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## Improvising New Rituals for *The Bacchae*

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In this essay, I discuss the process of rehearsing the chorus of Euripides' *The Bacchae* for a production I directed at Trinity University in January and February, 2011. Negotiating the pull between improvisational exploration and choreographic fixity, I led twelve undergraduate chorus members to explore a tension that lies at the root of Friedrich Nietzsche's famous definition of Greek tragedy as the collision between the Apollonian and Dionysian, between the plastic visual arts like sculpture and the intoxicated impermanence of music.<sup>1</sup>

In *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche writes that the Apollonian tendency is connected to the soothsaying power of painting and poetry, a radiant and meaningful aesthetic dependent on individuality: "Apollo himself may be regarded as the marvelous divine image of the *principium individuationis*, whose looks and gestures radiate the full

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<sup>1</sup> A video about the making of this production can be viewed at:  
[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_YbMo717IFI](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_YbMo717IFI)

delight, wisdom, and beauty of 'illusion.'"<sup>2</sup> The individualistic basis of this representational radiation relies upon separation and seeing from some distance the aesthetic pleasure of luminous dreams. "Dionysian stirrings," in contrast, "arise either through the influence of those narcotic potions of which all primitive races speak in their hymns, or through the powerful approach of spring, which penetrates with joy the whole frame of nature. So stirred, the individual forgets himself completely."<sup>3</sup> If poetry, painting, and sculpture give dream images that work by radiating meaningfully and individualistically, music and dance work by moving fluidly, suggesting the forces and currents of nature in a way that annihilates individual egos. While some arts are dominated by one or the other impulse, Attic tragedy, for Nietzsche, arose in the tension and synthesis between them.

In my approach to directing *The Bacchae*, Nietzsche's tension between the Apollonian and Dionysian played out in the form of a *pas de deux* between staging specific moments and images on the one hand, thereby creating Apollonian clarity and visual signification, and facilitating an improvised collective action on the other, releasing the intoxicating Dionysian musicality of bodies in motion. The performers found a way of connecting deeply to one another and blending the responsiveness of the moment with the discipline and rigor of clear choreography. The performance that resulted had a combination of lucidity and intoxication that audiences found moving and powerful.

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<sup>2</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy* (1871) in *The Birth of Tragedy and The Genealogy of Morals*, trans. Francis Golffing (New York: Doubleday, 1956): 22.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid* 22.

While Nietzsche read this tension and synthesis in Greek tragedy generally, there is something ironic about using his ideas to fuel an approach to *The Bacchae*; Nietzsche saw Euripides as the symptom of tragedy's decline into Socratic rationalism. Indeed, Euripides' Pentheus and Dionysus engage in dialogic exchanges that remind one of Platonic dialogues, and Dionysus questions and subverts Pentheus' received wisdom philosophically. Still, underlying and surrounding the structures of reason in the play, the chorus lurks and slips out of any rational attempt to grasp or define it, a reminder of tragedy's irrational dithyrambic origins. Despite the limitations and imprecision of Nietzsche's text as scholarship, and even despite his dismissal of Euripides, the paradigm set out in *The Birth of Tragedy* makes for inspiring and provocative material; it gave us a particularly potent way of navigating the relationship between image and intoxication, between concept and improvisation.

### **The Concept**

Nietzsche's Apollo/Dionysus binary plays out in Euripides' play most obviously through the conflict between Pentheus and Dionysus. Certainly, Pentheus is no Apollo; in fact, Pentheus disrespects Teiresias, a prophet intimately connected to Apollonian soothsaying. However, Pentheus upholds a certain approach to seeing that works in dramatic counterpoint to Dionysus' infinite becoming and interpenetration; he embodies a certain facet of the Apollonian in that he clings to his image of himself and the state he represents. Furthermore, he rails against the dangerous ambiguity of the Bacchic rites, and his fatal curiosity about the women is voyeuristic and therefore removed from the action.

Camille Paglia, in her evocative and controversial revision of Nietzsche's paradigm in *Sexual Personae*, associates the Apollonian energy with masculinity, egotism, separations, and pornography, whereas the Dionysian melts boundaries, dissolves separate egos and genders, and interpenetrates bodies and minds such that they are no longer solid and separate: "Dionysus is the empathic, the sympathetic emotion transporting us into other people, other places, other times. Apollo is the hard, cold separatism of western personality and categorical thought. Dionysus is energy, ecstasy, hysteria, promiscuity, emotionalism -- heedless indiscriminateness of idea or practice. Apollo is obsessiveness, voyeurism, idolatry, fascism -- frigidity and aggression of the eye, petrification of objects."<sup>4</sup> For Paglia, Dionysus touches on essentially animalistic and feminine dimensions of nature and culture repressed by masculine civilization. Even to think about a directorial concept at all is to operate within the Apollonian sphere, embodying the *principium individuationis* of unification and adherence.

