



*'The Bacchae' at BAM (Craig Schwartz)*

## THEATER REVIEW (NYC): EURIPIDES' 'THE BACCHAE' AT BAM

👤 Jon Sobel 🕒 October 5, 2018 👁 197 Views

The Greek gods and heroes are alive and well, and living on stages around the world. Of them all, Dionysus, or Bacchus – god of the grape, and of the theater – remains the most relatable today. That makes Euripides' *The Bacchae* one of the most effective classical Greek plays for modern audiences.

Electra and Antigone come with deeply affecting stories. So do the Trojan Women. But only Dionysus brings the fusion of ecstatic bacchanalia and gruesome violence we find in Euripides' masterwork. Director Anne Bogart and SITI Company charge up Aaron Poochigian's balanced new translation in a graceful new 90-minute production. It debuted at the Getty Villa a month ago, and has alit at the BAM Harvey Theater in Brooklyn as part of BAM's Next Wave Festival for a brief run through 7 October.

Ellen Lauren, a SITI co-artistic director, sparks a gender-neutral and bilingual cast as Dionysus, who has arrived at Thebes to find its king, Pentheus (a powerfully raw performance by Eric Berryman), resolutely

opposed to recognizing the legitimacy and even the existence of the new deity.

The god has bewitched the city's women, including Pentheus's own mother and aunts, and led them to the mountain outside town for an orgy of celebration and ritual. Even the old blind sage Tiresias (Barney O'Hanlon, funny yet believable) and Pentheus's own grandfather Cadmus (a multifaceted turn by Stephen Duff Webber) are ready to join the revelry.

But only the god himself, in mortal guise, can induce stubborn Pentheus to don women's garb and venture up the mountain to observe the festivities. They are the last, it turns out, the young monarch will ever see.



Ellen Lauren as Dionysus in 'The Bacchae' at BAM (Craig Schwartz)

The king's appearance in drag, a deliciously amped-up sight gag, is emblematic of the production's whole approach. Like other Greek dramas, *The Bacchae* is cloaked in form and drenched in symbolism. It also roars with Euripides' spectacular poetry, ably suggested by the translation. Hence, just as its language shouldn't be sieved into full vernacular, its action and characters oughtn't be re-sculpted into realism. These plays were meant to be full-on entertainments. They also carried strong messages, some of which resound more fully today than others. But they delivered those themes through colorful comedy and drama. This production delivers both.

An energetically staged ensemble piece, the production is also a showcase for individual performances, especially Lauren's Dionysus and Akiko Aizawa's Agave. When I read that Pentheus's mother would deliver all her lines in untranslated Japanese, I feared the gambit would feel confusing or gimmicky. To the contrary. Lauren's Dionysus dances and gambols anticly about, playing archly to the audience. By contrast, Agave wrings every drop of emotion from her words as she transitions from glazed-eyed triumph to tragic keening. In a language we don't understand, her speeches ring all the more powerfully; we experience them as raw emotion, unmediated by rhetoric or poetry.



Once or twice when I missed a few lines, I lost track of whether the solemnly attired company was playing the Chorus or the bacchants. Contributing to this confusion were the male actors playing most of the latter. Nonetheless the play never lost its potency or momentum. In English or in Japanese, Euripides' words carry the story unstoppably, while the staging – stark, symbol-heavy, at times funny – would have made many parts of the story comprehensible even to a viewer who understood neither language.

Still, the translation is key. Poochigan intended his for live performance and achieved his aim of a text that's "comprehensible on a first hearing" and also "preserves, formally, the incantatory quality of the poetry in the original." That poetry indeed comes alive here. As always in classical Greek drama, messengers describe offstage events at length, and Leon Ingulsrud and Gian-Murray Gianino make every word count and make the most of these roles. As I drafted this paragraph I instinctively almost wrote "make the most of their solos," influenced by the musicality of the translation and the staging. As the god of wine puts a spell on the women of Thebes, this production put a spell on me.

*The Bacchae* runs through this weekend. For information visit the BAM website.

