

The Bacchae: A Manipulated Creation of an Epic and Mythological Atmosphere

The Bacchae (UFV Theatre, 2017) was the first classical tragedy I had ever seen. It is a play adapted for Euripides, who was one of Athens's three great tragic dramatists, and it left me with a great impression by its excellent cast, who were all from the UFV theatre department. The ensemble created a dramatic environment, which provided a sense of dating back to ancient times. There was a significant gap between the dramatic contents of the show and the reality. The play itself contained myths and epic stories, and the ensemble portrayed the essentials of these mythological and epic sections so that they came alive in the theatre. There were fantastic results of the acting of the performers (i.e. intense dialogues, clear character relationships and dramatic body movements, etc.), as well as the lighting, costumes, makeup/dressing, and the use of multimedia projection used throughout the play.

The Bacchae presented by UFV theatre alumni had subtle management in the voice of the performers. This was the first time that I had seen the frequent use of microphones in a stage show. This performance went against my expectations of what a play is in terms of the expressive quality of the performers' vocal capabilities. They used microphones in order to emphasize implied and implicit meanings behind the normal lines and to show the details and subtleties of their beautiful voices instead of just using the microphones as props for singing. The performers also expressed their small and delicate emotions that are normally too imperceptible to be captured by the audience. Regarding my understanding and experience in theatre performances these years, in my opinion, they were able to show the verbal, tonal and vocal subtleties usually only possible in films. The dialogues included whispering, murmuring, and mumbling, but with the microphones, all of these were strengthened; I got the emotional complications evident in the original voices of the performers. I thus realized in my future live performances I can take advantage of microphones and manipulate them. If the theatre is large enough or has some special architectural structures, the microphones would enhance the echoing effects. However, this does not mean that the performers in the Bacchae relied on the microphones using them as

the only way to convey emotions. In addition to the microphones, the acoustic performances were sublime in *The Bacchae*. I think that the entire ensemble created a unique environment and atmosphere that capture ancient Greek society. The performers shouted and yelled, but were able to portray the ups and downs of emotions as though they were living in a primitive society that is not wholly civilized. This was impressive and noticed in all sections of the performance of *The Bacchae*; the performers were even able to maintain this level of voice when they walked into the auditorium to finish their parts of a particular scene, keeping their exaggeration of acting without any stage fright. This is what *The Bacchae* called for, a performance that highlights the mysterious and primitive sacrifices of the play and shows the audience how people behave when they are almost insane with religious fervour. Overall, the tension in the vocal performances was an integral aspect of the performance of the entire ensemble.

There was also a diversity of onstage movements in *The Bacchae* (2017), which helped set the tone of this slave-owning society from so long ago. The performers utilized dance movements that were well organized and they suited the scenes. They trotted, jumped, ran, rolled, and crawled all over the entire playing space. They lied prostrate on the ground and contracted their bodies, tensed with their muscles, then stretched out to take up space. They twisted and contorted, chased one another, circles around, rotated themselves, and went back and forth using elastic ropes. They bowed, kneeled, genuflected, pulled their heads back, bent over backwards, and crept backwards. Every corner of the stage was used and they even continued their movements in areas where the stage lighting did not reach; however, they were still visible to the audience. This also emphasized just how far a stage can reach, pushing the performers that much closer to the audience. The performers did seem to get almost too involved in their acting, which transforms them into savage creatures of ancient Athens. I do appreciate the commitment and sacrifice they make in order to create this unique and epic atmosphere. Actually, as I learned more and more theatre /performance techniques, I have known that the intense physical performances that I saw in the *Bacchae* (2017) all went to a unique acting training methodology called the

Cat by Grotowski. Grotowski is one of the most important postmodern masters of drama in the world. Among his theatre performances research, the Cat is one of the most famous and effective physical training methods that leads to primitive and free voice-and-body performances. The Cat was frequently and successfully used in the Bacchae. Similarly, these years, I have been using Grotowski's the Cat to create many pieces of visual performances and choreography. The Cat is the most efficient performance making method as it easily helps performers to express their original self. I have been continually promoting this acting methodology to new drama learners.

While the physical performances in The Bacchae were essential, there were other aspects that contributed just as much to the overall atmosphere. These included stage lighting design, costume and make-up design, and multimedia projection. Instead of using extensive lighting to create scenes, The Bacchae used smaller but more subtle spotlights in order to create a kaleidoscope effect. The riot of colours cast onto the stage floor gave the audience a sense of the mythology as the unique lighting occurred during scenes where the "Gods" spoke. In addition, the make-up of the performers as well as the costuming was all in white. This resembled the religious fanatics of Dionysus, who all dressed in white with even their faces covered in white powder (likely a white make-up foundation). This was important for the furthering of the plot. The only costume change occurred for Pentheus as a dramatic turning-point, who dressed up as a woman. His original costume was torn off, but the same white colouring made up the one underneath. This scene and costume change directly contributed to his tragic destiny. When Agave realized that she had caused Pentheus's death, the only make-up change occurred (the actress entirely wiped away her white make-up by hand in the scene); this was also the climax of the play. These very obvious and specific costumes and make-up changes emphasized important moments in the play and they also served to make significant impressions on the audience.

The use of multimedia projection on the back wall was another stage element that captures the audience's attention. Rather than focusing on a specific issue, the projection in The Bacchae was a series of shots that showed the kind of role that

human beings play in the ecosystem and how bad our relationship and behaviour is towards the environment. The projection implied that the majority of environmental damage in the world has been created by humanity. The projection did not superficially suit the play at all; however, in my opinion, it was used to highlight how disastrous our lifestyles are to the ecological equilibrium without us even realizing it, similar to how Agave treated her son. The story of Agave and Pentheus was a tragedy and was supposed to serve as a warning to the audience that if we continue to ruin our homeland, eventually it will take its revenge. The Bacchae had Dionysus as the God who led the eventual tragedy and revenge, while in reality, we would only have ourselves to blame. The projection effects were moving for the audience and added to the play by helping establish the mythology, stage environment, and epic quality.

Consequently, The Bacchae was successful in terms of the voice performances, body movements, and manipulation of other stage details. It was extraordinary that it offered me a unique theatre experience which is beneficial for my theatre life from then on. All of these elements in The Bacchae that interacted with one another provided a cooperative manner, as the acting itself, make-up design, costume design and special projection worked together to create this mysterious and epic atmosphere. I believe that a good play must make its audience forget they are watching a play and immerse them in the story. The performances in this show just did that and were helped by the manipulation of the other stage elements; I forgot that I had watched a drama production done by my alumni and became engrossed by their performances since they devoted their entire passion and effort into our school's independent theatre production work. Instead of watching the play, it became a multi-dimensional live theatre lesson that taught me a lot. Since then, I have cultivated my performance-making passion and I keep working and researching on contemporary drama and film. I have become a zesty fan of lighting design and projection design, and I have successfully used what I have learned into my own theatre and film productions. I am already on the right track and I will definitely keep working hard.

Reference

Euripides. (Writer), & Kirkley, B., Von Waldenburg, R., Sharifi, P. (Directors). (2017, March 12). *The Bacchae*. Live performance at UFV Performance Theatre, Chilliwack, B.C.