The paradigm set out by Nietzsche and expanded by Paglia became crucial to my conceptualization of the production, particularly concerning our approach to ritual and gender. The paradigm also became crucial to my approach to dealing with conceptualization as such. If a concept could give context and contemporary relevance to this production, it could also threaten to frame it within a strictly Apollonian ideal (as opposed to the Dionysian fluidity that renders any concept impermanent, a moving target). Dionysus calls for a challenge to conceptual thinking, a move to the body, to motion, and to the release Paglia sees as inherent to the sex act.<sup>5</sup> As I approached our first

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<sup>4</sup> Camille Paglia, *Sexual Personae: Art and Decadence from Nefertiti to Emily Dickinson* (New York: Random House Digital, 1990): 96.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

production meetings, I suggested a concept rooted in glam rock, a genre that gave so many young people in the 1970s both an intoxicating dance and suggested strange ambiguity in gender and sexuality. I saw Dionysus as a sort of mash-up of David Bowie, Iggy Pop, and other rock stars who were not precisely sexless in the sense of being neither male nor female and therefore somehow chaste, but rather hermaphroditic in the sense of being simultaneously very masculine and very feminine, heterosexual and homosexual.



This concept was helpful not only for setting up Dionysus's androgyny but also for establishing the quality of his Bacchic cult. I encouraged the performers to see their "characters" as liberated from restrictive gender norms and polite social mores, somehow masculine in their violence and bold sexuality, but also feminine in their ability to indulge earth rites. Yet the concept alone, with its attendant signifying images, was not enough to bring this energy into being. Yes, the "glam rock" approach dictated several

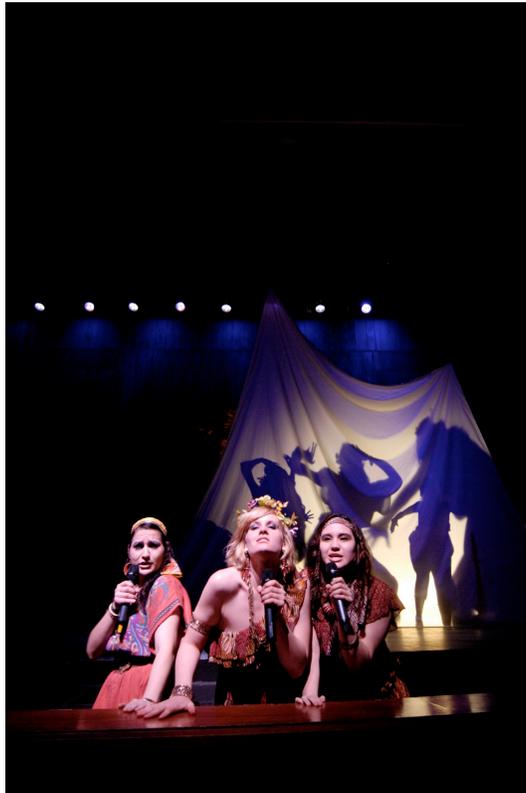
costume and acting choices, but it was only part of the story. I encouraged the designers, performers, and musicians to think of the entire approach not as a master concept so much as something closer to Fredric Jameson's notion of pastiche, which "is, like parody, the imitation of a peculiar or unique, idiosyncratic style, the wearing of a linguistic mask, speech in a dead language. But it is a neutral practice of such mimicry, without any of parody's ulterior motives, amputated of the satiric impulse, devoid of laughter."<sup>6</sup> The music, set, costumes, and choreography would not posit an alternative and superior consciousness from which to render judgment (the prerequisite for parody or commentary) but instead place periods and styles, movements and sounds, next to one another ahistorically. This pastiche, the "speech in a dead language," undermined not precisely the content of the concepts embedded in the choreography and design but instead the singularity and certainty of conceptualization as such. The Apollonian image, just as it began to emerge, would dissolve into a Dionysian collectivism and impermanence.

The set designer, Steve Gilliam, and I also wanted the set to be a clash of old and new, of metal lines and soft curves, of beauty and horror. The lights, designed by Tim Francis, invoked a rock concert and strange visions of divinity. Jodi Karjala's costumes drew from a variety of sources rooted in glam rock but also gypsy culture and several different fashion design aesthetics from the 1890s, 1920s, and 1970s that themselves were riffs on classical and neoclassical forms. On the one hand, the glam rock concept framed and contextualized the performance in a recognizable cultural paradigm, playing off its meanings in a bright clarity that embodied Nietzsche's Apollonian side of tragedy.

