

Bacchae explores Greek traditions

The Bacchae
Northern Light Theatre

review by Olga Jagodnik

Classics majors will love Euripedes' *The Bacchae*, a Northern Light Theatre production directed by Brian Deedrick. This is the opinion of one of my favourite classics majors (a friend who will remain unnamed) who says the play is a "beautiful Greek drama with a lot to say about religion and the role of women."

Not being a classics major, but a passionate lover of good drama, I have certain reservations about this play and of this production in particular.

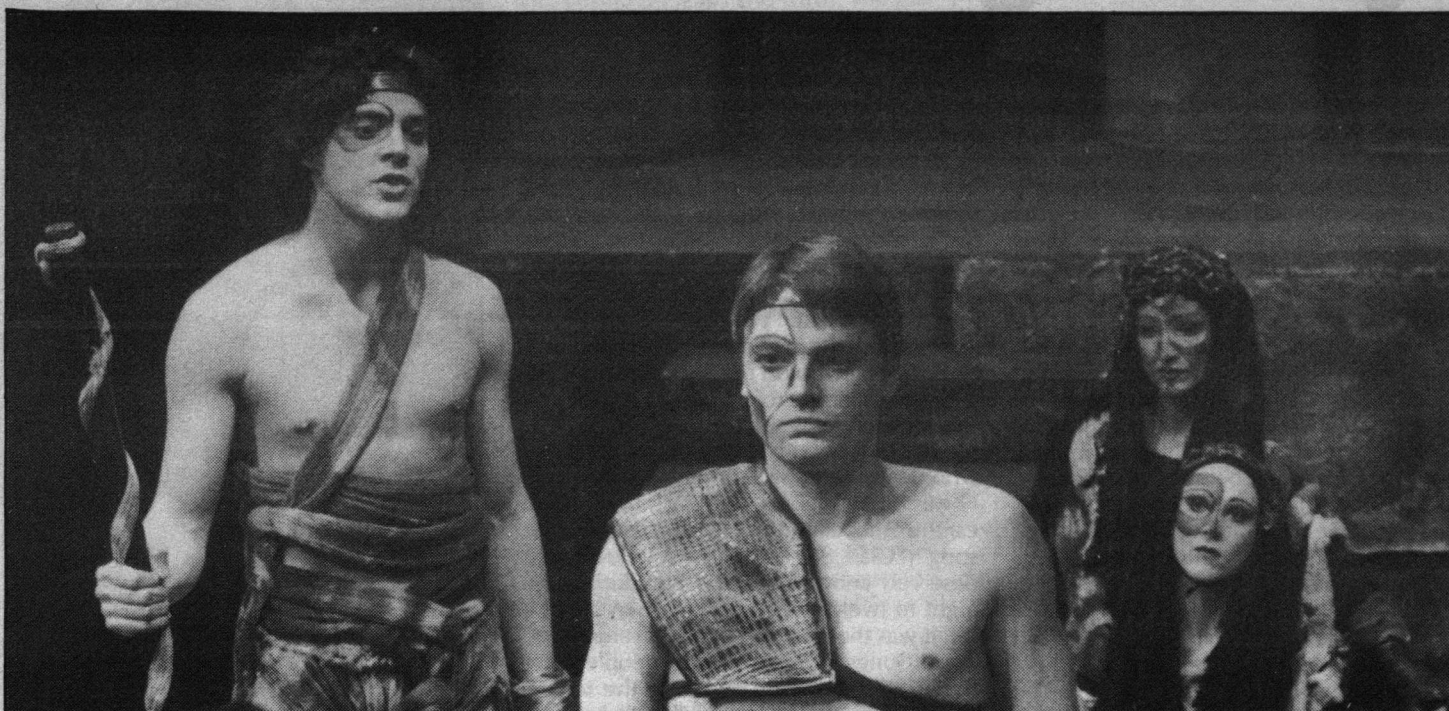
The Bacchae is the story of Dionysus, son of Zeus, coming back to the city of his birth — Thebes — to claim his rightful place as a god of the citizenry and punish his family for their impiety.

Dionysus is King Cadmus' grandson and the son of Semele. Semele had been impregnated by Zeus, firing his wife's (Hera) infamous jealousy. Hera went disguised to Semele and convinced her to ask Zeus to appear before Semele in all his majesty. Zeus did so, and appeared to Semele as a thunderbolt, killing her. Zeus plucked the unborn Dionysus from her corpse and sewed the fetus into his thigh. He then carried the child to term.

Cadmus' grandson, Pentheus, and the people of Thebes do not believe in the divinity of Dionysus or in the circumstances of his birth. They refuse to worship him.

Semele's sisters also refuse to believe in his divinity and are therefore driven into the hills, made mad by Dionysus. They are forced to join his followers, the maenads also called the bacchae) in their wild orgiastic worships. Only King Cadmus, who has given up his throne to Pentheus, and the seer, Teiresias, believe in Dionysus' divinity.

Northern Light's *Bacchae* is faithful to the



David McNally (Dionysus), Robert Wisden (Pentheus) and two members of the chorus in the *The Bacchae*.

Photo Bill St. John

Greek tradition of stark minimalistic production. Set designer Daniel Van Heyst's set is simple and clean: a ring of columns and a large bloody stylized bust of Semele in the middle of the playing space. Nothing detracts from the tragic confrontation of Dionysus and Pentheus.

Of course, this epic confrontation would have been nothing without the performances of Robert Wisden (Pentheus) and David McNally (Dionysus). The two actors manage to develop an amazing stage chemistry and come to grips with two nearly impossible characters — after all, it's not everyday that a young actor gets to play a long dead god.

An example of this chemistry is the scene where Dionysus cons Pentheus into dressing

up like a woman to spy on his mother and aunts who are reveling with Dionysus' other bacchae in the hills. Wisden, fingering his woman's robes, asks, "How do I look? Do I carry myself like my mother Agave? Is one of my curls out of place?"

McNally gently arranges the curl and purrs, "I'm glad you've changed your old rigid ways. Before your mind was unsound; now it is sane!"

The antics of the very well muscled Wisden in drag and the catty sarcasm of McNally are the play's comic highlights.

But it is actress Susan Henley who steals the play's dramatic laurels. She plays the mad Agave who accidentally murders her son. Agave prances about the stage bragging

about her "marvelous hunt" carrying the severed head of Pentheus. (In her magically inspired madness — the product of Dionysus — she had been led to believe that her son was a lion).

Her initial elation turns into an almost suicidal grief as Agave emerges from her magical trance and discovers the results of her action.

Henley manages to keep her performance in line and put out a strong performance without the melodrama or hyped up hysteria.

All in all, this production of *The Bacchae* — while it has its rough spots — is well worth seeing. After all, as the Greeks say, "to suffer is to learn and the more you suffer, the more you learn." I did plenty of both.

The Bacchae runs through to March 10.



A member of the chorus rests on Semele's grave in Northern Light's *The Bacchae*.

Photo Bill St. John

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