

PROSCENIUM

The Bacchae

By Euripides

In a version by David Greig

The Bacchae

Wednesday 4th November to Saturday 7th November 2009
Compass Theatre, Ickenham

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By Euripides

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Cast:

Dionysus, a new god.....	Michael Williams
Teiresias, a blind prophet.....	Keith Bayross
Kadmos, retired king of Thebes	David Pearson
Pentheus, Prince of Thebes, Kadmos' grandson	Mark Sutherland
Agave, Pentheus' mother	Evelyn Moutrie
Man, henchman to Pentheus.....	Sam Thornton
First Messenger, a cowherd.....	Colin Hickman
Second Messenger, a house servant.....	Paul Davis
The Chorus, followers of Dionysus	Nicola Bielicki, Izzie Cartwright Anne Gerrard, Linda Hampson, Sheila Harvey Jane Inglese, Rosie Moutrie, Susi Thornton
Soldiers, serving Pentheus.....	Sam Thornton, Paul Davis
Directed by.....	Kathleen Jones
Movement devised by	Susi Thornton
Set design and construction	Colin Tufnell
Stage Manager	Crystal Anthony
Assisted by.....	Margaret Rudolph
Music composed and played by	Duncan Sykes
Costumes.....	Evelyn Moutrie
Lighting	Joe Cohen

The action takes place in Thebes

The Playwright

Very little is known about the life of Euripides. He was born in Attica, the cultural centre of the Greek speaking world, in about 485 BC. He lived in Athens for most of his life, at the time of its artistic and political pre-eminence. He wrote at least eighty plays performed at the Great Dionysus, Athenians' major drama festival, of which seventeen survive. His first production was in 455: he won first prize in 441 (play unknown) and again in 428 for *Hippolytus*. It is not known when he left Athens but he died in 407/6 BC in Macedonia, far from his native Athens. *Iphigenia in Aulis* and *The Bacchae* were found among his papers, staged posthumously in 405 and awarded first prize – 'the final statement of the most provocative playwright of the era, looking back from a barely Greek frontier territory, at the city which prided itself as being the home of civilisation, and the education of Greece.' (Simon Goldhill 2007).

Euripides was the youngest of the great Athenian playwrights, following Aeschylus and Sophocles, and the most revolutionary and radical, both in his treatment of verse and his theatrical style: he uses the Chorus not only as commentators on the action but as vital participants in the play and he deals with contemporary as well as classical themes and stories.

He was not admired in the nineteenth century: Jowett thought him 'no Greek in the better sense of the term' and he suffered in comparison with 'the purity and Hellenic spirit of Sophocles'. But the twentieth century responded to his apparent modernism: subversive, experimental and ironic, exploring the gap between what is said and what is felt and meant. Edith Hall (2000) says that to modern critics and playwrights 'Euripides has been an existentialist, a psychoanalyst, an idealist and humanist, a rationalist, and an irrationalist, an absurdist nihilist and a pacifist feminist.'

The Characters

Dionysus (Roman Bacchus)

God associated with the pleasures of Dionysiac worship: the joys of dance, music, wine and harmony. Dionysus was actually born in Thebes. His mother was Semele, Kadmus' daughter, Pentheus' aunt, who was impregnated by Zeus, and who died when she asked to see the god's splendour and was incinerated by his thunderbolt. Dionysus was snatched from the burnt, pregnant body and sewn into Zeus' thigh, where he was incubated. He was taken to Mount Nysa in India, where he was brought up by the nymphs and taught the use of the vine by Silenus and the satyrs, and also of ivy, which is a mild intoxicant when chewed, and a symbol of everlasting life. Carrying his thyrsus, and ivy-entwined magic staff, he led his followers, the Maenads or Bacchantes, across Asia and eventually reached Greece – and, in *The Bacchae*, Thebes.

So Dionysus is actually from Thebes. He is from the family of Pentheus. He is an outsider who is an insider, a non-citizen who comes from the city, an enemy who is Pentheus' cousin. What is more he is a god who is born of a human woman. Euripides creates an extremely complex character: he is a male god who is effeminate and has a special relationship with women; his worship can produce transcendental serenity and repulsive violence; he causes the imprisoned to be liberated, the rational to become demented, humans to behave like women, men to dress as women, women to act like men.

The Maenads (Roman Bacchantes)

The Chorus are followers of the cult of Dionysus where they experience an altered state of consciousness, the sublime state of ekstasis (standing outside oneself). They share their god's ambiguousness: they can celebrate peace, ease and pleasure to the sound of song and music, and they are capable of violent cruelty.