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<sup>6</sup> Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, Or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Chapel Hill: Duke University Press, 1991): 17.

On the other hand, I wanted to reach beyond the clearly signifying power of the concept to energies and collisions that would touch on the distinctly Dionysian bodily energy outside the realm of conceptual thinking and the pastiche quality of juxtapositions that undermined master narratives.



Over the course of rehearsal, I discovered that the choreography, most centrally, required not an execution of the concept so much as a dialectic push and pull between concept and its opposite, between idea and body, between blocking and improvisation. This tension, present in any performance and rehearsal process, became particularly apparent in working out a relevant contemporary Dionysian fluidity. The final production in no sense laid to rest these tensions, but some interesting lessons did emerge about the contours of the shifting interrelationships between idea and exploration, between fixity and improvisation.

## Inspiration and Sources

While the relationship between Pentheus and Dionysus in many ways lies at the heart of the play's thematic dichotomies (rational vs. religious, authoritarian vs. anarchic, separate ego vs. fluid identity), the lifeblood of the performance needs to come from the moving, throbbing, whispering, singing, and dancing chorus. In trying to provoke a lively and cult-like fluidity (not the idea or sign of a cult but its spiritual affect), some of my inspiration for this project came from relatively recent adaptations. In December of 2009, I saw the Austin-based performance collective the Rude Mechanicals restage Richard Schechner and the Performance Group's influential avant-garde performance piece, *Dionysus in 69*, using Brian de Palma's film as their text. This often nude, ritualistic, environmental theatre riff on *The Bacchae* has become something of a modern classic in its own right, initiating as it did the further work of the Performance Group, its even more influential spin-off company the Wooster Group, and a host of collective theatre practices. I was deeply inspired by the Rude Mechanicals' approach to recreating this work so earnestly and specifically, partially as an homage to the Rude Mech's own collectivist origins. I wanted our production to tap into something about *Dionysus in 69* that lay at the heart of devised work, even as we did what was in most ways a more faithful production of the play itself.

Already interested in the ways in which Bacchic fluidity extends to the porous boundaries between performers and spectators, I drew direct staging influence from the ways certain of the Rude Mechs performers made direct eye contact with spectators right before Pentheus was killed, asking the audience to join in. Coinciding with the notion that the Dionysian dissolves barriers between the seer and seen or the subject and object, I

wanted this production to puncture the traditional divisions held up by proscenium conventions. If, in Paglia's revision of Nietzsche's paradigm, the Apollonian is pornographic in its distance, then when Pentheus falls from the tree, he ultimately falls from a viewer/subject into a fluid, interpenetrating rite in which there are no separations and the viewer becomes part of the event. Of course, Pentheus becomes not a collaborator in what he beholds but its object and victim. His subject position inverts, and violently, not liberating him into the genderless free play of the dance but tearing him to bits.

Since Pentheus, as the ultimate watcher, stands at least in part for the spectator, I wanted his flipping between subject and object to resound with the spectator's awareness of his or her own gaze. I wanted the audience to feel at the moment Pentheus leaves as if they too are now threatened by the very chorus they had enjoyed watching from the safety of comfortable seats. Just before the second messenger enters the stage to narrate Pentheus's gruesome dismemberment, I had the chorus finish the climax of the preceding stasimon by stepping offstage and speaking to particular spectators before sitting in the front row. Spectators were faced, eye to eye, with performers calling for them to "come kill him, it's justice" and even penetrating their audience space. They climbed on top of the chairs, reached out to particular audience members, and writhed around in bloodthirsty ecstasy. As the messenger's speech progressed, they disparately reentered the stage and slowly surrounded him, circling in and doubling the unseen offstage murder through a half-improvised, half-choreographed set of actions.

The Rude Mechs' recreation of the Performance Group's piece pulsed with Dionysian excess and corporeality, somehow timeless though simultaneously blatantly (and, for the Rude Mechs, deliberately) dated. Schechner along with his collaborating

performers had not only infused the spirit of the Dionysian into the particular performance piece but also into the collective devising practice of the group and the formal experimentation of late 1960s environmental theatre. I wanted to guide our chorus to touch that spirit because it suggested the human potential of the body and the collectivist impulses of the Bacchantes' rites in the woods. Because we, unlike the Performance Group and the Rude Mechs, were using a proscenium space, I wanted to subvert and disrupt that space's orientation of viewing, not dropping the audience into an environmental configuration from the beginning but instead using precisely the proscenium convention of watching safely from a distance against itself. The frame subverted became a disruption of traditional seeing and a physical analogue around which Apollonian and Dionysian modes of perception could turn.

