
Tyranny of The Text: *The Bacchae*

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BACCHAE ABOUND in New York. In the summer of 2008, the Lincoln Center Festival presented the National Theater of Scotland's production, directed by John Tiffany and starring Alan Cumming as Dionysos. (I reviewed the original Edinburgh production in *Arion* 15.2 [Fall 2007]). Then in August 2009, The Public Theater in New York staged a brand-new version helmed by Joanne Akalaitis, with an original score by Philip Glass, at the Delacorte Theater in Central Park.*

So what is it about *The Bacchae* that inspired two major New York productions in just one year? Joanne Akalaitis—renowned director, co-founder of Mabou Mines, and former Artistic Director of the Public Theater—is on record that she considers Euripides “the greatest living playwright before Shakespeare” (*American Theater*, July/August 2009) and that in her opinion *The Bacchae* is an enigma: “We really don’t have a mechanism to internalize its violence—its strangeness.” One has to be a little worried when a director of Akalaitis’ caliber and talent describes a production she is about to direct as “an enigma,” and it has to be added that this is more often than not the prevailing attitude that lies behind contemporary stagings of Greek tragedy. I am not sure it is possible to stage “an enigma,” but the actors at the Delacorte were certainly trying their hardest to be enigmatic. And therein lay the essential problem with this *Bacchae*; nobody seemed to have any notion of what they were actually trying to *do*.

**The Bacchae* by Euripides, translated by Nicholas Rudall, directed by Joanne Akalaitis; original music by Philip Glass; produced by The Public Theater at the Delacorte Theater, July–August 2009.

The play opened with a portentous discordant drone from the small group of musicians clustered stage right and this was the cue to bring on the actors, from upstage entrances rising onto the large circular performing space of the Delacorte. The stage itself was surrounded by a small rivulet of water and severed down the middle by a jagged fissure that glowed an angry red and puffed intermittent wisps of stage smoke. So far so good—it would be hard to find a better location for Greek tragedy than the near-two-thousand-seat open-air Delacorte which had been built in 1962 with a Greek theater in mind.

It was a humid August night, the theater was full, and the audience was treated to the marvelous pre-show spectacle of a family of raccoons gamboling across the stage. Unfortunately this was not the only time these garrulous creatures grabbed our attention—more on that later.

And then came the actors walking that walk. You know the walk I mean, any of us who regularly attend performances of Greek tragedy have seen it many times before: that slow, ponderous, acutely self-absorbed and above all, *serious* walk. *The Greek play walk* lets us know that we, the viewing public, are gathered to watch something very, very important; *the Greek play walk* has become a modern theatrical ritual, but one we don't really understand. It signifies something grave and monumental and we in turn must show due deference and respect. It cannot be compared to other solemnized forms of pedestrian travel: the ushers who pace slowly up the aisle of a church have a sense of purpose, a destination, and the symbols they carry radiate meaning; the soldiers sliding their feet to the rhythmic beat of a lone snare-drum as they slow-march at a military funeral are transported by a sense of communal grief, dignity, and a spirit of resolve. No, *the Greek play walk* is devoid of any meaning—it is of itself *enigmatic* and when I saw it on stage at the Delacorte my heart sank.

I can't only blame Joanne Akalaitis for my response to her *Bacchae*. In fact, there was much to praise, particularly her

chorus: although it failed to gel dramatically, this was an incredibly brave attempt to place choral action at the center of the work—again, something I will return to in more detail below. Rather, it seems endemic in the performance culture of the United States to approach Greek drama as something completely alien, overly ritualistic, and more often than not, totally incomprehensible. Nor am I saying that I could do any better: I have run into the same entrenched, misguided notions about Greek theater from superb professional actors and have had a very hard time convincing them otherwise. So I am uncomfortable criticizing another artist's work without at least trying to understand the principles guiding its formation and always trying to take into consideration that theater is one of the most subjective of all art forms. But I just can't give up on the idea that we can produce effective and thrilling Greek tragedy on the American stage. We have in the past—Lee Breuer's *Gospel at Colonus* was one of the most moving experiences of Greek drama I have witnessed—and we can again. We just need, once and for all, to acknowledge that big, old, twentieth-century elephant in the rehearsal room, and free ourselves from the absolute tyranny of *the text*.

