



PRESS KIT

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Short Synopsis

small town fathers and sons
become victims in a struggle for authority
within a film of a mysteriously familiar world
documenting the play of their dreams
in an ongoing festival season of mourning and excess
of Masks in the Sun ...

One Paragraph Synopsis

In the town of St. Gabriel, in the Autonomous Province of Michigan, a beautiful still life of economies and privilege on the verge of decay, a documentary filmmaker is videotaping members of a local theater group as they create an adaptation of A Christmas Carol. In the process of making his documentary, his film becomes enmeshed in stories of conspiracy and murder revolving around an old man suffering from dementia.

Simultaneously, within both the town and the old man, the spirits of Halloween and Christmas are running together. Strange scenes are being acted out in a series of masquerades, an ongoing festival season of mourning and excess being mysteriously presided over by an enigmatic figure, seemingly part human, part angel, and part trickster.

Masks in the Sun Synopsis

Certain residents of the small town of St. Gabriel in the Autonomous Province of Michigan are being visited with secret encounters of figures wearing Halloween masks, a series of characters known as the “Nound Spirits.” They all know of them, but none speak of them.

A community leader in this town, Marla Larson, the wife of a family court local judge and community theater director, is on a crusade to protect older persons from being financially exploited. Enlisting the help of a cemetery groundskeeper/actor and an administrative assistant for the defense ministry, who is also a local actor, Marla begins creating an upside-down production of Charles Dickens’ *A Christmas Carol*. In her new adaptation of this familiar story, Scrooge, now a retired automotive worker who has amassed a good sum of money in his lifetime, becomes an old man suffering from Alzheimer’s disease. Instead of the Scrooge character being the victimizer, he becomes the victim of the greed of those around him.

Marla is letting Doug Walters, a local documentary filmmaker and actor, create a documentary film of their adaptation, chronicling their work from start to finish, between a few days after Halloween to the play’s opening night in the second week of December.

Playing the role of Scrooge in their adaptation is a local actor named Jean “John” Birken. John also works as a private detective, and the cemetery groundskeeper/actor has hired him to spy on the activities of his soon-to-be-ex-wife. This investigation soon discovers

that his soon-to-be-ex is not only having an affair with a Marla's husband, the local family court judge, but also with a lawyer who is looking to unseat the judge and take his place.

The identity of the cemetery groundskeeper is mysteriously unclear. While he is one of the main characters of the story and the documentary film, he is also the film's narrator and key interviewee, going by the name of Gabriel Grab. He narrates events leading up to the evening when John, the private detective, murdered his seven-year-old son and then killed himself. He tells of a local conspiracy to unseat Marla's husband from his seat on the bench, and her attempt to turn their adaptation of *A Christmas Carol* into a kind of Shakespeare's Hamlet, where this conspiracy is exposed in the theater. And he tells of the conspiracy theories being fed to him by the private detective and murderer John, as John seems to mentally unravel while rehearsing the role of Scrooge.

When John kills himself near the last two weeks of rehearsals, the documentary director Doug Walters steps in to assume his role as the retired auto worker/Scrooge character, and the play moves along towards opening night.

The still mysterious figure of the narrator Gabriel Grab becomes even stranger as he begins speaking more about himself and his role in the story.

Masks in the Sun: Director's Statement

Masks in the Sun was an odd project from the outset, in that it was never conceived as simply a film in the traditional sense, never as a cinematic interlude where one sees a film and leaves a theater. The film was written and produced as both feature film and a portal to a whole other ongoing series of transmedia, game-like performances using stories, objects and images of the world that I had been crafting for years before its inception.

The story has its earliest origins in 1991 when I was working in Japan hanging out with practitioners of Shinto and other groups who were theatrically and ritually representing the complex world of spiritual beings and mythical history. I followed this up by working in Nigeria, learning from similar ritual performers involved in traditional medicine and masquerade performances. At this time, I was working both as a performance artist and cultural anthropologist.

