

## Invitation to World Literature: The Bacchae Video Transcript

Mendelsohn:

It's a play about the dark places both literally and figuratively.

Cumming:

It's sort of like about your worst fears, really the most awful things a human being can endure. And I think we all like to see that.

Schechner:

The struggle is between a young king Pentheus, and the god Dionysus—the god of ecstasy the god of wine.

Schechner:

The play pits these two very strong characters against each other, it's like matter and anti-matter: when they meet they explode.

TITLE: ALAN CUMMING/Actor:

I probably first read the Bacchae when I was about 18 or 19 when I was at drama school in Scotland

TITLE: DAVID DAMROSCH/ Professor of Comparative Literature/Harvard University:  
In the late 60s very much the kind of Age of Aquarius?

TITLE: RICHARD SCHECHNER/Theatre Director:

When we did the play in '68. I wanted to in a certain sense, take us through the experiences that were reflected in the streets

TITLE: WOLE SOYINKA/Playwright:

This is the case of a revolt. And in that sense it was a reflection of my own society.

TITLE: FROMA ZEITLIN/Professor of Classics/Princeton University:

I've taught it in Greek, I've taught in translation, I've taught in the context of gender and sexuality in society.

TITLE: BRAD MAYS/Theatre and Film Director:

When I did my adaptation, I kind of felt I was somehow channeling the spirit of Euripides. And I will say that Euripides pretty much kicked my ass.

TITLE: HELENE FOLEY/Professor of Classics/Columbia University:

Since I'm obsessed with Greek theater in a way I suppose am involved with what Dionysus is really about.

GRAPHIC: WHO ARE THE BACCHAE?

TITLE: DAVID DAMROSCH/ Professor of Comparative Literature/Harvard University :

The Bacchae are followers of Bacchus, this god, known either as Dionysus or Bacchus, the god of wine. They're the ones who go off into the hillsides and start reveling and worshipping, either in these horrible drunken orgies or in these very peaceful happy scenes depending on who you believe.

TITLE: RICHARD SCHECHNER/Theatre Director :

Dionysus brings and he arouses in others, as I hope I'm arousing in you, this notion that the flesh is delicious. That dancing is a way to ecstasy. Ec: outside, ec stasis: to stand outside of one's self.

Mays (reading):

"First they let their hair fall to their shoulders. Then they tied their fawn belts up.

Some women cradled wild gazelle kids and their wolf cubs close to their arms to suckle them with their pale milk." It's as if it's a big acid party.

Foley:

Dionysus had a particular attraction for women because their lives in general were more circumscribed than men's lives. To drink wine, to let their hair down literally which they do in a lot of their vases was obviously a tremendous liberating opportunity for women in particular.

Cumming:

It's a very patriarchal society there. And suddenly the women are not at home, cooking and cleaning, but they're out there, drinking, and they've got flowers in their hair, and they're all kind of unkempt. It's really outrageous.

BRAD MAYS Theatre and Film Director:

When you do the Bacchae, it's very seductive. The women are all under the spell of Dionysus. They're screaming their lungs out. It's degenerate, it's profane.

Foley:

Well in the story, King Pentheus has heard that all of the women of the city, including his mother Agave, have gone up into the mountains and are engaging in Dionysiac worship very intensively, which is exactly what he doesn't want to have happen.

Damrosch:

These women are bursting out of their confinement, they are going out into nature. Pentheus is afraid that his power is being disrupted by this strange force.

FROMA ZEITLIN Professor of Classics Princeton University:

That's a threat. That's a threat to the establishment. And that's what Dionysus is.

But Pentheus isn't a bad guy, you know, he's young, impetuous, and he also feels a responsibility towards keeping the society in order.

Cumming:

Not just people in his kingdom but his family are running up a hill and drinking all this stuff. It would be like a new drug being invented and your mum suddenly going off and being wasted in the park, that's, that's what he was dealing with. You know, he's got a lot of issues.

Mendelsohn:

Pentheus doesn't believe in Dionysus and has forbidden the worship of Dionysus.

Foley:

By and large Greek gods represent forces that are in the universe and they can't be controlled by humans.

Soyinka:

Obviously Dionysus is a god you just don't talk back at them, otherwise they turn you into a worm or a stone or something like that.

Mendelsohn:

The god Dionysus himself reappears in his ancestral town Thebes. And says, I'm going to prove that I'm a god.

Cumming:

It's sort of like one of those, you know, soap operas where suddenly someone appears who you've never seen before and suddenly it's like, "Why Cody, you're my long lost brother from Aspen?" Sort of like that, but in Greek. But he's coming back to his hometown, and he wants to play a real rocking gig.

When I did it, I was like a rock star, the girls were like my band.

