



Greek Theatre

Actors in Greek theatre

Felix Budelmann

Who were the actors of the Greek theatre? What were their costumes, how did they move, and what was the impact of the actors wearing masks? Oliver Taplin and Edith Hall examine the evidence of early representations of the theatre in ancient Greece.

Oliver Taplin, University of Oxford

There is a very clear division in the people on stage between the actors and the chorus. The actors, there are very few of them and they're very highly skilled. And it became a very highly professionalised activity.

Back in the days of Persians it looks as if there were only two actors for each set of tragedies, took all the parts between them. So that means they might be acting a young woman one moment and an old man the next moment.

They would change their masks. They may have slightly changed their costumes, obviously they changed their body language, they may have changed their voice.

But only two, and then three. Within Aeschylus' lifetime it became three. But it stuck at three. Occasionally it looks as if maybe a fourth person could take on a very small role. But it sticks at three actors.

Why does it stick at three actors? I think there are two ways of coming at that. One is that it was a highly specialised profession, and only very few were regarded as having the presence and above all the voice to be actors in a theatre of this size, and of performances of this importance.

But at the same time, actually they're wearing masks remember, and they are a long way away from the people at the back of the audience. And if you try acting in a very large acting area, you will find that once you've got more than three people speaking, it is very difficult to know who's speaking.

Edith Hall, Royal Holloway, University of London

Persians was performed by only two actual speaking actors plus the chorus and it's very interesting to see Aeschylus writing particular roles for particular kind of skills that he expected from the actors.

The messenger, for example, has some of the longest speeches in Greek tragedy and had to be able to sustain an extremely long and detailed story without losing the plot as it were and without a lot of significant action.

On the other hand the roles of the Queen of Persia and of Xerxes, require a considerable amount of effort in terms of impersonating either a woman or a king who never does anything but sing. The whole role of Xerxes is written in lyric metres which show that it was actually sung more like an operatic role.

Oliver Taplin

We don't know as much about the acting profession in these early days as we'd like. But it is pretty likely that certain actors became famous for certain kinds of acting. Certain actors became famous as singers. Other actors maybe became famous for playing women's parts. But there's no doubt when you divide the parts up in the plays, actors had to be prepared to play both male and female, and probably had to be prepared to play both old and young.

Edith Hall

The chorus were not professionals. They were actually ordinary Athenian citizens, probably very young men. It seems to have been a bit equivalent to doing military service, was actually performing in – in big choruses in the city.

Athens was a city alive with song and dance. There were literally dozens of occasions on which men got together in big groups and sing and dance together. They were very proud of this and it required a lot of discipline and in fact when your tribe had to put up a chorus for the Dionysia and you would go along and see all the young men of your town doing the big dances and so on, it was a moment for great pride.

Oliver Taplin

If we ask what did the actors look like? What did the chorus look like? We're short of good evidence. The good evidence ought to be painted on vases, because painted vases survive in the earth across hundreds and even thousands of years, and there are a lot of painted vases from Athens from this period, but for some reason that is difficult to know, if they reflect theatre, that do not reflect it explicitly.

But there is one which clearly does show a chorus, or part of a chorus rather, in performance. It's pretty early. It's probably even earlier than Persians. It may date from as early as 490. But it has six men, all costumed as soldiers, as young soldiers, all with exactly the same face, and exactly the same hair, which even though you can't see it's a mask, is very suggestive of a mask.

They all have their mouths open. They're all clearly singing. And they're dancing, and they're dancing in unison, in front of what is probably a tomb, and it's got offerings on it and there's a figure behind it.

Now the important thing about this vase is the way it gives us some idea of costume and choreography.

If we want to get some idea of what actors look like and what actors look like in relation to a chorus, there's one vase, unique. It's known as The Pronomous Vase, and it was painted in Athens, but somehow, for some reason, was exported to a Greek city in South Italy, and painted around 400, or perhaps 420, 410, so we're talking 50 years later than Persians. But what's interesting about it is it is clearly the celebration of the victorious tragic team.

It has Dionysus on it as the god, the patron god. But it also has the three actors with their costumes, with their masks, and a whole chorus holding their masks, and with the costumes, and uniquely it has their real names painted on the vase, at least by nearly all of them. So it actually identifies the individual chorus members, not by their role in the play, but by their name as citizens, while the actors don't have names by them. So the vase was clearly to celebrate the team achievement rather than the actors.

But it does celebrate the instrumentalist. In fact, he's in a pretty central position, seated beneath Dionysus, and his name is Pronomos. He was a very famous player of the aulos. And on this vase you can see actually what an aulos looks like. It is a double pipe with two reeds.

This was the instrument that accompanied tragic choruses and tragic singing. It's an instrument that clearly had a really strong piercing sound that would be heard throughout this large auditorium area.

And also the playwright is there with his name, he's called Demetrius, and he's sitting on a stool with his roll of papyrus, his script in his hand, looking a little bit disconsolate actually, he's slightly sidelined I think by the aulos player, but he is there.

