

Dionysus: The Greatest Showman



The worst thing, I imagine, about being the Bacchae – along with being forcibly controlled by a malevolent god to do whatever horrific or insane thing he so desires – is that they are the title characters of a story that they are not even the focus of. Euripides gives the group of women top billing, but then subjugates them to the background of a story about a god and a king fighting for their souls. Or rather, the story of a God slowly and meticulously punishing a man for his insolent refusal to obey. The story of the two men clashing with one another is not dramatically unexciting, it absolutely is, but it is made less engaging when the people that are held in the balance are not imbued theatrically with a sense of humanity that makes them

meaningful to both the tragic players. As well as to the audience. They need to be placed in a context in which the dramatic tension they create makes the stakes of the story personal and worthy of the tragic players, Pentheus and Dionysus. From the unwise ruler, to the temperamental God, to the blind man who sees all – the characters of *The Bacchae* – including the literal Bacchae – are more strange, complex, and simply downright weirder than many others reflected in Greek tragedy. Some would even call them freaks. Sideshowes. Misfits that are confused as to how they best fit into their world. Dionysus is a showman. And what does a showman do with all these “freaks?”

He puts on a show.

“I am Dionysus, son of Zeus.
My mother was Semele, Cadmus’ daughter.
From her womb the fire of a lightning-flash delivered me.
I have come.”
(Euripides 192)

I want to reinterpret Euripides’ *The Bacchae* through the lens of the story of famed entertainer, unethical businessman, and inventor of the freak-show P.T. Barnum as Dionysus. Using a 20th Century translation of Euripides original text, in my production Dionysus is a wealthy, all-powerful showman in the early 1900’s who’s come to save Thebes. Thebes in this version reimagined as a lowly yet large community of cast-offs of society. Freaks. Dionysus has come to save them by offering them a way to survive, to live, to even thrive – by making them attractions in his freak-show. By having them exploit themselves, sell their dignity, and show off their disorders and maladies for the entertainment of himself and the world. The Theban freaks are starving in the streets and this all-powerful, all-giving man has gifted them an opportunity for sustenance – so they flock to it – to his theater in the mountains to perform. Three-legged men,

armless women, conjoined twins, dwarves and giants, deformed humans, walking skeletons and wolfmen – all jump at this chance to perhaps finally live lives.

All follow Dionysus except for the freaks who are still unsure whether or not they want to participate, mostly the men, including the man who's tried to protect them from the evils of the world and the cruelty of man, Pentheus. A freak himself and the unofficial leader of them, like his father before him, Cadmus the Wolfman, Pentheus is a hairy monster that pain-stakingly shaves his entire body everyday and dresses as a proper businessman. This is in order to make sure that no one knows what he truly is – and he instructs all his people to do the same. To hide their weirdness. He is a leader who is trying to save his people and in his mind, the first step in doing that is to reject what they were born as.

He makes it law amongst his people to hide their differences in order to be accepted into outside society and to attempt to live happy lives. He does not wish to follow the traditions of his people's past – selling their souls to the rich and powerful, worshipping the powerful for the sake of survival. As Dionysus remarks to his audience, “[Pentheus] is a fighter against gods, defies me, excludes me from Libations, never names me in prayers. Therefore I will demonstrate to him, and to all Thebes, that I am a God” (Euripides 193). Dionysus is not respected in the world of high society, as both a bastard child of a single mother, and a man who's gained his power through the unnatural and dirty world of freak-shows and theatre and liquor and prostitution, he is disrespected by his fellow 1%-ers and now, even by the people of Thebes, the lowest of the low. In order to make sure no freaks make Dionysus look bad by resisting his offer, he plans to have Pentheus killed, but it wouldn't be in Dionysus' nature to just have him killed right away, behind closed doors – he's a showman. Dionysus decides to disguise himself as a regular man and enters the city of misfits to not only teach Pentheus, but all the freaks of Thebes, and all the

oligarchs of the world, that he is a force to be reckoned with and respected. And a force that can put on a damn good show.