Mendelsohn:

What's so interesting though is that he both appears and isn't there. We know that this character is the god Dionysus but Pentheus doesn't.

Foley:

He takes prisoner Dionysus in disguise as a mortal and tries to keep the women under control.

Mendelsohn:

Pentheus wants to show everyone how strong he is so he keeps throwing everyone in prison.

Mays:

What Pentheus brings is suspicion, is just simply an unwillingness to bend. So Pentheus has ordered his men to arrest this effeminate stranger and bring him to be interviewed.

Schechner:

"Untie his hands. We have him in our net. He may be quick, but he cannot escape us now, I think. So, you are attractive, Stranger. What fair skin you have, you must take care of it. No daylight complexion. No, it comes from the night, when you hunt Aphrodite with your beauty. Now then. Who are you, and from where?"

Mendelsohn:

That passage is the crux of the entire play in a way. You know, that's the first encounter between Pentheus, the Boy King, and Dionysus, the Boy God. Pentheus is kind of very attracted to him. You know, it's so brilliantly written, God, because Pentheus says "oh, well you know, you have this fair complexion like women because, because you're a creature of the night." Euripides already showing you that Pentheus is obsessed with sex . . . "Aphrodite" he says he's so fascinated by sex, but he can't ever admit it.

Foley:

And you think you're negotiating with a human, but in fact you're negotiating with something far more powerful.

Mays:

Little does he know that he is just...he's just invited into his own home a living tornado, a living hurricane. This is a scene where man is up against a god.

Zeitlin:

There's an element of mystery, there's an element of something which is bigger than ourselves.

Mendelsohn:

You know, nothing in this play is black or white. It's not an either /or just as Dionysus himself is not either wonderful or terrible.

Damrosch:

Euripides offers us no simple solutions no comforting answers and at the same time it's a kind of a negative wisdom. Don't think logic is going to help you here. We have to sort of break through the very structures we put in place that keep the society together.

GRAPHIC: TRAGEDY'S BIG 3

Mendelsohn:

Well, Euripides was the youngest and the last of the three great Greek tragedians Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides. And he was supposed to have been born around 480 BC.

Foley:

It's said in ancient sources, okay, that Sophocles specifically writes about men as they should be and Euripides writes about men as they are. And I think that that's a fairly perceptive statement.

Zeitlin:

The notion of inner life, that there's an inside, that inner life, that he has many more monologues and which the character expresses these feelings—mostly women, at the same time they are free of psychobabble, they are not sitting around psychoanalyzing.

Mendelsohn:

What's interesting about Euripides biographically is that his life essentially is the life of Athens. Athens becomes a world power with the victory in the Persian wars which is when Euripides is born. And he dies right before the awful ending of the Peloponnesian war, in which Athens is defeated by the Spartans, and so Euripides' life is the life of Athens.

Schechner:

Now these playwrights wrote in the 5th century BCE., roughly 2,500 years ago. And they were staged at the City Dionysia, the theater on the hillside of the Acropolis in ancient Athens. That theater still exists; the acoustics are fabulous. At least once a year, all of the adult males of Athens assembled in this one theater. Maybe 15-18,000 people.

Mendelsohn:

You know the annual festival was sort of like a cross between Thanksgiving, July Fourth and the Oscars. There were these civic rituals that preceded the performance of the tragedy. The booty from battles that had been fought were paraded around, there was a theatrical competition they gave prizes.

Zeitlin:

He didn't win very many first prizes in his lifetime.

Cumming:

He won the prize didn't he? For this? Was it for this that he won the big prize?

Zeitlin:

After his death he's the most popular till the end of antiquity.

Cumming:

Oh it didn't get done until after he died? Bummer...

Schechner:

So Euripides wrote for this theater. Now there were certain conventions about the theater . . . all the players had to be male, so all the female roles were played by males. And the Greeks wore masks, but inside their masks there was a kind of loud speaker . . . little megaphone, because they would shout their lines or say their lines and thousands of people could hear them.

Zeitlin:

It's a theater of convention. There's certainly special effects, the use of music, what are you going to do with this chorus?

Schechner:

The chorus is this collective which is the community and it interprets what happens.

Mendelsohn:

Well, the Chorus, you know, is in many ways to us the most irritating aspect of Greek tragedy. You know here you want to this nice family drama and there's this group of 15 people wandering around the stage saying "Oh me, oh my" it feels very artificial.

Zeitlin:

The most wonderful parodying of that is in Woody Allen's *Mighty Aphrodite*. Which has a wonderful chorus.

Excerpt from *Mighty Aphrodite*

Zeitlin:

It was an embarrassment for Greek tragedy. But not in *The Bacchae*, *The Bacchae* the chorus is completely integral.

