

## A PERFORMANCE HISTORY OF EURIPIDES' *BACCHAE*

FISCHER-LICHTE, Erika, *Dionysus Resurrected: Performances of Euripides' "The Bacchae" in a Globalizing World*, Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2014. Pp. xvii + 238 + 9 photographs.

**E**RIKA FISCHER-LICHTE NEEDS NO introduction. She is a leading figure and renovator of *Theaterwissenschaft*, and her impressive work—in length as well as ideological breadth—has contributed significantly to the advancement of Theatre Studies world-wide.

This review commences from a rather informed standpoint<sup>1</sup> and it is in a position to recognize that *Dionysus Resurrected* lucidly portrays the unique stage reception of Euripides' *Bacchae* from the 1960s onwards, replacing thereby previous studies on the subject.

The book is not intended to be a stage-history of the *Bacchae*; rather it is a history of those productions which clearly picture the cultural usage of the play in different socio-cultural environments, many of which bear the functional qualities of pre-expressive aesthetics. F.-L. long ago introduced an emphasis on the cultural analysis of the performance, permanently rejecting the transformational model of performance-analysis, which was broadly used by classicists precisely because it gave priority to the original text. *Dionysus Resurrected* was methodologically foreshadowed by two older articles by F.-L., both partly concerning modern productions of the *Bacchae*: "Interculturalism in Contemporary Theatre", in Patrice Pavis (ed.), *The Intercultural Performance Reader*, London and New York: Routledge, 1996, 27-40; "Between Text and Cultural Performance: Staging Greek Tragedies in Germany", *Theatre Survey* 40 (1999): 1-29. But over the past few years, F.-L. in several public discussions and conferences chose to promote the more culturally dialectic term "interweaving" instead of "intercultural", first because it rejects the prevalence and subsequent dominance of a supposedly superior culture, and secondly because it draws attention to the process of interaction and cooperation between different performance cultures, thus verifying the

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1. My Ph.D. thesis had the same subject: *Bakkhai-Model: The Re-Usage of Euripides' 'Bakkhai' in Text and Performance*, University of London, London 2005 (available at [www.academia.edu](http://www.academia.edu)).

prominence of cultural diversity. This theoretical trajectory is now properly represented in hers *et al.* (eds.): *The Politics of Interweaving Performance Cultures. Beyond Postcolonialism*. New York and Oxford: Routledge, 2014 (especially pp. 1-23).

The interweaving of performance cultures (kathakali, Beijing opera, fire-walking and cannibalistic rituals) in recent performances of the *Bacchae* was in itself a careful methodological parameter, as this interlinking stage-process was inconsequential but not unavailable before Grotowski and the Environmental movement of the sixties. Moreover, in *Dionysus Resurrected* F.-L. chooses to analyze carefully selected performances of the *Bacchae* from 1968 onwards, which in her view demonstrate a relation to the process of globalization and its socio-cultural consequences such as (xiv):

1. Globalization as a generic cause for “the fragmentation, indeed dissolution, of communities” both “as a threat but also as liberation from different kinds of oppression”.
2. “Dedifferentiation, resulting in the loss of clear-cut, fixed and stable collective and individual identities”.
3. The productive transgression and subsequent re-definition of borders between different cultures following the increasing number of encounters between their members.

This is a masterly planned methodological model as it translates the plot-pattern of the *Bacchae* into modern theory: Dionysus came to Thebes to destroy/dissolve the aristocratic *κράτος* of Pentheus, liberating the oppressed and threatening stable cultural identities (religious, social, sexual and so forth). As a result, a new political structure was established after the transgression and subsequent broadening of borders. But globalization can partly explain the otherness of the play’s unique stage-history.

