



The Acoustics of Ancient Theatres Conference
Patras, September 18-21, 2011

MASK, ACTOR, THEATRON AND LANDSCAPE IN CLASSICAL GREEK THEATRE*

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Abstract

Theatre is too often associated with an interior and urban performance space. Symptomatically the indoor version of the theatre has relied heavily on the face of the actor, at least since the Renaissance. When the mask occasionally displaced the face on the indoor stage it always happened as representing the interior space of a human being. The investigation of the potentialities of the mask has never exceeded the potentialities of the interior space.

In ancient Greek theatre the mask is organically connected to the theatre space. It is impossible to imagine the ancient Greek theatre without the mask, whether it is tragedy, comedy or satyr plays. All theatrical forms that developed in Athens during the 6th and 5th centuries BC were forms of masked drama. The mask was an organic element in the form of theatre that originated in the cult of Dionysus and got such great importance in the social and political life of the city of Athens and the other Greek states.

Keywords

Theatre, masks, drama

* Invited paper

1. Theatron

It is impossible to imagine an indoor theatre performance during the Greek classical period. Theatre, the unity created by the acting space and the space of the spectators, was always an outdoor space. It was part of the landscape and of a network of pre-existent spatial relationships. *Theatron* means a place where to watch, examine, contemplate. It implies always a view, *theoria*. The word is etymologically connected to divinity, *theos*, and to therapy, *therapia*.

A great deal of the Western landscape tradition, and consequently of the theatre tradition, is, since the Renaissance, based upon perspective, the system of representing three dimensional space on a two dimensional plane. The egocentric visual control provided by this technique has given the impression of the spectator's dominance of the world outside the frame and the conviction that the world can be controlled by the subject. The technique makes the spectator believe in an illusion and forget that in order to maintain it s/he has always to be an outsider, fixed in a position of created distance; doomed to be a voyeur/e. If the Renaissance theatre of perspective strived for control and exclusiveness - then the circular forms of the Greek theatre strived towards participation and communion. The performance space of the classical period is the spatial correlative of democracy where all citizens should be placed on the same level, where the theatres were modifications of the landscape and not impositions - and always conceived in consideration of the view of the surrounding landscape. The theatre and the landscape co-existed in a dynamic balance. In search for greater participation and inclusiveness of the citizens the form of the theatre changed successively from rectangular and trapezoid forms to more and more circular.

2. The Theatre of Dionysus

All ancient tragedies and comedies known to us were written in order to be performed at the Dionysus Theatre situated on the slopes of the Acropolis in Athens. Its oldest parts are from the late 6th century BC. In the beginning it probably consisted only of the orchestra, the audience standing on the hillside. Later wooden benches were built. The orchestra was surrounded by the shell shaped auditorium, the whole being embraced by the landscape. A historical move away from the agonistic and dialectical ideas of the early classical era and major changes in the relations between chorus and roles influenced the formation of the theatre. Around the middle of the 5th century a stage was erected. It seems that the theatre of Dionysus did not have excellent acoustics, but it is difficult to be sure since it underwent many changes during the centuries and is not well preserved. If we follow the development of theatre architecture from the 6th century to the beginning of the Hellenistic period in the 4th century, it is obvious that there is a desire to develop a theatre space with better acoustics and better visibility as a way to further increase the feeling of inclusiveness of the spectators.

3. The Theatre of Epidaurus

This development culminates with the theatre of Epidaurus. The theatre is not representative of the 5th century theatre buildings but contains in its architectural form one important aspect of the earlier classical theatre, the aspect of healing and catharsis. The theatre is located in the sanctuary of Asclepius, the god of health and medicine in Peloponnesus.

The building is the expression of an age that saw the flourishing of mathematics and acoustics, the influence of Pythagorean science. It is the best preserved of the classical Greek theatres and nearly all the seats are in their original places. It has remarkable acoustics for intelligibility of speech, solo delivery or unison chanting and for solo musical instruments. Rather than a single factor it is the cumulative effect of many refinements that contribute to its acoustical excellence. The theatre can accommodate 14 000 persons. The construction of the building is based on a single module. The dimensions of all parts correspond with each other in a system based on multiples of that module, which is a cubit; a unit of measurement related to the human body. The centre of the orchestra is occupied by a stone with a radius of 35 cm. This seems to be the unit and all the measurements are multiplications of this basic unit in an elaborate system of corresponding measures. The perfection of the geometrical arrangement of seats results in many early reflected sounds being received by all listeners in the auditorium almost together with the direct sound.

The tiers of seats are curved giving the auditorium the form of a shell. The audience is collected in this shell, as close as possible to the orchestra. This form retains sound, minimizes the sound energy loss during sound production and facilitates resonance. It also ensures that spectators' lines of view are unobstructed by the rows of people in front of them. The perfection of the geometrical arrangement results in the acoustical and visual excellence. Both visual and acoustic criteria dominate the design of the theatre. The lines of the auditorium converge in the area of the orchestra, where the focus at the centre of the orchestra has a magnetic force. This focused space produces an enormous concentration by the spectators who all look downwards being focused and at the same time being able to see their fellow citizens. The Greek theatre in general and Epidaurus in particular, is a democratic space that permits the creation of a union of the audience in a common body. A space that permits its inhabitants to contemplate together, a space based upon the unity of thought and emotion.

