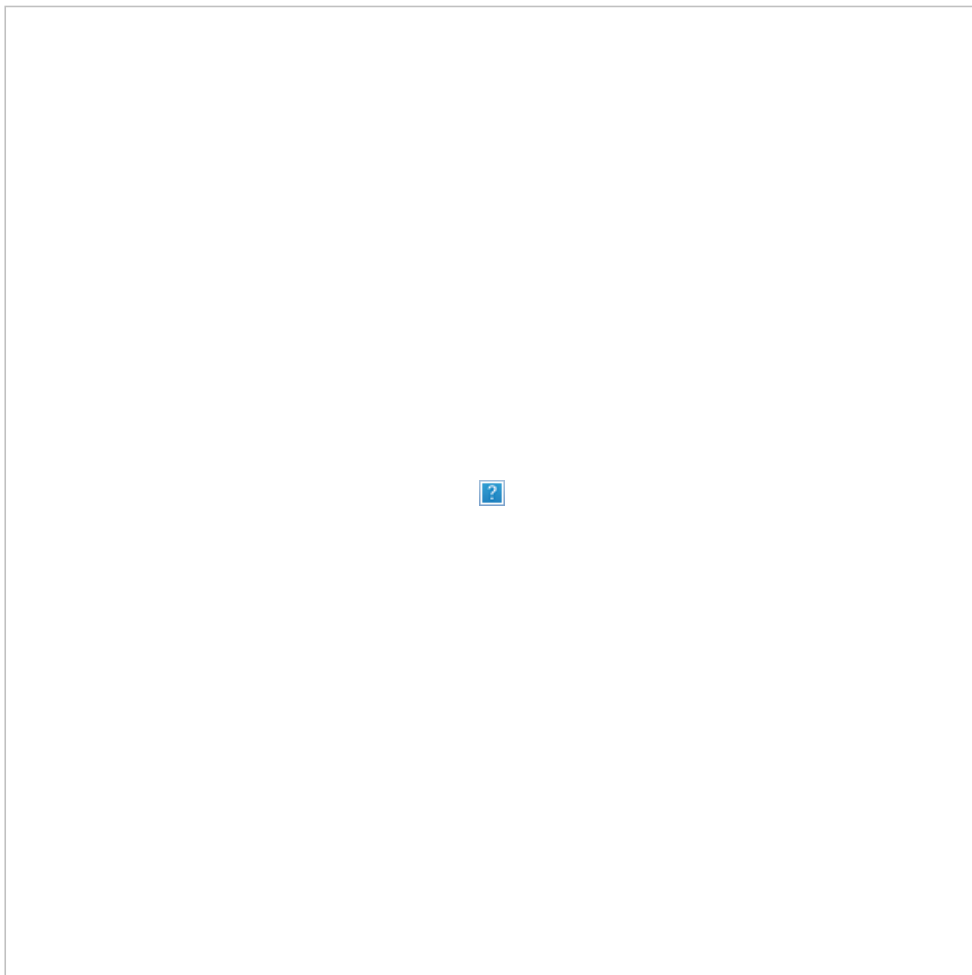

Getty Museum Theatre Presents ‘Bacchae’

Posted on [September 11, 2018](#) by [Sue](#)



“Bacchae” at the Getty Villa. Left to right: Eric Berryman (Pentheus) and Ellen Lauren (Dionysus). Photo by Craig Schwartz

Euripides’ ‘Bacchae’ Startles with Relevance

By LIBBY MOTIKA

The scene is set on the empty stage at the Villa outdoor theatre. Quietly, the large bronze doors of the Getty Museum open, revealing a sliver of the Greek statues within. An ordered phalanx of men and women, somberly dressed in grey and black, walk out of the interior onto the stage.

“Bacchae,” Euripides’ final play, written in 410 A.C.E, opens the 13th annual outdoor theatrical production in the Getty Villa’s Barbara and Lawrence Fleischman Theater.

Directed by Anne Bogart, “Bacchae” is the third production presented by Bogart’s SITI Company at the Getty Villa (previously “Trojan Women” in 2011 and “The Persians” in 2014) –and the most challenging.

In no time, this stately procession withdraws as Dionysus, the son of Zeus, the god of wine, ritual madness, fertility and theater, sweeps onto the stage, disguised as a mortal.

In order to refute the slander against his mother that questions his divinity, he has returned to his birthplace to spread his cult among the people of Thebes, driving the women of Thebes, frenzied and crazed of mind, up to the mountains. “This is my ritual, so people can see my divinity,” he says. “Thebes must learn my rites; it was a god she bore to Zeus.”

It’s worth recounting the story of Dionysus’ birth. Doubters said that he was no son of Zeus; that his mother Semele had slept with a mortal and fathered off her shame on Zeus. They said she lied and Zeus in anger at that lie blasted her with lightning.

Zeus, protecting his young son from the fury of his wife, Hera, sewed the god into his thigh, as to a womb, until he was born.

Dramatically, the core of the play is the confrontation between the two major opponents: the young god Dionysus and the adolescent Pentheus, king of Thebes, who rages against “a fraud name Dionysus. A foreign man has come claiming Dionysus is a god; I’ll cut off his head.”