The costumes of Greek tragedy were probably not as differentiated as we think of the costumes in modern drama being. There are regal costumes. There are humble people's costumes. There are slaves' costumes. Obviously there's some differentiation of male and

female. But actually, as far as we can judge from the art record, the biggest single differentiation of costume is between Greeks and barbarians.

For barbarians, and Persians in particular, we've got quite a lot of evidence of how they were costumed, or how people thought of them as costumed, because there were quite a lot of vase paintings and other artworks showing barbarians.

For the purposes of this play, there's one particularly interesting one, which is an Athenian pot from the mid century, so not long after Persians, which was found at Corinth and is unfortunately broken into fragments. But the fragments are quite interesting, you can see quite a lot from them.

And the two main features of a barbarian costume are clearly there. One is what they wear on their head. They wear a big head-dress, a big kind of cap.

The other is trousers. Trousers are very un-Greek. A Greek wouldn't have been seen dead wearing trousers. In the representation of the trousers of barbarian men on costumes, they're very highly decorated. They're highly ornate. And just luckily we've got a scrap of a leg, a trousered leg on this Corinth vase.

We can be pretty sure that in the original performance of the Persians, that the old men looked something like that. That Darius would have looked like an even more ornate version of that.

The mask became the symbol of the theatre. The tragic mask became the symbol of tragedy. The comic mask became the symbol of comedy, and in the later vase painting, including the Pronomos Vase, the actors are holding their masks.

So every actor wore a mask the whole time. Every chorus member wore a mask the whole time. The difference is the actor's masks will have been, to some extent, individualised for the roles and the chorus' masks will be very similar to each other.

What's the function of the mask though has been a... there hasn't been as much written about that as you might expect, but it is an interesting dispute, because some people come at it from ritual, and they say the mask it to do with ritual and it's a symbol of participating in an activity for Dionysus.

Other people take a very practical line. They say, No, the only reason they wear masks is because we're in a very big theatre. There's no room for minute facial expression. There's no room for the kind of psychological nuance of the face that we're used to, therefore they wear masks to be properly visible. I think a third way of coming at it and the one which I personally have my sympathy with is to say that the mask is the sign of impersonation.

That actually, when you impersonate ... we're so used to it, we're used to people, children acting in plays. But you're actually doing something rather strange. You're saying, Here am I, a young male Athenian citizen, and I'm going to impersonate being an old woman, or I'm going to impersonate being a god. That seems to be quite dangerous. I'm going to impersonate being a dead Persian King, or I'm going to impersonate being a foreign, a foreigner or I'm even in this particular play going to impersonate people with whom we had a deadly battle with in the last ten years.

It seems to me that to do that needed, if you like, some kind of barrier, some kind of barrier between the person and the role. And the way they handled that was by putting on the mask, so when you've got the mask on you have the licence to be something quite different from your real self. And when you take the mask off, you return to being your real self.

Edith Hall

As an actor the great advantage of the mask is that you can be old and ugly and still play beautiful young people and there's actually a lot of discussion of that and a lot of comment on

that. Provided you had the skills to impersonate them you could carry on acting until you were 70 or more and people did.

Secondly, actually delivering the kind of loud speeches and songs that were required in the ancient open-air theatre probably required a lot of facial distortion. It was extremely hard work. We've all seen opera singers with their features quite contorted, the mask allowed you to do that freely and concentrate simply on the acoustic effect that you were making.

The other great advantage of the mask for an actor, is that it can be very scary. There's something very sinister about a painted artefact that covers your features but animated from inside by a vital human force. And I think Greek theatre managed to combine some of the scariness of puppets or automata with the real physical full-on actorly charisma that you get with knowing there's a famous actor up there.

Oliver Taplin

Any kind of intimate acting, especially any kind of acting that's filmed, tends to use the face. Masked acting uses the whole body, the language of the whole body much more. And clearly the Greek theatre was a theatre of body language, not a theatre of facial language.

Edith Hall

There's considerable evidence from much later in the 5th century for an increasingly naturalistic type of acting. Much more fluid movement and much more attempts at real emotionally effective representation of the way people move under pressure. As early as Persians I think that the acting was much more formal and I think that such gestures as there were were probably much bigger and possibly much slower.

Persians is something of an exception however. Although it's the earliest Greek tragedy the text actually tells us about several gestures and things that went on in the course of the play.

One is all the ritual gestures of mourning, the chorus do a lot of breast beating and beard-plucking and they even rend their clothes in their despair.

And secondly there's a curious word which means something like 'softly stepping' which they constantly use of themselves. Somehow or other they impersonated the gait of people wearing softer footwear than the Greeks were used to. The Greeks tended to wear leather sandals. They had some kind of soft slippers on and they did some rather strange walking.

My own subjective feeling, having read this text for several years, is that it was an exotic fantasy. It was an Athenian's imaginative reconstruction of what went on in an eastern court. I think that the dresses were gorgeous, I think that the actors actually really went overboard with what we would call very racist impersonation of these orientals. I think the effect may have been quite like Gilbert and Sullivan's *The Mikado* when it's actually trying to pretend what it's like to be in a Japanese court. Probably had more to do with fantasy than with fact. elicited from it.