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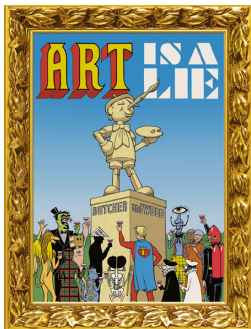
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reviews

columns

calendar

et cetera



LIGHTNING'S LEGACY – THE BACCHAE

The Bacchae — Euripides, translation by Aaron Poochigian Co-production of SITl Company, directed by Anne Bogart Barbara and Lawrence Fleischman Theater at The Getty Villa — Thursdays-Saturdays, 8:00 p.m.; through September 29th

by Ezrha Jean Black ·

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Table of Contents

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Presenting **Euripides' *The Bacchae*** against the backdrop of the **Getty Villa** has to be as challenging in sheer existential terms as it is technically to a theatrical artist. It's a play that addresses both the essential conditions of the theatre and civilization's precarious balance between its flawed human stewardship and the wilderness contending both outside and within that order. (Irony to think of the fortune the Villa was built upon—but there's no denying the serene splendor of the backdrop.) Director **Anne Bogart** had spoken of the **SITI Company's** production as addressing the contemporary political moment of echo-chamber 'stable genius' demagogues screaming about Castle-Amerika walls and unsanctioned border-crossings.

The contemporary historical moment gives some urgency and focus to the rediscovery artists have everywhere made of the foundational conditions of their arts and media. But the essential aspect of the human (and divine) condition *The Bacchae* describes is actually borderless: fear of the loss of personal agency and control. It also touches on the nature of that fear. Setting aside matters of art direction or production design (a classical acropolis or the pastoral splendor of the Getty Villa), the backdrop beyond the palace of Cadmus and Pentheus is long, extending to Semele, ill-fated sister to Agave and aunt to the soon-to-be macerated Pentheus. We might



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also consider (post-#MeToo we can hardly help it) Zeus's long history of affairs with mortals. Zeus struggles with his 'conscience' more than Dionysus himself (in this play or any other incarnation). It's less about an acknowledgment of the divine than of the combustibility of the divine and mortal; less about hubris *per se*, and more a caution regarding (to borrow the Donald Rumsfeld haiku-like formulation), 'unknowns' both known and unknown—in other words, the natural world uncircumscribed and unpolluted by the effects of human agency. *The Bacchae* endures in part because it questions our purchase on human agency itself—what we actually know of ourselves and the way we know it.

Bogart and SITI give us a particularly androgynous Dionysus, here played by Ellen Lauren, who puts a rock-star spin on roving gypsy Dionysus—a kind of megalomaniacal mountebank. Even the costuming (by **Eleni Kyriacou**, with **Lena Sands**) makes me think of classic rags-and-fags rock-star style, à la Rod Stewart or Roger Daltrey. Lauren swaggers out, wavy blonde hair bouncing, in brick-red leather pants, wisp of a crimson tank-top, cloaked with a long black crimson-lined duster, swigging from a wine bottle and proffering a goblet to her audience. All s/he really knows is that s/he's a god (or at least a star)—that moving, grooving hippie gypsy Daltrey once sang about (though Lauren looks more like the youthful Jill Clayburgh).

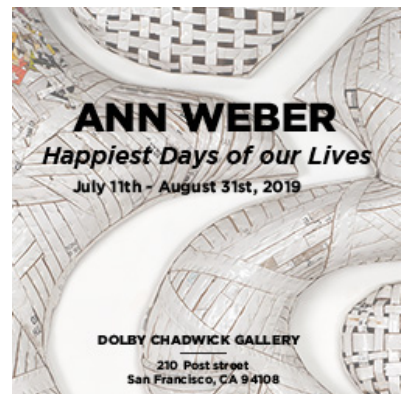


Like the combustion engine of divinity and humanity that propels him, we also get that Dionysus is as drunk on his power as he is on libations. He's conscious of wearing a certain mask, but he's no less self-deceived by it. Notwithstanding the spell he casts on Thebes, and its women in particular, he projects his power in a distinctly human manner. He makes no attempt to disguise his arrogance and contempt for his enlisted *bacchants*. He treats the 'sisterhood' of his followers as little more than back-up singers. Lauren seems to get this; but the production generally steers clear from this aspect of the Dionysian sway, or for that matter the mortal *man's* sway over the women, the *maenads*. That too plays into the 'rock'n'roll style on a certain level. It's a 'man's world' on Cithaeron, too—and women are simply a means of exchange. In the meantime, Cadmus (Stephen Duff Webber) is fully on board to project the power of his 'grand-god', albeit himself under the Dionysian spell. It's just politics, baby—'all in the family'.

