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# Dionysus Resurrected

Performances of Euripides' *The Bacchae*  
in a Globalizing World

Erika Fischer-Lichte

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## Dionysus Resurrected

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# Preface

This book seeks answers to the question of why Euripides' *The Bacchae*, which until the late 1960s had almost no performance record at all, has since been staged a number of times. This is true not just of Europe and the United States, which pride themselves on a long tradition of performing ancient Greek plays, but also of Africa, Latin America, and Asia.

During the time of late antiquity in Greece, *The Bacchae* was among the most popular tragedies. Plutarch (*De Gloria Ath.* 8) reports that it was performed in Athens frequently. Apart from performances of the whole play, actors also successfully toured with some of its solo arias. People referred to segments of the tragedy on a number of occasions – as for instance at an event that took place in the camp of the Parthians, as recorded by Plutarch (*Crassus* 33):

Now when the head of Crassus was brought to the king's door, the tables had been removed, and a tragic actor, Jason by name, of Tralles, was singing the part of the "Bacchae" of Euripides where Agave is about to appear. While he was receiving his applause, Sillaces stood at the door of the banqueting-hall, and after a low obeisance, cast the head of Crassus into the centre of the company. The Parthians lifted it up with clapping of hands and shouts of joy, and at the king's bidding his servant gave Sillaces a seat at the banquet. Then Jason handed his costume of Pentheus to one of the chorus, seized the head of Crassus, and assuming the role of the frenzied Agave, sang these verses as if inspired (*anabakheusas . . . met' enthousiasmou*):

"We bring from the mountain  
A tendril fresh-cut to the palace,  
A wonderful prey."

(1170–2)

This delighted everybody.

(Perrin 1915: 421–422)

Plutarch also mentions that Alexander the Great frequently quoted from the tragedy at his banquets and that his mother Olympia, believed to have been a devotee of Dionysian cults, liked to play the role of Agave (Plutarch, *Alexander* 53).

In view of the tragedy's popularity during antiquity, its complete absence from European stages until 1908 and very rare reappearances after that until the end of the 1960s seems even more striking. This is not to say that *The Bacchae* had been forgotten. In the second half of the sixteenth century several translations into Latin and even one into Italian (in 1582) appeared. This more or less coincided with the inauguration of the newly built Teatro Olimpico in Vicenza, for which *Oedipus the King* was performed (1585). While many Greek tragedies were adapted or rewritten and performed during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, there is no record of a new version of *The Bacchae*. Interest in it was rekindled only in the first half of the nineteenth century, particularly in Germany. In 1799 Friedrich Hölderlin translated the first 24 verses of the 'Prologue', which inspired him to write his hymn "Wie wenn am Feiertage," in which Dionysus is likened to Christ. Goethe praised *The Bacchae* as his "favourite play by Euripides" and translated parts of it in 1821 (see Petersen 1974: 198). Despite his plaudits, however, the tragedy was not performed, and Goethe only staged Euripides' *Ion* (1802) in a version by August Wilhelm Schlegel and Sophocles' *Antigone* (1809) at his theatre in Weimar. Schlegel, who disliked Euripides' tragedies and set out to "correct" him in his version of *Ion*, excepted *The Bacchae* from his harsh verdict. In his *Lectures on Dramatic Art and Literature* held in Vienna in 1808, he states:

In the composition of this piece, I cannot help admiring a harmony and unity, which we seldom meet in Euripides, as well as an abstinence from every foreign matter, so that all the motions and effects flow from one source, and concur towards a common end. After the *Hippolytos*, I should be inclined to assign to this play the first place among all the extant works of Euripides.

(Schlegel 1965: 139)

Still, this did not encourage a theatre to stage the tragedy. It was not until the last three decades of the nineteenth century that *The Bacchae* and its protagonist Dionysus rose to prominence again, this time in the context of the quest for the origin of ancient Greek theatre, especially among classicists. The trigger was Friedrich Nietzsche's seminal treatise *The Birth of Tragedy out of the Spirit of Music* (1872), in which he states:

Greek tragedy in its oldest form dealt with the sufferings of Dionysus . . . all the celebrated characters of the Greek stage – Prometheus, Oedipus and so on – are merely masks of that original hero . . . this hero is the suffering

Dionysus of the mysteries, the god who himself experiences the suffering of individuation.