To make the argument stronger, F.-L. connects the consequences of globalization to (a) the topicality of the *Bacchae*, “the analogy between the events of the tragedy” (5) and the social phenomena of political violence, power struggle, social transition and transformation emerging in the sixties world-widely; and (b) particular readings of the play and anthropological theories, mainly those which consider rituals as modes of transition to new orders (Arnold van Gennep and Victor Turner). She also places emphasis on the functional power of (symbolic) violence and sacrifice in the process of social change, using the theories of Walter Burkert and René Girard in order to argue that these theories had an influence on certain performances of the *Bacchae* in as much as “the outbursts of violence in modern Western societies [...] went hand in hand with the transition from industrial to

post-industrial societies" (16). In short, F.-L. sees contemporary history as a ritual process parallel to the story-pattern of the *Bacchae*, a fact which in her view offers a theoretical explanation for the resurrection of Dionysus. This is a very logical projection of the *Bacchae* to modern history, going back to the Cambridge Ritualists (to one of whom we owe the actual resurrection of the play on stage in 1908) and to Richard Seaford's neo-ritualist theory. Where the Cambridge Ritualists<sup>2</sup> argued that tragedy ensures the rebirth of a dead world, that of the *Sacer Ludus*, Seaford<sup>3</sup> contended that tragedy re-dramatizes the birth of a new world, the coherent world of the communal democratic polis, which succeeds the destruction of the autonomous royal household. The point of coincidence, in fact tautology, is that both attempt to construct a genetic model using the *Bacchae* as the essential point of departure:

| <i>CAMBRIDGE THESIS</i>                 | <i>SEAFORD'S THESIS</i>          |
|---|----------------------------------|
| PRIMAL RITUAL<br>( <i>SACER LUDUS</i> ) | DIONYSIAC INITIATORY RITUALS     |
| ↓                                       | ↓                                |
| TRAGEDY INCLUDES:                       | TRAGEDY DRAMATIZES:              |
| AGON                                    | CRISIS                           |
| PATHOS/THRENOS                          | SELF-DESTRUCTION OF ROYAL FAMILY |
| ANAGNORISIS                             | RESOLUTION                       |
| THEOPHANY                               | FOUNDATION OF CIVIC CULT         |

Precisely because the story of the *Bacchae* has a structural typicality (destruction of order/rebirth of new order), which F.-L. also uses in order to explain the stage history and in fact the *Historisierung* of the play, it was readily available for scholars and artists to be used as a political metaphor. There were plenty of Phaedras and Andromachae on the stages of the seventeenth century, a significant number of Oedipuses and Medeas in the nineteenth century, but Dionysus remained unwelcome until the beginning of the twentieth century. A good reason could be that the *Bacchae* encouraged

2. Gilbert Murray, "Excursus on the Ritual Forms Preserved in Greek Tragedy", in J. E. Harrison: *Themis: A Study of the Social Origins of Greek Religion*, Cambridge 1912, 327-40.

3. Richard Seaford, *Reciprocity and Ritual: Homer and Tragedy in the Developing City-State*, Oxford 1994, esp. 233-34.

a performance ideology beyond psychological characterization and closer to the modern ritualization of theatre. Moreover, a play where male-ordered *kratos* is destroyed by frenzied women and an effeminate Eastern god could not possibly be seen as properly 'Greek' before the twentieth century. There are also two serious parameters that should be taken into consideration for the absence of the *Bacchae* until 1908, when William Poel's *Bacchae* was presented in London with Lillah McCarthy as Dionysus:

1. In considering a very specific problem of exclusion, there should be a specific agenda of theatre, which, in some way, has prevented the performance of the *Bacchae*, and conversely, there should have emerged a new function that the performance should fulfill when the 'ban' is raised.
2. Respectively, there should be a series of performative and/or socio-cultural values that *Bacchae* was unable to satisfy (or conversely the emergence of new values that the *Bacchae* was called to comply with).

F.-L. chose to focus on the topicality of the play's analogies to history and theory giving priority to the second parameter, but she also underlines that the play's emergence is due to the "new understandings of performance" and the negotiation of cultures in performance (20).