Ten years ago, in an excellent essay that surveyed the various theoretical approaches to Greek drama, Simon Goldhill addressed the then-current state of what he called “stagecraft criticism” by describing the text-based analytical approach of Oliver Taplin and the performance-theory studies of David Wiles. He concluded that there remained “a highly problematic issue: how to move from a script to a performance.”¹ It seems to me that Goldhill put the question the wrong way round. Should we not be asking how performance moved to a script? We simply don't know if a script was even part of the creative process of Greek tragedy; there is no evidence at all for anyone reading the text of a Greek tragedy until the late fifth century where Aristophanes has Dionysos saying that he read Euripides' *Andromeda* while serving on an Athenian warship in Aristophanes' *Frogs* (406

BC) and Eupolis, in a fragment also dated to that time, mentions a section of the Agora where books (not explicitly dramatic) could be purchased.² In the fourth century, plays were certainly revived, and Plutarch tells us that Lycurgus had official copies preserved in a state library to prevent actors from taking too many liberties with the “original” versions. It was these texts that made their way to Alexandria and formed the basis for the copies that have come down to us.

Might I then venture so far as to suggest that perhaps there may have been no written scripts used in the creation of Greek tragedy? In a culture that taught its children to memorize the entire *Iliad*, is it so hard to fathom that the actors and chorus members may have learned their parts the same way that we learn vast amounts of song lyrics—by listening and repeating? Christopher Marshall made a fascinating attempt to understand the ancient rehearsal process by comparing a reference to Greek choral training found in Plutarch to a newly unearthed fragment of Euripides’ *Alcestis*. In Plutarch’s *De Audiendo*, Euripides gets tetchy with his chorus when they laugh at him singing their parts as he “directs.” According to Marshall “call and response” was used to rehearse at least the ancient chorus.³

If this was the rehearsal process then was there even an author’s text or did the Greek dramatists compose their works live? Edith Hall counts around forty-five representations of papyrus rolls on Attic vase paintings that depict an educational or musical setting but finds no fifth-century images of dramatic texts.⁴ The Pronomos vase (ca. 400) depicts the cast of a Satyr play and actors surrounding Dionysos and Ariadne, and it does show a scroll in the hands of a seated nude male figure named “Demetrios” with another larger scroll or a scroll holder leaning up against his chair. Demetrios may be the dramatist of a winning tetralogy who the vase painter immortalized in a state of heroic nudity or the *choregos* clutching a copy of his winning plays. Whoever he is and whatever these scrolls represent, the Pronomos vase is dated to the beginning of the fourth century when the Athenian book trade

was already doing brisk business. We have no evidence at all for any kind of original authorial dramatic scripts from the fifth century, and if they did exist we do not know what form they took. Papyrus scrolls were being used at that time but were incredibly unwieldy and difficult to use, several feet long and with no word separation or punctuation. Aristophanes offers some clues, albeit comic ones, as to how tragedy might have been created. In *Thesmophoriazusae*, Euripides and Mnesilochus go to the house of the tragic dramatist Agathon and are told by his doorman to be silent as Agathon is “constructing” a new play. The language he uses here is of the plastic crafts: ship-building, forging bronze, and wood-carving. When the doors finally open and Agathon is revealed on the *ekkyklema*, he is in the midst of his creative process, not *writing*, but *singing*, “airing his strophes out in the sun” with a chorus and strumming a lyre. When Mnesilochus asks him why he is dressed as a woman, Agathon says when he composes he must get as close as possible to the character he is creating. At least, according to Aristophanes, Athenian playmaking was a performative act, not a textual one. Even Aristotle advises the dramatist to construct a play by visualizing the action and acting out scenes as they are created (*Poetics* 1455a). It is then at least conceivable that Greek tragedy may have been created without *text*.

In the Japanese Kabuki tradition, the notion of a fixed text did not exist until the late nineteenth century, and actors freely altered the works of famous playwrights like Chikamatsu Monzaemon, Tsuruya Nanboku, and Kawatake Mokuami; and their plays were handed down actor to actor by word of mouth. Even in modern Kabuki rehearsals, the actors only use a script to briefly jog their memories and prefer instead to memorize the repertory.⁵ In the contemporary theater there are many rehearsal and creative techniques that attempt to free the actor from dependence on the script, such as “Dropping In,” developed by Tina Packer and Kristen Linklater and widely used at *Shakespeare and Company* in Massachusetts. This involves an acting coach feeding the words together with

a proactive question to stimulate the actor's imagination and activate the natural imaging process of the brain.

