



ANCIENT GREEK THEATER, *THE BACCHAE*, AND THE POLITICS OF THEATER

In late November of last year, a conversation arose in the public discourse about the role of theater in society. It was prompted by the cast of the musical juggernaut *Hamilton* breaking with the usual protocol to directly address an audience member, Vice President-elect Mike Pence, to ask that Pence and the upcoming administration be inspired by the show to “work on behalf of all of us.” A small scandal erupted afterwards, with some condemning the cast of *Hamilton* for bringing politics into what they perceived to be a place of entertainment—the theater. The President-elect, Donald Trump, weighed in, tweeting that “The Theater must always be a safe and special place.”

But while theater is no doubt a special place, to imply that it must be “safe” from pointed civic discourse is to misunderstand the role of theater from its very beginnings. In ancient Greece, theater was performed exclusively as part of a civic festival—the Greater Dionysia, a festival honoring the god Dionysus (god of wine, the harvest, and reveling)—that was presented to all of Athens to teach valuable lessons about how to live as a human being and as a citizen. The festival was so important that the four days of its duration were made a national holiday in order to allow all citizens (and many visitors) to attend.

The Greater Dionysia began with an elaborate parade, in which a large statue of Dionysus was carried to Athens. After it was celebrated with

revelry (naturally), the statue was carried to the theater, where it was placed in the audience in order to watch the plays with the rest of the Athenian citizenry (although there is some debate as to whether women were allowed to watch). As many as 16,000 Athenians would watch three days of plays, all competing to be declared the winner of the festival by a group of judges chosen by lottery from amongst the populace.

The plays themselves consisted of three types: comedies, tragedies, and satyr plays (bawdy burlesques that provided emotional release after the tragedies). Far from being merely entertaining, both comedies and tragedies had very pointed and specific political functions. The comedies were often cutting political satires, openly mocking famous figures in Athenian politics and society (most of whom would be sitting in the audience with everyone else). The tragedies told stories, often based on myths, of humans who defied the gods and suffered greatly for it.

Euripides’ *The Bacchae*, the play upon which *Hurricane Diane* is based, is one such tragedy. The winner of the Greater Dionysia festival of 405 B.C., *The Bacchae* begins with Dionysus (who was also called Bacchus) himself addressing the audience (as does our version of Dionysus, Diane). The King of Thebes, Pentheus, has outlawed the worship of Dionysus. In punishment, Dionysus returns to Thebes and gathers together a group of women,

the maenads, who revel and dance in ecstatic madness outside the city. Pentheus’ own mother is seduced into the group, and when the king (encouraged by a disguised Dionysus) goes to spy on them, she and the other women, in the midst of their frenzied madness, rip him into pieces. Thinking she has killed a lion, she carries her son’s head back into the city. Although it is a brutal punishment, it is presented as the just end to disrespecting a god. In seeing this story, all of Athens, rich and poor, would sit shoulder to shoulder and watch a story about a king who fails, in itself a leveler of social hierarchy. But more than this, all would see a warning about hubris; we human beings are not large enough to deny the force of a higher power, whether it is a god like Dionysus or the warnings of Mother Earth.

In ancient Greece, theater was a vital force, bringing the people of Athens together to learn, to feel, and to question. Yes, theater was certainly entertaining (after all, we’re still rapt by many of these same plays centuries later), but it was also a key tool of civic engagement. Theater today remains so. Although theater has changed vastly in its form and content (and in the sheer variety of its incarnations), the shared experience of taking in a story enacted on a stage and allowing it to affect your mind and heart is a vital part of being a human.

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