Dionysus is always seemingly trying to be two things – an entertainer who revels in the performance for an audience that he is taking through this story, but also a god who feels the instinctual and urgent need to be respected. A god who wants to malevolently torture this man with such horror that he exemplifies what it means to cross him. P.T. Barnum and the central idea of a freak show are perfect vessels to retell this story through. Barnum was the famous co-founder of the classic American touring circus company, Ringling Brothers and Barnum & Bailey Circus. He was recently depicted by the human embodiment of the word, “charming,” actor Hugh Jackman, in the popular musical film *The Greatest Showman* that was released late last year. But P.T. Barnum was absolutely no Hugh Jackman, at least not all the time. This was a man who had a love for the performative nature of theatre and the spotlight, but truly valued money, power and subjugation over all else. And was ruthless in his pursuit of it. He exploited mentally and physically challenged human beings that that he would then put on display to entertain the eager masses. To sum up his mindset in a nutshell, his first ever “attraction” was a female slave he bought from a man who claimed she was the 161 year-old former slave of George Washington. He then paraded her around the country making up myths and selling performances to come witness “the thing” tell stories of the first president from long ago. And when she ultimately died, Barnum squeezed a few last pennies out of her by selling tickets to her autopsy (Jackie Mansky). He had performers beaten, whipped, and caged for fun, maimed and killed many animals for the sake of performances and displays, and successfully exploited thousands of people for the sake of financial gain and fame.

But that two-sided nature of a hateful overlord and a lover of theatre is why P.T. is such a great body for Dionysus to operate through. Dionysus' duality is present in the way he speaks and takes us through this performance, as when he first commands the Bacchae to dance at the end of his opening speech:

"Come, my band of worshippers, women whom I have brought from lands of the East, from Tmolus, bastion of Lydia, to be with me and share my travels! Raise the music of your own country, the Phrygian drums invented by Rhea the Great Mother and by me. Fill Pentheus' palace with a noise to make the city of Cadmus turn and look! – And I will go to the folds of Mount Cithaeron, where The Bacchantes are, and join them in their holy dance!" (Euripides 193).

With the way he speaks, illustrating the images and sounds of what the audience is about to witness – he almost embodies a lion tamer, a circus showman who's setting up the wild and unbelievable events they are about to witness. But underlying those lines is a sense of righteous purpose in the show he's about to put on. A sense that he's when he says something like filling "Pentheus' palace with a noise to make the city of Cadmus turn and look," that his true feelings are bubbling just under the surface of his performance, but he must keep those passionate insecurities on a tight leash if he is to fully carry out his plan and put on a show for everyone to take note of. In his own words, "It's a wise man's part to practice a smooth-tempered self-control" (Euripides 213). Exploring Dionysus through Barnum allows for that duality to be played up more by actively exhibiting the god of theatre and what that means.

The production would be staged in the round inside of a larger than average black box, with a classic red-and-white striped carnival tent pitched in the middle of the black box, filling most of the room. Inside the tent is a circular dirt stage with an audience surrounding the circle in 4 rows, with risers that increase in height with each row – making the circus tent look slightly like a bowl – enhancing the claustrophobia of the story. It should feel slightly tight and uncomfortable because in this new telling, the audience who's come to see this show paid to see

Dionysus' freak show, and we shouldn't be allowed to look away or feel above the truly awful events he's about to take us through.

The setting of carnival-inspired freak show could make the choral dances and speeches a visual feast that could evoke the dark, unconscious demons within Dionysus – as we can see different trapeze artists come out and perform, men shot out of cannons, magic performed, lions tamed – this would all be done through dynamic movement and lighting and some live stunts. But these are people that are suffering both mentally and physically, that still need to somehow attempt to muster a happy, carnival atmosphere. The tone we'd be seeking is one of witnessing a nightmare through a child's kaleidoscope.

