

Oxford University Classical Drama Society  
present

THE BACCHAE  
by Euripides

Oxford Playhouse  
until 21st October 2017

***Review by Charles Atkinson***

*'The Bacchae'* was performed in ancient Greek, with subtitles. This was a judicious combination - it allowed the actors to engage with the original text (which they did with real passion and commitment) whilst enabling those members of the audience unfamiliar with the language or the play (the majority, I suspect) to follow the action without difficulty.

Dionysos was played by three actors, all of them in their different ways strikingly effective; perhaps the most memorable was Derek Mitchell as a sneering, mocking embodiment of the deity, as devoid of compassion for humanity as Pan in 'The Music on the Hill'. Spencer Klavan gave a thoughtful measured performance as Pentheus, articulating his lines with a biting precision, and showing that same utter blindness to good advice that characterises Creon in 'Antigone'. Pentheus, of course, is in some ways a more sympathetic character than Creon; whilst the former is involved (as he sees it) in the justified suppression of a dangerous religious cult, the latter outrages human decency as well as divine law by his refusal to bury the body of Polynices. Spencer contrived to deliver us a Pentheus who was human, vulnerable and capable of exciting pity, as well as infuriatingly stubborn.

William Bunce was an effective Cadmus, and Odysseas Myresiotis-Alivertis gave a powerful performance as Teiresias, though in his choric role he could perhaps have shown a little more restraint in his acting. He and the other members of the chorus worked very well as an ensemble – fluid, well-choreographed and all handling their solo parts with smooth professionalism.

The music was superb, integrating recorded soundtrack with excellently played onstage viola; it complemented rather than dominated the choric action, and was extremely effective in creating the eerie, disturbing atmosphere which is very much part of the play. The set was interesting - a movable cube centre stage, two sides gauze, one side a door, one side a window covered by a spider's web. In the first half I felt that it was under-used, with the action taking place downstage and rarely incorporating the cube, but in the second half it came into its own, with light projected from upstage centre onto actors concealed behind the gauze, creating some memorable silhouette effects, as when Pentheus was undressed and reclined as a woman.

The cinematic sequence, again projected onto the gauze, in which Pentheus is pursued by the Maenads and torn to pieces by a frenzied crowd including, amongst others, his own mother, was a bold artistic experiment; it didn't quite work for me; I think that a mime in silhouette would have been more consistent with the symbolic style of the production - but it was arresting, interesting and imaginatively conceived.

The performance was brought to a traumatic conclusion by Emilia Clark as Agaue, Pentheus' mother, who is clutching the severed head of her son in the delusional belief that she is holding the head of a lion cub. Her triumphant, half-hysterical laughter at her success as a huntress was gradually replaced by the dawning horror of reality, and in a quiet, moving ending she and Cadmus slunk desolately from stage into interminable exile. It is a cruel play, a warning that the world is not governed by human will but by elemental forces that can utterly destroy us, and it was given memorable expression by this enterprising student troupe, who have clearly put a vast amount of effort and energy into their work. Congratulations to all concerned.