The actors can not look away from the audience or over their heads. The actors are in full contact with the audience and get energy from it without being in a dominant position, but more in a position of unity with the audience, embraced by it.

The Greek theatre had a number of constructional characteristics to support the desire to create a theatron, an architectural unit oscillating in harmony with the human voice. The possibility of further improvement of the tonal quality as well as of the amplification of the voice by the use of sounding vases arranged in the auditorium for even further reinforcement of theatre acoustics is proposed by Vitruvius in his treatise "On Architecture". The intention was that these vessels would amplify and improve the quality of the sound, creating resonance in the vases and producing an increased clarity. Even if Vitruvius meant this passage as a prescription rather than as an actual description, its importance remains the same. It shows a will to create a theatre building that can function as a great musical instrument oscillating in harmony with the human voice.

The theatre of Epidaurus is part of a complex of buildings situated in the nearby valley. They all belong to the sanctuary of Asclepius the god of health, medicine and healing. It was the most famous medical and healing centre during Antiquity with baths, springs, temples, libraries, hotel, restaurant, and stadium. The healing process was based upon the cathartic power of the water and the presence of the god in the dreams of the diseased. The mountains surrounding the theatre and the valley are: on the northern side of the valley the mountain of Arachneon which was one of the residences of Zeus and Hera, on the northern side of the valley but nearer to the sanctuary the mount Titthion where Asclepius himself was born, on the south east side of the valley the mountain of

Kynortion where Apollon Maleatas, the father of Asclepius, was born. On the southern side of Kynortion we have the mountain of Koryptheon, the residence of Artemis. This gives us a hint about how a space might be perceived as a sacred and spirited landscape.

4. The Mask

The Greek theatre masks covered the entire head. All documentation shows that up to the end of the 5th century theatre masks were closely fitted to the head. The size was probably not larger than the head, and the masks had rather small mouth and eye openings. On the masks depicted on ceramics both the whites and the pupils of the eyes are painted, suggesting that the eye holes of the original masks were as small in size as the pupils of a living person.

According to my research this feature helped the actor to concentrate, acting as a lens to focus the actor's attention. As the gaze is directed through this construction, the optic field becomes very narrow and after a while the actor has the feeling that he is looking through one single eye hole – a “third eye” – placed in the area between the eyebrows. The gaze is directed to one point, rather like a lens that focuses the rays of light. The minimization of the sight leads to the maximization of the listening to the other actors, to a different awareness of their presence based not so much on seeing but on hearing. It leads the actor to the act of *akroasis*, the act of conscious and active listening.

According to Aristotle acting is a matter of voice and there are three qualities that are considered – volume, harmony, rhythm. All these qualities are especially important for communication in outdoor theatre. The voice was the theatre's most important instrument. And the mask was the instrument to enhance the voice and give life to the entire theatre space and endow the voice with a decided directional delivery.

The form of the *whole head mask*, which covers the entire head, is based upon its function as a resonance chamber. The mask amplifies the voice, creates resonance and is an instrument designed to control the direction and the intensity of the voice. The mask is the actor's own resonance chamber, connecting him to the greater resonance chamber of the Theatron.

The fourth aspect of how the mask influences the actor spatially is the essentialization of the movements and gestures. The strong extrovert direction given by the new field of view promotes an increased awareness of the body's axis, the spine, the pelvis and the physical actions. In an outdoor theatre the actor has not only to express the role but also, simultaneously, focus the audience through his presence and movements. Being visible and discernable means being essentialized. The actor must develop presence, connections to the space, and must get rid of all the personal, parasitical movements of everyday life.

Minimizing the range of vision, maximizing the awareness of bodily movement and creating resonance the mask becomes an instrument to focus the actor in space, putting him into a state of attentiveness, alertness, intensity; focusing a point outside himself, a state of total presence, a state of emptiness. Total emptiness is thus the same as total presence; an expansion of consciousness. It is akin to standing outside oneself and watching oneself objectively. Being absent and present at the same time. Being absent - so the absence can be filled with a new presence, the presence of the role. In that emptiness, in the inter-space that arises, the actor creates space for the role – in the actor's presence the tragic archetype is born.

Mask creates an interior space for the actor. Through the mask the actor becomes ready to meet his audience, to communicate with the vast theatre space. The mask is the actors own space, inside the acting space - and both inside the theatron.

This kind of theatre is not centred upon the individual, the single actor, the single role interpretation, but upon the chorus and the narration, a theatre in which the whole ensemble creates a common body for the narrative. A living organism which is something much greater than individual roles, individual achievements, individual actors. The mask is an instrument for the creation of this common body of the chorus at the service of the narrative.