Asserting that royal might alone has power over mankind, Pentheus has Dionysus captured and incarcerated. He soon learns that a man is foolish who confronts a god with haste and lordly excess. Dionysus emerges from his chains and seeing that Pentheus is not only impetuous but shows a voyeuristic interest in watching the women’s revels on the mountain, accelerates his plan.

A messenger reports the women on the mountain “let their hair down, cradled fawns and wolves and let them suck. They shredded animals with no weapons; surely they had help from some divinity.”

Dionysus coaxes the young king to disguise himself in women’s clothing to avoid being discovered by the women before setting off for the mountain.

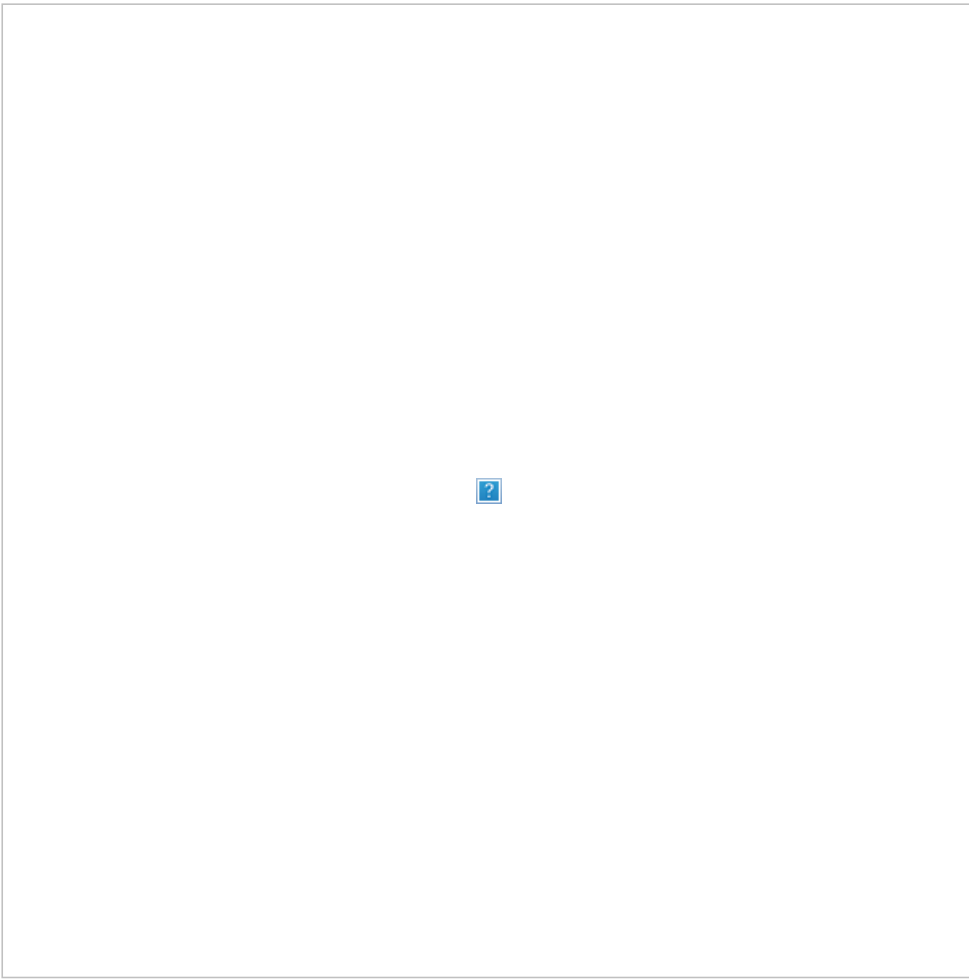
As predicted, Dionysus’ revenge spells suffering for all.

As with all great plays, themes in “Bacchae” resonate across the centuries. We can understand the fear of the new and the exotic, of the thin line between codified, semi-ossified societal rules, and passion, fearlessness, joy or contrariness. We also recognize that foolish petulance leads to rash proclamations and belligerent action.

SITI Company, while respecting the power of Euripedes’ words, recognizes and respects present-moment sensibilities. The role of Dionysus, played by co-artistic director Ellen Lauren, is what we would imagine, neither male nor female, promulgator of religious ecstasy, self-knowledge and exacting vengeance.

Eric Berryman’s Pentheus emphasizes the impetuous youth, full of bombast, hubris and foolishness.

Respecting the company’s commitment to international exchange, Akiko Aizawa, who plays Agave, Pentheus’ mother, chooses to speak her native Japanese to convey her agony over having mistakenly slain her son. While



the audience is left not understanding her words, there is not doubt we feel her excruciating pain.

Translated by Aaron Poochigian, “Bacchae” is powerfully conveyed in words and choral songs of great power and beauty.

“Bacchae” continues at the Getty Villa Thursdays through Saturdays, 8 p.m., through September 29. For tickets (\$40; \$36 for students, seniors), visit getty.edu or call 310-440-7300.

Akiko Aizawa (Agave) agonizes over having mistakenly slain her son. Photo: Craig Schwartz

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