

An intense experience in theater of the soul

By [Louise Kennedy](#)

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On a nearly bare stage, with a few carefully placed lights, a couple of handmade masks, and some plain bolts of fabric draped and tied into costumes, Whistler in the Dark Theatre's production of "The Bacchae" creates a genuine and haunting sense of ritual mystery. This is theater at once returned to its ancient roots and rejuvenated with modern artistry. Somewhere, Euripides is smiling.

Whistler in the Dark uses Francis Blessington's clean, poetic translation of the text to great effect - particularly because director Meg Taintor and her five performers surround and enrich the text with rhythmic movement, chant, and song. "The Bacchae," in itself an exploration of the power and limits of religious ecstasy, here blossoms into what it should be: an incantatory, involving experience that has as much to do with the soul as with the stage. It's not going too far - and it's not an empty joke - to call it a religious experience.

Before the performance begins, the actors are already standing in the open space of Rehearsal Hall A, upstairs in the Calderwood Pavilion of the Boston Center for the Arts. They're stretching, chatting, doing vocal exercises - so casually that more than one audience member hesitates at the door, thinking they've in fact stumbled on a rehearsal rather than a performance. But the actors welcome them in, then keep chatting, gradually drawing audience members into the chat as well.

Then the performance proper begins: The lights go out, the actors find places along the edges of the black square of flooring that marks the "stage" around which the audience is seated on three sides, and a mask that had been casually placed on a central raised block slowly starts to glow. Dark amber, then gold, then blazing white, it draws the performers like moths. They reach for it in awe, pull back in fear, reach again, until finally one puts it on - and is transformed. Dionysos stands before us, uttering a curse on Thebes, the city that scorned him.

Because of the curse, the women of Thebes will become bewitched by a truly Dionysian madness, worshiping the god in the mountainous forests beyond the city walls while Pentheus, the repressive Theban ruler, rants against the religious excess of these Bacchae (or Bacchantes, in translation). When Pentheus, drawn by curiosity, is caught spying by a group of Bacchantes that includes his mother, Agave, the encounter can end only in tragedy.

The story's stark, propulsive intensity - it takes just 90 minutes to play out here - takes on an almost mythic power through Taintor's staging. The performers take turns playing the role of Dionysos, with the mask conferring a frightening power on whichever one puts it on. It's almost as if they're being possessed by the god they portray - and that, you realize with a sudden sharp intake of breath, is why the actors started out chatting like regular folks before the "play" began. They're possessed, too, by the characters and by the story. And, watching them, so are we.

This is what moves "The Bacchae" from the realm of theater to the realm of religion - not that, ultimately, they are so far apart as we like to pretend. Actors Melissa Barker, Phil Crumrine, Curt Klump, Jennifer O'Connor, and Elizabeth Rimar each play the roles of celebrant, storyteller, worshiper, and god, but they also call on each of us to play our roles: not just as spectators, but as participants in an ancient and illuminating rite. We don't just watch the play; we play along, and so

we absorb its themes - the balancing of ecstasy and reason, the dangers of ignorance, the ultimate mystery of all that is - in our very bones.

Go. See. Feel. And take your children. Show them what theater can be.

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THE BACCHAE Play by Euripides, translated by Francis Blessington

Directed by: Meg Taintor. Lights, PJ Strachman. Costumes, Kelly Leigh David. Masks, Sarah Rushford.

Presented by: Whistler in the Dark Theatre.

At: Boston Center for the Arts Hall A, through May 16. Tickets, \$20.75, 617-933-8600, www.bostontheatrescene.com