Shortly after this period, I moved from the Tisch School of the Arts at New York University to doing similar work in cultural anthropology uptown at Columbia. My work in performance art and anthropology led me to become interested in the experience of persons with Alzheimer's disease, how they saw and interacted with the world around them. As a visiting researcher at the University of Miami's School of Medicine, for two years I spent a great deal of time with those with Alzheimer's and those dealing with

them. It is from learning from those in Miami that I began developing ways of making art that is performed to enact the nature and characters of dream experience.

Throughout the history of film, it has been a desire of many filmmakers to use filmmaking and screening to simulate or evoke dreamlike experience. For most of my life, as a lover of film and its form of storytelling, I was acutely aware of not only the promise of this kind of undertaking, but also of its immense difficulty. Could our dream experiences be separated from our telling stories of these experiences, or were the two forever entwined with one another, set to forever elude the work of performers and filmmakers? It was in the experiences I had among persons with Alzheimer's disease that I began to see the two might indeed be able to be separated, but not in a way that could simply be explained. In addition to being told to audiences, dream experiences needed to be felt by them. And, in addition to being told and felt by the audience members, dream experiences also needed to engage others, help cause some sort of action, or change in the world.

As a feature film, *Masks in the Sun* reflects this ongoing pursuit of how film and performance can create experiences simulating dementia in audiences, a simulation that, like my years of experience among those with Alzheimer's, is half dreamlike and half theatrical. The film is also a direct engagement with variations of a Midwestern American conservative worldview involving gun violence, conspiracy theory, and other playfully willful forms of ignorance. I studied and incorporated techniques from different genres, including documentary, true crime drama, film noir, horror and mystery, and helped the actors to help me create narrative and characters that are "experimental" in senses that extend beyond this category of filmmaking.

I actually postponed writing the "sister story" that follows and flows along with the narrative of *Masks in the Sun* to enter into the film's two-year production and post-production process, a process that was fraught with setbacks and turmoil but eventually overcome by the diligence of cast members and the film's producer.

From the beginning, *Masks in the Sun* was meant to be a portal to a fictional, transmedia world and alternate reality game called *Emblem, I*. This, along with its goal to create game-like engagement with dreamlike experience, demanded a great deal of faith from actors and others who often wanted to see what they were doing as creating a simple narrative with the usual, logical elements of stories and characterization. It was my goal to make a film from which viewers themselves have various social media and other web-based venues to pursue, engage and develop mysterious or otherwise odd ideas and images from the film. Viewers also have the ability to directly engage places and objects in the film in the real world, from a small town in Michigan with a fictional history, to contemporary urban areas of Detroit and Berlin.

I made *Masks in the Sun* to be viewed in three ways, in essence amounting to three different films:

The first is as a projected, two-hour movie in a space with an audience. I call this a “diagnostic screening.”

The second is as a film being shown in its entirety or in selected clips, but broken by performance pieces over the course of an evening. I call this a “performance screening.”

The third is as a series of four, online, streamable parts. I call this a “textual screening,” and it can be watched on computer screens or televisions via YouTube.

The film was cast and directed using local theater actors, and many key 'documentary-like' scenes were done in long, continuous shots while these actors ad-libbed their roles as writers and creators of a community-theater adaptation of Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*. The story and identities of the actors themselves weave in and out of the narrative of *A Christmas Carol*.

The film's score was composed over the span of a year by Elden Kelly, a graduate of the New England Conservatory of Music. The mood I wanted for the score needed to be thematically inspired by an old English mourning song called *The Lyke Wake Dirge*. I wanted the film itself to have the thematic resonance of a funeral march.

PRODUCTION BACKGROUND

Gabriel Embeha is a pseudonym of Drew Walker, a performance artist and cultural anthropologist. He is a self-taught director and editor with years of experience in directing projects of various kinds. Walker took the name Gabriel Embeha from an amalgam of various persons with Alzheimer's disease whom he worked with while doing research in Miami. This experience, along with previous and subsequent experiences ranging from local Shinto shrines in Japan, to state government agencies in Michigan, make up the material of his larger work for a performance art cycle called *Emblem, I* of which *Masks in the Sun* is a key part.

