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REVIEWS



L to R: Roshni Shukia, Stephen Duff Webber, Barney O'Hanlon, J. Ed Araiza, Akiko Aizawa, Samuel Stricklen, Leon Ingulsrud, and Ellen Lauren in Aaron Poochigian's translation of Euripides's *Bacchae*. (Photo by Craig Schwartz)

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Bacchae

Reviewed by Vanessa Cate

SITI Company

Through September 29

Dionysus has to be one of the coolest gods out there, especially for theatre die-hards. As the only surviving play that explicitly honors the god of wine, fertility, divine ecstasy, and, of course, theatre itself, Euripides' enduring tragedy (translated here by Aaron Poochigian) is an enticing feast for artistic sensibilities. But delicious as the ancient play might sound, staging the beast is no small feat.

Dionysus (Ellen Lauren) announces his return to Thebes, but the god is displeased with the uptight and impious attitudes of its residents. In response, he drives the women into an ecstatic madness, and they make their way to Mt. Cithaeron, where they stay in a state of holy pleasure and ... active observance. Pentheus (Eric Berryman) does his best to stifle the uncivilized cult, but only succeeds in provoking the god's ire.

SITI Company's co-founder and artistic director Anne Bogart takes up the ancient reins of the project. Directing this epic and verbose tragedy is a challenge in and of itself, but such a challenge is amplified by staging it in the outdoor amphitheater at the Getty Villa. Bogart succeeds not only in making great use of the space but in forging a technical accomplishment; the ensemble moves and speaks with a sustained precision expected of SITI Company's style.

Precision is all well and good, but you need an incredible amount of charisma and mastery to bring the god of theatre of life. Luckily, Lauren seems meant for the role: her mastery of the language, her physical stamina, and her otherworldly aura combining to create a Bacchus that seems not only timeless, but perfect for this day and age. Her only shortcoming may be a penchant for mugging — a grating flaw shared by many in the ensemble, betraying a probable directorial choice or oversight. Still, the performers are talented and adept.

So, the technicality of the text is well-handled, and the cast is comprised of highly talented and effective players. However, whether we look at producing *Bacchae* as an artistic challenge or as a ritual act of observance to the god itself, the vital — and necessary — feeling of pleasure is woefully missing. *Bacchae* may talk a big game, but this production feels undeniably prudish. If you're looking for Bacchic revelry, sorry, you'll have to settle for academia.

The production's approach to gender dismisses the binary system of identification as befits a queer god. Lauren is unquestionably Dionysus, her power and androgyny alarmingly apt. The ensemble — both men and women represent the traditionally feminine maenads — are arrayed in muted costumes, consisting of suit jackets and long skirts. The sole example of traditional gender normativity can be seen in the character of Pentheus, the ruler of Thebes, whose toxic masculinity is at least partially to blame for his downfall. His decent into madness evolves into a drag show, which, as directed, doesn't quite land; here, the camp undercuts the enlightened perspective manifest in the rest of the show.

Bogart's biggest and riskiest directorial choice lies at the bloody climax. As Pentheus' mother Agave, Akiko Aizawa delivers her heart-shattering dialogue in her native Japanese language. In a medium comprised so specifically of words, the expectation that performance and art can transcend language is both beautiful and controversial. Agave's unfathomable speech comprises what is arguably the most important and memorable part of the script. In delivering it, Aizawa rises to the occasion, and Bogart's daring in choosing to stage it this way is what ultimately makes this production most memorable.

Getty Villa, Barbara and Lawrence Fleischman Theater, 17985 Pacific Coast Highway, Pacific Palisades; Thurs.-Sat. 8 p.m.; Through September 29; www.getty.edu or (310) 440-7300; Running Time: 90 minutes, no intermission



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