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Arts: Bacchae Like Me

The Summer Cabaret at Yale strums and chants a sin-sational Greek tragedy.

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Thursday, August 09, 2007

By Christopher Arnott



Promotional Photo

Spill the wine, dig that girl.

The Bacchae

Adapted (from Euripides) and directed by Mike Donahue. Through Aug. 11 at the Summer Cabaret at Yale, 217 Park St., New Haven. \$14-\$25. (203) 432-1567, summercabaret.org.

Some shows you feel you have special knowledge of, and can deeply relate to. With this one, the connections are so strong and so quirky that I feel like the Summer Cabaret at Yale folks broke into my house and took some of my most cherished possessions.

They're welcome to them, since they really know how to use them.

My father, a classicist and theater historian, once did his own translation of Euripides' *The Bacchae*, which he adapted for his marionette theater and toured for years. But the resonance for me doesn't end there. I love playing the ukulele; this *Bacchae* features two of them. I keep a Harmony practice amp in my study for when I want to rock out; the *Bacchae* cast straps the same model around their necks for when they chant and echo and bang on things. I love rock opera theatrics and Brechtian songspiels. Those are in here too. I like courtyards. *The Bacchae* is performed in the breezy, balmy one just outside the Cabaret's hot underground indoor space.

Don't share those tastes? Maybe the nude modern dancer writhing in a vat of wine is more your speed.

Hearing my father rehearse and perform *The Bacchae* so many times over the years has made me appreciate what a vibrant yet trickily layered show it is to produce. Mike Donahue's new adaptation of the play finds the balance between the frivolity and the tragedy, and makes each of the play's distinct social cultures believable.

So you needn't be intimidated, the way I saw a few in the opening night audience becoming when they perused this show's overwrought program notes. *The Bacchae*'s plot is intertwined with dozens of other Greek myths, a chronicle more convoluted than *General Hospital* (and with even more shocking deaths and transformations). But you don't need to have majored in Ancient Civilizations to understand *The Bacchae* any more than you need to have studied Plato to get *Hedwig and the Angry Inch*. There are even some sly similarities between this *Bacchae*'s Dionysus, god of playfulness and harsh vengeance (played with winks and smacking lips by the engrossing Barret O'Brien), and the destructive rocker Hedwig from that punk philosophy musical—a streetsmart sensuality that explains not only how gods and mortals can co-exist but how easily they can get on each others' nerves.

The Cabaret production isn't perfect. Greek purists who happily go along for the reinterpretive ride may still blanch at the questionable and inconsistent pronunciation of some of the Greek names. Also, one of the most surefire of all Greek staging conventions—having a chorus onstage the whole time to narrate the action and interact with the lead players—is torn asunder. Four of the mere six players not only must be the entire chorus but assume several other key roles. This unnecessary downsizing not only causes confusion but dilutes stand-out moments like the entrance of the grieving delusional mother Agave, who's helped tear her own son to shreds in a wild party on a mountaintop.

Wait—she does *what?! Whatever* the quibbles, you always keep coming back to that outrageous and engaging plot, which Donahue and his colleagues bring into the modern day with raucous fury. There are slews of surprises that I won't reveal, but the biggest surprise if you ever had to endure dry, stiff, morose cocktail parties with Classics professors (as I had to do many times back when my father was

touring his own lively, shocking *Bacchae*) is how nasty and sleazy and fun and absolutely non-academic this sensational evening is.

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