Three Electras and the Multivalent Mask

by Chris Vervain

The different treatment of the Electra theme by the three great tragedians - Aescylus, Euripides and Sophocles - was my inspiration for a short piece of mask theatre, called *Three Electras*. To create it I took a passage (in English translation) from each Electra play, linking them together to form a modern piece of ritual theatre, for three female performers. The chorus (of two) were envisaged as 'an actor' and their changing relationship with Electra was explored, not only in the verbal medium of the texts but also (and in response to these) through the physical form of body and movement. In this way I employed the language of physical theatre and mask, to bring to the fore aspects that may go unnoticed in other readings of the plays. The three chosen passages arguably display a changing conception of the tragic genre and the role of the chorus within it and suggested to me that this might be expressed physically in three different performance styles. Much has been written about, and debated upon, the nature of the original performances. However, *Three Electras*, was not an attempt to reconstruct the ancient practices, to rediscover 'authentic' *schemata* or staging. It was rather, another type of translation, using in a visual language and perhaps could be seen as giving concrete form to some of the poetic imagery of the plays, with symbolic and even some psychological dimensions. Although this was not an exercise in re-creating the ancient forms, I hoped that it might contribute to the debates surrounding them as well as serving to clarify some of the views on fifth century tragic masks. With this in mind I put aside the *Three Electras* for a while and pick up some of the contested strands related to mask and performance style in the ancient theatre.

I start with two opposing views. According to the first, the ancient theatres were characterised by excellent acoustics but were poor visually due to the considerable distance between actors and audience. As a result meaning, or at least subtlety of meaning, in performance was essentially conveyed vocally. The drama was primarily an auditory experience given for an audience, far more than it was a visual experience, for spectators (Arnott 1989). The second sees the original performances as above all a visual experience; one in which the meaning and the emotional impact of the words could only be effectively conveyed by the masked actors performing what Michael Walton (1984, p.44) terms a "graphic style of acting" akin to dance.

Those who emphasise the aural dimension of the genre have variously assumed the fourth century theatre of Epidaurus to be a good model for the acoustical properties of the fifth century Theatre of Dionysus in Athens; that the masks would have been no impediment to vocalisation and may even have enhanced it; that the many ancient references to actors vocal training was indicative of the importance placed on a strong delivery and that acting and oratory were considered to be closely related, or in the words of Peter Arnott (Arnott 1989, p.51) "the same art before two different kinds of audience". A passage in Aristotle's Poetics (1461b34-5), suggesting that there was a change in acting style towards the end of the fifth century, is seen by Arnott (1989, p.48), amongst others, as indicating a move from a "simple, declamatory style" to one "more vivid and expressive" involving a "lavish use of gesture".

Walton (1984, p.44f), taking a different view, rejects the idea of oratory as a model for ancient acting, arguing that the language of mask is of a different order of expression. He suggests that we should instead refer to fifth century sculpture and painting to discover how the drama operated visually. He follows J.J. Pollitt (1972, p.27 cited Walton 1984, p.41) in envisaging a mutual influence between the two arts. Other commentators (Halliwell 1993, p.202) have also perceived links between the visual aesthetics of the classical style and the representations of tragic masks that have come down to us in a few surviving examples (Pickard-Cambridge 1968, p.180ff), mostly in the form of attic vase paintings. Here I leave the theatre space and performance styles for a while, to pick up this particular thread.

The neutrality of expression and lack of individual characterisation of the faces of classical sculpture has often been observed and the images of tragic masks arguably conform to this aesthetic. C.H. Hallett (1986, p.80) usefully adds that lack of expression does not make the sculpted classical face appear 'less life-like', rather it "appears to take on a subtly different emotional tenor in different situations…it renders the expression… multivalent". It seems to me that this multivalent quality of sculpted faces would also have been an aspect of the tragic masks giving them the 'life' necessary for performance. Here a quote from the eminent French teacher of physical theatre seems apposite. Jacques Lecoq (1987 cited Wiles 1991, p.104), speaking of the qualities required in a good performance mask , says it must be one "which changes expression when it moves. If it stays the same when the actor changes posture and situation, it is a dead mask."