Additionally, Greek tragedy was masked theater, and in my experience of working with masks in rehearsal, a script is actually a severe hindrance both to memorization and to creating the kind of line-delivery essential to effective masked acting, a delivery that unifies word and body, the visual and the aural, to combine and create dramatic *ekphrasis*—theatrical vividness.

Even in modern Western theater, where the text does indeed have supremacy, a performance is still made tangible by the on-stage movements of the actor; and famous theatrical practitioners like Constantin Stanislavski and Michael Chekhov developed techniques to help actors “embody” the text. Performance-study theorists have shown that these rehearsed movements can be viewed as a kind of semiotic text, and David Wiles points out that “a performance, I repeat, is itself a ‘text.’”⁶ It should be noted, then, that original Greek plays were actually performed only once.

The point I am making here is that the performance may have come first and that the text is a “recording” of one, just one, element of that original performance—the words. There are no stage directions, no complete descriptions of costume or scenery, no musical or dance notation, only the words and the metrical systems they follow. The rest of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*—anything *seen*, *heard*, or *felt* has not been preserved.

We have evidence that the Athenians remembered tragedy without the assistance of a text—from the prisoners of the Syracusan mines reciting Euripides to the characters populating Old Comedy who are constantly quoting from tragedy. These same theories of memory transmission have often been applied to Homeric texts, which are thus viewed as written recordings derived from an older and more fluid oral tradition. Even Aristotle seems less concerned with text than with plot, placing *muthos* at the heart of the *Poetics*. It is, after all, the plot of a great movie or satisfying play we remember first.

In the high school in Harlem where I teach an after-school theater program, I know several kids who can recite the script of Brian De Palma's film *Scarface* almost in its entirety. When the words of plays did begin to be written down at the end of the fifth century, these new texts offered a completely novel experience of *reading*—not *seeing*—a play, and changed forever the way drama in the West was understood.

Jaś Elsner has advanced an exciting theory that Athens in the early fifth century may have undergone a revolutionary “visual turn” where the rise of naturalism in Greek art coincided with the development of tragedy. This fundamentally changed the way in which art was viewed “from a direct and frontal form of visual address (the gaze) to an askance and self-absorbed look (the glance).” Elsner’s theory compares the passive act of gazing at an archaic sculpture situated in its own world to a new, acute sense of self-reflexivity where works of art “can commentate upon the process of their spectators’ responses to them.”⁷ Prior to the development of drama, audiences experienced live choral works passively and were addressed directly by the performers. With the invention of the second actor, this archaic mode of spectatorship was broken and the audience encountered a more naturalistic reflection of their own world, “to which the viewing relationship is one of indirect identification and imaginative absorption.” This shift in viewing can be related to the contrast between the frontal stance of the *Kroisos kouros* from Anavyssos (ca. 530 BC) and the *contrapposto* of the self-absorbed *Kritios Youth* (ca. 480 BC) who, as Elsner puts it, “has become a particular person rather than a universal cipher for a man.”

If we explore the notion that the tragic text could have been a secondary event produced to memorialize only the vocal part of a Greek play, then with this in mind, might I propose we attempt developing another approach to tragedy? One that could complement textual analysis and also provide some different answers to the questions these dramas give rise to. This would be a theory of “visual dramaturgy” which

regards Greek Tragedy as a live, participatory performance event devised organically, without a script. This visual dramaturgy would not only consider events depicted on stage and in the orchestra but everything within view of the bodily eye: the spectacle and spectatorship of the audience, the architecture of the theater, the monuments, shrines, civic and geographic features that they could see—and had seen—on their way to the theater, and the imagery of the mind's eye conjured by words, music, and movement. Such an approach to ancient drama might be highly illuminating for classicists, but if we could also arm our theater directors with it, might we not be able to offer Greek tragedy as far more than the performance of a literary artifact?