Along with the Dionysian subversion of subject/object binaries, I also wanted to explore an aspect of the gender-bending, androgyny, and popularity of the Bacchic rites that would resonate with more recent popular culture familiar to a young audience. Tom Jenkins, a colleague in the Classics department, introduced me to David Greig's adaptation of *The Bacchae* written for the National Theatre of Scotland's production. This adaptation highlighted the homoeroticism and double entendres while also transforming the stasimons into R&B and Gospel lyrics.<sup>7</sup> I was immediately attracted to this version because it brought out Dionysus' playfulness with language in a very fresh way and gave meat to the chorus' intoxicating musicality. Beginning with the Greig adaptation as the working script, I set out to discover the rhythms of our own piece.

I drew inspiration not only from theatre but also from more approachably popular musical sources. I wanted the chorus to move in a way that resonated with our early 20s

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<sup>7</sup> David Greig, *Euripides' The Bacchae* (London: Faber and Faber, 2007).

student audience. I wanted the parados, stasimons, and exodus set to music so that they would have a feel to them somewhere between soul, funk, gospel, and glam rock, idioms that gave a rhythmic pulse and the ecstatic wails I felt could substitute for cultural traditions inaccessible to both our audiences and our performers. This orientation at times manifested as something not unlike a concept -- Dionysus came together like a love child of David Bowie and Iggy Pop; the chorus's eclectic costumes resembled for some audience members a 1970s sensibility -- yet the underlying impetus for this orientation was not primarily a signifying system but instead an opportunity or a framework through which physical ritual could move with an intoxicated musicality. Expanding beyond Dionysus' ancient intoxicant, wine, which arguably has come to connote genteel dinner parties more than orgiastic rites, the range of musical styles we began to work with suggested a broader and ultimately more dangerous intoxication, such as the psychedelic effects of L.S.D. and hallucinogenic mushrooms as well as the darker and increasingly deadlier results of heroin.

A colleague in the music department introduced me to Marcus Rubio, a music student versed in avant-garde and classical but who had also made a name for himself around town as a local rock star. We had a few meetings and found ourselves on the same page in terms of influence. We threw out names that ran the gamut of sources: David Bowie, Prince, Iggy Pop, the Beatles, Kanye West, old bluegrass and southern gospel songs, Cee Lo Green, and Nick Cave, among others. Every single one of these influences made it into at least some part of some song, creating an effect of radical difference among them and paralleling the mishmash elsewhere in the design elements. Rubio's songs transformed many of the rituals into something you could move to, something that

seemed both linked to a tradition of American popular music and immediately contemporary. Rubio's participation in the show became indeed one of its most successful elements, both in terms of the audience's enthusiastic enjoyment and in terms of the concept. On the one hand, the music was recognizable and situated the piece in certain identifiable genres (a la Apollo); on the other hand, it throbbed and pulsed with an intoxication that, according to dozens of spectators' accounts afterwards, carried the audience away.

### **Creating the Dance**

For the musical and design as well as choreographic influences, I wanted not cohesive unity but collage-like juxtaposition. Although I wanted the chorus to tap into a certain kind of collectivism, I also wanted each of them to maintain individuality and input into the creation of the dances. I wanted not seamless continuity but something rough and lifelike, a ritual-like dance. Along those lines, my first assignment for the chorus took place over winter break, after casting and our first read through but before our first regular rehearsals began. I asked each woman to create two dances, one that focused on the lower body and one on the upper body. Each dance was to take one minute, with 20 seconds inspired by a walk in nature, 20 seconds inspired by an experience of ecstasy (broadly construed), and 20 seconds inspired by a fantasy of violence. I borrowed this exercise from a project I had collaborated on called *.us.*, a devised piece performed in May 2010 at the *AtticRep* Theatre in San Antonio under the direction of Rachel Joseph, who in turn had taken the exercise from working with Lin Hixson and Matthew Goulish of the Chicago-based performance group Goat Island.<sup>8</sup> When rehearsals began, each woman performed her dance. I selected two or three

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<sup>8</sup> See Matthew Goulish, *Small Acts of Repair* (London: Routledge, 2007).

gestures or actions from each piece and everyone learned those. For example, one gesture involved a woman hunched down in a squatting position and a violent but very grounded downward motion with both arms, hands joined. Another was almost balletic in its apparent weightlessness and aspiration toward flight, with long lines formed by an outstretched arm and leg. Still another juxtaposed a soft, curved spine sinking inward against a sudden leap up.