The book is divided into three thematic parts connected to the aesthetic and functional qualities of the productions discussed in each chapter. In my view, the parts are thought of as a typology of performance strategies and the three productions analyzed in each part are seen as the cultural symptoms realized in most cases through the interweaving of different aesthetics and performance traditions: I. Festivals of Liberation: Celebrating Communality (1. The Birth Ritual of a New Theatre – Richard Schechner's *Dionysus in 69* in New York, 1968; 2. Celebrating a Communion Rite? – Wole Soyinka's *The Bacchae of Euripides* at London's National Theatre, 1973; 3. *Sparagmos* and *Omophagia* – Teat(r)o Oficina's *Bacantes* in São Paulo, 1996); II. Renegotiating Cultural Identities (4. On the Strangeness and Inaccessibility of the Past – The Antiquity Project at the Schaubühne Berlin, 1974; 5. Performing or Contaminating Greekness? – Theodoros Terzopoulos' *The Bacchae* in Delphi, 1986; 6. In Search of New Identities – Krzysztof Warlikowski's *The Bacchae* in Warsaw, 2001); III: Productive Encounter or Destructive Clash of Cultures? (7. Dismemberment and the Quest for Wholeness – Suzuki Tadashi's *The Bacchae* in Japan and on World Tour, 1978–2006; 8. Transforming Kathakali – *The Bacchae* by Guru Sadanam P. V. Balakrishnan in Delphi and New Delhi, 1998; 9. Beijing

Opera Dismembered – Peter Steadman and Chen Shi-zheng's *The Bacchae* in Beijing, 1996).

### I. Festivals of Liberation: Celebrating Community

The Performance Group's *D69* (New York, 1968) is a monumental performance, precisely because in this production “the god of theatre, performed the dismemberment of the theatre in its old, traditional form so that it could be reborn in a new shape and function” (46). In Schechner's production the text of the *Bacchae* was appropriated according to his theories about an Environmental Theatre that would challenge aestheticist theatre and the conventional “expectation-obligation network”<sup>4</sup> between the spectacle and the spectator. As Schechner pointed out,

Environment can be understood in two different ways. First, there is what one can do with and in a space; secondly, there is the acceptance of a given space. In the first case, one *creates* an environment by transforming a space; in the second case, one *negotiates* with an environment, engaging in a scenic dialogue with a space.<sup>5</sup>

As F.-L. notes, a new type of acting emerged in as much as “performing meant undergoing a rite of passage that might lead to a new individual identity” (31), creating thereby “in-between identities” (33), given that, first, the actor's identity was not concealed behind a dramatic character and, second, the performers wrote their own lines, even if “the formal [i.e., Euripidean] pattern [was] underlying the creation of the text” (31). F.-L. rightly highlights the “ritualistic structure” (34) of the performance and, above all, its political statements in liberating “the spectators from their tired theatrical conventions” (41), as well as in including ““the ecstatic fascism’ of the followers of Dionysus, i.e., the women, and was directed at all those who did not belong to their group, i.e., the men in the formation” (43).

Although discussed (34-5, 39-40, 45), I have the impression that the sexual aesthetics of the performance were slightly avoided. Despite the dense theorization (perhaps mythologizing) behind *D69*, this production remains a revolution in itself as it was the first one to feel the sexual suggestions in-built in the text. Only after Schechner's production did a ‘gay’ Dionysus and the exposure of the naked body become fashionable, almost mainstream, for the *Bacchae*. The Performance Group played an essential role in promoting the American movement for sexual liberation and freedom of speech:

4. Richard Schechner, “6 Axioms for Environmental Theatre”, *The Drama Review* 12 (1968) 43 (41-64).

5. *Ibid.* 50 (his italics).

PENTHEUS: What specifically do you want me to do?

DIONYSUS: Specifically, I want you to take off my shirt and my pants and my underwear. Then I want you to caress my body all over. I want you to caress it very slowly and carefully. And then I want you to caress my cock until it gets hard. And then I want you to take my cock in your mouth and caress it with your lips and your tongue and your teeth. I want you to suck on my cock. Bill, I want you to suck my cock.<sup>6</sup>

Also, the violence (42-44) and cruelty that the *D69* brought forward (either in the blood-spattered scenes of the Birth and Death Rituals, or in Pentheus' terror when he was jumping from platform to platform), became a typical feature of the post '69 productions of the *Bacchae*.

