



NT Education Workpack

Bacchai

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Bacchai
by Euripides
in a new translation by
Colin Teevan

Further production details:
www.nationaltheatre.org.uk

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The play

Introduction

Bacchae, one of Euripides' last two plays – the other was *Iphigenia in Aulis* – was not performed until after his death. He wrote it when he was over seventy, having left Athens and gone into near exile in Macedonia. The story explores the conflict between opposing elements in man's nature: the ordered, civilised but repressed on the one hand, the instinctive, sensual and irrational on the other. Although the play always seems relevant to the time in which it is being staged, it has rarely worked satisfactorily in the theatre.

In March 2002 the director Peter Hall and the composer Harrison Birtwistle began rehearsing Euripides' play *Bacchae*. Over the next nine weeks this masterpiece of Greek classical drama, written two and a half thousand years ago, was transformed into a brilliantly imaginative piece of contemporary theatre.

Twenty years before the two men had successfully collaborated on Aeschylus' *The Oresteia*, staging it first in the Olivier theatre at the National and then in the famous open-air theatre in Epidaurus in Greece.

Since then Peter Hall had staged many other Greek plays, all in masks, including *The Oedipus Plays* at the National in 1996.

Although there are more than thirty translations of *Bacchae* in existence, he was not satisfied with any of them. So he commissioned a fresh one from the Irish playwright Colin Teevan, who reads ancient

Greek, and has translated Euripides' other late play *Iphigenia in Aulis*. As designer for the production he chose Alison Chitty, who had worked extensively with both him and Harrison Birtwistle.

It was agreed at an early stage that the music, set, masks and costumes would all be created during the nine-week rehearsal period. This was a radical departure from the usual system at the National, where such matters are normally settled well in advance of rehearsals. But Peter Hall was unhappy with this system: 'With proper theatre work, if you decide what a play is before you do it, if you decide on the route before the journey, you get nowhere. The rehearsals are to find the way.'

The story

Pentheus, a repressed and violent young man, has taken over as ruler of Thebes from his grandfather Cadmus, who founded the city. He and the women of the city refuse to honour Dionysus, the god of wine, music, dancing, theatre, liberality and instinct. Nor will they acknowledge that he is the son of Zeus. In revenge Dionysus, returning from the east with a band of female followers, sends the women of the city, including Pentheus' mother Agave, up the mountain to perform his secret rites and wild dances. Cadmus and the old blind prophet Teiresias decide that they too will honour the god by joining the dance.

Dionysus takes on human form as a priest of his own cult, but is captured on the orders of the enraged Pentheus, who is determined to stamp out this 'Bacchic evil'. Dionysus escapes and creates an earthquake which destroys Pentheus' palace. He then forces Pentheus to admit that he secretly desires to see the Bacchae performing their rites on the mountainside. Since no men are allowed to watch these rites, he offers to take Pentheus there if he will disguise himself as a woman.

Once there, Dionysus reveals Pentheus' identity to the women who, led by Agave, proceed to tear him to pieces in their fury at being spied on. Agave returns to the city with her son's head held aloft on a shaft, believing in her trance-like state that it is the head of a lion she has killed. Cadmus, her father, coaxes her into understanding what she has done. The two of them are then sent into exile by Dionysus.

Greg Hicks as Dionysus
with the C chorus
photo Manuel Harlan



Interviews

Interview: Colin Teevan, translator

There are different views on how the classics should be translated. Should you keep every word, or focus on the spirit of the original? With drama I think you should go for the spirit, and that's what I've tried to do with *Bacchai*. I first did a literal translation of the Greek text, and then a version which was read by a group of actors from the National at the Studio in February 2001. Peter posed the question, Why are we doing this play? I then realised that it was about the art of theatre: What is invention, what is reality, and the paradox of how you see truth through artifice. *Bacchai* is Euripides' homage to theatre.