The (mostly male) chorus preceded Lauren onto the stage, attired in pleated black skirts and gray blazers (and Converse low-tops), carrying staves to be rhythmically pounded on the tiled courtyard, to **Screamin' Jay Hawkins'** "I Put A Spell On You"—not a bad choice, especially as an entrée into the play. But if they were moving in that (musical) direction, I wondered why Bogart and

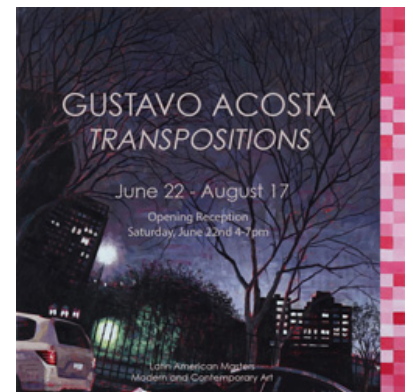


company had not woven a few similar musical signatures (they could have been very brief) sequentially into the progress of that spell. (Say, a Who/Daltrey moment for Lauren's Dionysus?) Later in the play, having succumbed to Dionysus's seeming post-hypnotic suggestion, as Pentheus (Eric Berryman) returns to the courtyard from the Villa-museum-turned-palace, in a long bias-cut shift, to a few bars of the Sammy Davis, Jr. rendition of Walter Marks' "I've Gotta Be Me" (same era roughly, but very different (Broadway) aesthetic), the effect, though it elicits an easy laugh, seems obvious and unearned, out-of-place. This is a crucial point in the play—not the climax exactly, but a kind of reverse-exposure of both the mask and the very mortal person behind it. We need to understand the acute vulnerability behind that earlier entitled fascist-smoothie in his slim-cut pale tan suit (a kind of Bryan Ferry-by-Hedi Slimane look that works well here). This is where the production goes slightly awry.



In this regard, it's Pentheus's grandfather, Cadmus (with Tiresias (Barney O'Hanlon) as his guide) who strikes the right notes in tone and attitude (and, again, costuming: the pair of them look like a pair of stumble-drunk south Florida retirees). 'Revere the gods'—why not? There's "no other muse for misery."

Does Dionysus actually betray his legacy? Or is it simply the fickleness to be expected from all gods or demiurges? Euripides is actually paying small homage to the Dionysian spirit with *The Bacchae*, acknowledging simply the irresistible undertow of cosmic forces that can be scarcely grasped (and are not even today). His Dionysus is as weighed down by the legacy of Zeus's lightning as Pentheus is by his royal title—and the chain of blood relations that connect him to that same lightning. Both Pentheus and Dionysus are walking illustrations of the fragility of the mask and its tenuous connection to the self behind it. Do we know ourselves only by the mask we wear; and can we *ever* know the self behind it? Dionysus can only be sure of his divinity. "But gods should not repeat / the passions of mere men," Cadmus wisely observes—to no avail. Dionysus never really sees the residue of the proud, capricious and demanding mortal human he litters in his wake. (He is his mother's child after all.) Pentheus in turn can only be sure of his royal power (giving the lie to a notional 'divine right'), trapped in a conception he can no more than superficially rationalize.



Then there is the mask that staves off panic. Could Agave possibly recognize her changeling son—in or out of drag? Surely she took care to clap that royal mask on him the moment the umbilical cord was severed. And who is to say that the unmasked (and yes, unhinged) Agave may not be expressing her maternity in full flower in her delirious ferocity? (And here we might consider a larger #MeToo moment for the classical theatre in which Euripides is an essential pillar: how is that women are merely a means of exchange? For gods *or* men? The cradle of civilization is also the foundation of patriarchal culture: gods are gods; heroes are heroes; and women are fungible. As Clytemnestra might have put it—this sucks.) Here the production takes another (non-musical) turn for alienating effect: having Agave (here played by Japanese-born and Japanese fluent Akiko Aizawa) perform essentially the entirety of her monologue and last exchanges with her father, Cadmus, in Japanese.



The idea (or at least as Bogart, et al. seem to want to put it across) is that Agave is effectively

having an out-of-body (or mask) experience. Out-of-the-mask she may well be; but she's not disembodied or separated from her identity as a woman and mother. (It had the incidental effect of making me—an enthusiast of Japanese culture—feel very guilty for not speaking Japanese.) Aizawa is a very effective actress, and her movements and gestures conveyed a sense of re-awakening and hysterical grief. But unless you were more or less fluent in Japanese, the pathos and catharsis of these moments were seriously undermined. This is not the kind of resolution we're expecting from Euripides' *Bacchae*. It's conceivable that Bogart might want to deny us this catharsis, however at odds with the play's structure. (It's justified: in 2018 we clearly don't deserve it.) But if the reverse of that mask, human or divine, is a void, it shouldn't require a translation.

Tags: Akiko Aizawa, Anne Bogart, Dionysus, Eleni Kyriacou, Ellen Lauren, Eric Berryman, Euripides, Lena Sands, Semele, SITi Company, Stephen Duff Webber, The Bacchae, The Getty Villa