

The Numinous Has Many Shapes and Ways: On SITI and Aaron Poochigian's "Bacchae"

By Kevin McMahon



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THE GETTY VILLA is the only L.A. folly worth visiting regularly, relished by locals as an oceanside lunch spot, a garden to air the kids, and a space for couples to wander.

Its camp aspect has aged more genially than a lot of institutions from the 1970s, especially after the renovation rationalized circulation, made space for exhibits that offer fresh takes on antiquities, tweaked the faux-villa with witty details, and added amenities like the 450-seat outdoor theater. The theater has become the heart of the Villa, offering fresh takes on ancient plays, a once-a-year event (each year, a different play, in a different translation, presented by a different company — no simple or straightforward undertaking). Over the last 13 years fans have developed a ritual of lurking over the Getty's website at 9:00 a.m. on July 1 to score tickets before they disappear.

This year, the ticket delivered Aaron Poochigian and SITI Company's version of the *Bacchae*, the still timely 2,400-year-old tragedy by Euripides about the fragility of reason and community — an occasion attended by a sequence of howls. The first is the "Hands off!" of King Pentheus (Eric Berryman) of Thebes as he recoils from his grandfather, Cadmus, who is attempting to crown him with a bit of ivy. All of the local women have just put ivy on their heads and run to the mountains to party and pillage the locals in honor of the god of debauchery, Dionysus (a.k.a. Bacchus). The king is enraged by the revelers and disgusted by the sight of Cadmus and the aged seer, Tiresias, hobbling off to join them. His shriek at his grandfather registers a panic

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vastly in excess of the situation — it suggests his concern was something other than maintaining civic order.

The central howl in the design of the play is the “Wait!” of Dionysus (Ellen Lauren), which implied at once a laugh (“Ah-ha!”), a private revelation (“Ah!”), and a snicker (“Now I’ve got you”). He is commanding Pentheus, whose attempts to contain the disorder through force are failing. The pause ends their intellectual debate (authority versus populism, convention versus nature, cult versus community, men versus women, reason versus ecstasy). What comes next is unexpected: Dionysus suggests to Pentheus that he spy on the women while disguised as a woman. The plan is absurd, but the supposedly powerful Pentheus is under its spell. In SITI’s staging, Dionysus crooned that one syllable “Ah!” over the king’s prone body. It was a seductive sigh, but it was also the squeak of the machine shifting gears. Dionysus keeps his cool, not because he is a saint, but because he is a conscience-free serial killer. He seduces Pentheus the way Shakespeare’s Richard III seduces Lady Anne. How terrifyingly easy it is for the oppressor and the oppressed to exchange roles.

Then, at the end, rings out the howl of howls as Agave (Akiko Aizawa), the mother of Pentheus, makes her

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which is in fact the head of her son. She has Pentheus spying and led the charge of the rip him to pieces. As Agave realizes that her excess has destroyed her life, her howl registered astonishment, disgust, horror, and grief in a single, magnificently extended syllable.

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These howls punctuate a design inaugurated 2,423 years ago, when, after a day of processions, sacrifices, feasts, and patriotic pageants, the *Bacchae* of Euripides opened with the entrance of an actor in a mask portraying Dionysus, the patron of the theater and the festival (the Dionysia). Then, the chorus would enter: all men, playing women, singing, dancing, and wearing eye-catching costumes. The prominence Euripides gave to the chorus in *Bacchae* probably struck the first-nighters as a throwback. Though a late work — it was produced after Euripides had died — Gilbert Murray called it “the most formal Greek play known to us.” The stately methodical pace and echoes of real-life cultic ritual created maximum dissonance with the ferocious content.

The production at The Getty, devised by director Anne Bogart and SIT1, offered nine men and women wearing dark jackets and black kilts and carrying aikido sticks. Individuals peeled away from the group to play characters. Dionysius, with his own L.A. rocker-ish look, came and went independent of the others. It began with the chorus marching into the playing space with a precise but graceful ceremoniousness, accompanied by Screamin’ Jay Hawkins’s apt “I Put a Spell on You.” It was an austere kind of spectacle — actors in motion, their unamplified voices, minimal costumes and props, some discreet sound and lighting effects — but it was not gimmicky: instead, it spotlighted translator Aaron Poochigian’s words.

For example, the entrance song of the chorus was famously spectacular, and for this production, Poochigian provided lyrics with a pattern of rhymes and almost-rhymes:

side/God/road/dread/mode. It was capped by, “*That’s the reason / why Maenads now weave snakes, their mountain prey, / into their hair, a wild accessory.*” All that is left of the music of the first production is rumors, posing a challenge that SITI solved by emphasizing movement: the production flowed through the actors’ bodies. There were moments of full-on dancing — a spoof Broadway number — but most of the choreography took the form of deliberate walking and standing.

