

Electronic Opera Pumps Up the Euripides  
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On opening night, apparently, Open Studios went bacchic.

Responding to a throbbing electronic beat and a bit too much booze, a couple of revellers had to be asked to take it down a notch. Euripides' almost 2,500-year-old play remains relevant: we're still trying to find the balance between unhealthy repression and disruptive unruliness.

Pentheus, king of ancient Thebes, reacted to revelry by locking up all those under the influence of Dionysus, god of dance, poetry and everything else that's fun. Not only were the god's devotees drinking and carousing but women were creeping off into the shrubbery and having it off with "lecherous men." Unwary goats were being slaughtered, their flesh stripped off and eaten raw. Where were the goatherds? Shaking their booties in the bushes, no doubt.

Not a whole lot of shaking went on the night I attended this Screaming Weenie production directed by Ilena Lee Cramer. It was a smallish house and uninhibited boogie-ing would have been out of place. But the absence of anything to sit on plus DJ Tracey Draper's percussive score kept most of us shifting from leg to leg in a discreet little dance. A full house would undoubtedly have resulted in a tangle of gyrating bodies usually associated with clubs and raves.

And that's what this Bacchae is: part rave, part theatre. Familiarity with Euripides' original story will help you only a little since the characters go off on confusing historical tangents. Euripides went off on tangents, too-but briefly and, thank goodness, there are footnotes. This remount of Screaming Weenie's 2003 production could use a cleaner storyline.

I'm not sure this Bacchae ends up in the same place Euripides did, either-which is OK, but I'd like to know. The repetitive choral chant at the end goes, "Blood like water flowing/Power in our hearts is growing." Freedom at any cost? Is that where Screaming Weenie took us? I don't know.

However, the music, the staging and the performances almost seduced me in the same way as Dionysus seduced those crazy ol' Thebans. The half-dozen performers in this show are underground MCs, R&B and spoken word performers. Placed singly on scaffolding around the studio's perimeter, each has an extremely distinctive voice and style. While Brendan McLeod's Zeus is delivered as a furious rap, Deanna Teeple (Agave) nearly blows the speakers out with her Mahalia Jackson-like voice. Christine Stoddard (Semele, Europa and Artemis) is a little more restrained, but half-naked Troy Jackson (Dionysus), his body in constant motion, belts out frenzied encouragement to "Open up. Open up." RC Weslowski (Pentheus) is a readily accessible poetic voice: "My kingdom is not a nightclub," Pentheus warns his subjects before cracking down. We know where he stands. "I am she and he is me," explains Rachel Flood as the narrator, an androgynous Teiresias.

A darkened room. Projections. Composer/DJ Draper and a couple of technicians operating from a booth in the middle of the room where we can watch them watching their glowing computer screens and sound and light boards. A booming beat pulsing through the soles of our feet. It's an experience that could have-but didn't quite-blow me away. I felt a bit like Cadmus (in the original text) when the old codger is trying to decide whether he's too old to join the revellers. Euripides' stage directions tell us Cadmus stamps about, beating his thyrsus (a bunch of twigs twisted with ivy) on the ground before ancient Teiresias assures him, "The god draws no distinction between young/And old, to tell us which should dance and which should not." So grab your thyrsus-or not-and join the bacchanalia – if you're in a partying mood.