



[The Bacchae](#) at the [Royal Exchange](#)

An all new version of this dark and liberating play, produced and created by artistic director Braham Murray.

Reviewed by [Iain Brassington](#) November 2010

I once had a politics tutor who decided that it was important that we should study *The Bacchae*, and that we ought to be drunk before the tutorial started, on the basis that... well, on the basis that it's

The Bacchae

. Since then, there's been a small part of me that's wanted to try my hand at directing it. But how?

One option would be to go for the cold, alienated anti-naturalism of Northern Broadsides' recent *Medea*

. It'd be tempting to do something similar with Euripides' tale; after all, a world in which a god visits, and visits havoc on, a city whose population grew from sown dragon's teeth is not the world of the everyday. Yet Mike Poulton's adaptation of this strangest tragedy is utterly down-to-earth, and that's a much better idea. Why? Well, we oughtn't to forget that

ho theatron

referred originally to the audience. In watching the artificial

polis

on the stage, one is also watching members the real
polis

on the other side of it; that's partly why going to the Athenian theatre was such a political act (especially when the king ends up dis-membered). By surrounding the play, reality is at its centre. And that centrality of reality means naturalism.



The story, for those who don't know it, is this: the young god Dionysus returns to Thebes, the city in which he was conceived when Zeus seduced (or raped) Semele. Semele died during the pregnancy; Zeus rescued his infant son, whose gestation he completed in a cavity dug from his own thigh. Dionysus, the twice-born son of divine father and mortal mother, brings with him wine and blood-drinking rites from the East (stop me if you've heard this before). Yet his cousin,

Pentheus, now king of Thebes, refuses to admit Dionysus; it suits him to maintain the story that Semele's pregnancy was all too human in its cause. Dionysus seeks revenge, seducing the women of the city into his cult, and eventually leading them to kill the king.

The bulk of the work is shared between three actors: Sam Alexander, Jotham Annan, and Penny Layden. Alexander's arrogant Pentheus is somewhere between an East End hard-man demanding respect, and Bullingdon prig – or maybe Danny Dyer with a hint of Tony Blair; his authoritarian instincts are just about hidden behind a desire for calm and order, but you know they're there. It's all-too-easily that he finds himself wrapped around the finger of Annan's silky and gold-painted Dionysus. Not just Pentheus: the same applies to the audience, seduced by Annan's measured, controlled and calm performance as the personification of immeasure, uncontrol and frenzy; it's a portrayal that is powerfully bewitching from the moment he appears to give his prologue, to the moment he leaves the stage at the end of his slightly-too-long epilogue. Yet neither character carries much emotional weight; Pentheus because he's not supposed to, Dionysus because he doesn't need to.

The emotional weight comes from the women. Penny Layden's dual role, as leader of the Bacchantes and as the leader of the chorus, demands that she balance between being engaged in the action, and being a slightly detached observer of it; it requires that she half-know what's going on for the whole time, but that she be unable to prevent disaster – rather like the audience, in fact. It's a demanding part – she's on stage for the whole thing – and at the curtain call, she looks blasted. The remainder of the chorus of followers of Dionysus – who also squirl their devoted, otherworldly, maybe mad ways around the stage throughout the whole performance – are also convincing Bacchantes: during one of the apostrophes, I'm directly in the line of sight of Elizabeth Mischler's dancer. I can't bring myself to, either; she's *terrifying*.

The only other woman to speak, Eve Polycarpou as Agave, is a little distant when we first meet her; but she's still under Dionysus' spell. As her head clears, this changes abruptly. The

moment of anagnorisis is perhaps hard to act – on what resources could an actor draw to portray Agave's realisation of what she'd done? – but the aftermath – a strange musical keening – is devastating.



The Bacchae is a rich, confusing, and perplexing play. Two-and-a-half millennia old, it's also very, very modern, prodding worries about power and authority, and about alien religions coming from the East and disrupting the *polis*. Pentheus was a fool for not giving due honour to a god, but Dionysus is clearly dangerous. Is it better to let the Other in and thereby hope to tame it, or to try to keep it out and thereby not have to take the risk of failure? Pentheus is a tyrant, but is Dionysus any less so with his demands? (Philip Short, in his biography of Pol Pot, describes the Khmer Rouge cadres as representing an "eternal Khmer dichotomy between serenity and uncontrollable violence, with no middle ground between" – which looks to be pretty much what Dionysus offers, too: in other circumstances, the ribbons of gore would be pretty.) Is Thebes' tragedy perhaps that Pentheus thought he was doing the best by his city, but could never tame the irrational forces at large within it? (How about Pentheus as Robespierre, an incorruptible protector-dictator ultimately culled by an inability to reconcile the forces at work in his state?)

And what about Dionysus' parting words, addressed directly to the audience? We've been watching each other through the action on the stage all evening; we know what's going to happen to Pentheus; and yet we do nothing. So on whose side are we? Why do we, godlike watchers, not offer counsel to the king? No one gets out of this one easily.

The show runs from 10 Nov - 4 Dec 2010.