

## BOOK REVIEW

*Dionysus Resurrected: Performances of Euripides' The Bacchae in a Globalizing World.* By ERIKA FISCHER-LICHTE. Blackwell Bristol Lectures on Greece, Rome and the Classical Tradition. Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2014. Pp. xvii + 238. Hardcover, £60.00. ISBN 978-1-4051-7578-4.

In *Dionysus Resurrected*, Erika Fischer-Lichte investigates the performance history of Euripides' *Bakkhai* via case studies of nine productions dating from 1968 to 2008. Fischer-Lichte poses her main question at the very beginning: "the question of why Euripides' *The Bacchae*, which until the late 1960s had almost no performance record at all, has since been staged a number of times" (ix). In a programmatic preface and introduction, Fischer-Lichte then identifies three prominent features of globalization (xiv) before connecting those features, and the plot of *Bakkhai*, with van Gennep's three-phase model of rites of passage (11). Next, she introduces three dominant paradigms for understanding ritual elements in *Bakkhai* and associates each paradigm with one of the aforementioned features of globalization (22). These three foci then govern the book's tripartite structure, with nine productions grouped around the themes of communality, identity, and cross-cultural encounter. To sum up the theoretical approach, these nine productions project three different ways of thinking about ritual and instantiate three different kinds of post-globalization liminality.

To be sure, Fischer-Lichte draws a long bow. Yet in doing so, she plays to her strengths: ritual, performance, 'thick' description, and cultural history. She tells a great story about the fate of Dionysus and Pentheus on the world stage in the era of globalization. She offers compelling interpretations of individual productions. Most of all, her enthusiasm for *Bakkhai*, and for the power of theatre to change the world, is rather refreshing.

Philologists, however, may find themselves disappointed. Throughout, Fischer-Lichte de-emphasizes Euripides' *Bakkhai* at the expense of its after-image in later productions. She devotes barely half a page to the play itself (3) and refuses to offer a traditional reading: "it makes little sense to begin . . . with a single reading of the play. . . . Each time, the focus was on different aspects and elements which,

while referring to the play, did not necessarily articulate a particular reading of it” (20–21). To my mind, this is interpretive *aporia* gone somewhat astray.

More egregiously, an over-reliance on generalizations, assumptions, and second-hand information has hampered Fischer-Lichte’s treatment of the play and its poet. In the preface, for example, she claims, “During the time of late antiquity in Greece, *The Bacchae* was among the most popular tragedies. Plutarch (*De Gloria Ath.* 8) reports that it was performed in Athens frequently” (ix). This is just plain wrong, on at least two counts. First, although *Moralia* 349a1–6 implies that *Bakkhai* was one of the more well-known plays staged in Athens, Plutarch says nothing about the relative frequency of performances of the play, in any period. Second, Plutarch could not write about late antiquity without a time machine.

Fischer-Lichte also claims that Euripides wrote *Bakkhai* “in the last years of his life in Macedonia, where he had been exiled from Athens” (3). Even setting aside Scullion’s attack on that particular shibboleth (*CQ* 53.2 [2003]: 389–400), this would have been a *self-imposed* exile, not an ostracism. Later, we are told that at the play’s end, “the chorus sings in praise of the god” (3). *Bakkhai* concludes with the *pollai morphai tôn daimoniôn* tag in recitative anapaests. This is not a song of praise to Dionysos. Furthermore, Fischer-Lichte calls Dionysos a ‘foreign god’ (e.g., 226). In myth, Dionysos was born in Greece to Greek parents (Zeus and Semele), and his epiphany in Thebes constitutes a return home from time abroad. In cult, Dionysos was a quintessentially civic deity honored in multiple festivals. He also had good enough pedigree as a Greek deity to appear in Linear B tablets under the name DI-WO-NU-SO.

When it comes to the modern performances, Fischer-Lichte tends to make unsubstantiated claims redolent of intentionalism and, at times, pseudoscience. For example, “Their [i.e. the actors’] movements were not meant to express an individual emotion . . .” (123); “the actions on stage were performed in order to generate energy and let it circulate in the whole space so that it would be transferred to the spectators . . . so that they might be able to tap into it themselves” (123–4). As nice as this sort of thing may sound, I fail to see how one could ever prove it.

To return to the main thread of the book, I am in fact persuaded that these particular productions enact the three facets of globalization on which Fischer-Lichte has chosen to focus. But these are not all ‘performances of *Bakkhai*, at least not in the usual sense. Rather, most are what I would call adaptations and some are not even that: “Soyinka’s *The Bacchae of Euripides* is not to be regarded as an adaptation of Euripides’ tragedy, but as a Nigerian play” (68). In that vein, *Dionysus Res-*

*urrected* not only dismisses the ancient text and interpretations thereof, but ultimately focuses on the god instead of the play: “we can expect to find Dionysus active and effective in many performances in various parts of the world, even if it is not *The Bacchae* that is being staged” (230). This crux blurs the difference between Euripides’ *Bakkhai* and ‘Dionysiac drama’, however one construes that concept.

In the end, then, the author only partially answers her own question. “It is perhaps no surprise, then, that Dionysus, the god of theatre, came back to life on a stage approximately forty years ago when the process of globalization was set in motion” (230). ‘Perhaps no surprise’ is a telling qualifier here: correlation is not causation. All told, Fischer-Lichte uses Dionysos and the Dionysiac as a paradigm for post-globalization theatre; she then applies that paradigm to a specific group of productions which staged a dramatization—not necessarily Euripides’ dramatization—of the story of Dionysos and Pentheus. And as one would expect from a renowned theatre historian engaging with a classic play, the resulting book holds plenty of interest for students of tragedy, reception, and theatre history.

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