

Review: In This Entertaining ‘Bacchae,’ Dionysus Is a Nasty Woman

Next Wave Festival: The Bacchae Off Broadway, Play | Closing Date: Oct. 7, 2018 |
Brooklyn Academy of Music - Harvey Theater, 651 Fulton St. | 718-636-4100

By Alexis Soloski

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The women of Thebes are dancing. The women are rioting. They are breast-feeding wolf cubs and disemboweling cows and using snakes as belts. Just because you’re possessed by a fierce and devouring god doesn’t mean you can’t be fashion-forward.

Welcome to Ancient Greece (actually, a time before that) and also welcome to 2018. SITI Company’s flashy “The Bacchae,” directed by Anne Bogart at BAM Harvey, makes the play’s back-burnered anxieties about women and power feel very front-burnered and very now.

“The Bacchae,” part of the Next Wave Festival in a new translation from Aaron Poochigian, is a late tragedy by Euripides. In most productions, “The Bacchae” isn’t centrally about women, though a woman commits its most heinous act. It’s a grudge match between two men — well, a man and a god.

The god is Dionysus, the son of Zeus and the mortal Semele, though none of Semele’s relatives buy Zeus’s paternity. The man is Pentheus, Dionysus’s first cousin, another skeptic. When Dionysus rolls back into Thebes, he wants revenge on the city-state that doubted his mother. And he gets that revenge, bloodily. Now this is me talking and not Euripides, but see what happens when you don’t believe women?

Why am I going on about women? Because this “Bacchae” casts Ellen Lauren, for many years SITI Company’s chief actress, as Dionysus and she plays the god with moussed hair and red leather pants, a female incarnation or possibly a nonbinary one. Her maenad chorus wears skirts on the bottom, blazers on top. (Something’s in the air: This spring Madeline George’s “Bacchae” update “Hurricane Diane” will offer a butch Dionysus.)

Ms. Lauren's incarnation makes an entrance to Screamin' Jay Hawkins's "I Put a Spell on You" (a song much too on-the-nose and frankly overused and frankly thrilling), strutting like an overcaffeinated Mick Jagger and slopping wine across the stage. This hyperbolic performance reorients the tragedy as a showdown between male hierarchy in one corner and androgynous anarchy in the other.



Emphasizing the focus on androgyny, members of the production's chorus wear blazers and skirts. Stephanie Berger

As soon as Dionysus arrives, order collapses. As in Euripides, God-maddened women establish a radical separatist commune in the woods. Old men like the king, Cadmus (Stephen Duff Webber), and the seer, Tiresias (Barney O'Hanlon), bop around in fawn skins. The holdouts are Pentheus (Eric Berryman) and the soldiers he commands.

Is Pentheus against Dionysus and the maenads because he's the patriarchy's golden boy or because his kink means he wants to be a maenad himself? It's unclear in Euripides and it's unclear here, though when Pentheus reappears in a wig and a dress (that part is in Euripides, too), Mr. Berryman has the rictus smile and rolling eyes of someone roofied by a god.

Ms. Bogart's deconstruction of the classic is sometimes silly and, if you try to trace its themes all the way through, often incoherent. But it's also broadly entertaining — a nice surprise as SITI has a recent history of self-serious, no-fun works.

This “Bacchae” is dynamic and accessible, sometimes very accessible, as when Dionysus gifts a patron with a glass of wine. “This is straight from Joe Melillo’s hands,” the god says, name-checking BAM’s executive producer. “It’s the good stuff,” the god adds, but more profanely.

Is this rendition tragic? Not really. A mother’s harrowing speech, in which she realizes she’s murdered her son, is performed by Akiko Aizawa in Japanese, a distancing move that diminishes the horror.

But in between the writhing and the boozing and the performance of “I’ve Gotta Be Me,” the show is also asking pertinent questions about female anger and female force. Whether Dionysus is male or female or nonbinary, the play is still about men freaking out when they discover that women can’t be controlled, that they can’t be made to stay at home, that they might have voices and desires and weaponry all their own. That they might fight back.

Of course, Euripides being Euripides, a playwright tagged as so woman-hating that his colleague Aristophanes could write a comedy about it, this experiment ends very, very badly.

But is this disaster really so much worse than patriarchal repression? Dionysus 2020, anyone?

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The Bacchae

Through Sunday at the BAM Harvey Theater; bam.org, 718-636-4100. Running time: 1 hour 40 minutes.

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