So I came up with a device to frame the play, based on the idea of Dionysus as the god of theatre. This is never mentioned in the text, because audiences of the time were sitting watching the play in the theatre of Dionysus, with a statue of him there, so it never had to be spelt out. But the other reason for the device was to plug a big hole near the end of the text. The equivalent of three pages are missing, where the manuscript sources have only a few fragments, and it's not clear when Dionysus makes his final entry.

In the play Pentheus disappears from the action; he has a tragic flaw but no moment of recognition; that's taken by his mother Agave. So in a sense the two of them are one tragic character. Structurally it seemed very flawed having a new character entering with ten pages to go. That got me thinking that perhaps the same actor should play both parts.

The Chorus
photo Manuel Harlan



Euripides managed to use only three actors, and when I tried to work out how he had done this, the structure became beautifully clear: one played the three *protagonists*, Dionysos, Teiresias and the Servant; another played the *antagonists*, Pentheus and Agave; the third played the more human, down-to-earth parts, Cadmus, the Soldier and the Herdsman. So this was how we did it.

One of the great mistakes theatre companies make with new versions of the Greek plays is that they always commission poets – and by that they mean lyric poets. But Aristotle defined three types of poetry – epic, dramatic and lyric – and lyric poets aren't dramatic poets. There are huge differences between lyric and dramatic poetry. While lyric poetry just describes the action, with dramatic poetry the action is embedded in the language. Although it might appear on the surface that *Bacchai* describes a lot of action, there's actually a huge amount of action within the language. As a dramatist that's how I've tried to realise it.

Interview: Peter Hall, director

I've lived with Euripides' masterpiece for over fifty years, seen it three times, but never been satisfied with it. I think it's one of the most original plays ever written; I would put it in the top dozen of all time. And whenever it's performed it seems to be extraordinarily timely.

Like Shakespeare's plays, *Bacchai* is full of the most meaningful ambiguity. It's not a tragedy in the conventional sense; it's a very ironic and disturbing play, full of opposites and irreconcilable differences. It's about freedom, and the price you pay for it – emotionally, sexually, politically. It shows the danger of repressed emotions, but also the destruction and violence that follows when we release them. It's about East versus West, male versus female, reason versus emotion, chaos versus order. It's about everything that is in the papers every morning, but just more hideously so at the moment.

Whereas so much drama has necessarily and properly died, Greek drama shows no sign of doing that – it goes on renewing itself. It deals with elemental conflicts and emotions, and we all come back to them. There are over thirty great tragedies, and nine or ten great comedies. The problem is that they are so far away from us, and the theatres that

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they were performed in were so different from ours, that there is a cultural gap. So every age and decade has to find a way of making them speak.

I believe the plays don't work at all unless the actors wear masks. I would never direct one without them. The mask allows you to explore extremities of emotion, suffering and pain, and still be communicating, attractive and understandable. I find that audiences accept masks, but critics are often resistant: they see them as going back to something formal, primitive and 'antiquey'. Yet what could be less primitive and more sophisticated than Greek drama?

A few actors find it very difficult to work with a mask. They find it claustrophobic, or too self-revealing, or they discover that it releases things in themselves they don't want to look at. With the mask work I've done, the process is always the same. At first they're just thinking about this new identity, and it takes them about a week to speak. After about ten days they start to relate to each other, but become very hostile and belligerent, very territorial. Then gradually after about three weeks, they become a collective. It's very mysterious, and I don't know why it happens.

Diary extract: Rehearsals, day 3

Wednesday 6 March

One side wall of the rehearsal room is almost entirely taken up by a large mirror. A collection of brown, grey and yellow masks is lying face upwards on a table at the back. Mouths agape, eyes wide

Will Houston as Agave and
David Ryall as Cadmus
photo Manuel Harlan



open, they make an eerie sight crowded together, with no one to animate them.

