to end his studies.

ACTOR

Oh, human stupidity...your folly... II 1210

(ACTOR puffs as if setting off flying toys)

MASK MAKER

He spends his days making puff-up flying toys (ACTOR: Puff) and scaring the ladies at court with...

ACTOR

(as a dragon): Haaa!

MASK MAKER

Ahhhh! -- a fake dragon.

ACTOR

(to the audience) I have wasted my hours. Just wasted my hours. 376.

(ACTOR is reduced to making doodles in the air.)

MASK MAKER

(imitating his doodling) And this great painter, sculptor, artisan and engineer wiles away his idle moments...

ACTOR

(muttering) Spirals.. spirals.... spirals ... (Etc.)

MASK MAKER

...making repetitive geometric drawings in the margins of his notes...

ACTOR

Spirals in spirals in spirals in... (Etc.)

MASK MAKER

-- the equivalent of Shakespeare doing crossword puzzles.

ACTOR

(Suddenly stops, takes off his mask) Wait a minute. Wait just a minute. Are you trying to give the impression that Leonardo Da Vinci, the quintessential Renaissance Man, wound up his life an unfulfilled failure?!!

MASK MAKER

Well, of course. Didn't you order his failure mask to portray his last days?

ACTOR

Not at all.

MASK MAKER

But you yourself admitted that half the things he started never got completed, and most of his inventions never saw the light of day. Even the Pope complained that he could never seem to finish anything.

ACTOR

Maybe so. But Leonardo has been an inspiration through the ages...

MASK MAKER

Oh, you want his inspiration mask. Why didn't you say so.

(Hands him a different mask)

Try this.

ACTOR

It better work.

(MASK MAKER urges him to step forward. Fanfare.)

Signori, signorini, ladies and gentlemen, the last -- and glorious! -- days of Leonardo.

(Puts on the inspiration mask)

MASK MAKER

The maestro goes...

ACTOR

... to Rome!

MASK MAKER

....to France!

ACTOR

...to France!

(Trumpets sound; MASK MAKER puts on a King of France mask; ACTOR hands the script to MASK MAKER )

MASK MAKER

Comes a clarion call from the young King of France. Inviting Da Vinci to spend his last days as adviser to the royal court.

ACTOR

I will continue. I will continue...

MASK MAKER

And in the window of this room -- his last room -- he touches up the still unfinished Mona Lisa in the twilight of his years.

(He touches up the Mona Lisa in the room)

ACTOR

Just as a well-filled day brings blessed sleep, so a well employed life brings a blessed death. Ahhh...

(Leonardo collapses on his death bed; Angelic music)

MASK MAKER

The King of France rushes to his bedside to hear his last words.

ACTOR

I must work.

KING

Rest.

ACTOR

I must work.

KING

Rest.

ACTOR

I MUST...

KING

Rest.

ACTOR

(taking off his mask) wait a minute.

KING

Rest.

ACTOR

There's something wrong here.

KING

Rest. (Tries to lay ACTOR to rest)

ACTOR

The King probably wasn't anywhere near Leonardo when he died. That's just a glorified

legend.

MASK MAKER

(Taking off King mask) Well, of course. You're wearing the inspiration mask.

ACTOR

But I want the true mask of Leonardo.

MASK MAKER

Ah, the true mask. You never specified the true mask. I'm sorry that's impossible: the true mask of any man is interred with his bones, but I can mold the mask of Leonardo into anything you please. Artist, Scientist, Inventor - So, what is your pleasure?

ACTOR

Please, this is a play! I am an actor, a dealer in illusion. I would simply like to give the illusion of Leonardo.

MASK MAKER

Ah, the mask of illusion. Are you sure? (Takes out a velvet box)  
I must warn you: If you wear the mask of illusion you will be looking through the very eyes of Leonardo.

ACTOR

Yes, that's what I want. To see through the eyes of Leonardo.

MASK MAKER

But that could be disorienting, even dangerous. Leonardo does not see things as we see them.

ACTOR

I don't care. And I'm not scared.

MASK MAKER

What about them. (meaning the audience) It could be dangerous for them too.

ACTOR

(To audience) What do you think? Are you willing to risk it. Shall we open the box?  
(They say yes of course.)

Give us the mask of illusion.

(He opens it up melodramatically, with melodramatic music)

B-But there's nothing there.

MASK MAKER

Oh, there's something here alright. It's just invisible.

ACTOR

Oh, sure. I've heard that one before.

MASK MAKER

Look, do you want to see through Leonardo's eyes, or not.

ACTOR

Well...

MASK MAKER

Here. Try it on. Like this.