(Nietzsche 1993: 51–52)

While Nietzsche identified the Dionysian chorus of satyrs as the origin of Greek theatre, the so-called Cambridge Ritualists some decades later believed to have found it in the so-called *eniautos daimon* ritual, the slaying and resurrection of the year-god. In her book, *Themis: A Study of the Social Origin of Greek Religion* (1912), Jane Ellen Harrison, a classics scholar and the leading spirit behind the Cambridge Ritualists, set out to prove that ancient Greek theatre originated as such a ritual. Gilbert Murray contributed a chapter entitled ‘Excursus on the Ritual Forms Preserved in Tragedy’ to the book. In it he attempted to show that the elements identified by Harrison as constitutive of the *eniautos daimon* ritual had survived in *The Bacchae*, where, so he argues, they fulfill similar functions as in this ritual. Murray’s enthusiasm for the tragedy grew to the extent that he translated it into English, but, rather than spurring a series of performances in England, this led to only one: in 1908 the stage director William Poel, famous for his Shakespeare productions, used Murray’s translation for staging the play at London’s Court Theatre. Instead, in England as in the United States, *The Bacchae* was relegated to university campuses, particularly at women’s colleges.

Yet the tragedy and its protagonist remained a favorite subject of classical scholarship, as demonstrated impressively by, amongst others, Walter F. Otto’s study, *Dionysus: Myth and Cult* (1933), and Eric Robertson Dodds’ edition of and commentary on *The Bacchae* (1944).

Despite the classicists’ fascination with the play, it remained more or less absent from the stage. Two performances are known to have taken place at the ancient theatre of Syracuse (in 1922 and in 1950, the latter starring Vittorio Gassman as Dionysus) and one was recorded at the Teatr Wielki in Lwów in Poland in 1933. In 1950 Linos Karzis staged *The Bacchae* at the Odeon of Herodes Atticus in Athens, and in the early 1960s the tragedy was performed at the National Theatre of Greece, directed by Alexis Minotis (1962).

Against this backdrop of the rather meager performance history of the tragedy until the late 1960s, the sudden abundance of productions from 1968 onwards begs for an explanation. The worldwide spread of *The Bacchae* coincided with the dissemination of ancient Greek plays in general. As Edith Hall has stated in *Dionysus Since 69*, “more Greek tragedy has been performed in the last thirty years than at any point in history since Greco-Roman antiquity” (Hall, Macintosh, and Wrigley 2004: 2). Hall, Macintosh, and Wrigley (2004) focus on the question, which is also the title of their introduction, “Why Greek Tragedy in the Late Twentieth Century?” By

restricting their examples to performances in Western countries (with one notable exception: Lorna Hardwick's contribution on "Greek Drama and Anti-Colonialism") and discussing them in the context of issues such as the sex war, politics, aesthetics of performance, and "the life of the mind," the performances are related to more recent social, political, aesthetic, and scientific developments in that part of the world, serving as a kind of missing link in terms of an explanation.

Other classicists often discuss the fascination with and subsequent spread of performances of Greek tragedies, especially when including those of non-Western countries, in terms of an ideology of universalism. The tragedies can be performed in cultures that lie outside of the purview of the Greek heritage, so the argument goes, because they embody universal truths and values (e.g., McDonald 1992). The same argument also frequently appears in Western theatre reviews when such performances are presented at international theatre festivals in Europe.

This argument is unacceptable for at least two reasons. First, during the colonial period, it was generally used to back up the colonizers' claim to superiority. The dichotomy between the universalism of Western cultures and the particularism of colonized cultures, constructed and upheld by the colonial masters, suggested that the only way in which the people they ruled over could enjoy universally valid cultural goods was to adopt Western ones. This means that, even today, performing a Greek tragedy enables them to experience the universal truths and values embodied in it. The concept of universalism must therefore not only be questioned but also abandoned altogether.