In classical scholarship the idea that the masks would not have been individually characterised has been proposed by John Jones (1962, p.45) and other commentators. Jones sees the masks as socially defined types distinguished only by age, gender and status. Toph Marshal (1999, p.190f) reduces this to a two variable model with only age and gender distinctions, on the grounds that this

is all the audience could have perceived from a distance. The result is a list of six basic mask types that, he argues, were applicable to all the roles in the existing canon. The 'multivalent' mask of Greek tragedy is seen as versatile in its ability to convey various emotions and roles. Would all this have been visible, though?

I return now to the ancient theatre space and ask how distant would the ancient actors have been from their audiences. If, as is the view of many scholars today, they performed in the orchestra along with the chorus, rather than on their own separate stage (Wiles 1997), they would have been close to those sitting in the front rows. It seems relevant to me that the people occupying these were the city dignitaries and the priest of Dionysus. The fact that many performances also took place in smaller theatres in various rural *dionysia* is also pertinent. For many the masks in performance were viewed from some proximity. The viewpoint of others would, of course, have been less favourable. However, the masks may have been made more visible by the manner in which they were modelled and painted. I am not suggesting large, brightly coloured masks; rather ones that are only slightly larger than the performer's head, conforming to the *mimetic* principles of the classical style, but also incorporating particular design features to be found, for example, in some of the miniature mask artefacts from Lipari. In one, a mask of an old man, the space between the top of the eye lid and the brow appears to be in heavy shadow, either through modelling and/or painting (Bernabo-Brea 1981, ex2 Plate xxii). (Unfortunately, I have only a photograph as reference having had no opportunity to see the original). However arrived at, this shadow clearly defines the upper boundary of the lidded eyes and the set of the brow. In another example, this time a female mask, there is also shading in this area that defines the position of the lidded eyes but the treatment is different, covering a smaller area (Bernabo-Brea 1981, ex12 Plate xxxix). By modelling and painting these shaded areas on my own masks (Plate 1) I have found that they convey the idea of a face and the type of role being played even from a considerable distance, whilst not looking incongruous close to. It is perhaps no accident that the position of eyebrows as an indicator of temperament features in the list of comic masks in the Pollux catalogue of 2BC and in ancient theories of physiognomy. I should add here, that although I see the visual dimension of performance as important I see no reason for the aural element to be discounted. My own observations and experiments lead me to the optimistic view that there would have been a happy coincidence of well designed masks, actors employing appropriate vocal techniques, and theatre spaces that were generally acoustically sympathetic.

Plate 1 Masks for Greek tragedy by Chris Vervain, 2005.

I turn again now to the ancient acting styles, and the change mentioned by Aristotle which many commentators have taken to mean a movement away from a simple, static style of delivery to one full of expressive gestures. This interpretation has recently been challenged by Eric Csapo (2002, p.128), who argues that Aristotle is describing not a change involving "excessive or exaggerated gestures" or "overacting" but rather a move to an unacceptable degree of *mimesis*, that is, in imitating actions he considered to be beneath the dignity of tragedy "specifically the gestures of the non-elite". In support of this Csapo appeals to Aristophanes *Frogs* (*Ran.* 959-61) and the innovations that Euripides boasts of introducing to the tragic genre which might be construed as bringing it closer to a portrayal of everyday life.

I prefer this new interpretation not least because I could never accept the idea of Aeschylus performed in a static oratory manner. Certain Aeschylean passages immediately suggest to me dance-theatre, whilst others conjure up something different. In fact the

work of all three tragedians seems to me to be composed of what we would think of today as a diversity of acting styles. Kostas Valakas (2002, p.81, n.64) observes something of this when he recognises that more than one acting style could co-exist within one role, for example in that of Cassandra in the *Oresteia*. He also speaks of the "stylistic variation of the performance" reflecting a "variable identity of roles" that created an "unstable and dynamic depiction of man, of the world and of truth in poetic performance" and sees this as a principle of Greek performance related to "Heraclitean dialectics and Protagorean relativism" (Valakas 2002, p.88f). This "stylistic variation", is by definition, not part of our modern theatre of naturalism. However it is by no means an alien concept to what we call physical theatre. Moreover, it is my experience that masks, particularly those as versatile as the multivalent tragic mask, can impart a sense of unity to what might otherwise appear as a disparate assortment of performance styles.