(Lights darken, we're in a thick woods)

ACTOR

(groping, like a blind man, eyes closed) Where are we? Where are we?

(MASK MAKER scatters some leaves on the set.)

MASK MAKER

You tell us. You have the eyes of Leonardo.

ACTOR

But I'm lost. I'm totally lost.

MASK MAKER

No, you're not. I brought Leonardo's notebooks to guide us.

ACTOR

What do they say?

(MASK MAKER puts on the notebook mask)

MASK MAKER

"Open your eyes... open your eyes..."

(He opens his eyes, and looks around)

ACTOR

We're in a dark forest.

MASK MAKER

Describe it.

ACTOR

I just did, a dark forest.

MASK MAKER

Look closer, what do you see?

ACTOR

Ah -- I see a cave.

MASK MAKER

Ah, the cave of Leonardo.

(He puts on his “notebook” masks and reads a passage)

“Driven by an ardent desire...

(ACTOR responds to key words and starts to bend down to look into the cave, stooping, shielding his eyes to peer in.)

ACTOR

-- an ardent desire

MASK MAKER

-- to view the abundance of strange forms...

ACTOR

-- strange forms --

MASK MAKER

-- created by nature I came to the entrance to a large cave.

ACTOR

A large cave.

MASK MAKER

Suddenly!

ACTOR

-- suddenly.

MASK MAKER

-- two emotions woke in me... fear...

ACTOR

-- fear of the dark, fear of the cave...

MASK MAKER

-- and desire.

ACTOR

-- desire to see some miraculous thing... I...

(He starts to go in but then hesitates)

What should I do?

MASK MAKER

Well, look with Leonardo's eyes. Which is the stronger: his fear of the cave, or his desire to see...

ACTOR & MASK MAKER

(chanting) -- desire to see, desire to see, desire...!

ACTOR

Oh the light, the light, I see...light everywhere.

(Suddenly there is a bright pinpoint light, shining on ACTOR;  
MASK MAKER either holds the light or holds a piece of cardboard,  
through which the light shines.)

MASK MAKER

Where is it coming from?

ACTOR

A tiny pinhole. The light is coming through this tiny pinhole. And (panicking) everything is upside down.

MASK MAKER

Relax relax: you're just inside a camera obscura.

ACTOR

A what?

MASK MAKER

A small metal box with a pinhole in it.

ACTOR

I'm in a box?

MASK MAKER

And whatever's brightly lit outside it appears on the back of the box upside down. Leonardo uses it to prove that light comes to the eye, not from the eye, as many people thought.

ACTOR

Ah, this must be how the eye works. Through a pinhole, upside down.

MASK MAKER

Not quite. But it's a pretty good guess.

(Lights change. MASK MAKER starts walking up and down in front of ACTOR)

ACTOR

Wait, through the pinhole, I see something moving.

MASK MAKER

What do you see?

ACTOR

I see a young man walking...

(MASK MAKER walks)

MASK MAKER

A man walking. Is that all?

ACTOR

No, I see how his clothes fall on his body... I see the muscles move beneath his clothes.

MASK MAKER

Is that all?

ACTOR

No. I see how his weight shifts from one leg to the other.

MASK MAKER

Is that all?

ACTOR

No, I see the life he's led etched into the lines of his face.

(Light shift, music shift, maybe ocean. He walks with MASK MAKER)

Oh, and now I am a man walking. Walking up.

MASK MAKER

Up where?

ACTOR

Up a mountain.

MASK MAKER

What do you see on the top of the mountain?

ACTOR

Shells. Sea shells.

MASK MAKER

Sea shells on a mountain? How can that be?

ACTOR

I don't know.

MASK MAKER

Look. Look with the eyes of Leonardo. Were they left there by Noah's Flood, like most people say?

ACTOR

Can't be.

MASK MAKER

Why not?

ACTOR

The oysters are with the oysters, the clams with the clams. They're left there in beds like they would be on the ocean floor. A flood would have mixed them all up and deposited them by weight and size.

MASK MAKER

Very good. You're beginning to see.

(Wind sound)

But now look out. From the top of the mountain, we're going up.

(Starts flying. ACTOR helplessly starts flying too.)

ACTOR

Up! From the top? We can't... Hey! Hellppp. What's happening?

MASK MAKER

We're flying.

ACTOR

Flying? (Looks down) Oh! We're gonna die?

MASK MAKER

Don't look down. Look at the birds.

ACTOR

The birds? You're crazy. Get me down.

MASK MAKER

Watch the birds. How do they do it?