Foley:

If you listen carefully, in this opening chorus, towards the end you will see a particular meter, which is strongly associated with the god Dionysus which goes, da-da-dum-dum, da-da-dum-dum. And I think you will especially here it in the phrase (ita ba-chaë, ita ba-chaë), which is...means go Bacchae, go Bacchae.

[Foley reads Greek]

Foley:

That chorus is there to demonstrate what Dionysus is about, not just in words but in a visceral sense that you can experience through music and dance and movement.

Soyinka:

Theater for me is one of the most social of the arts. It's a set of human beings reaching out to another set of human beings. What the playwright, I suspect, experiences is a seamless flow of empathy with the characters. It's almost like a communion. That magic of direct communication between one set of human beings and another.

GRAPHICS: THE SEDUCTION AND FALL

Mendelsohn:

Dionysus teases Pentheus into admitting that rather than making war on these Bacchae, the worshipers of Dionysus, he wants to see them, he wants to watch them, he's not horrified, but really curious.

Cumming:

He tricks him into going up the hill to see the women. Sort of saying you know, you know, wouldn't you like to go up there and see them? And Pentheus said, "oh, no that

would be disgusting. I'd hate to go and see these women drinking, and lounging provocatively and touching themselves. That would be horrible."

Mendelsohn /Dionysus and Schechner/Pentheus (reading)

Mendelsohn (as the disguised Dionysus) : "But for all your sorrow, you'd very much like to see them."

Schechner (as the disguised Pentheus) : "Yes, very much. I could crouch beneath the fir trees. Out-of-sight."

Mendelsohn : "But if you tried to hide, they may track you down."

Schechner : "Your point is well taken. I will go openly."

Mendelsohn : "Shall I lead you there now? Are you ready to go?"

Schechner : "The sooner the better. The loss of even a moment would be disappointing."

Mendelsohn : "First, however, you must dress yourself in women's clothes."

Schechner : "What? You want me, a man, to wear a woman's dress? But why?"

Mendelsohn : "If they knew you were a man they would kill you instantly."

Schechner : "Ah, true. You are an old hand at cunning, I see."

Mendelsohn : "Dionysus taught me everything I know."

Schechner:

And he says, "Dionysus taught me everything I know." The audience knows it's Dionysus speaking, but Pentheus thinks of him as a stranger. Think of Pentheus as a mouse coming to a mouse trap. To Dionysus, Pentheus is the mouse, and the cheese is his curiosity. "Wouldn't you really like to see them?" "I would, I would!"

Mays:

At the heart of his whole worldview, lies is a degenerate lack of faith in things larger than himself. And now he's being drawn by impulses that are clearly his, but that are being manipulated by the god.

Cumming:

Dionysus is also taking a smaller revenge on him about his attitude toward what defines masculinity, because he has been very derided, Dionysus has been very derided for his look and his aesthetic and his sensibility and his "manhood." I find that really

fascinating, because I kind of think our idea of what makes a man a man is very odd. Very odd.

Damrosch:

Dionysus leads Pentheus on through his own repressed desires. To catch Pentheus and to humiliate him by...by trapping him in his own voyeurism. Dionysus says you want to see what gives you pain. That of course is what we want, too, if we're the audience.

Mendelsohn:

I wonder how the audience is supposed to react. I think of this all the time when I am watching reality TV, are we supposed to enjoy watching this poor person being humiliated and tortured? It's a question that doesn't stop coming up, about the nature of spectatorship, you know what does it mean to be a watcher of someone else having a terrible time.

Damrosch:

Aristotle had one view: he thought it had an almost medical effect. It raises up the emotions of pity and terror and allows us to purge them. I think this is probably what horror movies do for us. We get to shock ourselves and then we walk out of the theater.

Schechner:

It's called the cathartic theory. It's like a sacrifice. The word tragedy's based on the Greek word "tragos" which means goat. Because a goat was sacrificed. So the tragedy, in a certain sense, is a substitution for an animal sacrifice. It's a marvelous idea, when you think about it.

#### GRAPHICS: THE BACCHAE REIMAGINED

Mendelsohn:

There is a kind of a fundamental symbolic quality that The Bacchae has. Of course, it's irresistible as a vehicle to be adapted. You know it's like an erector set: you could do it in outer space, you can do it in ancient Greece, you can do it with men in drag, you could do with women in drag, you know, I mean, there's no end to the possibilities,

Foley:

Certainly in the late 60's early 70's in the United States, all of a sudden there were a lot of productions of The Bacchae. It was a period in which new ways of being were being developed – the hippie movement and so forth, drug-taking, the upset over Vietnam led to the sense of things opening up that were hard to understand and hard to contain.

Schechner:

I directed a play called Dionysus in 69.