The Bacchae teems with optical references; the illusionary nature of the theater is the basis for the very nature of the play: we never know for sure what is real and what is imagined or staged. Dionysos plays the role of his own priest and Pentheus is “re-cast” midway. Masks, costume, dance, and visuality are not only staging devices but central themes in this play. It is as if Euripides, brooding away in Macedonia, wanted to remind his fellow Athenians of the meaning and importance of losing oneself in the mimetic world of the theater. But Akalaitis' production seemed only intermittently aware of power of the visual despite the fact that the Delacorte Theater is a magnificent venue for Greek drama with its two thousand open-air seats curved around a circular stage looking out over Central Park with vistas of leafy trees, Turtle Pond, and the faux battlements of Belvedere Castle towering above. It is also a great space for people-watching although the Delacorte's scaffold cavea is on a more acute frontal plain than the theater of Dionysos which wrapped its audience in the three-quarter round so they could see each other as well as the play on stage. Joe Papp fought an epic battle with Robert Moses to get the Delacorte built, stage classical drama, and keep attendance free (this is now not quite true as the Public Theater has set up a kind of reverse theoric fund where one can circumvent the free ticket line by

making a one-hundred-dollar “donation”). Yet in its nearly fifty-year history it has only seen three other Greek plays: Lee Grant and Olympia Dukakis in *Electra* in 1964, Andrei Serban’s *Agamemnon* in 1977, and Yukio Ninagawa’s breathtaking *Medea* in 1989. John Conklin’s set made of epic sweeping curved steel bleachers that dissolved into rubble was successful and his decision to open up the vast circular stage worked well as a design concept. But the cast seemed lost in this enormous structure and only once or twice did the twelve women of the chorus ever break out into a formation that allowed them to dominate the stage. For most of the play they were scattered on the bleachers, reclining, sitting, or running up and down looking rather crestfallen and forlorn. When they did peel off the set to enter the playing space, they spent most of their time clustered together. It seemed a waste of 12 bodies, 24 hands and 240 fingers. Once, during the first choral song, they fanned out, covering every inch of space, and yet remained connected as a unified group; this was a fleeting moment of confidence and for just a few seconds I could imagine how effective a twelve-person masked chorus might have been. Akalaitis’ chorus were not masked and were rather unfortunately costumed in garish orange baggy pants and layered sparkly tops making them look like a cross between MC Hammer and the Siamese girls in *The King and I*. The flashy fabric of their vaguely Middle Eastern clothes under Jennifer Tipton’s perfectly serviceable but unmemorable lighting design just kept on pulling focus, and not in a way that helped the audience envision them as exotic foreign followers of an exciting new god.

The chorus can be the bane of any modern staging of Greek tragedy; yet as Helene Foley has pointed out, many contemporary directors have found novel ways to create effective choruses in their respective productions. These range from Lee Breuer’s spiritual choir in *Gospel at Colonus* (1989 and 2005) to the kabuki- and Noh-influenced white-faced, black-clad, highly-choreographed sixteen men of Yukio Ninagawa’s *Medea* (1978–99) to Ariane Mnouchkine’s Katha-

kali- and Balinese-inspired chorus in *Les Atrides* (1992). But in this *Bacchae*, reverence for the text in the form of the fine and very performable translation by Nicholas Rudall, seemed to stifle not only the acting but also the music, dance, and movement depicted on stage. This was most apparent in the work of choreographer David Neumann, who created intricate, delicate—and I have to say, rather obvious gestures to accompany the choral lyrics that were sung in a tentative monotone. Their words were better suited to be read or spoken, and I wonder if Rudall had ever intended for them to be sung when he published the translation in 1996. The chorus struggled to connect with their words, at times emotionally, at times intellectually, and that made experiencing the choral odes very tough going indeed. Then Neumann's choreography compounded the problem by showing us exactly what was being said in a simplistic gestural style that looked as though he was trying to make dance into text. For example, when the chorus sang the word "sun," they drew an imaginary circle with both hands for "heart"—well, they clasped their hands over their left breasts. I suppose it could have been worse, they could have sketched an imaginary heart shape. This was incredibly frustrating. Why can't we see a superbly trained chorus of dancers under the aegis of one of our foremost modern choreographers transport us into the incredibly expressive world of a trained human body in motion and provide a truly contemporary and thrilling chorus? If we applied a little visual dramaturgy, could we not find a different creative starting point for a tragic chorus than the spoken word? Yes, we need the plot—a sense of time and place and a dramatic objective, but what about putting the visual first for once—like seeing some really spectacular dance? What might Jiri Kylian of Nederlands Dans Theater or Doug Varone or Bill T. Jones⁸ do to blow the dramaturgical cobwebs off this oft-misunderstood theatrical dinosaur? Or might they too be crushed under the cultural weight of *the text*. One person that I would like to see make an attempt at a Greek chorus is Ohad Naharin, who has been bringing

his Israel-based Batsheva Dance Company to these shores for the past several years and visiting various American companies as a guest choreographer. His work unites a sense of modern tension and isolation with a deep ritualistic power drawn from both traditional European and contemporary Israeli experience with choreography that creates compelling contrasts between muscularity and sensuality, fluidity and explosiveness, power and pain. Take a look at footage of his *Deca Dance* on YouTube and just imagine what he might do with *The Bacchae*. If nothing else, may this serve as a call to arms for our modern choreographers to come and rescue the chorus. We need you to allow the chorus to *dance*.