Second, the argument of universalism fails to answer the question of why Greek tragedies were not performed between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries. Once translated or performed, they ought to have revealed their universal truths and values and spread like wildfire – right? The fact that this did not happen and the plays remained neglected until fairly recently highlights that the argument of universalism simply makes no sense.

Moreover, two other ideas I do not believe in often go hand in hand with universalism – that of ownership and that of the text as the primary authority controlling the performance. Often, an author's birthplace or passport is used to justify a nationalistic claim. Shakespeare is thus believed to be "owned" by the British, Ibsen by the Norwegians, Brecht by the Germans, and so on. This becomes more complicated in the case of the ancient Greek tragedies. Undeniably, the Greeks claim the exclusive right to ownership. However, most European nations but also the United States, Canada, and Australia have appropriated these plays, asserting that they also form an essential part of their cultural heritage. But if ownership can be extended from one nation to include another, as has clearly been the case, why not extend it to all without claiming universalism? The claim to ownership

usually serves the purpose of awarding oneself greater competence in interpreting, understanding, and staging the plays and of rebuking “misinterpretations” committed by others.

The debate on the relationship between text and performance is not new. The idea that the written text of a play serves as an authority that controls the process of staging or that a performance acts as “concretion” or “realization” of the meanings hidden inside the text has long been superseded. Yet it is still reproduced by Western critics and sometimes even scholars with regard to Greek tragedies performed by artists from non-Western cultures. It was Brecht who already argued with respect to *Antigone* that the text of a play is nothing but a raw material to be changed at will to serve the most diverse purposes. Greek tragedies are usually translated in order to be performed. All translations are by their very nature “adaptations” and should be seen as a first step in the process of appropriation culminating in a stage production. The creative use of the main materials – the space, the actors’ bodies, the translation, light, sound, etc. – and their combination, synchronization, or opposition is what constitutes the production. In addition, it is the special relationship between stage/auditorium and actors/spectators that, each night, determines the success and impact of a performance. The text is just one enabling factor among others and by no means the determining one.

This understanding of ownership and of the text as a controlling authority ultimately serves the same purpose as the ideology of universalism – to maintain the superiority of Western artists, critics, and scholars over everyone else. It does not offer any clues concerning our question.

The subtitle of this study, “Performances of Euripides’ *The Bacchae* in a Globalizing World,” might suggest some kind of a connection between the renewed interest in the play and globalization, even though the beginning of globalization has been a subject of some debate. Some date it to after the fall of communism, others to the 1960s, when societal shifts, e.g. due to the emergence of postcolonialism, the passage from industrialism to post-industrialism (such as in Japan and in the Western countries) and the rise and spread of novel communication technologies, provided new conditions and possibilities for politics, the economy, the market and financial flows, the production and circulation of commodities and knowledge, services, information, lifestyles, etc. As such, the above-mentioned time frame does more or less coincide with the period during which *The Bacchae* began to be revived on the world’s stages.

The concept of globalization has also been defined in many different ways, which, mostly, are not mutually exclusive but simply bring one or more aspects of it into sharper focus (e.g., Appadurai 1996; Beck 2000; Ellwood 2001; Held and McGrew 2003; Lechner and Boli 2007; Steger 2003; Waters 2001). For our purposes its consequences rather than definitions are of

interest, which the above-mentioned authors also discuss at great length. In summary, they seem to agree on three interrelated consequences:

1. Globalization has led to the fragmentation, indeed dissolution, of communities, giving rise to the need to find new ways of bonding. The dissolution was experienced both as a threat but also as a liberation from different kinds of oppression. In the latter case, this meant enabling a new form of bonding, allowing for the experience of a fair and equal communality. In the first case, attempts were made to restore the lost community, which ultimately turned out to be impossible. In this scenario, the new community was often only temporary and/or unstable.
2. The second consequence is the process of dedifferentiation, resulting in the loss of clear-cut, fixed and stable collective and individual identities. Instead, identities have and continue to become flexible, fluid, and ever-changing – they are identities in limbo that can no longer be described through dichotomies, which subsequently collapse.
3. The third concerns the increased number of encounters between members of different cultures and/or social classes and milieus, religions, linguistic communities, etc. They either happen as productive encounters, in which the “border” that separates them is redefined as a threshold that invites transgression, or as a destructive clash, when any attempt to transgress the “border” is seen as a hostile attack to be dealt with accordingly.