Dionysus would be dressed in a beautiful yet threatening, long black and blood red early 1900's suit with a black top hat and red cane to match. And when he comes back out, disguised as the "ordinary man," the solider, identifying that this man is not a freak of Thebes and perhaps a trespasser, would then arrest Dionysus. The solider, as well as the messenger and herdsman, would all reflect the view of Pentheus and the misfits who stayed in Thebes. For example, the solider would maybe be a three-legged man who ties one of his legs to the other to blend in, or a dwarf who walks on stilts. People not entirely comfortable with the submission to the freak show that have stayed in Thebes, attempting to fit in like their leader Pentheus.

With each deception that Dionysus pulls on Pentheus, they seem almost designed to be visually imagined as magic tricks that Dionysus performs to show off to the audience. When Pentheus believes to have had chained Dionysus, he locks him in a Harry Houdini-esque type, inescapable, full-body contraption inside of a big steel cage. He then throws a red blanket over the cage and orders him to be taken away. Pentheus then all of a sudden hears the mystical rumbling of a drum roll, feels the mounting anticipation of the audience, turns and quickly

snatches the blanket from over the cage and reveals what's under the blanket to be an ox wrapped in the Houdini trap. Perhaps utilizing a trap door rig, or some other tool of illusion to shock the audience – so that they are right there with Pentheus in his disbelief. To which Dionysus then unfathomably appears in the audience, eating popcorn with the rest of the theatre patrons. The audience applauds. Or when Pentheus tries to plunge the knife into Dionysus, this feels like it could be a direct lift of the classic swords-in-a-chest trick that so many classical magicians would do. These illusions feel right at home in a man who wants to entertain and impress the audience with his power, along with making his pawn look foolish and weak by comparison.

But Pentheus is a wildly interesting ruler – a man who purposefully disobeys the decrees of Gods against the advice of all – and yet he is rarely given the theatrical life worthy of such a character. He is all too easily pigeon-holed into this character idea of a sniveling, petulant, stubborn young King who doesn't understand the gravity of his actions. He is so much more than this, and has always been a character with moments of relatability, such as when he sees his mother before he's killed, or when he's being toyed with by Dionysus and is made to put on a dress – these moments give us opportunities as the audience to feel for Pentheus. But for the most part he is seen, as well as acted, very often as a foolish leader who is insolent towards the gods merely for the sake of being insolent. By making the Bacchic women disabled men and women who are being taken advantage of for the pleasure of some unstoppable billionaire and other rich folks – it gives him a shade of leadership and care for his people that is sometimes completely vacant from other interpretations of the character. It gives his quest to get the Bacchae back and restored to their normal selves more noble and fitting of a king, rather than

just out of pointed hatred for the god he refuses to worship. It makes him a man of the future, refusing the traditions of his ancestors and the treatment of freaks in the past.

His yearning to be ordinary also colors that famous line Pentheus has, “Well, friend: your shape is not unhandsome – for the pursuit of women” in a completely different light (Euripides 218). That sense of subtle fluid sexuality is still there, but now it is shaded with jealousy. As the form Pentheus sees Dionysus in at this moment is as not a freak, but an ordinary man – something that Pentheus wishes he could be everyday. In the beginning when we first meet Pentheus, he should have multiple red scars over his arms and neck and face from the constant shaving and cutting of himself to rid the freakiness from him. Perhaps he first approaches Dionysus and Dionysus gestures to the king’s shoulder, wherein Pentheus can look and see he missed a patch of hair on his neck and rip it off and toss it aside – just so it’s clear to an audience. The immediate attraction that Pentheus feels to the god is then ingrained in something deeper than just sexual curiosity, it’s an attraction steeped in jealous wonderment and envy of how his normalcy. Instead of getting down to the business of the stranger’s presence, Pentheus can’t help but remark “you are no wrestler, I can tell from these long curls cascading most seductively over your cheek. Your skin, too, shows a whiteness carefully preserved; you keep away from the sun’s heat, walk in the shade, so hunting Aphrodite with your lovely face...tell me who you are. What is your birth?” (Euripides 206) By the time he finally gets to his inquiry, it feels more like a question about wanting to know where these beautifully normal humans come from, rather than one centered on preserving the safety of his city.