ACTOR

Well, well, it must be they fly by pushing the air off with their wings. Yes, that's it. They fly by pushing off with the wings, and we could build wings just like that...

MASK MAKER

(reciting with Leo mask on): "the great bird will take its...flight..."

ACTOR

-- flapping like birds with ropes and pulleys...

MASK MAKER

-- "filling the universe with wonders..."

ACTOR

-- aided by a power spring...

MASK MAKER

-- "fame!"

ACTOR

-- and landing gear.

MASK MAKER

-- "eternal glory!" 1428

ACTOR

Yes, yes, yes, I wish to work miracles! 1000

(He flies joyously, model in hand.)

MASK MAKER

Excuse me, there's just one trouble.

ACTOR

What's that?

MASK MAKER

Birds don't fly by pushing off and this miracle won't work.

(MASK MAKER takes the model away from ACTOR, makes it start to crash. ACTOR starts to lose his balance and crashes too.)

ACTOR

Won't... Aahhhhhhhhh!

(Sound of crash)

MASK MAKER

If only he had taken his own advice: (Puts on the Leo mask) "Remember that your bird should have no other model than the bat and wings like a bellying sail." inventions 52

(Mournful music: MASK MAKER starts setting up dominoes; they could actually be big cardboard bricks kids use as blocks).

ACTOR

(muttering to himself): Di mi se mai fu fatta alcuna cosa. Di mi se mai... (Etc.) 237 Clark

MASK MAKER

Come on, cheer up. It can't be all glory.

ACTOR

Di mi se mai fu fatta alcuna cosa. Di mi se mai...! Di mi se mai! What am I saying? Does anyone out there speak Italian? I have this phrase rushing through my head. Di mi se mai fu fatta alcuna cosa.

MASK MAKER

Tell me if anything was ever done. Tell me if anything was ever done. It appears over and over in his notebooks.

ACTOR

The Last Supper, the Bronze horse, ruined, ruined...

MASK MAKER

(Simultaneously, wearing his Leo mask): Di mi se mai. Di mi se mai...

ACTOR

(Seeing the dominoes): All the unfinished projects and unfulfilled dreams.

MASK MAKER

(Simultaneously) Di mi se mai. Di mi se mai...

ACTOR

What good is this mask. Even with the eyes of Leonardo, this is what life is like.

(He tips over a dominoe and they all topple forward,  
Music of toppling dominoes continues, like a cascade.)

MASK MAKER

Time, a falcon!

(Pause; he steps closer to ACTOR and moves in on him like a bird of prey, speaking with a “falcon” voice.)

In his book he writes: “Time, a falcon.” For him, Time, is a falcon, a bird of prey ready to descend and tear you to shreds, ripping and destroying your body and the body of your works and days.

ACTOR

(simultaneously) No. No No No.

(The falcon tears him apart)

Ahhhhhh. Death. This is death!

MASK MAKER

(whispering, with old man voice) Don’t be scared. Look through his eyes, am I death? Am I death?

(Pause)

ACTOR

(Surprised) No, you’re just old. An old man.

MASK MAKER

That’s right. And where are we?

ACTOR

(Looking around) In...in a hospital room.

MASK MAKER

Right again, sonny. I’m not “Death” but I’m near death. (cackles wickedly)

ACTOR

Just how old are you, old man?

MASK MAKER

Oh, one hundred, hundred and one, something like that.

(He mutters to himself while ACTOR talks to the audience:  
”Oh, I’ve seen a thing or two in my day. That’s right,  
I was in the war. Fought the Turk, I did...” (Etc.)

ACTOR

(To the audience) So we're sitting in the Church hospice. And I'm asking him what it's like to be so old. And he's telling me all about his life and times.

(Pause)

And now he's breathing softly.

(Pause)

And now he goes to sleep.

(Pause)

And now his breathing stops.

(Pause)

And now he's dead.  
Such a sweet death...

(ACTOR starts to lay MASK MAKER out, as if to wash him down, and cut his body open.)

And now they're leading me to dark morgue in a basement room. Now they're washing his cadaver with hot water and lime, and now I have a saw and scalpel in my hand. And now...

(He raises an imaginary knife over MASK MAKER)

I cut into his flesh to see what could cause such a death, I remove his liver, his kidney, his spleen, I separate his muscles from his bones. I study the insides of his veins.

(Pause)

And then I walk away.

MASK MAKER

(Still lying down as a corpse):

And what does it feel like inside the mask of illusion now?

ACTOR

Cold. Cold and calculating.