Pentheus

Grandson of Cadmus and son of Agave and Ekhion, recently set up in authority over the city. He sees clearly the benefits of law and order and is deeply disturbed by the cult of Dionysus. Pentheus is one of Euripides most subtly drawn characters and a much more complex figure than just a mortal who pits himself against a god. He is concerned with social order and rational behaviour but is also fascinated by and curious about the Maenads. 'It is through Pentheus that each member of the audience faces up to the difficulty of the famous message written above the oracle at Delphi: know yourself' (Simon Goldhill)

Kadmos

The legendary founder of the city of Thebes. The oracle at Delphi told him to found a city where a cow lay down: this led him to the site of Thebes, beside a spring, where he killed its guardian dragon and sowed the dragon's teeth. He married Harmonia, daughter of Ares and Aphrodite and had several children, including Semele and Agave. In the play his days as warrior and ruler are long over and he is responsive to the call of Dionysus.

Teireseus

A seer of compelling power. Ovid describes how when he saw two snakes mating he struck them with his staff and was changed into a woman. Seven years later he saw them and hit them again and reverted to man's shape. Some time later he was called on to settle a dispute between Zeus and Hera on whether men or women get most pleasure from sex, he having experienced both. He declared for women in a ratio of nine to one. Hera was insulted and blinded him; Zeus gave him long life and the gift of prophecy in compensation. His experience of both sexes is important in *The Bacchae* in considering his response to the cult of Dionysus.

The Play

The Bacchae was a popular play in the ancient world – a particular favourite of Nero's – but eighteenth and nineteenth century England found it distasteful: 'the refined delicacy of modern manners will justify revolt against this inhuman spectacle of dramattick barbarity.' (Jodrell, 1798).

However, although the play may portray a mythical world of Thebes, in the far distant past, struggling to deal with a new god, it has become one of the most repeatedly produced plays in the modern era and has inspired ballets by Diaghilev and Martha Graham and an opera by Henze. It is not hard to see why, because the themes are indeed modern. It shows how the forces of sexuality, violence and irrationality can undermine society's most cherished commitments. At the political level, it shows how social order cannot suppress violence swelling from within itself; and at a personal level, it shows how self-control and propriety collapse into dangerous release and ecstatic destruction.

On one level the play illustrates that those who doubt the power of the gods must be disabused of their belief: the royal house of Thebes must be punished because it questioned the divine paternity of Dionysus. Yet, 'it neither endorses nor repudiates the cult whose arrival in Thebes it narrates. It never did prescribe for its audience a cognitive programme by which to understand an inexplicable universe. It simply enacts one occasion on which the denial, repression and exclusion of difference – psychological, ethnic and religious – led to utter catastrophe.' (Edith Hall 2000)

Finally, Simon Goldhill points out that 'As with wine, Dionysus' great gift to mankind, we are not sure how much the power of the god makes you behave quite differently from your proper self, or how much he exposes the truth – in vino veritas.'

The Adaptation/Translation

David Greig writes: 'In January 2007 John Tiffany asked me to work on a version of *The Bacchae* for a production at the Edinburgh festival. I asked John if he wanted me to set the play anywhere in a Glasgow tenement? In nineteenth century Edinburgh? And to my relief he said 'No'. He wanted the play to be set in Thebes and he just wanted to tell the story as it was.

I wanted to write in a heightened but plain verse and to convey the story with energy. I tried to structure the drama so as to embody Euripides' visceral, funny, sexy dramatic energy. I wanted to honour Euripides not only as a philosopher but also as a playwright.

Every night I sat down with a bottle of red wine beside me and a copy of Bob Dylan's *Hard Rain* playing over and over again and every night I produced fifty lines. *The Bacchae* is a story which speaks directly and truthfully to the heart of what it means to be human. It is such a strong play that it will survive any failures in this retelling.'

To The Audience

*Come with vine-leaves
in your hair*

Our Next Production

Uncle Vanya

By Anton Chekhov (Trans. by Michael Frayn)

Set in a large country house in the Russian countryside in the late 19th century, Uncle Vanya, which has been called a tragi-comedy, tells the tale of a family of landowners, stuck in a world of boredom. The play is emotionally charged but it is also a skilful mixture of melancholy and wry comedy, together with an overall sense of wasted lives. Chekhov disliked the fact that the humorous element of his plays was often neglected in production - this will not happen in ours.

Directed by Michael Gerrard

Wednesday 13th January to Saturday 16th January 2009

7.45pm Compass Theatre, Ickenham

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Artistic Director : Mark Sutherland

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