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It's Greek to Me: The Grapes of Wrath and Laughs

BY ED RAMPELL



Akiko Aizawa and Stephen Duff Webber (Photo: Craig Schwartz)

BACCHAETheater Review

So first of all, let me get this out of the way: I really enjoyed the annual experience of watching an ancient Grecian play performed under the stars at the Getty Villa, seeing and hearing it in an amphitheater the way Greek audiences did when Euripides' *Bacchae* opened in 405 BC. The drama pits Dionysus (a whimsical Ellen Lauren) – who, according to press notes, is “the god of divine ecstasy, fertility, wine and harvest... [and] theater” – against Pentheus (Eric Berryman), king of Thebes (the dramatist’s birthplace).

I’m certainly no expert on Greek drama but it seems to me that what Euripides, the playwright of antiquity, was getting at is what Sigmund Freud, the 19th century founder of psychoanalysis, would much later describe in works such as 1930’s *Civilization and Its Discontents*. That is, the struggle between the id – the unrestrained, instinctual, inner self – and the superego, from whence rules

and regulations emanate. Out of this epic clash and collision Classical tragedy is born – and borne.

But this SITI Company production of *Bacchae* directed by co-founder Anne Bogart also thinks there is much mirth to be found in this conflict, too. Crossing genders, the freewheeling Lauren depicts Dionysus as a rock superstar, sort of as a Hellenistic, rollicking, swaggering Mick Jagger or Steven Tyler – or, Dionysus as Dion, for that matter. I don't know what Euripides' intent was, but certainly there can be something comic about the divine god of the vine.

However, in this 90-minute one-acter presented without an intermission, what seems to be a comedy quickly devolves into tragedy as SITI's rendition of the prizewinner at the City Dionysia festival competition becomes an ancient version of the grapes of wrath. After all, this is by Euripides – not that knee-slapping satirist Aristophanes.

Like many Greek tragedies such as *Agamemnon* (which was mounted a few years back at the Getty Villa starring Tyne Daly as the murderous Clytemnestra and Delroy Lindo as the title character), *Bacchae* becomes a bloodbath. (Euripides did write *Medea*, which makes the Manson family seem like the Brady Bunch in comparison.)

Bogart's iteration of Euripides' tragedy has a pastiche quality. A recorded soundtrack includes rock songs and coyote howls; born in the land of the rising sun, as Agave (Pentheus' mother) Akiko Aizawa speaks mainly in Japanese. She's supposed to be such a gifted thespian that we mere mortals in the peanuts gallery are supposed to understand her lamentations of grief, as if Yankee Doodle Dandy audience members possess the gift divination. But then again, Euripides probably understood Japanese as much as he comprehended English. It's Greek to me...

The decapitation subplot, which was more common on L.A. stages during the heyday of Al Qaeda and Isis, may reference this barbaric practice of some terrorists. Before he meets his fate, Pentheus cross-dresses. Combined with Lauren's transgender switcheroo as the male Dionysus one may surmise SITI is cashing in on the trans trend as in Amazon's *Transparent* series, but in fact,

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Leon Ingulsrud and Eric Berryman (Photo Craig Schwartz)

Pentheus dresses like a female Maenad in our man Euripides' original text.

SITI's production uses ancient terms it doesn't bother to explain to viewers, such as "Maenad" – like the titular (and similarly not translated) *Bacchae*, they are the female followers and priestesses of Dionysus. The words literally translate as "raving ones," which could be due to the ec-static electricity imparted by Dionysus to these females, as well as the inebriated state imparted by the god of the grape to them during their frenzied bacchanalias.

BTW, Bogart's production doesn't bother to explain to 21st century Americans that Bacchus and Dionysus are the different names for the same godlike character, with the former being Roman and the latter Greek nomenclature. (Backus, on the other

hand, is the name of the actor who provided the voice of Mr. Magoo.) For all this version bothers to explicate you have to be Mr. Peabody and Sherman traveling in their "wayback machine" to ancient Athens or Thebes to understand this.

In the play, Euripides skillfully interweaves the titular *Bacchae* with the Greek chorus. They are mostly unattractively, unappealingly clad by Eleni Kyriacou and Lena Sands in black skirts and jackets – there is not a toga to be seen. I keep complaining about these mostly toga-less revivals of Greek classics and am beginning to suspect that contemporary showrunners feel a compulsion about needing to "update" ancient plays to make more "relatable" to 21st century auds. But if I want to see modern dress I can just walk outside my door and maybe if you don't want your spectacles to be Greek, hey, here's a suggestion – I know it's a wacky idea, but why don't you just write something new and original? (What's next? A revival of *Animal House* without a toga party?) The liberties taken with pieces by authors who can't defend their oeuvre because, like, they're dead and with works unprotected by copyright is sometimes truly mindboggling.



Eric Verryman and Ellen Lauren (Photo: Craig Schwartz)

Like togas, SITI's production is largely devoid of props – except for staves, garbage cans and a few other items – and sets. Although the glorious backdrop of the Getty's museum with its colonnade is ideal and mood-setting, as the building is modeled after the Roman Villa dei Papiri at Naples, which was buried by Mount Vesuvius' legendary eruption in 79 AD.

Speaking of volcanoes, Trump seems to combine the worst characteristics of Dionysus and Pentheus. One can only imagine the drama Euripides could have wrought based on the current tragedy unfolding at 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue.

Be that as it may, I suspect that Euripides' point is that the Dionysian impulse could, at times, do with some restraint. Drunken, orgiastic revels are one thing, but embarking on a murder spree simply because you're slighted by someone saying you're not the son of Zeus is quite another. Come to think of it, maybe Euripides did possess the gift of prophecy and foresaw the tragedy of Trump after all?



Bacchae plays through Sept. 29 on Thursdays, Fridays and Saturdays at 8:00 p.m. at The Barbara and Lawrence Fleischman Theater at the Getty Villa, 17985 Pacific Coast Highway, Malibu. For more info: (310) 440-7300; www.getty.edu.

Ed Rampell

L.A.-based reviewer Ed Rampell co-authored *The Hawaii Movie and Television Book* (see: <https://mutualpublishing.com/product/the-hawaii-movie-and-television-book/>).

POSTED ON SEPTEMBER 9, 2018



About Ed Rampell

Film historian and reviewer Ed Rampell's interview with legendary Greek director Costa-Gavras is in the September issue of *The Progressive Magazine*. Rampell is the co-author of *The Hawaii Movie and Television Book*, to be released by Honolulu's Mutual Publishing in October 2013.

Comments



Eleni says

September 10, 2018 at 9:22 am

Hi Ed,

I agree with you 100% on the costumes which is why my name should not be in this article. An in-slip was supposed to clarify this at The Getty – I was only consulted. My

