

The Dangerous Liberation of Theater

In Conjunction With The Bacchae, Part of BAM's 2018 Next Wave Festival



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The Bacchae. BAM 2018 Next Wave Festival. Photo by Julieta Cervantes

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platform, we hope to spark dialogue about the series and make its ideas and performances accessible to a broader audience. For more on *Speaking Truth to Power*, check out [BAM's website](#) and the other articles in our collaboration.

Euripides apparently wrote the *Bacchae* while in Macedonia, shortly before his death in 406 BCE and in the wake of a difficult period for Athenian democracy. The Peloponnesian War with Sparta and its allies was still going on. An oligarchic revolt in 411 had led to a bloodbath in Athens and the democracy was only just re-establishing itself. In Macedonia, Euripides was observing first-hand an autocratic regime.

Shortly after Euripides' death, the comic poet Aristophanes' *Frogs* has the god of wine and theater Dionysus descend to Hades with the intention of bringing Euripides back to keep the city safe for producing its choruses — that is, theater and all public choral performances by democratic citizens in Athens. Like Aristophanes, Euripides likely worried about both the stability of the democracy and the future of the public performing arts. Festivals of Dionysus were central to Attic democracy; they were expensive for the city and the producers but inclusive of the male citizen population. They allowed people release from the restrictions of ordinary life. In *Frogs*, Euripides defines himself as a democratic poet who gives a voice to everyone, including those who had virtually no public voice in the city. In my view, he ended a life spent writing and performing plays for Dionysus with the *Bacchae* in part to reconsider the future of both theater and democracy, and he is afraid of what repressing Dionysus' special form of speech might mean.



The *Bacchae* was performed in the Athenian theater of Dionysus in front of the god's two temples and before his statue, held by his priest in the front row. The play addresses the introduction of the worship of the god into Thebes, his birthplace, which is resisted by

his first cousin, the very young king Pentheus: he is just growing a beard, clearly has little experience with women, and is not confident in his authority. Dionysus has maddened all the women of the city, who are now worshiping the god in the mountains, leaving behind their children, families, and domestic duties. The god has also brought a chorus of Asian women with him to demonstrate his worship to Thebes, and this chorus risks imprisonment to perform its case.

If accepted, Dionysus brings wine, symposia, music, dance, special costumes — a valuable collective release for the whole city, and by implication, theater itself. While under the god's influence, people can shed their normal identities. Collectively, women feel empowered and liberated to imitate male activities like hunting; men can express an attraction to sides of themselves they normally repress. Old men no longer feel their age. Asian women begin to seem less foreign; the choral odes in the *Bacchae* have democratic undertones. Social identity feels culturally imposed rather than natural.

Thebes is a young city. Pentheus' grandfather Cadmus founded it and established order with the help of the armed Sown Men sprung from a dragon's teeth; one of them is Pentheus' now-deceased father, Echion. The city has not yet incorporated everything festal and liberating that Dionysus represents. Pentheus can only imagine keeping order by using military force and imposing binary oppositions — male versus female, Greek versus barbarian — on his city. He rejects the advice of his grandfather Cadmus, the priest Tiresias, the servant who arrests Dionysus, disguised as a mortal priest of his Bacchic cult, and a messenger who has seen the maddened women tear apart cattle and defeat armed men on the mountain to accept the worship of Dionysus. Pentheus does listen, but he cannot hear. His attempt at repression fails. Dionysus releases the women and escapes imprisonment. He tortures Pentheus offstage with phantoms and shakes his palace with an earthquake. Pentheus is shocked to find the disguised god outside and immediately plans to deploy military force against the women on the mountain.

Yet he is vulnerable to the speech he allows the disguised Dionysus because the god can use language to disrupt his narrow cultural vision and introduce ambiguity and alluring impulses into his mind. Pentheus initially imagines that the women are having illicit intercourse with men on the mountains. Although he hears that they are not, when the stranger tempts him with seeing what the women are doing, he resists with difficulty. As he descends under the god's influence into an altered state, he agrees to go spy on them

rather than attacking them. Dionysus dresses him as a woman. Pentheus begins to perform the role of a worshipper, to dance, to imagine the thrill of being carried back to the city in his mother's arms. The women on the mountain tear him apart. As he dies, Pentheus recognizes his errors, but too late. His crazed mother Agave carries his head back to the city. Cadmus, his wife Harmonia, Agave, and her sisters are banished from Thebes even though Cadmus accepted the god's cult. Dionysus' worship is established in Thebes and, since the ending of the play is damaged, we do not hear what regime replaces the descendants of Cadmus in Thebes.

The god and his chorus depart for other Greek cities, Athens presumably included.



In this play, Dionysus says that he is the kindest and most terrible of gods. If accepted, he offers a festal liberation from the stresses of ordinary life and of maintaining traditional social identities for everyone in a city. For the moment, he creates communal unity. If repressed, resistance is likely to fail and an explosion of undifferentiated and amoral violence can occur. The speech with which the *Bacchae* is concerned, as the chorus keeps showing Thebes in its song and dance, is performed speech. We can only understand what Dionysus is about by performing selves that are different from our daily selves. We perform this speech in a group with our bodies as well as our voices. It is not strictly rational. We temporarily enter another world as spectators or participants. Theater and the performing arts, like Dionysus, aim to communicate this potentially dangerous liberation in a form that invites us, unlike Pentheus, to hear what it has to say.



Euripides' *Bacchae* is directed by Anne Bogart and translated by Aaron Poochigian. The show is

running at BAM Harvey Theater from October 3–7, 2018. You can buy tickets for the production [here](#).



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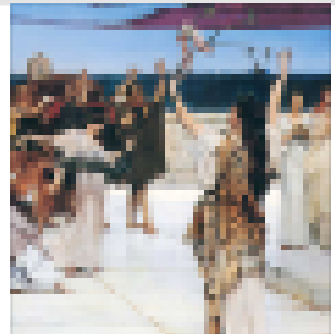


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