I now follow the suggestion of commentators such as Walton and Pollitt and see what information on acting styles is to be gleaned from classical art. Rather than sculpture, I am drawn to certain fifth century vase paintings that depict the mythological stories on which the tragic narratives were based. Csapo and Slater (1994, pp.54 and 59) whilst prepared to see the influence of tragedy on the treatment of this material, caution against interpreting these images as depictions of theatrical scenes. Throwing caution to the wind, I look at a fifth century vase painting, the so-called Boston *Oresteia* (Plate 2) and recognise dance-drama; the movement and gestures of physical theatre in which meaning is conveyed through the use of body language and the configuration of interrelated bodies in space. There is a sense of energy held under tension present in all the figures; there is no suggestion that expressive gesture is inappropriate for high status figures or for women. This might be contrasted with the depictions of gesture in fourth century theatrical paintings. Csapo (2002, p.145) describes how gesture becomes an indicator of social status, with restraint, grace and lack of expressiveness having the same connotations of 'respectability' as in everyday life; he sees this as another manifestation of the change in acting style towards what he reluctantly terms 'realism'.

Plate 2 Boston *Oresteia* vase painting, drawing by Chris Vervain.

Looking again at the Boston Oresteia, the faces, whilst not identical, are all fairly similar. Figures are distinguished by hairstyle, costume, attributes, and their part in the scene. They are not a group of separate individuals but are inter-connected components of one action, linked by lines of movement that run through the gestures and also the folds of the drapery. When I read the Electra scenes from Aeschylus, I see something analogous in the relationship of Electra to the chorus. At times it is as though she is part of the chorus. Her emotion is expressed by reference to images of the natural world and they can be seen as powerful forces flowing through her body. The text encourages this reading: " …great waves toss us all around/like men at sea" (Aeschylus [2005] *Cho.* 201-2). They flow through her and move her body and also through her, the bodies of the chorus, as they are linked to her. In physical theatre terms we see the actor's bodies visually express in movement both the powerful action of the waves and the vulnerable ships struggling to stay afloat.

Some of the modern techniques of masked performance are particularly relevant to finding a physical expression for these ideas. The approach to actor training developed by Jacques Lecoq (2000, p.42f) involves exercises in which the performer seeks to embody different materials from the natural and man-made worlds. These exercises are usually undertaken using the Lecoq neutral mask, which is designed to be uncharacterised but lacks the life needed for performance. The neutrality of the multivalent masks of tragedy, particularly those of young figures, makes them in some respects comparable to those of Lecoq, but they differ in that they are very alive for performance. Besides their ability to embody imagery they can also become the figures in the action taking place at a more human level.

Finally I return to the *Three Electra*. The conception began with an extract from Aeschylus and for this I envisaged Electra and chorus as linked and part of a greater whole; the natural world of primeval forces. In the passage from Sophocles that followed, the three figures operated more on a recognisably human plane and the chorus, although supportive, and at times taking on the role of a surrogate mother, were beings separate from Electra. In the final, Euripides based section, there was an insistence on 'realism' that arguably acted to sabotage the genre. The chorus was more detached from the action and were voyeuristic. As the piece progressed there were minor changes in costume but the same masks were worn throughout. Moreover, the three masks used were virtually identical in their modelling and painting; the Electra mask differed in having visible hair and hair band. The three performers were not dissimilar in height and build but they each brought a different energy and physicality to their parts. These factors and the different roles made it possible to convey the idea of Electra as an integral part of the chorus at one time whilst at another, she was distinguishable as a separate person. The multivalent mask served to make this most plausible.

Note:
Three Electras by Chris Vervain was performed in the Boilerhouse studio at RHUL as a practical demonstration in conjunction with a paper given at the 5th RHUL/APGARD Postgraduate Symposium, *Sight and Sound*, held at the Royal Holloway, Egham on 23rd June 2005 [Accessed 30 May 2008].

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