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FRONT PAGE COLUMNISTS ARTS & EVENTS THE WEEK FULL TEXT

Arts Listings

The Theater: Euripides' 'The Bacchae' at Zellerbach Playhouse

By Ken Bullock, *Special to The Planet*
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"It is impossible to pin down what Euripides' *The Bacchae* is about." Barbara Oliver,     who founded the Aurora Theatre and is in residency at UC's Department of Theater, Dance and Performance Studies to direct this peculiarly contemporary late tragedy, opens her program notes with this statement.

Euripides is represented by more surviving plays than his older contemporaries, Aeschylus and Sophocles, probably because of the aphoristic nature of many of his speeches, which made them popular for inclusion in courses on rhetoric. Even his seemingly most thematic works are so saturated with irony (the stock-in-trade of classical tragedians) that Aristotle called him the most properly tragic of the poets. Scene by scene, his almost Mannerist plays seem to change tack internally and contradict themselves, casting light on a whole complex of things rather than on just the edifying fate of a mythic hero. And part of what they illuminate—or cast doubt on—is the very process and perspective by which this ambiguous message is received: the mounting of a play and the audience's response to it.

The *Bacchae* and *Iphigenia in Aulis* were brought back to Athens and staged by Euripides' son after his death, ex-patriated in Macedonia. He had been an increasingly harsh critic of Athens' role—and defeat—in the Peloponnesian War. The *Bacchae* to many has seemed a summation of his ironic, ambiguous attitude to his own profession, a critique of Dionysus, from whose cult Athenian tragedy originated. Others find the culmination of what they regard as his anti-Apollonian exalting of the god of wine and the irrational. Is it a mixture of the two, or putting into perspective the extremes of revivalistic religious urges and the attempt, citing reason and law, to curb them? Antonin Artaud, the poet of modern dramaturgy (and the one who coined the Nietzsche-flavored term, Theater of Cruelty), who admired *The Bacchae* perhaps most of any play, said "In Aeschylus, Man is very evil ["mal," also sick], but still acts like a little god. Finally with Euripides, the floodgates are open ... we slog through all that pour out ... and we don't know where we are."

The UC production is up at the Zellerbach Playhouse, one of the best theaters in the Bay Area, aesthetically and technically—and with this show, a new, upgraded lighting system is inaugurated, with David Elliott's fine design. Robert Mark Morgan's set is a massive Grecian civic structure topped with a frieze of figures locked in struggle with walls that move to expand the playing area, or to frame silhouetted trees against the sky at the top of several flights of marble stairs.

There are portentous special effects: claps of thunder, reverberating voices, an earthquake that brings down the cornice and its frieze at a vertiginous diagonal, metaphor for what is happening to the very state of Thebes.

The eight-woman chorus is deployed across the stage by assistant director Marc Boucal's movement—and in stasis, veiled figures of the chorines sitting, outlining the action of the scenes which their dancing and chanting both forecast and react to.

The action of those scenes builds from the arrival of a stranger, a long-locked Dionysian priest, with news of the women of Thebes dancing ecstatically on Mt. Cithaeron. Pentheus, whose name signifies grief and whose regal relations are letting down their hair as Bacchantes, moves to stop the religious frenzy. Imprisoning the stranger proves fruitless; he's freed in a quake he claims his god caused. And in a moment of mesmerism, he suggests to young turk Pentheus that he go in disguise to watch the women dance on the mountain.

Like *Romeo and Juliet*, *The Bacchae* takes on a different tone when the principals are young actors, as the story suggests. Pentheus and the stranger, who hints he's really Dionysus in mortal disguise, are young cousins. And Dionysus is looking for revenge over the spurning of his divinity by the family of his mother Semele, impregnated by Zeus and burned by his lightning.

The stranger-Dionysus, featured in the curtain call, is an excellent Carl Holvick-Thomas, whose movement, voice and fluid expressions give a sinuous presence—seductive, mocking and vengeful—to his role. Only his echoing voice, coming from the skies, figures in the deus-ex-machina, following the catastrophe, perhaps the most awesome and lamentable of Greek tragedy. His presence would have been better. And Theo Black proves a game Pentheus, filled with youthful martial enthusiasm and reckless pride and scorn. But he's not given equal footing with the young priest or disguised god; the tension is not fully brought out. His fate is rendered a bit more pathetic than tragic. And the admittedly difficult final scene, the most humane moment of all, with the bacchic revelers having to contend with the awful fruit of their violent frenzy, and the scattering of the Theban founder's family into exile, is cut short, not catching the reverberations of suddenly all-too-human heroic figures struggling with comprehending the mystery of a mythic fate.

But the sweep—and the arabesques—of the story and its dancing choruses come through clearly enough with Oliver's direction and in the translation of Neil Curry, which renders the unresolved meaning best in an exchange between Dionysus ("I am a god—and you spurned me!") and Cadmus, Thebes' founder (Ricardo Salcido), in effect: A god should not act as mortals do.

Barbara Oliver will direct Euripides again in a few weeks for Aurora—next time, *The Trojan Women*.

THE BACCHAE

8 p.m. Friday and Saturday and 2 p.m. Sunday at Zellerbach Playhouse, UC Berkeley campus. \$8-\$14. theater.berkeley.edu.

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