

ENTERTAINMENT & ARTS

Review: Euripides' 'Bacchae' is spellbinding in modern update at the Getty Villa



Eric Berryman (Pentheus) and Ellen Lauren (Dionysus) in a scene from "Bacchae" at the Getty Villa. (Craig Schwartz)

By CHARLES MCNULTY
THEATER CRITIC

SEP. 9, 2018
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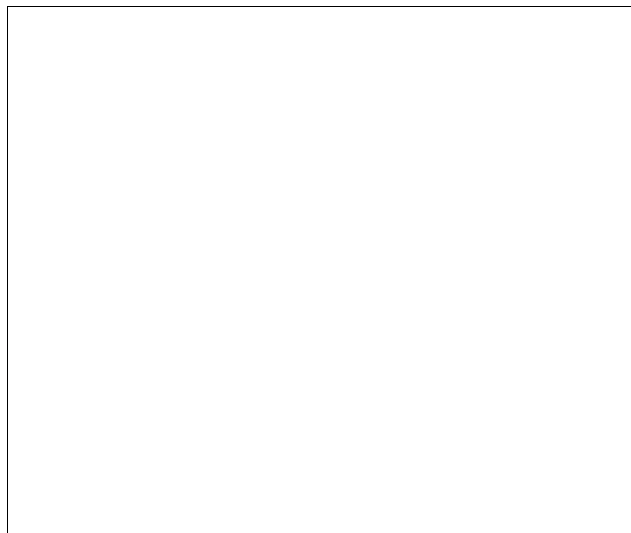


The surviving Greek tragedies pose inordinate challenges to contemporary theater practitioners, but Euripides' "Bacchae," one of his most beloved works, may be the trickiest of all to stage. It's sneaky hard. The success rate in the theater (in my experience) is close to nil. No one seems to have a clue how to handle one of the most boldly imaginative dramas to have emerged out of classical Greece.

Euripides wrote "Bacchae" near the end of his life when he was living away from Athens, perhaps in self-imposed exile. The play was produced only posthumously and reveals a subversive dramatist in potent form, still talking truth to power and at once completely liberated stylistically and in total poetic control.

Anne Bogart is an ideal auteur to take on this formidable masterpiece. Her combination of directorial freedom and formal elegance is exactly what's required to make "Bacchae" live again.

The new production at the Getty Villa's outdoor Barbara and Lawrence Fleischman Theater, a collaboration with Bogart's SITI Company, might not satisfy purists. But it's by far the most theatrically assured rendition of the play I've encountered. The fluid translation by Aaron Poochigian is as mercurial as the staging.



Yes, this "Bacchae" is incomplete, but grippingly so. Bogart and her company, building on the experience gained through their Getty Villa productions of "Persians" and "Trojan Women (After Euripides)," hold us in their spell as tightly as Dionysus controls his wild-eyed followers. We

follow where forces greater than ourselves lead, a break from the grind of rationalism, where ecstasy mingles treacherously with chaos.

Ellen Lauren, a SITI founding member and co-artistic director, brings a capering, vaudevillian energy to her portrayal of Dionysus, the new god in town who has brought his cult from Asia and expects Thebes, his recalcitrant birthplace, to finally give him his due. Casting a woman in the role of the deity associated with wine, fertility, ritual madness and the theater isn't such a leap, as Dionysus' earthly form blends masculine and feminine qualities with seductive impunity.



Los Angeles Times

Log In



determined to show who's in charge. Dressed like a billionaire DJ, he scoffs at his grandfather, Cadmus (Stephen Duff Webber), and Tiresias (Barney O'Hanlon), who have fearfully succumbed to the religious madness taking over the city.

This young monarch doesn't understand that this androgynous votary of Dionysus is actually the god himself. Nor does he realize that the more he tries to punish this troublesome newcomer, who has roused the women of Thebes to perform frenzied rites in the mountains, the more he falls into the trap that has been laid for him.



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Pentheus is the clear tragic protagonist, a character whose lack of reverence reflects a lack of knowledge, including self-knowledge about his own animal nature. But the play isn't named after him for a reason.



Akiko Aizawa and Stephen Duff Webber in a scene from "Bacchae" at Getty Villa. (Craig Schwartz)

Euripides is more curious about our shifting relationship to the god than in the hubris that brings about the downfall of an idealistic, if arrogantly misguided, young king. Our sympathies are not permitted to be permanently aligned with any figure, not with Pentheus, not with his mother, Agave (Akiko Aizawa), who becomes the unwitting agent of the god's revenge, and certainly not with Dionysus, who grows only more violently implacable. (Lauren, donning a janitor uniform as her character blithely sweeps away the tragic mess, infuses an elemental indifference into Dionysus' impish humor.)

The chorus, a staple of Greek tragedy that invariably presents contemporary stumbling blocks, is treated here with refreshing variety. The performers, outfitted in long black skirts and gray suit jackets exposing bare flesh, sometimes speak simultaneously, sometimes individually; moralizing one moment, they turn stinging irony the next. Bogart keeps us on our toes, never letting us settle into a single rhythm, as she exploits the agility of her SITI troupe to neo-Euripidean effect.

The carnage traditionally occurs offstage in Greek drama, requiring messengers to come in and report in lengthy speeches the details that are too horrifying to dramatize. Audiences not

accustomed to listening to such elaborate descriptions can easily tune out. But the envoys here are mesmerizing.

Leon Ingulsrud, his eyes bubbling with the news of the extraordinary sights his character has witnessed, recounts the Dionysian mysteries and marvels in all their awesome beauty and terror. Gian-Murray Gianino sonorously delivers the spoken aria narrating the way Pentheus literally and figuratively loses his head after he's enticed to don female drag and spy on rituals no man is allowed to see.

The production makes full use of the outdoor theater, incorporating the royal aura of the museum architecture and the aisle staircases leading upward into the unknown. Brian H. Scott's set and lighting and the costumes (Eleni Kyriacou is credited as consultant) help map out this purely theatrical geography.

Effective as Bogart is at coming up with a flexibly modern stage vocabulary, she is less adept at tracing the dramatic subtleties. Theatrical vitality comes at the expense of a nuanced reading of a play that is politically, psychologically and philosophically nearly inexhaustible.

Aizawa, an actress of astonishing power, delivers Agave's shattering scene at the end in her native Japanese. At first, the chorus fills us in on the meaning of her words. But when that stops, all non-Japanese-speaking theatergoers have to guide them is the fiery intensity of Aizawa's enunciation. This portion of the text, which is included in a program insert, is discounted, and with it, some of the tragedy's most heartbreaking meaning.

Still, Bogart has given us a "Bacchae" that lights a path for future directors wanting to meet the treasury of ancient Greek theater on 21st century terms.



'Bacchae'

Where: Getty Villa, Barbara and Lawrence Fleischman Theater, 17985 Pacific Coast Highway,

Pacific Palisades

When: 8 p.m. Thursdays-Saturdays. Ends Sept. 29

Cost: \$40-\$48

Info: (310) 440-7300 or www.getty.edu

Running time: 1 hour 30, minutes

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Charles McNulty is the theater critic of the Los Angeles Times. He received his doctorate in dramaturgy and dramatic criticism from the Yale School of Drama.

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