(MASK MAKER rises like a ghoul wearing a skull mask.  
he speaks ghoulishly, while ACTOR speaks coldly)

MASK MAKER & ACTOR

(echoing, to the audience) "Be forewarned, If you have love for this work, you may be turned from it by disgust, or the fear of staying up all night in the company of corpses." 375

(Suddenly MASK MAKER / ACTOR in a period dance.)

MASK MAKER & ACTOR

(Singing): A long time ago the world began,  
With a snake and an apple and the rib of a man,  
It's dust to dust, and ashes to ashes,  
So now we all must... lift our glasses!

(Raucous 15th Century carnival music; they continue to dance.)

ACTOR

This pageant. This festival. What am I doing here?

MASK MAKER

Are you kidding -- you're the impressario. You designed that mountain for the Duke of Milan's wedding. See...

ACTOR

The mountain -- it's opening...

MASK MAKER

Your winch mechanism.

ACTOR

To my dazzling view of Paradise...

MASK MAKER

Gold dome, colored lights, and brightly attired actors playing the seven planets.

ACTOR

Well, I never knew this mask would make me so "festive."

MASK MAKER

Are you kidding. Leonardo was known for putting on a good show?

ACTOR

What show?

(He shoves ACTOR out in front of the audience,  
with a mike in his hand, like a standup comic.  
We hear canned applause. MASK MAKER prompts him.)

MASK MAKER

Tell 'em one from Leo's jokebook.

ACTOR

(speaking very fast, reading from the notebooks) Thank you, thank you, great to be back here

in Milan. So, have you heard the one about the priest and the painter. This priest, see, was making the rounds of his parish on Easter Eve to sprinkle holy water in the houses. So he comes up to the painters room, and sprinkles holy water on his pictures. Hey, says the painter, you're ruining my pictures. So the priest says, I must sprinkle holy water on Easter Eve since it is written every good deed will be rewarded a hundred fold from above. So the painter waits till the priest leaves, then he goes to the upper window and flings a pail of water on the priest's head, saying, "How dya like that padre: There's your reward a hundred fold from above".  
(notebooks) Heh heh, get it? Your reward from above...

MASK MAKER

Your reward from above...He kills me. It's in the notebook.

ACTOR

(Pause) What is this? An audience or an oil painting?

(To MASK MAKER)

This is ridiculous. This frivolous face of Leonardo feels like a facade.

MASK MAKER

What's beneath it, deeper down?

ACTOR

Something... (Pause) something terrible.

(Crack of thunder; flash of lightning.)

MASK MAKER

What is it? What do you see?

ACTOR

I see... I see...

(Crack of Thunder; flash of lightning)

MASK MAKER

Darkness... wind... tempests at sea...

ACTOR

Darkness, wind, tempests at sea, floods of water, forests on fire, rain, earthquakes, bolts from heaven, mountains in ruin, devastation of cities.

MASK MAKER

Whirlwinds, water spouts...

ACTOR

-- ships broken to pieces, beaten on rocks. Hail stones, thunderbolts.

And lightning --

MASK MAKER

-- lightning!

ACTOR

-- lightning from the clouds illuminating everything.

MASK MAKER

This is the apocalypse! His vision of the end of time!

ACTOR

On the hilltops terrified animals collect together in a frightened crowd.

MASK MAKER

Desperate men, weapons in hand, defend small shelters against beasts of prey.

ACTOR

In the waters, children cling to capsized boats as the tempest sweeps more victims from the shore and rolls the waters over the bloated bodies of the drowned.

MASK MAKER

Ah, what dreadful noises rend the air.

ACTOR

Ah, how many mothers weep over their drowned sons and shake their fists at heaven to curse the wrathful gods.

MASK MAKER

Ah, how many fathers in anguish, gnaw the knuckles of their own clasped hands till the raw flesh bleeds.

ACTOR

The crazed ones take their own lives, flinging themselves from lofty cliffs, falling on their own weapons.

MASK MAKER

-- while others fall upon their knees in silent prayer...

ACTOR

-- and cover their eyes that they might not see...

MASK MAKER & ACTOR

...the cruel slaughter of the human race by the wrath of God.

(Whispering, as the lights go down, simultaneously)

Darkness, wind, tempests at sea, bolts from heaven, mountains in ruin, devastation of cities.

And lightning from the clouds illuminating everything.

(Rush of wind and rain dies down until all we hear is  
an amplified drop of water:)

MASK MAKER

Drop...

(Drop of water)

Drop...

ACTOR

A drop of water.

MASK MAKER

A drop of water.

ACTOR

Looking into a drop of water.

MASK MAKER

What do you see?

