

THINGS TO DO > THEATER

Review: At the Getty Villa, ‘Bacchae’ speaks of ancient times — and today



J. Ed Araiza, Leon Ingulsrud, Gian-Murray Gainio, Roshini Shukia, Barney O’Hanlon and Samuel Stricklen, from left, star in the Getty Villa production of “Bacchae.” (Photo by Craig Schwartz)

By **DANY MARGOLIES** | dany.scng@gmail.com |

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Yes, this is our great-great-great-great-grandfather’s Greek drama.

SITI Company has brought its production of Euripides' "Bacchae" to the Getty Villa outdoor amphitheater, where this vibrant evening reminds us that the ancient Greek playwrights put human behavior downstage center, and that human behavior hasn't changed much since ancient times.

Several other factors make this production immediate and engaging. In large part, Aaron Poochigian's new translation and Anne Bogart's direction feel contemporary but are based in classicism.

But the elements we in the audience see and hear lock us in and make us invested in the play's socio-political commentary.

The story centers on a leader who acts like he's a god, on a god whose fragile ego makes him vindictive, on a woman more interested in good times than in the welfare of her child, and on the populace affected by the actions of the few.

Most of the interesting action takes place at other times and offstage. Or is that our modern, Western taste judging the ancient art form? Instead of plot as we now think of it, Euripides gives us emotion and observation.

Dionysus, the ancient Greek god of "wine, ritual madness, fertility and theater," returns to his birthplace of Thebes. Euripides has him heavily disguised; this production casts Ellen Lauren to play him.

She starts the play with a jolt of energy that keeps pulsating. Her Dionysus is a rock star whom costumer Eleni Kyriacou clads in blood-red leather slacks and a black frock coat. This Dionysus is in love with the power of the position, an insecure god with something to prove. Lauren's voice is deep and dimensional, and we see how this god can lure mortals into the dangerous hillsides — and into a life as a theatermaker.

Dionysus claims no one believes he is the son of Zeus. And this slight to his ego leads him to attract followers to his cult, inducing a frenzy.

The young, rational, civic-minded King Pentheus (Eric Berryman) imprisons the inciter, not knowing he's a god in disguise. As ancient plays customarily did, Euripides reminded his audiences to never cross vengeful, immature gods. So Dionysus slips his bonds, and tragedy ensues.

Proving that nearly everyone can be seduced by "fun," the blind seer Tiresias (Barney O'Hanlon) and the king's grandfather Cadmus (Stephen Duff Webber) don their idea of party clothes and wander up to the hills where the bacchanalia are underway.

But Euripides shows the consequences of too much wine, ritual madness and fertility — and the danger of acting on a raging ego. Agave (Akiko Aizawa), who is Dionysus' aunt and the mother of Pentheus, loses her rationality and unwittingly commits a horrifying act.

Portraying Agave as she begins to understand the tragic mistake, Aizawa speaks her lines in Japanese. It's intriguing, slightly distancing, but purposeful. Nationality and ethnicity fade in the presence of deep human grief.

Dionysus was also confusingly known as Bacchus, though mostly in Roman mythology, despite that a Greek wrote this play and titled it thusly. Speaking of which, the play reminds us that “psychology” is an ancient Greek word, one their playwrights have taught the best of our scribes to know well.

Dany Margolies is a Los Angeles-based writer.

‘Bacchae’

Rating: 4 stars

When: 8 p.m. Thursday-Saturday through Sept. 29

Where: The Outdoor Classical Theater at the Getty Villa, 17985 Pacific Coast Hwy., Pacific Palisades

Tickets: \$36-\$48, discounts available. Parking is \$10 after 3 p.m.

Length: 90 minutes, no intermission

Suitability: Children ages 12 and up and adults who can sit on a backless cement seat for 90 minutes

Information: 310-440-

7300, www.getty.edu/museum/programs/performances/outdoor_theater_18.html