

The Body and the Mask in Ancient Theatre Space: Perceptions, Coincidences and Diversions

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A two-day interdisciplinary conference was held on Saturday 5th May 2007 at the Handa Nô Studio on the campus of Royal Holloway, University of London and on Sunday 6th May at King's College, London, organised by the AHRC-funded research project "The Body and the Mask in Ancient Theatre Space" at the end of its first full year of work. This symposium set out to explore contemporary approaches to the world of ancient masked performance and brought together mask makers, practitioners and performers with scholars of Classics, Theatre Studies, Asian Performance, Digital Arts, 3D Modelling and Computing. Members of the research team presented the fruits of their latest research using advanced three-dimensional visualisation technologies to bring together the ancient mask and performing body in virtually-realised ancient spaces. The central focus of this conference was the project's collaboration with the distinguished Japanese Nô performer Matsui Akira, who talked about his work on the project and gave a live performance in Royal Holloway's unique Nô theatre for conference participants and the public on Saturday evening.

The project director, Professor Richard Beacham, began the conference with a short video demonstrating what the technology has already been able to achieve in bringing together body, mask and ancient space. The research team then proceeded to give presentations explaining the background of the work, which has evolved from an earlier AHRC project at Glasgow University on New Comedy Masks. Dr Richard Williams (who headed the earlier project) described the methodology of creating full-size, performable masks from ancient terracotta miniatures and showed the work of *commedia* actors from the Venezia INscena company (under the direction of Adriano Iurissevich,) performing in the masks. Drew Baker and Martin Blazeby, Senior Researchers from King's Visualisation Lab, demonstrated how the new project uses advanced motion-capture, Chromakey and 3D modelling technology to create (or re-create) ancient theatre spaces virtually and situate the actor's performance within them.

The first afternoon session focused on approaches to the mask, with presentations from three mask practitioners. In a paper titled "Preparing for tragic roles and the multivalent masks of fifth century Greece," Chris Vervain spoke about her work with actors of various training backgrounds in testing the limits and possibilities of the Greek tragic mask. Bianca Mastrominico, founder of Organic Theatre, talked of her experiments with half-masks and the extraordinary coincidences and correspondences she had found in responses to the masks from participants in the workshops she has conducted throughout Europe and the UK. Thanos Vovolis, the Greek maskmaker and designer now based at the Dramatic Institute in Stockholm, addressed issues of "Form, function and appearance of the tragic mask and its relation to the actor, text, audience and theatre space" discussing his own "acoustical" Greek masks, and the wider implications of these issues in mask making and performance. Focus then shifted to the Nô mask and Asian performance. Dr Margaret Coldiron, a member of the Body and Mask project research team, discussed the nature of Nô performance and the rationale for the project's collaboration with Asian performers in exploring the nature and expressivity of ancient Greco-Roman masks and showed how the project's work with Akira Matsui had developed. Dr Jonah Salz of Ryukoku University followed this up with a paper on "The Noh Actor As Ur-Cinematographer: Mask And Stage in Moving Montage."

The evening featured a performance by Akira Matsui which included an excerpt from the traditional Nô drama *toh* (about the torments of a cormorant hunter condemned to hell for his taking of life) and Matsui's newly created piece—developed in the course of his collaboration with the project—on the suicide of Ajax, based on material drawn from Aeschylus's 5th century tragedy about the Greek warrior

The conference continued on Sunday 6th May at King's College London and began with an extended conversation with Akira Matsui about his work with the project which was led by Dr Hugh Denard, one the Body and Mask project directors. The afternoon featured papers from Yana Zarifi on the Satyr dance and its relation to contemporary ritual—in particular the "goat dance" of Skyros—and Professor J. Michael Walton on "The Word and the Take," on deictic language in Greek tragedy. The conference concluded with a lively discussion of issues raised both by the conference and the work of the project and reflected excitement at the possibilities of technology along with certain reservations about the limitations of the technological approach. Two further conferences are planned for the Spring of 2008 and 2009. Select papers from this conference have been published in *Didaskalia*, vol. 6:4 (Winter 2007).