

Descriptions of a Struggle

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Greek tragedy has been an essential ingredient of opera since the time of Monteverdi; yet if Rameau, Gluck or Strauss essentially refashioned the tales of Euripides and Aeschylus to suit the dramatic conventions of their own eras, Hans Werner Henze's *The Bassarids* seems to have been an attempt to tap into the ritualistic strangeness of ancient theatre itself. The opera, an adaptation of the *Bacchae* of Euripides, opened the Komische Oper's current season in a new production by Barrie Kosky that seized on the work's alien austerity; with two powerful leads, focussed musical direction from Vladimir Jurowski and the impressive choral presence of Vocalconsort Berlin, it was a compelling modern journey into one of the ancient world's most ambiguous tragedies.

Kosky: The
Bassarids
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**Berlin, domingo,
13 de octubre de
2019.** Komische
Oper Berlin.

Henze: The
Bassarids. Barrie Kosky, director. Sean
Panikkar (Dionysus), Günter Papendell
(Pentheus), Jens Larsen (Cadmus), Tanja
Ariane Baumgartner (Agave), Vera-Lotte
Boecker (Autonoe), Ivan Turšić (Tiresias),
Tom Erik Lie (Captain) and Margarita
Nekrasova (Beroe). Vocalconsort Berlin.
Orchestra of the Komische Oper Berlin.
Vladimir Jurowski, conductor



Mr Kosky was determined never to let us forget that we were in a theatre: when the audience entered the auditorium the singers were already on stage, smiling, chatting, and greeting one another in an unaffected, unrehearsed manner; the pit was raised so that most of the orchestra was visible, and several groups of musicians were arranged, per Henze's instructions, on the stage itself, to either side of the palace steps where the action took place; the house lights remained on for the entire evening, dimming only in the final seconds. If the goal of much modern theatre is to provide its audience with an environment of total immersion, Mr Kosky's approach forced us to consider the artifice and exaggeration that formed such a crucial element of classical drama.

This is not to say that Mr Kosky was striving for anything close to an authentic period recreation; the essential modernity of the production was visible in the delightful costumes and the minimalist set (both the work of the vastly talented Katrin Lea Tag). Nor did Mr Kosky's distancing techniques ultimately prevent the audience from being drawn into the tragedy. While the peripheral characters were brilliantly rendered, the staging was ultimately conceived as an extended confrontation between two implacable forces – the angry god Dionysus, and Pentheus the sceptical king of Thebes – and each scene seemed carefully tailored to bring us ever closer to a climactic moment of crisis.

If the *Bacchae* still has the power to shock and overwhelm some two and a half millennia



Henze: *The Bassarids*. Vladimir Jurowski, conductor. Barrie Kosky, director. Berlin, Komische Oper, October 2019. © 2019 by Monika Ritterhaus /Komische Oper Berlin.

after its first performance – the libretto, by W. H. Auden and Chester Kallmann, remains reasonably faithful to the structure of Euripides – it is perhaps because the forces and ideologies at war in the conflict between Dionysus and Pentheus remain somewhat obscure. The story has received countless interpretations over the centuries, but Mr Kosky avoided the pitfall of trying to clarify the struggle, and focussed instead on its dynamics. What emerged was less a polemic on religious madness and autocratic folly than a distillation of tragic essence that

was all the more powerful for being presented with such relative restraint. Anyone who was present for Mr Kosky's recent production of *Moses und Aron* would be forgiven for imagining that an opera about a town gripped by Dionysian frenzy might be possessed of a certain burlesque indulgence, but the spare, suggestive quality of the even the wildest scenes allowed the tragedy to unfold with devastating precision. Even the reinstatement of the 'Judgment of Calliope' episode from the 1966 version, a play within a play rendered with a comedic lightness of touch, served mostly to underscore the severity of the principal action.

The escalating conflict between god and king was given its immediacy by two excellent central performances. The role of Pentheus is vocally and physically demanding and Günter Papendell embraced it with impressive gusto. His crisp tone and stern manner captured the haughtiness and inflexibility of a ruler whose reason had been warped by power; yet even in Mr Papendell's angriest assertions of authority there was the constant sense of a man unravelling, and the more he appeared to lose control, the more his performance seemed to gather in strength. As the regal façade of Pentheus began to disintegrate, the quiet resolve of Sean Panikkar's Dionysus began to reveal itself. The deferential quality of his early scenes was replaced with an ever greater sense of command, culminating in a gripping final scene in which the character's motives and identity are finally revealed. Yet it was the central confrontation with Pentheus, when the two characters seemed evenly matched, that would stand as the evening's most captivating moment.

As Agave, Tanja Ariane Baumgartner had a number of strong early appearances (and was delightful in the 'Judgment of Calliope' interlude) but was at her most compelling in her final scene, revelling feverishly in the bloody remains of Pentheus. The Tiresias of Ivan Turšić was as notable for his animated vocal delivery as for the manic physical contortions that came as he was overcome by religious fervour, and the sturdy-toned Jens Larsen had several emotionally fraught

scenes as Cadmus, the opera's unheeded voice of reason. Yet it was the choir who provided the evening with one of its finest performances, slipping on-stage at crucial moments and never failing to elevate the level of intensity whenever they appeared.

Although the orchestra was spread between the pit and the stage, with a vibraphone and celesta to either side of the seats and a small trumpet section in the left and right balconies, under the exacting direction of Vladimir Jurowski the disposition of musicians soon ceased to matter. For all the structural complexities and unexpected flourishes – the guitar and mandolins of the 'Judgment' interlude or the flurry of exotic percussion that accompanies Pentheus' journey to Cithaeron – Mr Jurowski's sense of the score as an extended commentary on the tragedy ensured that even the most dazzling passages remained tightly bound to the action on stage. His ability to maintain concentrated tension over the opera's two and a half continuous hours was as essential to the success of the production as Mr Kosky's heightened sense of the grand struggle at the heart of the story.



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Approaches to tragedy have varied considerably in the time since Euripides, but the fundamental goal has remained largely consistent: one emerged from *The Bassarids* slightly dazed, dismayed perhaps by the immutability of fate, but strangely elated from the experience of having watched it unfold. If Henze and his librettists drew their inspiration from the conventions of Greek theatre, the new Komische Oper production offered a stylish and highly accessible demonstration of how relevant those conventions remain in the twenty-first century.