Peter explains the two schools of thought about approaching the mask: one favours the use of a mirror at the start, the other prefers working with the mask alone. He then invites the actors to try them on in the rehearsal space. 'This is not a group activity, this is about you. Forget me and anyone else watching, and your colleagues. If you find a mask that gives you a charge, you can add fragments of clothing from the rail. If there's nothing there, let there be nothing. And if you simply gaze at the wall, that's all right.'

Half the actors walk over to the mask table and begin to try on a mask; after a few minutes the rest join them. The reactions are strikingly varied. One tries three masks before settling on a fourth; another rejects two, then leaves the space; a third crawls under the table and briefly adopts a foetal position; a fourth remains totally still for ten minutes. Gender becomes impossible to pin down: almost everyone moves in slow motion, as if involved in a ritual. The movements are measured, graceful, sensuous: the smallest change in a hand or head position suddenly assumes significance. Some use the mirror all the time; others move inwards into a world of their own; only two, already familiar with masks, begin to present theirs out front. A few appear to be already carving out an identity for themselves; others seem merely to be actors wearing a mask.

Overall Peter is encouraged: 'That was a remarkable session, the level of concentration was enormous. You were very honest, and there were some beautiful things going on. One or two of you achieved a oneness between mask and body.' He suggests that in future they should perhaps rely less on the mirror as a safety net. 'But this is just the beginning of a process; as you grow into the mask you will become social beings.'

He tells them that two actors withdrew from previous productions of his because of psychological problems with the mask. He then invites them to share any worries or tensions they have experienced. The actors respond in different ways. Richard Morris confesses he got a headache 'trying to mould my face to the mask'; Lee Haven-Jones says he was forced to take off his first mask 'because of a feeling of loss'; Wendy Morgan admits

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'My heart was going, but I had a feeling of great power and energy'; Jax Williams says 'I was anxious beforehand, but as soon as I put the mask on, I felt very liberated'. Attitudes towards their fellow-actors also vary enormously: Stefani Pleasance recalls 'I wanted to speak, to have a conversation', but Chuk Iwuji says 'I felt I could be silent for decades.'

(from Peter Hall's *Bacchai: The National Theatre at Work*)

Interview: Alison Chitty, designer

Peter's way is difficult and complicated, but it's exciting artistically.

It's very frustrating for a designer to work to the usual system, by which final designs may be demanded up to six months before the opening. It gives you much less time for reflection. For me there's no point in putting on a play if the design is finished before you start rehearsing. Apart from being incredibly insulting to the performers, that's not what it should be about.

Before rehearsals of *Bacchai* began I brought him visual material to respond to, books of work by

artists such as Rebecca Horne and Mark Dion whom I felt were dealing with the kind of world we were trying to create. With him I looked again at the Olivier stage, which since our collaboration on Shakespeare's *Late Plays* in 1988 had been lifted and brought forward, and new lighting added. It's a lovely space, but we thought there was probably too much there. We were very eager to expose the theatre and make it fantastically simple. So I had a great disc put in the space to see what it looked like, and started thinking about a lighting rig.

Peter and I also talked about the location of the play, which is set between city and country. We had to find an image of a place between places. I got caught up with this idea of something that was in construction or deconstruction, in transition. I started to think about building sites and demolition yards, and that made me think of the artist Anselm Kiefer, whose work I really love. Then I got on to wastelands and landfill sites, which are also found between city and country. I went to a site in Croydon, with loads of flapping plastic and hundreds of birds circling round. It was strangely beautiful, more epic and weird and pagan than you can imagine.

A lot of the set changes came out of the rehearsals. At one stage we considered having a shrine, gates to the city, a river running through the set. But gradually it became simpler, until we ended up with just the disc, a walkway up to the mountain, and a lighting rig. Certain things became an encumbrance or difficult to work with, or restricted the way the actors could use the space. I'm a great one for restraint and expressing things simply, so I was happy to go along that road. Usually this kind of evolution happens in the studio, but this time it happened in public.