Zeitlin:

It was a landmark for a number of reasons. It was a shocker. The way in which they used the space. They brought people in a few at a time, they initiated them. Brian De



Palma made a film of it, but he split the screen. They started off with bikinis, and that was ridiculous. So they took the incredible liberty of being nude.

Schechner:

The actual performance kept changing. I did not want to do the text as such. I wanted people to perform their own selves. So for example – when you play Pentheus, you have to say the lines that are assigned to you. But when you play Dionysus, you can change the lines because you're a god. The audience would dance with us, and the chorus would lead the audience.

Zeitlin:

Well, I think it was a staggeringly interesting production. I was a graduate student and I went with my husband and went with a couple of friends. But the production became very famous. It was part of a certain zeitgeist, about experimental theatre.

Soyinka:

There was something of a class conflict that really attracted me. I read this play at the time when I had just come out of prison—as a result of a position I had taken during a civil war. So I was very conscious of class divisions. Greek society, like many societies, was built on slave labor. And so I tried to imagine how the slaves would have responded to Dionysus, the god of liberation.

GRAPHICS: WHAT YOU SEE AND WHAT YOU DON'T

Foley:

The trap begins to close in a much more terrifying way in the next scene where Pentheus actually comes out dressed as a woman and is sort of coming into the role.

Mendelsohn:

It's a spectacle that is almost awful to watch. It's not "ha ha" funny, you know, it's not like Milton Berle putting on a dress.

Schechner:

He brings Pentheus with him to this mountainside. And Dionysus is a two-faced God. So to Pentheus he's "ah, look at this" and Pentheus is all eyes. But to the women he says "There's a man defiling your ceremonies" it's a young lion, a male lion . . . you've got to find him and hunt him and kill him.

Mendelsohn:

This is where the awful cruel, violent aspect of Dionysus comes out . . . you know, Pentheus, like all of us, he wants a good seat, you know, at the game, right? And he gets him to sit atop a tree so he'll have a good view.

Schechner:

Dionysus bends down the huge tree where Pentheus is hiding. And the women don't see the young King, they see a mountain lion up in the tree. And they pursue him. Especially Agave, the mother.

Foley:

He's ripped apart by his mother, her sisters and the other women of Thebes in a state of ecstatic madness.

Schechner:

Agave has the blood running down her face, she's so happy. And she brings this home to her father, Cadmus. Look what I've caught. You didn't think women could be so strong. I did this with my own bare hands. And he sees his grandson, her son.

Damrosch (reading):

"His pitiful head which his mother took in her own hands, she put at the top of a thyrsos. She carries it across Cithaeron slope as if it was a lion's head. What she wins for a trophy is her tears." She actually thinks she's carrying a lion's head, but it's the head of her own son.

Cumming:

She doesn't remember being there. And then she realizes what she's done, she sees the head. It's awful. It's just the worst thing that any parent, or anyone could imagine doing. Unknowingly kill your own child.

Zeitlin:

Well of course in Greek tragedy you don't see the violence on stage, it's described to you.

Foley:

The actually tearing apart of Pentheus occurs off stage. And then when Agave actually comes on holding the head of Pentheus you see this visceral effect of the violence that occurred offstage.

Cumming:

Suspense is actually much more terrifying than gore. In the scariest films like Blair Witch Project, you never really saw what the scary thing was. Or like Rosemary's Baby. That's a terrifying film—the whole notion that there's the devil in this crib. Do you ever see the baby?

Mendelsohn:

The play is just the unfolding of this clever little plot that the God has for showing mortals who's who. And that's very creepy. You know, one tends to see Pentheus as a stuck-up jerk who needs to relax a lot. And certainly that's true. But he's a victim . . . you know, the guy is a victim from the get-go.

Zeitlin:

It's double determination. On the one hand your actions determine your character: you are what you do. And at the same time the gods are not outside of the whole picture.

Soyinka:

Euripides was an unbeliever in his younger days. This play was almost a confession as if an old man after a far more secular view of the world now knows there are forces unknowable, inexplicable forces which rule human lives.

Zeitlin:

And at the end of the play, I think one of the most poignant moments in it, is when Cadmus who's the grandfather says to now the God Dionysus revealed, and says, I know we erred, but you are too cruel, you punished us too much.

Foley:

And then the god, Dionysus appears in his completely immortal form above the stage on this ancient machine, and he announces what's going to have to happen.

Schechner:

The whole city is kind of destroyed. I think this in the end of Thebes in Greek mythology. So Dionysus is kind of like one of those California fires. It just burns and destroys.

Cumming:

And...The End. Don't mess with the Gods.

Mendelsohn:

It just seems to be very true all the time. Whatever you do to it, it will always come back, you know. There's no getting rid of this play.

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