Imagine, reader, that you are producing a revival of *Hamilton* some time in the future — say, the year 4388 (about as many years into the future as *Bacchae* is into the past). Imagine further that after centuries of popularity, widespread distribution, and the attention of scholars, Lin-Manuel Miranda’s words have only partially survived — typos infect every other word and most of the ending is missing. Worst of all, the music has been completely lost, and nobody in the 44th century really knows what 21st-century rap sounded like, or, for that matter, what a Broadway musical was like. An even bigger obstacle is the foreignness and strangeness of the characters and situations. Future audiences will no doubt assume the world of 2015 New York City was indistinguishable from that of the Founding Fathers, and that the whole show was a patriotic celebration of bizarre primitive myths. Any attempts by the far-in-the-future production to communicate and entertain would have to modify the text so radically that the link with Miranda’s Tony-winning *Hamilton* would be strained to the breaking point.

Such are the headaches the Villa series faces every year. Therefore, rather than following a house style, or indulging in ego-trip publicity stunts, its organizers have cultivated a

variety of approaches, ranging from the relatively Hellenic and unmodernized (Court Theatre's *Iphigenia in Aulis*), to deliberately jolting mash-ups of Hellenic and modern (Anne Carson's *Hippolytos*), to completely modernized versions of the story (Luis Alfaro's *Mojada; a Medea in Los Angeles*) and complete rewrites based on analogies of the original (Culture Clash's glorious *Peace*, featuring prickly neighbors, stolen antiquities, and Stephen Greenblatt). The journey of *Bacchae* from Dionysia to the Villa illustrates the complications that attend such adaptations.

Euripides was awarded first prize at the Dionysia, and his *Bacchae* became a critical and popular hit. Like Shakespeare — the playwright most like him — Euripides offered both over-the-top spectacle, subtle psychological portraiture, and mesmerizing word-music. He became a rich resource for scholars and required reading in schools. Centuries after the premiere, Callimachus wrote an epigram in which an actor's mask sighs about eternally listening to school kids rattle off famous speeches from the *Bacchae*. Yet despite its popularity, the *Bacchae* that reached the Renaissance was in tatters — missing pages of the end — and so every subsequent translation or production contains more than a little conjecture.

The first attempts to revive it were bizarre. Voltaire wrote a version in which Pentheus ("Zopir") is an immaculate martyr of Enlightenment reason, fighting the good fight against religious fanaticism. A century and bit later, two Oxford undergraduates presented the first English-language version of *Bacchae* — as a domestic farce, in which Pentheus publicly campaigns against drinking but tipples in private. A decade later, the play was vandalized again, this time by

Friedrich Nietzsche. His *Birth of Tragedy* set up Euripides as a bloodless rationalist chatterbox who, with *Bacchae*, recanted and embraced Tragic Myth, which Nietzsche saw reborn in the works of Richard Wagner. Nietzsche later recanted in *The Case of Wagner*, but he had already set the stage for, in T. S. Eliot's phrase, the "Freudian-social-mystical-rationalistic-higher-critical interpretation of the Classics."

This was the context in which Gilbert Murray began his ambitious cycle of translations of Greek drama. In 1908, his *Bacchae* was the basis of the first English-language production of *Bacchae* in a commercial theater, with Dionysus played by Lillah McCarthy. Audiences were not quite ready: the show closed after two matinees.

After World War II, *Bacchae*-inflected works started appearing as varied as William Inge's *Picnic*, William Golding's *Lord of the Flies*, and W. H. Auden, Chester Kallman, and Hans Werner Henze's underappreciated opera *The Bassarids*. But *Bacchae* was reborn as an authentic postmodern myth with Richard Schechner's TPG production of *Dionysus in 69* (see Brian De Palma's [brilliant documentary](#)). Loved or hated, it precipitated Wole Soyinka's *The Bacchae of Euripides: A Communion Rite*, and productions that ranged from Tadashi Suzuki's multilingual global roadshow to National Theatre of Scotland's production with Alan Cummings as a rock-star Dionysus. *Bacchae* is part of pop culture, informing everything from *Ferris Bueller's Day Off* to Donna Tartt's *The Secret History*.

Chester Kallman's explanation for the rediscovery of *Bacchae* contrasted the post-World War II world with Voltaire's, which,

took it for granted that in a struggle between the Rational and the Irrational, Reason would inevitably prevail. [...] Even a century later, a librettist or composer searching for a possible subject matter for an opera would probably have rejected Euripides' *Bacchae* as "unnatural." Such goings on, they would have thought, might have taken place a long time ago in primitive, barbaric societies, but social and intellectual progress have made it impossible that anything like that could ever happen again.

Today we know that it can happen. We know that entire societies can be seized by the "demon," just as individuals can lose their heads.