And what of the music? I admired this production for placing music at the core and daring to invest in the chorus. Philip Glass composed some beguiling and beautiful soundscapes played live on stage, but I felt the rest of the production trod carefully around it, adding to the general sense of tentativeness and uncertainty that informed the entire show. It was reverential, polite, and fairly unmemorable, and I missed the hypnotic, strange vibes one often associates with Phillip Glass. When things did pick up with the assistance of some beefy timpani, it reminded me of the drum-stylings of Phil Collins from the early eighties. This complimented the same set of aesthetic choices that produced neon orange pasha pants next to charcoal gray business suits, but it lacked passion, intensity, and force, and produced a listless chorus. Once again, I wonder if the words, pushed to the fore, obscured Glass's brilliance and hobbled his creativity. According to Aristophanes, music could be a controversial element of Greek tragedy, with dramatists experimenting with bold new modes that in turn inspired original dance steps. At the end of *Wasps*, the old man bursts out of his door, where he has once again been placed under house arrest, and announces that he is going to show the young folk what real dancing looks like by performing to the music of Phrynichus, a tragic dramatist from the early fifth century, famous for his "honey-sweet" music. After leaping and gy-

rating like a “coiled spring,” he challenges any contemporary tragic dramatists to a dance off to see if they could do any better. *Wasps* ends with a wicked parody of the work of Xenocles—the son of Carcinus who was also a tragic dramatist—as the entire chorus exits doing the steps of the brand new “crab-dance.” In *Clouds*, the Superior Argument mentions that under his “traditional” education, students are beaten for daring to sing in “the cacophonous, newfangled style of that awful lyre-plucker, Phrynis,” who introduced new modes of harmony and rhythm to the kithara. Musical innovation was a big part of Greek drama and another way in which the art form was disseminated after the production had closed. There is no doubt that the texts of Greek plays are more intricate and developed than the average opera libretto, but it would be almost impossible to imagine the total effect of opera if all we had left were the librettos. What then would we make of *The Magic Flute*?

Andre De Shields gave a fine portrayal of Tiresias, though he too seemed somewhat restrained in comparison to the kind of exuberant performances he has become known for, and a little confused in the role. George Bartenieff did good work as Cadmus and even managed to create a moment of true heartfelt emotion in the final scene where he talks Agave down from the high of her ecstatic mania to finally look at the head of her dismembered son. Jonathan Groff, a pleasant young actor who has recently made a name for himself on Broadway in *Spring Awakening* and at the Public in *Hair* (at the Delacorte in 2008) just seemed too “nice” to really embody Dionysos. Dressed in torn jeans and a black leather jacket with a Heath Ledger “Joker” smear across his face, it looked as though he was trying for Jim Morrison but instead found a college freshman trying a little too hard to be cool. Not at all a god of Sex and Drugs and Rock and Roll. There was no danger in this Dionysos: we might follow him on a campus tour of the library but not up a mountain to tear a few animals limb from limb. If Alan Cumming’s Dionysos a year earlier also lacked the power to close the

play with daemonic force, he was at least compelling to watch in a wonderfully snarky, witty performance. Best in this *Bacchae* by far was Anthony Mackie, fresh from a tour de force performance in the movie *The Hurt Locker*. Mackie, as Pentheus, plowed onto the stage full pelt and brought a fierce conviction to the role, the kind of commitment and clarity of action that was so absent in the other performers. But the visceral truth of Mackie's Pentheus only served to heighten the problems with Groff's miscast Dionysos and this was most apparent in the dressing scene.

