



A Level

# Drama and theatre

## *The Bacchae* (Euripides)

### Background

- Greek tragedy: an error of judgement due to character *hamartia* brings downfall.
- Performance at the Festival of Dionysus competition in Athens.
- Written in a variety of metres.
- Clear structure – prologue; parados; six episodes and five stasima, exodos.
- Narrative arc – exposition, rising action, climax, falling action, denouement.
- Non-realistic formal static acting style for main actors.
- Mobile and choreographed chorus who dance, chant, sing, speak.
- Chorus function as narrator, commentator and interactor.
- Range of speech types – long oration, lighter narrative, quick line-taking conversation.
- Limited stage directions.

### Key characters

**Dionysos:** Half mortal, cousin to Pentheus, god of wine, theatre, hedonism and fertility. Uses disguises; manipulative, vengeful, clever, articulate, remorseless, powerful, alluring, attractive, androgynous.

**Pentheus:** Young king of Thebes, Dionysos' cousin. Conservative, arrogant, vain, powerful, self-assured, aggressive, harsh, self-conscious, curious, voyeuristic. Murdered and torn to pieces.

**Agave:** Pentheus' mother, Dionysos' aunt. Punished by Dionysos, loses her mind, becomes a Maenad, kills Pentheus thinking he is a lion, distraught. Banished into exile.

**Kadmos:** Father of Agave and Semele, mother of Dionysos. Old and wise. Reverential; follows gods; knows mortals' place; tries to dissuade Pentheus; joins the Bacchae; caring but bleak with Agave; loses all; exiled.

**Teiresias:** Blind and old, a sightseer, friend of Kadmos. Rejuvenated. Follows the god because it is wise. Warns Pentheus against his own stupidity.

**Messengers:** Three in total, of lower status. Provide narrative of highly significant events. All recognise and repeat the importance of not disobeying a god.

**Chorus:** Women following the cult of Dionysos, Maenads, Bakkhants. Dressed in soft skin with a pine cone on spear. Out of their minds in 'a spiritual reality'. Free, independent, uninhibited, at one with nature, violent and terrifying.

### Historical context

- Theatre of Dionysos, Athens
- Original production date: 405 BC
- Amphitheatre staging (thrust); tiered seating
- Natural light; outdoor performance
- 3 actors on *skene*. 3 actors multiroled
- Twelve to fifteen chorus members in orchestra
- All actors male and masked, costume may suggest status; simple props
- No deaths shown on stage; crane for gods
- Singing, chanting, speaking, dancing chorus

### Acting

- Underpinned by **research** and off-text work to establish status, social class, motivation, intent, super objective, relationships, backstory and character arc.
- Use **live theatre performances** to inspire you and influence your acting ideas. Consider: what happened, how, why, what you liked, how you could adapt the idea?
- Experiment and explore **practically**. Focus on ensuring your performance decisions communicate your intentions and chosen style. Make sure you can clearly explain what you are doing, how you are doing it and why.

### Vocal skills

- Communicate meaning via tone, volume, tempo, pause, pitch, intonation, musicality and accent.
- Also consider vocal sounds: breath, sigh, cry, sing, hum, chant, whisper, hesitation, stutter.
- Consider vocal skills for more stylised approaches.

### Physical skills

- Communicate meaning through posture, gait, body language, facial expression and gesture.
- Also consider tempo, rhythm, pace, energy, dynamics, direction, weight, speed and flow.
- Consider physical skills for more stylised approaches, e.g. dance sequences, physical theatre, stylised naturalism: unison, canon, repetition, motif, slow motion, exaggeration.

### Interaction

- Communicate meaning through character positioning, spatial relationships, proxemics, vocal choices and physical choices, driven by motivation and reaction.
- Needs to effectively communicate the relationship between characters.
- Between two or more characters, also with the audience or with the space/set.

### Themes

- Violence and death
- Identity and disguise
- Confinement and freedom
- Conflict and contradiction
- The human and the divine

### Motifs and symbols:

- Bull, lion, hair, hunting, disguise, nature, fawnskin and spears

### Directing

- Will your version of *The Bacchae* be a faithful interpretation or a reinterpretation?
- What staging and style are you are using?
- How are you interpreting the text? What do you want to say through your production?
- Which themes will your work emphasise?
- How do you imagine the characters and their relationships?
- How will you direct your actors to communicate relationships and motivation? How will you use character positioning and proxemics to communicate meaning?
- How can you link to contemporary context to make the play relevant?
- Which rehearsal techniques might you use with your actors, and how and why?

### Design

Are you creating a faithful interpretation or a reinterpretation? Use live theatre to inspire you and influence your ideas. How will actors interact with the design elements? **Decisions must be consistent with your chosen style.**

#### **Set and props – location, setting, period, themes, atmosphere, symbols**

Stage type; style; layout of space; size of space; entrances and exits; colours; materials; textures; shapes; symbols; levels; projection surfaces; floor; backdrop/cyclorama; furniture and props (style, size, colour, material, condition, location, use) above the stage; suspended from above.

#### **Costume, hair, make-up – status, age, context, personality, circumstances, location**

Garment: colour; size; condition; texture; material; time period. Hair: style; colour; condition; accessories. Masks and make-up: face; hands; feet; body; special effects.

#### **Lighting – mood, atmosphere, location, time of day, emphasis, emotion**

Naturalistic or non-naturalistic; colour; intensity; angle; positioning; type of lantern; birdie; special; practical; wash; gel; gobo; moving head; strobe; torches; phones.

#### **Sound – location, atmosphere, emotion, tension, pace, amplification**

Music; atmospheric; ambient; special effect; diegetic; non-diegetic; volume; fade; layering; soundscape; microphones; reverb; echo; delay; effects and treatment; speaker positioning.