5. The Mask and the Creation of a Mythical Topos

Tragedies are based on the shared cultural heritage founded in the myths and Homeric epics. The mythic material was well known and the persons inhabiting the Greek tragedy are figures of the Greek mythology belonging to a distant past.

The mask is the actual face given to the tragic archetypes during their temporary incarnation, their returning from the landscape of the dead. The mask as the mythical face transforms the actual acting area into a Mythical Topos; the mental and symbolic space where the dramatic act of *Mythos* is unfolded. It is both the general theatrical convention and also the presence of the mask that enable the stage to be transformed into the space in front of the Palace of Agamemnon, the temple of Apollo in Delphi or Athena's temple in Athens. The *Topos* created by the mask meets the dramatic and diegetic space of the narrative. A space defined as a *heterotopia*; where the real sites found within the culture are simultaneously represented and inverted.

6. The Mask as a Projection Screen for the Audience

The mask always exists in a state of tension in relation to the text. The mask with its lack of a definite expression and with its open inexpressive face becomes a projection screen for the text. The expressionless appearance of the mask allows the projection of different expressions upon it.

When the mask is in use by the actor, it is in constant flux because of its relationship to that individual. Every movement of the actor's body, every change in tone, voice, gesture and energy transforms the appearance of the mask. Voice/body/mask are in constant transition, in response to a stream of changes in the text. To these continuous changes we should add another chain of perpetual changes also contained in the text. The mask never illustrates these changes. The mask is in continuous dialogue with the text, in continuous tension, resisting the text. The mask becomes a projection screen for the audience to project the text upon. A medium, on which the audience "sees" all the emotions and all the expressions that the text produces through the actors. The mask becomes the topos where the energies of the voice and the body meet, the topos upon which the gaze of the audience and the tragic text are projected. The mask is a channel that leads all the energy to the creation of a new organism, the narration of the Myth. The tragic mask is an instrument, a projection screen, a bridge in space. The mask is the first external resonance chamber, a link in a chain of sound that starts with the actor and ends with the theatron and its surrounding landscape.

The Greeks' interest in the voice, speech, music, sound and acoustics is based upon their theory of sound as a cathartic force. Sound as another aspect of catharsis – the feeling of purification which may be experienced through the pulsating rhythm of the human voice, through the vibrations of the body of a fellow human being. It is indeed reminiscent of modern research into the therapeutic effects on the body by music and sound as a major creational and healing form.

Theatre is a visual phenomenon as well as an acoustic one and encompasses several art forms. In many cultures theatre is synonymous with music and dance. For many centuries Western theatre has been based on text and dialogue, on Character and Plot. Categories appealing to the logical and emotional level of the audience and its desire to understand and feel. Both are connected with the semantic levels of language but they do not necessarily awaken the other more subtle levels of human consciousness that I suggest theatre did for the ancient Greeks. Based on the energy of logos and the vibration of sound, and without betraying its semantic aspects, theatre restores the soul and the body. Theatre becomes the embodiment of the principle of catharsis.

7. Mask and Myth

Theatron, the unity created by the space of the actors and the space of the spectators, was always a part of the landscape, a part of a network of already existent spatial relationships.

The space of drama is the orchestra and the stage. The auditorium is the watching place of the spectator who simultaneously watches and contemplates both upon the action in the space of the drama and upon another space, a space beyond drama, the surrounding landscape. The landscape becomes the container of the drama, a space beyond dramatic narrative in progress, a landscape where drama is imbedded in a greater narrative of divine presence. The relation between *Theatron* and its surrounding landscape is based upon the construction of a double space, where the one is dramatic and focused and the other is beyond drama, panoramic and contemplative. A double gaze is developed where drama and conflict is imbedded in the contemplative presence of the spirited landscape.

Thornton Wilder wrote about Gertrude Stein and her idea of the play as a landscape:

“A myth is not a story read from left to right, from beginning to end. But a thing held in full view the whole time. So is the landscape.”

The landscape in full view, static and wholly present in itself, is not confined to the temporal developmental and successive structures of the dramatic narrative but adds contemplation to the dramatic action and confines to the invisible mythical presence of the divine. Dramatic fiction is contained in another universe, greater and actually more present, beyond drama. The incarnations of the mythical archetypes are given face and corporeality through the mask and the actor, making the presence of the myth discernible and concrete. These human figures, oscillating between presence and absence, meet the landscape, a symbol of the presence of the invisible divine.

The acoustical aspect of the mask connects the actor with the acoustical properties of the theatre. The mask is a medium for the expansion of the actors' presence which can create intimacy by acoustics in a theatre space of great size, where acoustics is a way of forming a network of relations between actor, audience, theatre space and the surrounding landscape. The visual connection between theatre and mask makes the mask a mythical *topos* for the actor and the spectator, a space focused on the narrative, a projection screen for the text. The mask is part of this theatre form as much as is the landscape.

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