In *American Theater*, Akalaitis described the dressing scene as embodying the spirit of the drag queen. This could have been developed into an intriguing directorial choice as drag highlights the difference between the body of the performer and the gender that is being portrayed. As Judith Butler points out, "We see sex and gender denaturalized by means of a performance which avows their distinctness and dramatizes the cultural mechanism of their fabricated unity."⁹ Dionysos, rejected by his mortal family, peels away the layers of his mortal cousin's own self-image and cultural identity by offering him the chance to become the ultimate spectator. But rather than explore the delicacy of such a transformative moment, this *Bacchae* blasted through the scene as quickly as possible, trying to emphasize humor and instead creating simple travesty, even a travesty of drag. Here Pentheus asks a series of questions about his appearance, totally dependent on Dionysos to act as his outside eye. In Lacanian terms, it is as if Dionysos has induced an adult "mirror phase," creating a new sense of self-awareness in Pentheus and responding reassuringly to his awkward questions about his appearance like a verbal looking glass. In the ancient world, a reflected image could never be completely trusted—the kind of clear metallic-backed glass mirrors we know were not invented until the sixteenth century and not widely available until the mid-nineteenth century, when the technique of "silvering" was perfected. Looking at a reflection in polished bronze or a pool of water creates a

sense of distortion that can be quite disconcerting. Even the word “mirror” is derived from the Latin *mirari* which means “to wonder at.” Considering Plato’s infamous mirror-analogy in *Republic X* (596d–e) in the light of the unreliability of the reflected image in the ancient world, we might have a different take on the comparison he makes to artistic *mimesis*. In fifth-century Greece, the witnessed act was held in much higher regard than a written account by a visual culture that produced the verb “I know,” derived from the word for “I see.” To *see* was to *know*, but it was impossible to truly see yourself.

Pentheus is being drawn into “deep play” (intense and transcendent play that often involves extreme risk) when Dionysus asks him if he would like to *see* the wild women on the mountain, an enormous risk and one that must involve a change of identity. Pentheus would pay any amount of gold to *see* them; for him the opportunity is worth enduring any humiliation, any risk. No wonder Jeremy Bentham thought “deep play” should be against the law. Akalaitis’ Pentheus was a garish drag queen, done up like Priscilla, Queen of the Desert, or RuPaul in a shimmering red dress, high heels, make-up, and a wig. It should be noted that men had been dressing up as women in the Greek theater for at least seventy years by the time *The Bacchae* was first performed, so the fact he is shown dressed as a woman is not the entire story, as it was for Akalaitis. Pentheus is being costumed as a Maenad, a female follower of Dionysos and a foreigner; he is not only crossing a gender boundary but a cultural one as well. Elizabeth Wilson writes: “A part of the strangeness of dress is that it links the biological body to the social being, and public to private. This makes it uneasy territory, since it forces us to recognize that the human body is more than a biological entity. It is an organism in culture, a cultural artifact even, and its own boundaries are unclear.”¹⁰ As the boundaries of Pentheus’ identity are fragmented and blurred, his own sense of perception is called into question, as he enters the stage saying he sees two suns and two Thebes and Dionysos tells him, “Now you really see things

as you should.” Here Dionysos acts like a theater director, arranging what his “audience” sees and recasting Pentheus as a member of his offstage Maenad chorus. In full view of both the watching chorus and the spectators in the theater, Pentheus is invited to become a voyeur and gaze upon the forbidden spectacle taking place in the mountains. As he sets out on the ultimate visual pilgrimage, he remarks that he is, “the only man in the city who would dare to do this.” He is the supreme aristocrat traveling to the most exclusive *theoria*, except he will never live to return home and tell what he has witnessed. Despite his disguise, Pentheus is not fully transformed. Under the wig he wears the same mask, the *prosôpon* of Pentheus remains firmly in place *before the gaze* of the entire audience.

Watching Joan Macintosh as Agave carrying the obviously prosthetic head of Pentheus onto the Delacorte stage, I wondered if it is really possible to play the end of *The Bacchae* without a mask. So many fine productions come unglued at this point, where the image of a mother unknowingly holding her son’s head becomes mired in the kind of special effect that simply cannot compete with the audience’s visual sophistication schooled by television and film. I remember the first time I ever worked with masks was a student production of *Agamemnon* at University College London in 1986. Twelve chorus masks were professionally made, based on a best guess of what fifth-century masks might have looked like, gleaned from images from vase paintings and working with the collection at the British Museum. These masks were all fashioned from the same basic mould, given a slightly different paint job and hairstyle and then handed out randomly to the twelve undergraduate male classics students who were playing the chorus. After only a week of performances, it was remarkable how each mask seemingly took on the “identity” of the actor who was wearing it, even though they were playing old men of Argos. Even to this day, when I see those masks I can still remember who wore which one, though I have long lost contact with many of the people who