The chorus then improvised a series of different group actions ranging from flocking together to expanding and contracting around particular areas of the stage, using these gestures in different repetitions and combinations. Throughout the next several weeks, the gestures of these dances became the physical vocabulary of the entire show, often remixed and mashed together for collective movements but also at times juxtaposed, each woman doing her own separate movement. The result of this process made the movements far more particularized than if I had personally invented each. This process also finally erased the movements' origins, as each gesture was digested and reconstituted by others, like a meme that repeats with variations. The process of creation, digestion, and mimicry went on without any particular style commenting on the others. Like Jameson's notion of pastiche, which in many ways characterized much of the design and music, the gestures were flattened in their relation to one another, not privileging a master narrative but bleeding into one another and mimicking the movements of main characters such that the images were refracted and emptied of meaning.

Later on in the rehearsal process, I asked each of the chorus members to tell me about her individual character's past in the first person: who she was, from what country, how her life was before she met Dionysus, and how she changed once she joined him.

Euripides, of course, did not individualize his chorus (nor did Greig), but this exercise helped each performer connect to a particular figure that was simultaneously individual and subsumed to the collective. I hoped that this work might add nuance and organic contours to the ways in which each interacted with the world of the play. Rather than a homogenous collective, I thought this work on individuation would filter the meme-like gestures and actions through bodies and minds who riffed on them differently, creating the sense of a collective that felt all the more alive because it defied the rigidity and militaristic sameness that characterized Pentheus's guards. The tension between individuality and collectivism deepened and complicated the women's status as chorus, marking the cult of Dionysus with the invisible remainders of individuals who bubbled inconsistently beneath the surface of collective actions and choreographed dances.

Although the play specifies that the chorus is made of Asian bacchantes, we interpreted that category broadly in terms of Otherness *vis-a-vis* Western European culture. The “Other” in this sense could be marked by an exoticism as Athenians and Thebans may have once viewed peoples from Lydia, Iraq, and parts East. But, for our 21<sup>st</sup> century audience, we widened that Otherness to include the “Others” as defined by a certain Eurocentric or North American perspective: Asian, Middle Eastern, African, Eastern European, and Central and South American places often depicted by affluent and middle class industrialized cultural narratives as strange, inaccessible, or even potentially dangerous. I thought it would be interesting for our Bacchantes to come from many different cultures, emphasizing the universality of Dionysian ecstasy but also the notion that the “cult” was growing and spreading. We also operated in an ahistorical fashion, imagining these women as gathered over the years from across the globe and without

regard to historical period. One woman, Emma Baker, established a wealthy character that had previously spent her days in the Library of Alexandria, trapped in logic and language (from which Dionysus's intoxicating dance liberated her and brought her into her body). Another, Caroline Arroyo, created a young villager of the ancient Mayan empire whose entire family was murdered by men, upon whom, with the help of Dionysus, she wrought bloody revenge. Then, one at a time, each woman performed her "first" dance with her fellow bacchantes, the first time she felt liberated from whatever social mores, cultural forces, or chance circumstances had imprisoned her.



These individual stories and the raw, vulnerable "first dance" influenced how the Bacchantes related to one another and to Dionysus. The characters each lusted for Pentheus's demise in a particular fashion. They each responded slightly differently to events between main characters. In their mimicry of certain lines or gestures made as part of the main action, they did not represent a unified, cohesive, knowing response but instead a kaleidoscopic hall of mirrors through which the original gestures were refracted, reflections of reflections of reflections. The Jamesonian pastiche that resulted sometimes

had the effect of emptying what once was meaningful of any semiotic value, putting it up for play as the detritus of master narratives.

