

# The Malibu Dionysia

September Brings Ancient Drama to the Getty Villa



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"Bacchae" at the Getty Villa (Photo by Craig Schwartz) .

The Getty Villa eternally enchants. Located in Malibu along California's Pacific Coast Highway, the Villa's allure is experienced as a traveler approaches witnessing a deep caerulean twilight blanket the expansive ocean, neighbor to J. Paul Getty's resplendent replica of Herculaneum's *Villa dei Papiri*.

Turning into the main gate, a steep cobblestone drive leads to the mansion's hilltop perch. Once parked, visitors ascend further by stairs or elevator to illuminated pathways bordered, on one side, by walls covered in roses and climbing vegetation and, on the other, by tall trees offering intermittent previews of the structure's full grandeur. The path finally opens upon the top ridge of the Barbara and Lawrence Fleischman Theater. As a delight for spectators, this venue, modeled on the open air theaters of ancient Greece and Rome, utilizes the two-story columned facade of the Villa as its backdrop. If one desires an escape from the endless concrete and steel of L.A.'s urban sprawl and congested freeways, there is no better location to feel transported to another world.

Therefore, when invited to attend the opening performance of this year's production, *Bacchae* by Euripides, I gleefully accepted. Since 2006, the Getty Villa has been staging a classical tragedy or comedy each September, and this year's offering celebrates the joy and emotional impact of theater as only a play, whose protagonist is the god of theater himself, could.

Loaded with arresting scenes and fervent emotion, it is apparent throughout the performance why *Bacchae* remains both one of Euripides' greatest surviving plays, and one of the most poignant tragedies ever

written. The events follow Dionysus' return to Thebes, his Greek birthplace. Here the god of wine, revelry, and theater, disguises himself as a cult leader for his own worship. Upon learning that his aunts reject his paternal legacy as the child of Zeus, he swiftly turns to revenge to sate his anger over his denied divinity. Commencing a plan to spread his cult, he sends the Theban women, bewitched by madness, into the mountaintops. Soon Pentheus, the young Theban king and the cousin of Dionysus, fears the disorder spreading throughout his kingdom and attempts to imprison the beautiful and enthralling stranger. His imprudent ploy to impede the divine leads to his own demise.

Having been commissioned to translate the words of Euripides for this production, Aaron Poochigian, who earned a PhD in Classics from the University of Minnesota and an MFA in Poetry from Columbia University, aptly captures the tragic gravity and lyrical beauty of the original, while keeping the language accessible and engaging for the modern viewer. Furthermore, actress Ellen Lauren's androgynous '70s glam rock portrayal of Dionysus offers a captivating interpretation of the "twice-born" god's dual nature. Donning a knee-length overcoat, red pants, and a tank top printed with a slithering snake, her loosened yellow curls toss about as she repeatedly contains and then unleashes the frenzied, manic, vengeful godhead within her character.

The production is directed by Anne Bogart, Theatre Professor and Directing Concentration Head at Columbia University, and co-produced by SITI Company. This group of artists, of which Prof. Bogart is a founding member and current co-artistic director, is committed to international

collaboration, a fact highlighted through the role of Agave, portrayed by Akiko Aizawa. The Japanese actress and SITI Company member speaks the exultant and then sorrowful final words of Pentheus' mother in Japanese. The utilization of a foreign tongue is understandable given the Company's mission to use theater as a means for cultural exchange, and serves to highlight the other-worldliness of the emotions which drive the women of Thebes and Agave, in particular, to tear their king limb from limb with their bare hands. However, for the viewer, Agave's boastful exuberance and climatic realization of filicide are overshadowed by the creative team's inclusion of far-too lengthy monologues, which ultimately feel self-indulgent and exclusionary.

In an otherwise impeccable production, one leaves acutely feeling the message of Euripides' original work. This play celebrates the nature of theater itself. And theater exists in the space between what is real and what is not. In this modern interpretation, Dionysus is a man played by a woman, and most of his female followers are male. We are reminded constantly that in theater scenes are acted out by individuals embodying others. Dionysus himself is an actor within the narrative as the god impersonates a man. Throughout the work, disguise and juxtaposition drive the plot. The maenads' frenetic revelry affronts Pentheus' desire for order. For the young king, fear of the unfamiliar impedes acceptance of the deity's power. Agave's triumph is revealed to her as an atrocity. In short, this play is about duality. Chaos and Control. Justice and Retribution. Faith and Disbelief. As a theater goer, we must suspend our disbelief in order to engage in and enjoy the unfolding story, and *Bacchae* masterfully guides us to do just that.

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*The Bacchae runs Thursday through Saturday evenings until September 29, 2018, at the Getty Villa. For more information and tickets visit the Getty website. Nota Bene: If you miss the opportunity to see the show at the Getty Villa, SITI Company will stage a short run in New York from October 3–7 at BAM (Brooklyn Academy of Music).*

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