

Guthrie hosts SITI's gruesome, indelible 'Bacchae'

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If Dionysus were alive today, he would be a female combo of Mick Jagger, Steven Tyler and Hedwig.

That is one takeaway from “The Bacchae,” the SITI Company’s inventive and visceral retelling of the Euripides classic that opened over the weekend at the Guthrie Theater. Ellen Lauren, the agile performer who plays the Greek god of wine, fertility and ecstasy, bounds onstage with a bottle of wine looking like a feral rocker. Her strong but slim stature and disheveled hair, not to mention her leering abandon, help make the ancient Greek a contemporary figure unleashing flashes of wildness in the McGuire Proscenium Stage.

This adaptation, created and performed by the 10-member SITI ensemble and staged as a striking ritual by Anne Bogart, boasts numerous updates. The score has throbbing dance music that suggests a nightclub or rave. Designer Lena Sands’ unisex costumes put one in mind of a religious order. And the stage, given texture by lighting and set designer Brian H. Scott, is empty save for curtains and a couple of modern landscape furniture pieces.

The text, translated by Aaron Poochigian, retains Euripides’ essential narrative. Dionysus, whose followers work themselves into frenzies, has returned to his homeland of Thebes seeking a warm welcome. But King Pentheus (Donnell E. Smith) does not believe in his divinity and has him arrested.

Blind seer Tiresias (Barney O’Hanlon) encourages the king’s faith. Pentheus instead disguises himself as a woman and goes to spy on Dionysus’ followers in the mountains. Tragedy and woe follow.

Bogart stages it imaginatively and simply. The actors march onstage wielding tall staffs. They narrate the action chorally, underscoring the religious rites present in the story. But it’s also a mixed production, slowing in the middle. That’s partly because of the nature of the Greeks — sometimes, they tell more than show a story.

“The Bacchae” culminates in a scene so gruesome, and effective, a viewer may have to remind her- or himself that what they’re seeing is a play, even as the moment becomes indelible.

Pentheus’ mother, Agave (Akiko Aizawa), has caught Dionysus’ energy and torn what she believes is a lion from limb to limb. Gleefully and proudly, she carries the creature’s head in a see-through plastic bag, the blood curdling around the shape. When her father, Cadmus (Stephen Duff Webber) tells her to look at the head, her spell breaks. The lion she has killed is her very son.

Aizawa delivers her dialogue in Japanese, another contemporary touch, but the emotional truth of her performance is unmistakable and requires no translation. She screams the grief of a mother who recognizes that her pious hands and mind have betrayed her.

The Greeks have a knack for these devastating theatrical moments. When Oedipus, who kills his father and sleeps with his mother, realizes what he has done, he gouges out his own eyes. In “Electra,” Orestes and his sister Electra hide their murdered mother under a shroud only to have her lover, Aegisthus, shockingly unveil her corpse.

Bogart’s production adds to this distinguished list of lasting tragedy.

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DAN NORMAN

Akiko Aizawa as Agave in “The Bacchae” at the Guthrie Theater.



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Ellen Lauren as Dionysus and Donnell E. Smith as Pentheus in “The Bacchae” at the Guthrie Theater.