Interview: Harrison Birtwistle, composer

For most of my life I sit there making decisions of which I am the lord. In the theatre it's different: you have to put yourself at the service of the piece, you've got to be prepared to go along with how things are while making your contribution. Peter's method on *Bacchai* meant that we found things out together. So what I was writing was speculative music.

I originally considered working electronically, then decided it would be more appropriate to use

Greg Hicks as Dionysus and William Houston as Pentheus
photo Manuel Harlan



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percussion for the musical and rhythmic elements of the play. But percussion can very easily be a cliché, so I looked for unusual instruments and, as we did with *The Oresteia*, had some made specially. I didn't want to take a culture off a shelf; I wanted to try something fresh, and avoid musical tourism.

I wanted the Chorus to have strong musical episodes, to make them into an orchestra. But first we had to find the rhythm of the verse, so before rehearsals began I set out basic rhythms for three of the choruses. They provided an armature, a framework I could then embellish. The rhythm of the verse is the only way you can anchor the spoken word to music, in a one-to-one relationship.

The pulse we put in under some of the dialogue wasn't easy for the actors. They could understand it technically, but when they started acting, it began to rock a bit, so you had to constantly bring them back to it. The problem was that they don't have any technical procedures to understand it. If I say to musicians you're half a beat late, they know what I'm talking about. But you can't say that to actors. They feel they should speed it up, not realising that

isn't the answer, that it's actually a question of putting more energy into it.

Compared with what I normally do, the rhythms I came up with for *Bacchai* were primitive and simple. I could have made them more complex, but there wouldn't have been any point, because you have to hear the text.

Interview: The actors

Greg Hicks *Dionysus/Teiresias/Servant*

Although I was playing three very different characters, once I started working on them I realised that they were all aspects of Dionysus. So the challenge was to inquire how I could reverberate with Dionysus' psychic energy in all three roles. I wanted to make them deeply empathetic to each other, so that they would have a similar flavour. After all, Teiresias the great blind prophet is Dionysus' flag waver, while the Servant tells the story of what happens when you resist him. He tells it with a sense of terror and extraordinary wonder, which is what I tried to work on; but in telling it I wanted to get a sense of the presence of Dionysus within him.

All that would have been much more difficult without a mask. I'd never put one on before I did *The Oresteia*, not even at drama school. It was like finding the perfect wife. Now I can't imagine doing a Greek play without one. The mask offers you a doorway through which you can get in to a metaphysical world, which is very difficult to do without one. It helps me go beyond my limitations as an actor, and move into archetypal behaviour. How I do that I don't know, it's an alchemical process. I'm not saying I achieve that every time, but when I do people say that Greg Hicks disappears.

William Houston *Pentheus/Agave*

Playing both Pentheus and Agave was an interesting challenge. Is it one journey, or two characters each with their own journey? At first I thought it was just one. But then I wondered what I would be going through when Pentheus is killed, what would I do to put myself into Agave's head space? I was concerned about the leap from one to the other. I didn't know if I should do something with my voice, I was afraid that could sound terribly cod. I wondered whether I should imitate a woman's voice, but then I thought No, there should be no

David Ryall as Herdsman
photo Manuel Harlan



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imitation whatsoever. Sounds must come from physicality, from what we're working on at the moment.

I'd never used a mask before. A week before we started rehearsals Peter asked me in to try one on. I was aware that it demanded a lot of respect; Peter and Greg had said it was almost a holy relationship between you and it. I think you can take that too far, I didn't want to treat it with too much respect. But the first thing I realised when I put it on was how blinkered you are. I always work from the point that the more of yourself you can let go in the early stages, the better. But in a mask you're not able to do that: you have no peripheral vision whatsoever, so you simply walk into people. One of your key senses has been closed down.