It is striking that the three most influential scholarly interpretations of *The Bacchae* in the early 1970s – i.e., at the beginning of the process of globalization – by the Swiss and German (respectively) classicists Walter Burkert and Bernd Seidensticker, the Polish theatre scholar Jan Kott and the French literary scholar and anthropologist René Girard, each focus on one of these three consequences, as will be explained in the introduction. Similarly, the performances discussed in this book all highlight one of these aspects while also considering the others. This is not to say that the reference to the process of globalization will fully answer our question. The performances discussed here all came into being in different countries between 1968 and 2008 and often under very different circumstances – in other words, global processes encountered very specific local conditions.

In this context I would like to define “local” as the given frameworks and particular circumstances prevalent at the place in which the production came into being. These include specific social and political conditions as well as cultural and theatrical traditions. The latter, for example, refers to the artists’ and spectators’ knowledge of various theatre forms, performance traditions and conventions, acting, dance and music styles, the actors of the company,

their repertoire of plays, and their performance history, as well as many other aspects.

These conditions are important for any process of staging without, however, determining it. They form a sort of enabling structure allowing for a number of possibilities to be tried out and realized without imposing one. That is to say that the local is not necessarily or exclusively to be identified with the traditional but with the sum total of the factors and conditions prevalent at that place. The particular performance aesthetic can therefore not be predicted on the basis of a detailed description and thorough analysis of all the local conditions informing the process. The local, with all its specific conditions, does not act as a determining but as an enabling factor.

This scenario renders any kind of generalizing or homogenizing approach counterproductive, which is why I will base my arguments on individual case studies instead, taking into consideration the specific conditions of each production and its particular ways and purposes of appropriating and localizing the tragedy.

The present book is not a reception study in the classical sense. It does not consider all performances of the tragedy during this time span or investigate the different readings of the tragedy highlighted by each performance. Rather, this is a study centered on why and how the play is put to productive use and whose needs it is meant to satisfy.

This is also not a study on intercultural theatre. It is true that my case studies include performances from the United States, Great Britain, Germany, Greece, and Poland, as well as from Nigeria, Brazil, Japan, India, and China. Yet the mere fact that a text usually regarded as constitutive of the Western tradition is performed in a non-Western cultural context does not make it “intercultural theatre,” especially not if we truly are to abandon the ideology of universalism, dismiss such concepts as ownership or authority of the text, and focus instead on the practices of localization. With regard to the guiding question of this study, I cannot identify a single fundamental difference between performances in so-called Western and so-called non-Western cultures that would suggest the use of the term “intercultural theatre” as a useful heuristic tool.

Lastly, I would like to define more positively what kind of a study this is. My analysis of the carefully selected performances examines how each of them dealt with and related to the three consequences of the globalizing process outlined above in terms of what they chose to show, how they showed it, and what its effect might have been. The assumption of such a link to the globalizing process serves as the point of departure. The performances in this book were chosen on the basis of whether they suggested a certain, even if not as yet apparent, affinity to this process at an early stage of my research. In order to avoid the risk of a premature and altogether misleading

tendency to generalize and homogenize, I do not discuss the general link to the process of globalization in my chapters, of which each one is devoted to a different production. Instead, I relate each production to one of the consequences of globalization outlined above. It is in the epilogue that the overall process of globalization is addressed.

The situation regarding the availability of sources and other documents on the productions varies greatly in each case. Some of the performances I have seen myself. Others are documented in detail, while in some cases only a number of photographs, very few reviews, and an interview with the director, stage designer, and/or the actors exist. A note at the beginning of each chapter indicates what kind of material was available for that production. Since the material is rather scarce in some cases, it cannot be avoided that some conclusions are drawn as a result of my argument without any further evidence at hand. These cases are clearly marked, so that the reader will not mistake an assumption for the statement of an evidenced fact.

