

Amy R. COHEN and Brittany STALLINGS Success in Ancient Original Practices:
Constructing and Using Linen Dramatic Masks

The difficulties surrounding the reconstruction of Greek theatrical masks are well known: we have no surviving examples, the ancient images we have are regrettably not blueprints, and the ancient texts we have are not construction manuals. What Greek masks were actually required to do is perhaps more clear: they helped the performers of Greek drama accomplish their tasks in the large outdoor theaters of ancient Greece. Masks have implications for the acting, dancing, and singing style of the original productions, for the relationship between the audience and the performers, and for the transformation of texts into staged dramas. We maintain that the best way to illuminate those implications is to try reconstructed masks in performances of Greek plays under ancient conventions, and we have therefore built dramatic masks to use in performance.

Following on the work of Vervain and Wiles (2001), McCart (2002), and Vovolis (2003), among others, we built fabric-based helmet masks in 2006, 2007, and 2008 that fit the ancient evidence as much as possible. We have now used the masks in two full productions of Greek dramas using original practices in a Greek theater that shares the *orchêstra* dimensions of the Theater of Dionysus. The latest versions of our masks, used in Sophocles' *Elektra* in October 2008, are made of linen hardened with animal glue and stiffened with shellac. Used even by amateur actors, the masks came alive and "showed" all the emotions that the characters experienced. The masks meant that the performers could be heard no matter which direction they faced, which allowed them to have a full range of movement in the playing space. The fact that the actors could not use their own facial expressions to convey any sort of meaning required them to use their whole bodies, the tilt of their heads, and the full capabilities of their voices to involve audiences in the action of the tragedy, and audiences responded, even though they were unaccustomed to the conventions of masked drama. The construction techniques we have developed for the masks have passed the first tests of playability in a Greek theater, and the difficulties that remain will be matters of refinement rather than reinvention.

In this unprecedented hands-on workshop, we will first present (in a traditional talk with video illustration) our research program and its results in *The Clouds* and *Elektra*. The Demonstration Session will then show our actual masks in action with the opportunity to handle and inspect them. Finally, the Construction Session will allow workshop participants to see and try out the techniques for building linen masks using our methods.