David Ryall *Cadmus/Soldier/Herdsmen*

Cadmus and the Soldier and the Herdsman are quite different people, but they have one thing in common: they're all caught up in an extraordinary situation. They're not exactly comic, but they're caught up in the comedy of life, in situations outside their normal experience. They're very

ordinary human beings. Cadmus is a pragmatist, a man who likes to think of himself as the elder statesman. The image I have is of Willie Whitelaw, dressing up in skins with a suit on, but still retaining his dignity.

It took some while for us to get our proper masks. It's a nice life when you get one, but I'm quite glad I didn't get mine too early on. I knew it would add something, so I didn't want to get there too quickly. Part of me wanted to postpone the moment, although I also wanted to know that it was going to be all right.

When I finally saw my mask for Cadmus, it crystallised something I'd been thinking about. I had in mind a chap who lives in our village in Oxfordshire, someone quite upper class and rather guileless, who ran a firm of accountants or something like that. Looking through the mask in the mirror, I suddenly saw him, and I thought, Good, that will help. And I could feel his voice.

In the rehearsal room we had to keep the mask absolutely out front. In fact Greek audiences watched the play from almost three sides, so once we got on to the circular set in the Olivier for the technical rehearsal I found you could share the mask round a little. It meant you could at least get a glimpse of the other actors, which was a great relief.

David Ryall as Cadmus and Greg
Hicks as Teiresias
photo Manuel Harlan



Practical exercises

Improvisation

To understand more about the characters, re-create one or more of the following moments from the story, none of which are shown on stage:

Dionysus persuading the Asian women to come with him to Thebes – why should they make such a lengthy journey?

Agave and her sisters arguing between themselves as to whether Dionysus is the son of Zeus – what will the consequences be?

Cadmus and Teiresias discussing whether they should join the cult of Dionysus – is it a personal or a political decision?

Pentheus being away from the city for three days – what was he doing?

The Soldier arresting Dionysus – how did Dionysus charm his captor?

The Herdsman persuading his fellows that they should capture Agave – how does he overcome their objections?

The conversation between Pentheus, Dionysus and the Servant as they climb the slopes of Mount Cithairon – how does the Servant demonstrate his loyalty?

The Verse

Clear verse-speaking depends on rhythm, intonation and inflection, but also on observing precisely the writer's punctuation. Like Shakespeare, Euripides often breaks up the five-beat line, notably in the choruses, to emphasise meaning or an emotion.

Take one chorus, and allocate each full sentence to a member of the class. Then speak it, tapping your knee at each line-ending, and snapping your fingers at the end of each sentence. Where they coincide, do both.

Divide the class into two groups, A and B. Take a different chorus, and have A perform it as above, and then B perform it in unison. What are the main differences between these two ways of speaking the verse? Which is the more effective dramatically?

Try the same exercise with the same chorus, but this time divide the class into male and female. How do the two groups differ in the effect they create?

The Chorus

photo Manuel Harlan



For discussion

Some of the ideas considered during rehearsals which may provide starting-points for discussion:

Attitudes to foreigners

The clash of cultures

Women and violence

Religious tolerance

Reason and emotion

Sexual repression

Euripides' standpoint on:

The actions of the gods towards the mortals

The morality of the behaviour of the Bacchae

Dionysus' treatment of Pentheus

Greg Hicks as Dionysus
photo Manuel Harlan



Related material

Books

Bacchai, Euripides, translated by Colin Teevan, Oberon Books, 2002.

Exposed by the Mask, Peter Hall, Oberon Books, 2000.

Peter Hall's Bacchai: The National Theatre at Work, Jonathan Croall, NT Publications, 2002.

Bacchai, programme of NT production, with specially commissioned articles by Colin Teevan and Edith Hall

Videos

The Oresteia, Peter Hall's production for the National Theatre, with music by Harrison Birtwistle

Medea, film by Pier Paolo Pasolini, from Euripides

CDs

Bacchai, choruses from the NT production, music by Harrison Birtwistle (check it's happening)

Will Houston as Pentheus and
Greg Hicks as Dionysus
photo Manuel Harlan