Soyinka's Yoruba *Bacchae* (London, 1973) is indeed an ideological adaptation of the Euripidean tragedy. The Nigerian Nobel Prize holder politicized the text drastically, offering thereby an allegory about the liberation of the oppressed from a despotic ruler (this is a typical *Historisierung* of the text: e.g. Eugene O'Neill's *The Great God Brown*, 1929; Joe Orton's *The Erpingham Camp*, 1965; John Bowen's *The Disorderly Women*, 1969; and—in a pessimistic way—the Suzuki *Bacchae*). Soyinka “introduced some changes, which mainly refer to the question of political revolution, a liberation of the oppressed, as well as the problem of establishing a new political order as a particular community brought about by ritual sacrifice” (56), that of king Pentheus who had to sacrifice himself for the sake of the community, liberating it from the tyranny of its ruler.

The actual production of the British National Theatre failed to accept the primarily African investments of the text, namely the *egungun* politics and aesthetics: “[i]n the production the African was almost completely left out” (62). Moreover, F.-L. clearly sees the National Theatre *Bacchae* as a post-imperialist piece of salvage ethnography: “[t]he cultural revolution brought about by the play itself provoked a counter-revolution performed by the production. It denounced the transformative, liberatory, and communal feast celebrated in the play as a barbaric ritual of some ‘primitive tribes’ to be laughed at with a mixture of amusement and disdain. Thus, the spectators’ sense of superiority was confirmed; they could feel as a community, bonded by the exclusion of the ‘barbarians’ represented on stage” (64). One could not agree more.

Less known, but extremely interesting, is the carnivalesque *Bacchae* (São Paulo, 1996) by the Teat(r)o Oficina, which caused contradictive reactions to the Brazilian audiences. The production, a part of which was directed as

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6. Richard Schechner – The Performance Group, *Dionysus in 69*, New York 1970, 109.

a Brazilian carnival, advocated the intrusion of the Dionysiac into the public order (73), yet again typically politicizing the play: "the action of the play [...] turned this order upside down over the course of the performance. The ruler turned into a victim and the assaulted, persecuted, and imprisoned god and his followers into those trapping and killing him. [...] The carnival atmosphere also turned the status of the spectators upside down, transforming them into performers" (76), given also a festive mood and a shamelessness typical of the carnivalesque state of mind.

The bare-breasted Chorus was dancing cyclically in a trance-like state performing symbolic rituals of birth, dismemberment and *omophagia*. Despite the festiveness, an "atmosphere of horror" (85) was occasionally established in the performance, though the key issue of the Brazilian *Bacchae* was that yet again the play was used as a political metaphor for the oppressed minorities: "*The Bacchae*, in particular the sacrificial meal at its end, could be understood as a reflection in the Oficina's own aesthetics and on the notion of *brasilande*, Brazilian identity" in the sense that "transformation lies at the heart of Brazilian cultural identity" (87).

## II. Renegotiating Cultural Identities

Grüber's *Bacchae* (Berlin, 1974) was one of Schaubühne's first post-Brechtian attempts to stage Greek plays and to rediscover the long lost connection with Greek antiquity. The actual performance did not take place at the Schaubühne am Halleschen Ufer theatre, but at an exhibition hall (Phillips-Pavillon) on the Berliner Fairground. The first political statement of the *Antikenprojekt* was already made obvious by displacing the performing space of an ancient play to a multinational company's exhibition space: Greek tragedy was ready for renegotiation under new socio-economical conditions. Accordingly, Grüber "not only broke with the conventions of staging classical dramas prevalent from the 1950s onwards, but he also defied those norms newly established after the 1960s by the so-called *Regietheater* [...] that was accused of demolishing the classics" (100). In doing so, the director presented the past not only as un-authentic, but mainly as inaccessible in the sense that "what remains are only fragments, play texts torn out of their original context, which cannot convey their original meaning".<sup>7</sup>

The Parodos is considered to be monumental in European Theatre aesthetics. The Chorus, all dressed differently, made their entrance from the

7. Erika Fischer-Lichte, "Between Text and Cultural Performance: Staging Greek Tragedies in Germany", *Theatre Survey* 40 (1999) 16 (1-29).

opening side wall amid blowing wind and flying leaves. They came to inspect and rectify the ‘new’ space with surgical concentration and calmness: they ripped off the wooden floor boards, started a fire, dug out water, ivy, grapes, wool, a mask, and suddenly, following this neo-Dionysian picture of miracles, two men were born from earth covered with mud and clay, Cadmus and Tiresias. In this way the Chorus came to reveal a new world that was suppressed under the wooden floor of civilization; a world that was earth-born exactly like the ancestor of Thebes, the earth-born Echion. But miracles are unsuitable for the civilized world, so the road-sweeping machines came to clean up the mess.