ACTOR

I am watching this particular drop of dew, and watching, as it grows in size, how its shape  
matches and fails to match the shape of the perfect universal sphere. Leicester 52

MASK MAKER

The particular in the universal, the universal in the particular.

(Lights up on the Mona Lisa; Mona Lisa music)

ACTOR

Yes, in spite of everything, there is harmony. There is order.

MASK MAKER

Just look into those eyes.

(Lights up on the Mona Lisa)

MASK MAKER

(Leafing through the notebook pages)

Our guide book fails us now. Historians have been arguing for centuries about the Mona Lisa. But Leonardo for all his notebook scribbles leaves not one thought, one sketch, one word about this painting.

What do you see?

ACTOR

(taking the pose beside her) I see a woman. A real woman. In Florentine dress. I see how easily and graciously she seems to lean upon her chair. I see the lustre in her eye and the ambiguity of her smile. I see how the spiralling braids of her hair seem to trail off into the waters beyond. And how the misty atmosphere behind seems to mirror the mystery of her beauty. I see all these things, and yet...

MASK MAKER

And yet.

ACTOR

-- and yet, most of all, I wonder what she's thinking. clark 172 Bramly

(Lights change, special effect, the circle of the planet earth and the famous anatomical proportion inside the "cave" of Leonardo. MASK MAKER and ACTOR breathe deeply, in and out, in and out, to the rhythm of "Gaia" music)

MASK MAKER

Breath....Breathing...

MASK MAKER and ACTOR

The breathing of this machine...  
The breathing of this machine, the earth. Lei 17

ACTOR

And suddenly I'm back inside the cave of Leonardo. And from the floor of the cave a spring bubbles up and forms a stream. And from this stream I understand that the earth's body, like our body, is interwoven with a network of veins, and that the underground waters are like our blood. And I see the grand design of nature.

(Pause; Music swells and dies)

But...

MASK MAKER

But...?

ACTOR

But... I remember that old man I dissected and how his veins got clogged with age, while underground caverns, the veins of the earth, are known to get larger over time.

(Thunderclap; Sound of rain. Drumbeat starts; we are back in the woods.)

And now it's raining, raining, raining in the dark woods outside the cave. And I realize that my grand design of nature, doesn't fit the facts. It's the rain that brings the water to these mountains, and the underground streams are nothing like our veins after all.

(Rhythmic drumbeat; MASK MAKER chants like a magic incantation)

MASK MAKER

Open your eyes...

ACTOR

(An incantation) I see earth.

MASK MAKER

You have only to see things properly to understand.

ACTOR

I see water.

MASK MAKER

Open your eyes...

ACTOR

I see fire.

MASK MAKER

You have only to see things properly to understand.

ACTOR

I see air.

MASK MAKER

Open your eyes!

(Special effect, strobe lighting or something like that)

ACTOR

I see: the light! The light! The light! Take it off! Take this mask off!

MASK MAKER

What's the matter? What's wrong?

ACTOR

The mask, it won't come off.

MASK MAKER

Of course, the mask is yours now.

ACTOR

But I want it off. It's overwhelming. It makes you see the surface and the inside of things, what things do and how they work, the smallest and the largest things together and inseparable. It's too much. I see too much.

MASK MAKER

Don't worry. don't you understand yet. This is the mask of illusion. There's nothing there. (lights change)

ACTOR

Nothing there? But...

MASK MAKER

But you can put it on and take it off any time you want. (To the audience) You all can. Anywhere, anytime.

ACTOR

You mean, anybody...

MASK MAKER

Of course. Anybody. See -- look out there. They've all been wearing the mask without even knowing it.

(Walking into the audience, putting the mask over their faces)

He's wearing the mask. She's wearing the mask. He's wearing one, too. This mask is the maestro's greatest gift to us all.

ACTOR

His greatest gift?

MASK MAKER

Not his inventions, not his paintings, not his notebooks. But his eyes. The the eyes of Leonardo.

ACTOR

Oh. So! I get it now. To take off this mask all we need to do is...

MASK MAKER

Shut your eyes.

(He shuts his eyes)

ACTOR

Shut your eyes. Right! And to put it on again?

MASK MAKER

All you need to do is...?

ACTOR

-- open your eyes.

MASK MAKER

Open your eyes.

ACTOR & MASK MAKER

Open your eyes.

(MASK MAKER and ACTOR overlap singing "open your eyes" and the following verse.)

The eyes are the windows to the soul.  
The soul of the world, and the soul of man.  
They show you the part and the whole,  
The mystery of nature's plan.  
The eyes are the windows to the soul.

**END OF PLAY**