performed in them. These empty masks are in no way lifeless to me—I retain a distinct visual memory of them in performance, they still retain “liveness.” A spectator’s relationship to an actor performing in a mask is entirely different from watching a barefaced actor. The masked actor projects a performance out to the entire audience, engaging each spectator’s bodily eye and stimulating the imaginative capabilities of the mind’s eye to project its own highly personal interpretation back onto the mask. The mask is then *before the gaze* of both the actor and spectator. The Greek theories of vision from around the fifth century all seem to advance a reciprocal relationship between the object and the eye. The Atomists, Leucippus and Democritus, for example, believed that the object gave off some kind of effluent that was filtered into the eye, while Plato variously described the eye as possessing an inner fire that sends out a ray to blend with daylight and the movement or light radiating from the object. If these ideas are applied to masked acting, we can begin to appreciate the importance of the deeply personal relationship between the spectator and the mask. Of course Aristotle disagreed with all of these theories, preferring a more passive notion of vision, yet he still starts *Metaphysics* extolling sight as the most loved of all the senses and the one that, “most of all, makes us know.”

Pentheus’ mask held aloft by Agave for all to see must have been a profoundly disturbing sight. Agamemnon and Cassandra laying on the *ekkyklema* or the corpse of Ajax—with their masks gazing out, these would have been shocking enough, but Agave turns this mask in her hand, reanimating it and giving it a macabre kind of second life. There was nothing even vaguely disturbing in Joanne Akalaitis’ *Bacchae*; her overriding aim seemed to be to alienate the audience and present something strange and *enigmatic*. This was a shame, especially as many people come to the Delacorte to experience classical theater (mainly Shakespeare) for the very first time. (The tickets are free and the large theater can accommodate many people over a three-to-four week

run.) We desperately need contemporary Greek drama that can compel an audience, not alienate them, one that is not afraid to transcend the twentieth century's preoccupation with the significance of *text* and to move beyond the safe confines of half-baked academic ideas and tentative reverence into a vigorous realm of passion, blood, and guts. *The Bacchae* is play about the ecstasy, sexuality, and the uncertainty of live theater; it can never work as a cool intellectual reflective chamber piece.

But wait, there was one moment that balmy August evening when screams could be heard from the audience and people started jumping out of their seats in a bizarre Mexican wave of fear. Those raccoons again! One had broken out from its safe haven under the stage and was happily roaming about the auditorium, running across feet and stopping every now and then to take it all in. Sadly this was by far the most exciting episode that night. Joanne Akalaitis' production needed a reason to compel her spectators to watch and keep on watching until they could hardly take their eyes off the sheer brutality of what was unfolding on stage before them. They should have felt the responsibility of a witness to terrible events. An audience should be drawn into the "deep play" of *The Bacchae* and feel revolted that they were ever so titillated and intrigued to have watched things before them that should never be seen.

NOTES

1. S. Goldhill, "Modern Critical Approaches to Greek Tragedy" in P. E. Easterling, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Greek Tragedy* (Cambridge 1997).

2. Robert Garland, *Surviving Greek Tragedy* (London 2004).

3. C. W. Marshall, "Alcestis and the Ancient Rehearsal Process (*P. Oxy.* 4546)," *Arion*, Third Series, 11.3 (Winter 2004), 27-45.

4. Edith Hall, *The Theatrical Cast of Athens: Interactions Between Ancient Greek Drama and Society* (Oxford 2006).

5. Ronald Cavaye, *Kabuki*, (Rutland, VT; Japan 1993).

6. David Wiles, "Reading Greek Performance," *Greece and Rome* 34.2 (Oct. 1987), 146.

7. Jas Elsner, "Reflections on the 'Greek Revolution' in art: from changes in viewing to the transformation of subjectivity" in S. Goldhill and R. Osborne, eds. *Rethinking Revolutions Through Ancient Greece* (Cambridge 2006).

8. Melinda Powers has documented a workshop version of *The Bacchae* by Bill T. Jones named *Loud Boy* at UC Davis in 2001, but a full production was never commissioned: "Unveiling Euripides," *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism* (Spring 2009), 5–20.

9. Judith Butler, *Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (London 1990).

10. Elizabeth Wilson, *Adorned in Dreams: Fashion and Modernity* (London 1985).