Trying to characterize the relationship between text and performance in Grüber’s production, F.-L. chooses the term *sparagmos*: “something seemingly whole is torn apart and the question is how the scattered pieces can be restored to the former—or a new— wholeness” (109). And she continues: “Theatre needed to evolve from a ‘hermeneutic’ interpretive institution conveying timeless values formulated in the classics into an *unmistakably performative art* and interventionist ‘political’ institution. The primacy of the text was refuted” (110; my emphasis). Accordingly, the Greek play could be critically experienced by the spectators “as a meditation on the fundamental strangeness and inaccessibility of the distant past” (111). I suggest that this historically conscious chapter on Grüber’s *Bacchae* should be offered as a manual to critics and scholars, who are interested in uncomplicatedly safeguarding the authentic meanings of ancient texts.

The chapter on Theodoros Terzopoulos’ *Bacchae* (Delphi, 1986) promotes a political analysis of the performance, arguing that the spectacle generated an atmosphere of cultural “in-betweenness” (129), i.e. liminality, and an aesthetic ambiguity for the spectators (131), both of which destabilized the horizon of expectations of spectators and critics alike. The author rightly introduces the unfamiliar reader to the widespread notion of the cultural sacredness that some of my compatriots attribute to Greek drama and its so-called revival in Modern Greece, given that this production rejected the traditional canon of gracefulness (125) and “archaicness” of modern productions of Greek drama. Apart from the cross-cultural elements of the performance, “[i]n Terzopoulos’ *The Bacchae* the human body not only featured prominently but also constituted the *conditio sine qua non* for the performance to come into being” (126). It is not surprising that F.-L. focuses on the negative critical reception of certain performances in Greece, which represent an unbearable -for some Greek critics- otherness, not only in the sense of an aesthetic atypicality, but also as an illegitimate distortion of the original play. The text in Terzopoulos’ production “was not only cut

substantially, but what was left of it was not 'shown' on stage. Neither the space nor the appearance of the performers [...] illustrated the text. Speech alternated with intervals during which no words were spoken at all – even if other sounds were always heard, if only as breathing. Moreover, the words were not spoken so much as hurled out of the body as an eruption” (132).

Warlikowski's production (Warsaw, 2001) was generally received as a type of Christianization of the *Bacchae*, using the typical (since the Cambridge Ritualists) Dionysus/Christ analogy, which was “substantiated by the consistent use of Christian iconography” (151). Even so, it should not be taken for granted that Warlikowski's *Bacchae* “was related to issues of religion itself” (152). In fact, “[t]he production showed deification and the religious attitude towards new trends in [post-communist] society as disastrous, promising people happiness and redemption but in reality leading to catastrophe” (153). Having seen the production in video, I am convinced that it was a relatively unsuccessful attempt to recreate a Grotowski-like, secularly sacred theatre, and F.-L.'s analysis carefully deals with all the aspects of the performance as well as its densely theoreticized reception by Polish critics and scholars.

### III: Productive Encounter or Destructive Clash of Cultures?

The Suzuki chapter is notable in documenting the adventures and transformations of the director's *Bacchae* (Japan and on world tour, 1978-2006), but it is slightly problematical in offering a clear reason for the director's long-term obsession with the play. Suzuki's cultural optimism with regard to the actor's body rediscovering its lost, traditionally Japanese, self contradicts his pessimism regarding the teleology of history. Liberation from the chains of non-animal civilization is replaced in performance by a pessimistic restoration of those values that separated the actor's body from its cultural self. F.-L. sees this as “the doubled-edged character of Suzuki's theatre – the attempt to develop a theatre aesthetics rooted in the human body as the common ground of all cultures [...], while exposing the cyclical nature of political history as a repeated clash of cultures leading to death and destruction” (169). This is not a paradox, since Suzuki is not a utopian and in this production was principally interested in showing that history has the power to repeat itself: in his *Bacchae*, Pentheus/Man/Ruler survived the *sparagmos* and was resurrected at the end to reinstate the civilization of oppression. In connecting tragedy to a sick world without hope, Suzuki remains loyal to his Marxist view on God as a cultural construct, brilliantly confirmed in one of his interviews in the Greek press, at the time he came to Athens to show *Dionysus*:

We are born by accident, but it's in our nature to try to convince ourselves that we are not born by accident... This nature of ours creates the role of religion in our lives... Our nature to rationalize everything is what triggers the existence of God... The existence of God gives reason for the construction of religions... In brief, religion invents God in order to pacify human nature and then politics uses God to drive human nature crazy. (Newspaper *To Vima*, 10.09.1995; original apologetics, my translation)

For Suzuki, the conflict between Dionysus and Pentheus was not a battle between god and man. It was a clash between a religious sect and political authority, the drama of conflict between two communal value systems that exist on the same plane.

The Kathakali and Beijing Opera *Bacchae* (Delphi and New Delhi, 1998; Beijing 1996) problematize F.-L.'s main argument about interweaving cultures, precisely because in these productions one culture and aesthetics prevailed over another. More significantly, although the Indian director stated that his production was interested in a "positive, in-between approach" (190), Kathakali is a performance genre fundamentally preoccupied with the polarity between Good and Evil, while the tragic heroes maintain a moral liminality. Thus, when the daemon King Ravana's make-up and subsequent "partly good, partly bad" (195) (indeed partly divine, partly demonic) moral qualities were chosen for Pentheus, that was an obvious case of the predominance of the Kathakali culture taking place. The practical problems (i.e., the invention of a Chorus, the restructuring of the text and its repetition according to the traditional Kathakali rhythmic patterns) were more complicated and most of them manipulatively solved "by trial and error" (198) in order to comply with the Kathakali dogma. In contrast, the Chinese production was the product of a reversed Occidentalism: "The emphatic proclamation of the integrity of a text that 'embodies' the heritage of Greek, European and, by extension, American, i.e., Western, cultures, was made in order to use the text as a pretext for dominating a theatrical form [i.e., the Beijing Opera] that, in a way, can be regarded as the embodiment of the Chinese cultural heritage" (215). Accordingly, no obvious type of interweaving was observed in either case and, having seen them both, I can recall that neither was interested in concealing its cultural point of departure behind a strategy of interweaving, given also the second one's naiveté (and perhaps picturesqueness) regarding the use of Chinese elements.

The astonishing history of Euripides' *Bacchae* in performance shows how the crossing of cultures is aesthetically productive and theatrically legitimate. One of the most important features of Fischer-Lichte's *Dionysus Resurrected* is that it is written by a theatre scholar and not by a classicist. Classicists have occasionally been interested in imposing limits on the stage in-

terpretation of ancient plays, sometimes “correcting” theatre artists, but the stage history of the *Bacchae* proves, quite undeniably, that the resurrection of the god of theatre was only achieved after the destruction of such limits. Nonetheless, one can adopt a very critical stance against the characterization of Dionysus as the “God of Globalization” in a “global village” where “one culture meet[s] those of others, and they adapt to each other” (225). Most productions of the *Bacchae*, the vast majority of which through the use of minority cultures, presented not a productive encounter but a destructive clash of cultures. “The outcome was not homogeneity”, as F.-L. admits, “but the production of new differences. The ways in which the local and the global met and were interwoven was unique in each case” (228). A productive interweaving of cultures could hardly have occurred in the productions discussed, since the destruction of the oppressive cultural establishment (and its morals) is always inevitable in the *Bacchae*. Moreover, this is the reason for which the play is chosen by directors throughout the world: it can be used as an effective political metaphor about the destruction of any *kratos*, political or cultural or both. ὁ Διόνυσος ὁ Διόνυσος, οὐ Θῆβαι / κράτος ἔχουσ' ἐμόν.

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