

Unconventional Theatre in an Unconventional Place

By Leanne Campbell

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In Greek mythology, the Bacchae are worshippers of the god Dionysus, he of "wine and revelry", and a bit of both are to be had at the Screaming Weenie's electronic opera version of *The Bacchae*.

The Weenies have created a theatre space in a most unlikely spot: a large room above a bakery on East 1st Avenue, near Main, in that funny little industrial area north of the car repair shops. Up the stairs and around the corner, we discover more of a club than a theatre; for a start, there are no seats, just a smattering of tall, round tables set with votive candles. There's a makeshift bar in the corner (the ginger ale was flat, but my partner said that the beer was good), and that, along with some on-film nudity and infrequent coarse language, are the reason that you must be 19 to get in.

Six individual scaffolds spaced around the perimeter of the room become six small elevated stages for the performers. In the centre of it all, inside a seventh scaffold strewn with high-tech gear, is composer Tracey Draper. A DJ known on the local scene as Tracey D, she also acts as conductor, alternately chopping the air in time to the driving beat and fiddling with myriad buttons and knobs.

True to form, there's lots of blood and sex and magical happenings, all told via song. But this is nowhere near your grandma's idea of opera. Rachel Flood begins rapping the tale and three large video screens flash images related to the story. (The very short version: When Pentheus, King of Thebes, fails to welcome Dionysus and his followers in his city - in fact, he imprisons them, not believing Dionysus to be a god - Dionysus conjures up an earthquake that allows the Bacchae to escape. Dionysus then exacts terrible revenge on Pentheus.)

There isn't a poor voice in the bunch, but Deanna Teeple is especially good as Agave. Her chocolate mezzo has just a hint of a growl, and the effect is very sexy. As Dionysus, Troy Jackson looks amazing in his outrageous get-up of a full-length denim skirt, sneakers and ultra-long false eyelashes. He wears no shirt. The two other males, RC Weslowski as Pentheus and Brendan McLeod as Zeus, are basically in street clothes, which is a bit of a disappointment. Rounding out the cast is Christine Stoddard in a trio of roles.

A sign taped to the box office warns that "pharmaceutical grade" smoke is used, but it never appears (not that it was missed; I don't care what "grade" it is, I can't stand the stuff), and the promised "audience participation" doesn't happen either, but that was likely due to the fairly small crowd of 20-or-so eager souls last Thursday. It's easy to imagine the energy that more people would bring to the happening. At just over an hour, it's not too long to stand (or dance). Even the remotely curious should wander off the beaten track and find this production of *The Bacchae*. Director/producer Ilena Lee Cramer has put together an energizing theatrical experience. Re-mount or no (it was first presented in 2004), *The Bacchae* feels fresh. It's certainly unique and very much of its time. Euripides would approve.