

11-12-1974

## 'Bacchae' Deserves Honor

Walter Lazenby

Follow this and additional works at: [http://thekeep.eiu.edu/lazenby\\_reviews](http://thekeep.eiu.edu/lazenby_reviews)

---

### Recommended Citation

Lazenby, Walter, "'Bacchae' Deserves Honor" (1974). *Walter Lazenby Reviews*. 34.  
[http://thekeep.eiu.edu/lazenby\\_reviews/34](http://thekeep.eiu.edu/lazenby_reviews/34)

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Theatre Arts at The Keep. It has been accepted for inclusion in Walter Lazenby Reviews by an authorized administrator of The Keep. For more information, please contact [tabruns@eiu.edu](mailto:tabruns@eiu.edu).

# 'Bacchae' Deserves Honor

By WALTER LAZENBY

The theme of Euripides' play "The Bacchae" is that the god Dionysus — personification of the forces of reproduction and growth, of the power that resides in ivy roots and can weaken the strongest wall, that changes grape juice to wine and affords ecstasy or madness to the partaker — cannot be resisted and must be honored in a balanced life.

Eastern's current production of the play, arena style at the Playroom, Fine Arts Center, deserves to be honored too, not merely because of the rarity in Central Illinois, of such a show but because it gives a balanced interpretation, using a more-modern-than-classical approach, and has some truly moving moments.

One of the most spine-tingling of ancient dramas, "The Bacchae" depicts a conflict between Dionysus, bent on winning worship from all Thebans, and King Pentheus, who puritanically decries the orgiastic nature of the rites without realizing that he pruriently wishes to join in them. Though Pentheus ardently supports "law and order," he fails even to recognize his own internal disorder and thus plays right into the hands of the cruelly amoral god. Presumably this strange divinity, by driving frenzied worshippers to commit a horrible crime against his mortal enemy, restores the balance upset by Pentheus's straitlaced hypocritical insistence on abstemiousness.

The two points of highest interest are the "reversal" scene, in which Dionysus seduces Pentheus's reason and the audience perceives that Pentheus, in his delusion, is making a decision that will bring his downfall; and the finale, where Agave, the king's mother, comes out of a Dionysian trance and realizes

what the audience has already learned, that she has helped work out her son's doom.

Despite drastic cuts from the original text, the subtle power of the first and the intensity of the second survive in this production, through Curtis Powell's convincing portrayal of Pentheus's bewilderment and Marcia Sanders's forceful appearance as the crazed, grift-stricken Agave.

Powell gives a rounded-out

## A Review

characterization of Pentheus, comprising indignation, rage, child-like simplicity (when he anticipates being brought back from the mountain by his mother), and pathetic weakness underlying a facade of strength (when he asks, plaintively, if no one can help him get rid of his adversary). Throughout he plays with enough restraint to gain a measure of respect for this tragic hero.

Michael Boyll, looking very much like a marble statue in white body make-up and barely more than a figleaf, appropriately does not try to give an appealing dignified picture of Dionysus. Instead his god is a cavorting, sarcastic one. He meets the challenge of the choreography and acrobatics well and achieves a wide range of vocal effects.

Gary Ambler as a herdsman and Barbara Evans as a servant tackle roles featured in the most difficult moments of the play to deal with. These are two long "messenger" speeches reporting action offstage. A director's problem is whether to treat these as pure narrative set speeches or as semi-dramatized narrative. Whereas the classical approach would lean toward the former, E. Glendon Gabbard has chosen the latter, in keeping with his aim in the entire production to keep things

lively. But it seems to me that occasionally the pantomime invented to liven things up actually slows down the progress of the speeches. Nevertheless, the use of off-stage voices in the second passage to give the narrative a greater sense of immediacy is a happy idea.

John Malkovich's Kadmos is perhaps his best portrayal in his career at Eastern. Bob Dodd gives a somewhat crotchety interpretation of the prophet Teiresias. The episode in which these two wise old men join in dancing adds a slight touch of comic relief.

Though the chorus's role has been trimmed, this chorus seems a very integral part of the production. Its almost constant movement in reaction to onstage events is authentic, too.

Be prepared for some impressive stage effects, eerie music (composed by Powell) from a synthesizer, abbreviated costumes in keeping with the nature of Dionysian cult worship, no intermission, and no curtain call.

It would be a good idea also to arrive a few minutes early to take advantage of the accurate and helpful program notes.