Gabriel came to write the screenplay out of a longtime interest in Charles Dickens' story *A Christmas Carol* and how it combined spirits, festival times, gift giving, old age, and financial corruption. He was also interested in creating a political economic portrait of crises in contemporary Midwestern America in a way that revealed their secrets while respecting their power.

Embeha's larger project involving “The Syncretic Beings Labs (SBL),” an organization he describes as “a self-styled, experimental human resources firm,” led to a story of international arms proliferation originating in a small city in Michigan and fanning out across the globe and back across decades of lives around the world. This story, now being

played out in his *Emblem, I* project, involves a global story called *The State: A Users Guide* that is inextricably woven into the more local story of *Masks in the Sun*.

Most of the characters in *Masks in the Sun* are in one way or another secretly tied to the greater events happening on a global scale.

“I wanted to tell a story in which local affairs seem to unknowingly be affecting very large global affairs, and the other way around,” explains Gabriel. “I wanted, in more ways than one, to humanize the world of international espionage, conflict, killing and arms dealing, to dramatize it without fetishizing it, romanticizing it, underestimating it.”

Masks in the Sun is a story that could very likely be true, in that acting, staging and drama are all parts of the everyday lives of so many adults working in various professions, for various organizations, from intelligence organizations, to infantry units, to business, academic work, police work, social work, and even medicine.

“There is this tendency to think of drama, acting, and staging in theater and film as somehow confined to dark, controlled, and sometimes dreamlike spaces, and not a part of the reality we operate in and talk about outside in our homes, workplaces and other public spaces,” says Embeha. “If you look at the many social and cultural milieus of the contemporary US today, though, what you are seeing is a kind of general, unquestioning, and almost demanded acceptance of the notion that all political and social reality is dramatic in nature, and there is very little outside-the-theater reality that we feel we can talk about. This even includes the reality of our own bodily, mental and spiritual suffering, and those of others like persons with Alzheimer’s disease.”

Gabriel sees our own contemporary situation of being lost in the dramatically real with ourselves and each other as being a situation similar to being with those suffering from Alzheimer’s disease. Being with people with Alzheimer’s demands a kind of interacting he has referred to as “dreama,” realizing that to those afflicted we are more similar to dream characters than who we may want to be, or think we are. “Many of those with Alzheimer’s are in some way telling us what we do not want to hear, what we’re not supposed to hear, what we can’t talk about,” says Embeha. “They are telling us that most of us are interacting with one another as characters in each other’s dreams as well as players in each other’s dramas—in a series of *dreamas* we call our lives and deaths. The big question seems to be how much space, how much freedom we have to ad lib, improvise with these dreamas in a way that doesn’t lead to the tragic circumstances, stalemates, or retreats we see in the all too common kinds of endgames depicted in *Masks in the Sun*.”

CREDITS

The Fimmakers

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|-----------------------------|-------------------|
| Gabriel Embeha | Director |
| Gabriel Embeha | Writer |
| Donna Daines | Producer |
| Gabriel Embeha | DOP, Editor |
| Elden Kelly | Composer |
| Nancy King & Judy Edsall | Costume Designers |

The Cast

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|------------------|---|
| Tommy Kawel | Gabriel Grab, Mike Brannigan, Nick Carter |
| Donna Daines | Marla Larson |
| Randy Wolfe | Jean “John” Birken, Jean “Gene” Carter |
| Chelsea Kubasiak | Pam Welles, Tammy Carter |
| Tara Bouldrey | Lisa Birken Brannigan |
| Greg Reitsma | Doug Walters, Jean “Gene” Carter |
| Gerald Stewart | Gene Sr. |
| Madeline Command | Allison Carter |
| Michael Gordon | Judge Tom Larson |
| Devin Laster | Brian Weller |
| Cheryl Hinds | Nurse |
| Jack Merucci | Boy Gene |
| Adalynn France | Girl in Nursing Home |

Liliana Walker

Ellie Carter