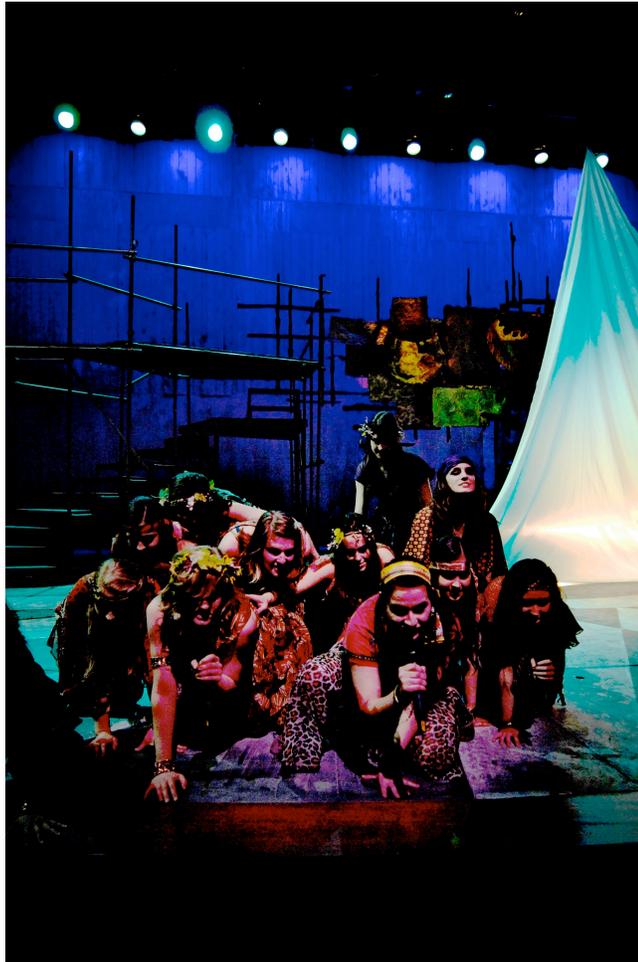
This individuation deeply informed how the chorus members reacted to the messengers' speeches. Originally I had directed specific reactions to particular lines, such as low moans, whispered repetitions of words, rhythmic beating or scratching when the first messenger describes the women in the woods or when the second messenger describes Pentheus's death. But things became much more interesting when I just let the women do it on their own, allowing them to play as they deeply internalized the rhythms of their individual and collective responses. By the last four weeks of rehearsal, my direction became: imagine or remember when you did this the first time you danced, the first time you experienced the intimate and sometimes violent interaction with nature that the first messenger describes, and relive it both internally, and, when it erupts into unconscious gestures (or convulsions), externally. As particular, individualized actions came to influence other women, ever-shifting groups of three to five women would find themselves riffing on each other's specific actions, and an organic, eerie quality emerged.

Another, more imagistic (and in Nietzsche's paradigm, more Apollonian) source of movement came from our dramaturg, Kristen Lovell. I asked her to give a presentation to the chorus that would include Greek vase paintings of Dionysus and his cult. Choosing five poses of Bacchantes or maenads, Kristen then taught all twelve women the particular poses, which they then used as a gestural vocabulary for a sequence of movement exercises. One gesture was frontal, with the right arm thrust forward and up and the head looking down at the other arm, where the hand was angled in a birdlike pose. Another was down on the haunches, with thighs perpendicular to calves and rib cages thrust to the

left. These tableaux ended up specifically in two dances, as a sort of popping response to rapped lyrics while Pentheus changed into a dress in silhouette. I wanted these gestures in there as a way of doing a sort of archaeological absorption of Greek sources that would then be riffed on and made our own, something like (to paraphrase Jameson) “gesture in a dead language.” The resulting dance was striking in its clarity and provided a fascinating contrast to the more fluid and curvilinear movements it followed.

This work was inspired by some of what the experimental Polish theatre company Gardzienice does in their performative archeology with Greek vases. I had participated in a two-week workshop with them in which we spent exhaustive hours piecing together tableaux taken from the vases. I drew from this work because, first and foremost, it was rigorous and in-depth. But I also wanted to pull from a variety of sources that would become dissolved into one another, much in the same way that each Bacchante’s dance dissolved into one another; I wanted to create a pastiche of forms, in Jameson's sense, resisting a conceptual overlay that would unite them all. I also asked Kristen to bring in videos of voodoo rituals, death and fertility rites from various cultures, and contemporary dance (which ultimately ranged from Pina Bausch and Sasha Waltz to Alvin Ailey). I also drew from exercises borrowed from Grotowski, British-based performance group Forced Entertainment, Anne Bogart’s SITI company, and Tadashi Suzuki as a way of connecting performers to space and to the ways in which bodies can expand and contract both individually and as a group. While there was at least one dedicated rehearsal that drew directly from exercises I learned while working with Bogart and SITI in a workshop at Stanford University, the de-centered way of working and improvising based on a few rules or vocabulary pieces (sitting, standing, walking,

jumping) drew from a wide variety of contemporary and older practices and became the underlying structure for the entire rehearsal process.



