

Our evidence for ancient Greek theatrical masks is spotty at best: they were made of materials not durable enough to survive archaeological time, and what images we have are problematic. Sculptural representations are generally from later than the period of extant plays, and vase images “melt” the masks onto performers’ faces unless the actors are dressing or undressing. Artists’ depictions of eye and mouth openings, particularly on vases, tends towards real facial features rather than the proportions necessary for the actors to see and be heard.

The Theater of Dionysus had a playing space roughly sixty feet in diameter for an audience of as many as 15,000 spectators. On a typical single day of the Great Dionysia tragedy competition, actors and chorus members performed four to six hours of intricate and lengthy speeches and songs *in masks* for that audience. The scholarly and practical question is *how were the masks constructed in such a way that the performers could be heard clearly?* And we know that they *were* heard clearly: after a single performance, plays are quoted or parodied for years afterwards, which could happen only if the audience could pick up on those allusions with great precision.

Following on the work of Vervain and Wiles (2001), McCart (2002), and Vovolis (2003), among others, we built masks in 2006 that fit the ancient evidence as much a possible and that proved to be successful in a live production of *The Clouds* in the Randolph College Greek Theatre. The masks do not hamper the ability of the actors to be heard, and, in fact, they are an actual help for a problem of the Greek theater: in the great curved sweep of the *orchêstra*, an actor, unless he stays far up stage, must often have his back to at least part of the audience. Any production in a Greek theater quickly finds that that sort of staging would be a terrible waste of space. In productions that make full use of the *orchêstra* as a playing space, unmasked or half-masked productions have problems losing dialog when an actor turns to address another part of the audience or a character on the other side of the curve.

With our new masks, however, built on the basis of ancient evidence, an actor with her back turned could be heard nearly as clearly as when she was facing the listener directly. The effect was consistent: without a mask, an actor could not be heard from behind; with the mask, she could, and as clearly as when she was facing forward. These masks show that ancient actors had a remarkable range of movement, and that range of movement, in turn, allows for a more realistic acting style than some think possible in the Theatre of Dionysus.

This paper documents and demonstrates (with video and the masks themselves) the results of the 2006 research and construction of masks as well as further work to confirm the acoustic properties of the masks and to ensure that those properties are achievable with materials available to the ancients.