This book is intended for a broad readership. It primarily addresses theatre as well as classics scholars and students with an interest in the performance history of Greek tragedy. It is also meant for a wider public interested in theatre and its relationship to overarching political, social, and cultural developments. Moreover, those researching such developments and the impact they may have had on cultural institutions in different societies hopefully will also find some stimulating ideas in this book. Lastly, it might offer some food for thought to readers working on or interested in problems of cultural comparison – a vast and still deeply contested field. Since this book addresses not only specialists but also a broad readership, it is inevitable that, depending on their field of interest, some readers might wish that this or that argument or aspect had been included or elaborated on in more detail. However, it is my hope that the overarching line of argument is drawn clearly enough that it might spark a fruitful discussion.

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## Further Reading

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# Introduction

## Rediscovering *The Bacchae*



FIGURE 0.1 Bronze sculpture of Dionysus. Photo: bpk/Antikensammlung, SMB/Johannes Laurentius.

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## Re-enter Dionysus

Dionysus, the ancient god of wine, of communal celebration, of the mysteries and of theatre, is dead. He was ousted centuries ago by Jesus Christ and passed away. But is he really gone from us? As the myth tells us, Dionysus, son of Zeus and Semele, the daughter of King Cadmus of Thebes, was dismembered and devoured by the Titans. However, Zeus destroyed them with a throw of his thunderbolt, reassembled the parts of Dionysus' body and restored his son to life. What happened once could happen again.

And it did. On June 7, 1968, at the Performing Garage on Wooster Street in New York, a slender young man with glasses addressed the audience with the following words:

Good evening, I see you found your seats. My name is William Finley, son of William Finley. I was born twenty-seven years ago and two months after my birth the hospital in which I was born burned to the ground. I've come here tonight for three important reasons. The first and most important of these is to announce my divinity. The second is to establish my rites and my rituals. And the third is to be born, if you'll excuse me.

(Schechner 1970: n.p.)

After having undergone the ritual of his rebirth the man continued:

Here I am. Dionysus once again. Now for those of you who believe what I just told you, that I am a god, you are going to have a terrific evening. The rest of you are in trouble. It's going to be an hour and a half of being up against the wall. Those of you who do believe can join us in what we do next. It's a celebration, a ritual, an ordeal, an ecstasy. An ordeal is something you go through. An ecstasy is what happens to you when you get there.

(Schechner 1970)

This was clearly Dionysus resurrected, making his reappearance in the United States of America. He came back to life in a place that had genuinely belonged to him at least from the sixth century BCE onwards: the theatre. He did so through a performance of Euripides' *The Bacchae* entitled *Dionysus in 69*, but he did not stay long. A few years later he left again and continued his journey through the modern globalizing world. Where he went immediately after his departure from the United States is unknown. Some years later he popped up again in Jamaica, England, Germany, Austria, France, Italy, and later on back home in Greece, from where he set out on a long journey to Japan, India, China, Brazil, Cameroon, and Nigeria, to name just a few countries which he honored with his divine presence. He is still roaming the five continents.

*The Bacchae* was Euripides' final tragedy. He wrote it in the last years of his life in Macedonia, where he had been exiled from Athens. It was performed after his death (406 BCE) in Athens, along with *Iphigenia in Aulis* and *Alcmaeon at Corinth*, which were also written abroad. *The Bacchae* is the only extant tragedy in which the god Dionysus himself appears, not just as a character but as the protagonist. The tragedy tells the gruesome story of revenge by the god against his mother's family for not believing in his divinity and spreading the rumor that he was fathered by a mortal lover of his mother. Arriving in Thebes as a stranger in the guise of a mortal human being and accompanied by a band of women from Lydia, he strikes the women of Thebes with madness so that they leave their households and ecstatically celebrate the god in the Cithaeron mountains. Pentheus, ruler of Thebes and son of Agave, one of Semele's sisters, confronts Dionysus and throws him in jail. The god frees himself by causing an earthquake that destroys the palace. Pentheus wants to spy on the women in the mountains, suspecting acts of immorality. Dionysus convinces him to dress in women's clothes in order to watch them unrecognized. He guides him to the mountains, places him on a tall fir tree and announces his presence to the women of Thebes. They get Pentheus down and tear him apart, the first blow dealt by his own mother, Agave. She impales his head on a thyrsus – a long stick twined with ivy branches and tipped with a pine cone – believing in her frenzy that it is the head of a young lion. At Thebes she awakens from her madness and falls into a state of desperation. Dionysus reveals himself and his revenge, granted to him by his father Zeus. He bans Agave, her sisters, and her parents from Thebes and the chorus sings in praise of the god.

