

The Greek Actor

Participating in Greek drama was considered to be a citizen's civic duty. Citizens were expected to volunteer to perform in the chorus. Experienced performers, especially citizens trained in oratory, elevated to the status of actor. The Greek actor, who might also be a governmental official or influential businessman, was highly regarded in Greek society. So revered, the actor was often exempted from military duty.

In this male-dominated society, women were not allowed to act. They were often excluded from the audience, or when allowed to attend, were relegated to the upper rows of seats.

The actor portraying the god, king, or legendary hero needed to appear larger than life. As a symbol, he reflected a grander status than mere mortals, like those appearing in the chorus. He needed to be seen by the audience who were at a great distance from the stage. Therefore, the actor donned a costume which added size and distinction to his role.

The actor wore a long, flowing robe, dyed in symbolic colors, called a **chiton**, with a great deal of padding underneath to give a broader than natural appearance. To add height, high, platformed shoes called **cothurni** were worn.

Though the actor gained in size, he lost mobility, which led to a more declamatory style of acting which required the actor to move little and to face his audience for delivery of his speeches. Because of distance from the audience and limited mobility, actors developed stock, broad, sweeping gestures and general movements which signified particular emotions, such as lowering the head to indicate grief, or beating the breast and rending their clothes to indicate mourning, or stretching out arms in prayer.

Actors carried **properties** (props) to indicate roles. A herald might wear a wreath, a traveler a broad-brimmed hat. Kings customarily carried scepters and warriors carried spears. The elderly carried sticks serving as canes.

The most distinctive feature of the actor's costume was the mask. Paradoxically, the mask both limited and broadened the audience's understanding of the role portrayed. The mask helped to identify the specific character, yet generalized the features enough to indicate a virtual **Everyman**, helping the audience to glean that personal message the Greeks intended to impart in their drama.