### **Improvising New Rituals**

As rehearsals began, most of the “choreography” revolved around improvising rituals through exercises, and the chorus members moving in response to each other. The ritualistic origin of choral dithyrambs, from which Greek theatre possibly emerged, seem to haunt Euripides’ play at every turn even as they are looked on by Pentheus with great mistrust. It was precisely this ritualistic notion, connected both to the body and the sacred, that I wanted to find a way to invoke. Almost every single chorus rehearsal began

with us saying together: "I don't know what I am doing. I am not in control. Dionysus is in control." This helped me, certainly, let go. As the director, however, I found myself reflecting on the dark side of what Paglia terms the "chthonic": the collective zeitgeist resembles less rational democracy than the unsettling irrationality of cults. Freedom from Pentheus and the Penthean, on the one hand, or even from the Apollonian artistic impulse, on the other, does not necessarily resemble anything like the twenty-first century western ideal of individual liberty. Indeed, in giving themselves to the Dionysian, or to the improvisational impulse underlying our working methods, the women were also simultaneously sublimating rational autonomy and choice. The potential for harm is latent in precisely this collectivism, whether such harm might manifest as a fascist state or the anarchic excesses of the French Revolution. In light of the Arab Spring protests that were surging through the Middle East and North Africa at the time, this collectivism seemed to have tremendously revolutionary potential but also the possibility of falling either into new forms of totalitarianism or sectarian chaos. In navigating the role of the director, I found myself occasionally overwhelmed by the desire to interrupt what was happening so that we could take a step back and recognize the excitement and danger latent in the moment of letting go. Yet rather than killing the emergence of a sometimes frightening collective zeitgeist, I tried to facilitate a safe space wherein its essence could unfold, wherein we could all together recognize how surrendering to Dionysus was ecstatically joyful and potentially catastrophic. The point was not to step back and represent this danger nor to fall into and celebrate the ecstasy but instead to put its contours and impulses into play such that we could both make them real and then also reflect on them.

The first full cast rehearsal back from winter break became instead of a second read through (as I had originally planned) a swirling, physical, improvised storytelling of the whole play. I chose to do this because I wanted to uproot a notion that the cast members were performing for spectators; I wanted them instead to become lost in the intoxication and circularity of it, performing for one another and for themselves, or for Dionysus. Most importantly, I wanted the whole cast to feel the Dionysian release of inhibitions that can come from exhaustion – not only the Apollonian recognition of the play’s meanings and signs. The swirl operated around a circular area in the middle of the stage. We began by all moving around in a circle, at first single file but then, as I urged, more messily. Layers of different speeds emerged. For each scene, I instructed those directly involved to swirl into the center of the space where they would turn constantly and talk to the individuals moving around them. The cast circled in a constant (if constantly transforming) whirl, with some figures emerging into the middle for their entrances as everyone surrounding continued to move, a constant and omnipresent whirlpool of spectators, all ready to find themselves in the middle. I directed this rehearsal not from the outside but from the swirl, moving with the actors, nudging a particular person into the middle, encouraging everyone to speed up or slow down, encouraging Pentheus and his three guards (whom I saw as a sort of fascist antichorus) to march against the flow and try to regulate it. Beginning this way had a tremendous effect on everyone’s feeling toward the energy at the core of the piece, an energy not quite reducible to themes or messages but instead made up of rhythm and impulse, moving with others and surging out alone. The rest of the process took on the character of the swirl even when we came back to it less.



Many of our rehearsals had a similar feel to them, made up of large repeated ritualistic actions that would grow organically into sequences made of impulses and responses, my role largely as coaxer and guider. Certainly, I often used a heavy hand in staging specific images, particularly pictures and actions related to a large hanging silk behind which actors projected their shadows and a giant sculptural face that opened its eyes when Dionysus reveals his full, unbearable presence at the end. But even around the edges of several key power moments involving a large structure stage right, much of our initial choral rehearsals evolved through this sort of guided improvisation. On stage (or in the audience) for the entire duration of the play, the chorus created a constant organic subversion of fixity at the outskirts of every "staged" event. If the core blocking of Pentheus and Dionysus scenes took on Apollonian images that spelled out power dynamics and their respective positions, the chorus swirling around them maintained a

Dionysian improvisation that undermined their fixity, or a Jamesonian pastiche that mimicked their meaning while emptying it of clear rhetoric or singular signs.

Nevertheless it was clear from the start that there were many parts of the chorus's stage life that needed specific choreography. I choreographed several group movements, especially in the beginning. I based two sequences of the chorus advancing on Pentheus or Agave on Pina Bausch's choreography for her version of Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring*. I found that Bausch's work combined very human and organic movements with a sense of collective motion. We looked at videos of this and other dances and the chorus took on that quality of throwing around their weight, shuffling forward, backgrounding what leads were doing, and then absorbing them.