While other Greek tragedies in the 1960s, in particular *King Oedipus*, *Antigone*, and *Medea*, had been part of a roughly 200-year-long performance history on modern European stages, *The Bacchae* had almost no performance record at all until that point. Hans Werner Henze's opera *The Bassarides*, directed by Gustav Rudolf Sellner, premiered in 1966 at the Salzburg Festival. It was a new version of *The Bacchae*. After the festival, the production was transferred to the Deutsche Oper Berlin, where it remained in the repertoire for quite a while. It constitutes a prelude of sorts to a series of performances starting in 1968 with *Dionysus in 69* (directed by Richard Schechner) and continuing throughout the 1970s. The most famous and widely discussed among them were the productions by Hansgünther Heyme at the Cologne Theatre (1973); by Luca Ronconi at Vienna's Burgtheater (1973); an adaptation by Wole Soyinka, later a Nobel laureate, commissioned by the London National Theatre, where it premiered (1973); a production of this version by Carol Dawes in Kingston, Jamaica (1975); the performance staged by Klaus Michael Grüber at the Berlin Schaubühne (1974); another one by Luca Ronconi in Prato, Italy (1977); productions by Michael Cacoyannis at the Comédie Française in Paris (1977), by Karolos

Koun at the Teatro Technis in Athens (1977), and by Tadashi Suzuki in Tokyo (1978). This impressive record would justify labeling the years between 1968 and 1978 the decade of *The Bacchae*. However, this was just the beginning. The tragedy not only entered the repertoire of European theatres and was henceforth performed on a more or less regular basis. Until recently in Japan, Tadashi Suzuki restaged it several times and encouraged other directors to do the same. Moreover, *The Bacchae* has been performed in other parts of Asia and in Africa and Latin America since the 1990s. Its recurring presence on the stages of the world over the last forty years, contradicting its almost complete absence until the late 1960s, is remarkable. With it, Dionysus returned to the theatre, raising the question of why this happened. Did staging *The Bacchae* seem an adequate response to the issues and developments that were on people's minds? Was it understood as a topical play?

### The Topicality of *The Bacchae*

Dionysus' return to the theatre was not entirely coincidental. It responded to certain events and developments within the societies in which he made his appearance. The plot of *The Bacchae* seemed somehow to have resonated with these societies. *The Bacchae* was performed because its protagonist, Dionysus, in whatever manifestation, was about to appear to the community or had already done so. The play became topical because it was interpreted differently in each cultural context, depending on the local situation.

However, the tragedy is ambiguous and so is its protagonist Dionysus. The tragedy continuously emphasizes two of the god's attributes. Firstly, he is a "democratic" god because "To rich and poor he gives/the simple gift of wine,/the gladness of the grape" (Euripides 1960; v. 423–5). Secondly, he has no fixed physical form, but rather takes on different appearances at will (v. 478), his favorite embodiments being three aggressive and dangerous animals – the bull, the snake, and the lion.

The first characteristic offers comfort and gives joy to all: "by inventing liquid wine/as his gift to man,/For filled with that good gift/suffering mankind forgets its grief; from it/comes sleep; with it oblivion of the troubles/of the day" (v. 280–3). Wine releases man from the burdens of social pressures and needs and induces a state of physical satisfaction and well-being.

The second characteristic incites man's urge to commit acts of violence:

O Dionysus, reveal yourself a bull! Be manifest  
 A snake with darting heads, a lion breathing fire!  
 O Bacchus, come! Come with your smile!  
 Cast your noose about this man who hunts your Bacchae! Bring him down,  
 trampled underfoot by the murderous herd of your Maenads!

(v. 1017–23)

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