Poochigian's version of *Bacchae* is the latest in a series of distinguished English versions (William Arrowsmith, Derek Mahon, Anne Carson, C. K. Williams, Colin Teevan, et al). His version is colloquial enough to be clear, but not *too* clear: if it weren't a bit odd, it wouldn't be Euripides.

Poochigian and SITI are Villa veterans. Four years ago, SITI did *Persians*, using Poochigian's blank verse that broke with the tradition of English versions of Aeschylus being harder to understand than the Greek. Verse seems to be Poochigian's natural mode. His noir novel *Mr. Either/Or* employs it to capture, among other things, the abrupt end of an unpleasant cell phone conversation: "The twang has twangled, so you close the phone."

Even earlier, SITI presented at the Villa a production of *Trojan Women* that was also admirably stripped down. Ellen

Lauren blazed as Hecuba, sustaining maximum violence and maximum expression for 100 minutes without a single strained sound or gesture. Akiko Aizawa previewed her great *Bacchae* howl as Cassandra, running around inside the museum, her screams echoing off the marble walls and floors.

This time, I was struck by SITI's engagement with the words. Leon Ingulsrud and Gian-Murray Gianino sang out Poochigian's lines in their long solo narratives arias. Rather than trying to hurry them along, the production gave them time to savor details, like Poochigian's description of the revelers in the mountains: "The mountain moved along with them, beasts roared and everything was running with their running." David Kovacs, in the excellent Loeb version, conveys the sense without the animation: "[T]he whole mountain with its beasts was as possessed as they were, and everything was set in rapid motion."

Another test for a translator is the chorus that comes after Dionysus has put his spell on Pentheus. It begins with a cry of liberation that Poochigian renders:

Should I, my roused feet gleaming, dance all night
in sacred exaltation? Should I shake
my neck in dewy air, exultant like
a fawn that dashes through the green delight
of meadows? She has shaken dread pursuit,
slipped from the hunters and their woven nets.

This moment calls for extreme lyricism, which others have run with as well, such as C. K. Williams:

Oh, will I, some-
time, in the all-
night dances, dance
again, bare-
foot, rapt,
again, in
Bacchus, all
in Bacchus,
again?

The real test, however, comes with the refrain, which abruptly changes the tone from whoops of joy to war cry. The deliberately jarring ugliness was too much for some of Poochigian's predecessors. H.D. made it an escape from banality:

O which of the gifts of the gods
is the best gift?
this,
this,
this,
this,
escape
from the power of the hunting pack,
and to know that wisdom is best
and beauty
sheer holiness.

Derek Mahon even made a familiar joke of it: "It's still the same old story, / a fight for love and glory."

Poochigian again employs fugitive almost-rhymes to convey

the fusion of lyricism and menace:

What, then, is wisdom? What finer prize
do gods bestow on humankind
than to hold a mighty hand
over the heads of enemies?
People always should acclaim
whatever gives a noble name.

SITI recited it like a spell; the effect was hair-raising. At this point, the design was just starting to unspool. The farcical elements of the story — the mistaken identities, fights about clothes and hair — are amplified and reframed in a play within a play, with Dionysus an on-stage director, cueing entrances and exits, offstage noises, and even becoming a costumer to help Pentheus get into drag — another classic trope of farce.

From a farce, the play turns into a Theater of Cruelty spectacle. For Pentheus, drag is not playing with identity, but destroying identity. After staggering around completely zonked and helpless, he scampers off to the mountains, and returns as a disembodied, decapitated head waved around by his equally deranged mother. At the premiere, it was a mask that Agave waved about, not a prop head, which might have been even more unsettling. SITI staged this scene — a show-stopping gift from Euripides for actors who are up to it — with Aizawa delivering Agave's dialogue in Japanese. Aizawa is a powerful performer, and she succeeded in communicating Agave's transition from delirium to sobriety through the music of her voice and her expressive posture and gestures. The scene is, admittedly, something almost beyond words, but not really. Euripides and Poochigian

found them, and without hearing the steps of Agave's awakening, the audience is cheated of its own *anagnorisis*.

During the epilogue, Dionysus appeared one last time to announce even further punishments and dishonors for the survivors. It was the custom at the Dionysia to end a day of tragedies with a farce. In a tip of the hat to that tradition, Ellen Lauren appeared dressed as a janitor — as if Dionysus ever cleaned up after himself!

The cruelty of it all destroyed any idea of justice or redemption. The chorus, unable to offer any consolation at the end, can only describe how,

The numinous has many shapes and ways;
our deities are given to surprise.
Whenever one wants to astonish us,
the unexpected comes about,
and that is how this play turned out.

The snap of the pattern's final detail into place will have to do.

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Feature image by Craig Schwartz.