Two of the chorus members, twin sisters named Marisa and Maribel Plasencia, were natural, gifted, and surprisingly mature choreographers. One evening following a disheartening rehearsal, they came up with a particularly good solution to a certain part of a dance that wasn't working. The partnering movements they created were compelling and strange, and fit perfectly the moment of the song. For the rest of rehearsal I relied heavily on them to choreograph the movements of the main songs. I worked closely with them, sometimes showing them particular sources, sometimes giving just a color or flavor, and frequently editing or complicating what they did. The first assistant director, Danielle Girard, worked many hours outside of rehearsal with them to establish complex and usually quite beautiful movement. But over time, many of the choreographed dances increasingly seemed *too* choreographed. Not only did this quality take away from any sense of intoxication or sensuality, but it also failed to reproduce Dionysus' infectious improvisational spirit.

Drawing from ways of moving inspired by Afro-Caribbean voodoo rituals, we replaced the choreographed fourth stasimon, which centers around text like “come kill him, it’s justice” and “come maenads of madness, cause pain to Pentheus,” with a ritualistic dance the women created together. One woman stomped her Thyrsus in a steady rhythm. Another joined in. Gradually they all started to beat together. While Marcus originally wrote a punk-infused song and Marisa and Maribel originally choreographed a specific dance to it, the danger and intensity of the moment was lost in what resulted, no matter how many hours we all devoted to saving it. Throwing out the choreography, we created the impetus and interactions that would culminate in a frenzied death dance. But then the improvised ritual was too random, too incoherent and unrepeatable. So the choreographers, Danielle, the second assistant director Noah Voelker, several other performers, and I with great trial and error choreographed a frenzy based on what emerged from the improvisations. The women gathered in a circle. Two at a time would enter and fling themselves into ecstatic motion while the others repeated movements from the choreographic and vase sources, beat rhythms with their feet, and riffed on what the two in the middle were doing. I had the Bacchantes enter the audience and each speak to several individuals. They turned their backs and sat in the front row, watching the stage as the second messenger entered, whom they later circled in multiple directions and closed in on. Then that too needed some destroying. We improvised around this choreography that had been based on an improvisation based on choreography.

## Conclusions

In the end, the performances were fascinating, both in terms of audience response and in teasing out the tension laid out by Nietzsche and Paglia between Apollonian and Dionysian. In the design, music, and movement, we juxtaposed images and actions that both played with and emptied out narrative and representational codes, bringing Jameson's notion of the pastiche to bear on the relationship between fixity and improvisation. I received dozens of emails testifying to how “exciting” and “intoxicating” the chorus was, and several classicists said it was among the most satisfying approaches to the chorus they had seen. The students found the work exhausting, and some even complained about the long hours and effort required, but in the end expressed enormous gratitude at what one woman called “a life-changing experience.” At certain points during the run of the show, the improvisational side lagged (when, for example, the Sunday matinee had low energy), but for the most part the unchoreographed or partially choreographed bits just grew richer and more nuanced as the women increasingly found subtle – and not so subtle – ways to riff off of one another. The improvised parts essentially grew more and more repeatable in their nuance, while likewise the choreographed parts became more and more infused with an improvisational riffing, until the boundary between the fixed and the improvised dissolved.

This process of fixing, exploding, and fixing again went on and on, like breathing. Like breathing, too, it brought a sense of life that revealed an unexpectedly volatile yet interdependent relationship between the choreography and the improvised movement: neither fixity nor improvisation were mutually exclusive, nor did one ultimately dominate. We did not need to choose between rigid fascistic lines and a bunch of random

impulsive action. Ultimately, it became clear, this was precisely the dualism that the play tries to deconstruct, with both Pentheus and Dionysus coming to resemble each other as two sides of the same coin (Pentheus, the uber-masculine dictator who longs to put on a dress and see the women dance/Dionysus, the god of freedom and intoxication who ultimately exercises more violence and desire to control things than any mortal). Instead of opposites, improvisation and fixed choreography could couple with each other in a perpetual *pas de deux*, wildly circling, responding, fixing, exploding, and swirling with one another. As the director, I found this interdependence was equally a dance for me to practice. I had to know when to insist on an image that burns in the imagination and when to let it go; when to guide and push and when to follow and discover what the moment has to offer. The Apollonian and the Dionysian, the classic and its riff, the concept that communicates and frames and the surge of energy that subsumes and melts all conceptual thinking: these pairs completed and defined one another, pushing the exploration of form into the foreground of content and suggesting an affective dialectic at the heart of performance.