Pentheus’ incessant denial of his freakhood, of his true being is a direct offense to Dionysus, a man who although not deformed in physicality, has been branded an abomination by being the misbegotten bastard child of Zeus whom no God properly respects. He has felt like a

freak his whole life and has a kindred spirit with the oddities of Thebes, and thus believes he's saving them by giving them an opportunity to be who they really are and earn a living and way of life equal to any one else on this planet. In this production, Dionysus tells us he comes down to Thebes to punish Pentheus for his refusal to let his people be their weird selves in his freak show. But Pentheus' ability to change his outward appearance by shaving himself only further angers Dionysus, as he is a freak himself as the bastard child of Zeus and cast-out amongst the Greek gods. Dionysus cannot rid himself of his "freak" label like Pentheus can. Dionysus can shape-shift and control minds, but no matter what fantastical thing he does he will still be labeled as the bastard child, cast-off, non-God, non-child of Zeus. This combination of disrespect, jealousy, insecurity, and rage are what push Dionysus to want to put on such a big, bloody performance. It's why he punishes Pentheus so mercilessly. For the sake of his sanity he *must* prove to everyone that he is the God that he believes he is.

In this context, Dionysus' punishment in the dressing-up scene is then convulsed into something immensely tough to watch, as we watch Pentheus become pressured into turning himself into the thing he despises, being a freak. Instead of it being a slightly comedic scene with the king not fully understanding why he's wearing women's clothes – it's now imbued with the uncomfortable shame that he's worked so hard to avoid. That of being a creature put on display, forced to do things that he's not comfortable with. "Besides [this costume] is there anything else you'll put on me?... I could not bear to dress myself in woman's clothes" (231). The eerie feeling of confused consent is suddenly thrust into the scene, making Pentheus seem like a lost boy who is just embarrassed and wishes this whole ordeal to be over with. But Dionysus sees this all as part of the performance. He starts the play a chess player but as the play goes on he seems to gradually lose his plans in the passion of the incumbent punishment. The finale to his show. He

makes grand declarations like ““O dreadful earthquake, shake the floor of the world!...Fan to a blaze the flame the lightning lit; kindle the conflagration of Pentheus’ palace!” (Euripides 211) He sounds like he’s using his powers not only to punish, but to get the crowd on its feet cheering, calling for the blood of Pentheus like Roman citizens at a gladiator match. When he commands Pentheus to move through the streets in his embarrassing dress, he morphs into a pro-wrestling commentator announcing the arrival of the villain of the show, the Freak named Pentheus. He shouts, “Come, perverse man, greedy for sights you should not see, eager for deeds you should not do – Pentheus!” (Euripides 224). The punishments of Dionysus are not solely meant to be served, they are meant to be performed. Acted out for an audience, much like the living punishment of the freak show.

For the final events of the play, once the Bacchae and Pentheus and Dionysus have been ushered out of the tent, I’d like a yet unseen actor to come in to the center of a the empty stage to play the messenger. He comes in to tell us what has finally happened, the grotesquely gory and familial end to which the play comes to – and he is a normal looking man. But as he tells the story he begins to take a wet cloth from his pocket and wipes away at his skin, revealing hundreds of tattoos hidden under skin-colored makeup. He begins to weep. As he continues to do this he tries thought to put on a smile though, still attempting to put on a show. He continues to wipe and suddenly takes false teeth out revealing an ugly mouth, he takes his wig off revealing a bald, scarred scalp. All the while still wiping, still weeping. He is in immense pain, but still trying to entertain the audience.

“Unless a man enters upon the vocation intended for him by nature, and best suited to his peculiar genius, he cannot succeed” – P.T. Barnum (*The Art of Money Getting*). P.T. Barnum refused to deny himself of who he really was – that was a ruthless entertainer and man of power.

Dionysus refuses to deny himself and the world what of he truly is – a righteous God who must be praised. But poor Pentheus could not live with the man he was created to be, a freak, and could not help but deny and shove away and stuff in a closet the creature he was born as. P.T. Barnum felt like a freak in the world of the wealthy and influential. Dionysus felt like an outcast amongst the gods. But both beings knew that to get what they wanted, they had to do what they loved. They had to put on a show.

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