

**RESOURCES FOR WORKSHOP WITH BRYONY LAVERY**  
**GETTING STARTED AND CREATING THEATRICAL CHARACTERS**  
**TUESDAY 20<sup>TH</sup> JANUARY 2015**

**EXTRACT FROM THE BACCHAE BY EURIPIDES**

**CHORUS**

Tell us everything, then: this tyrant king  
Bent on cruelty – how did he die?

**MESSENGER**

When we had left behind the outlying parts of Thebes  
And crossed the river Asopus, we began to climb  
Toward the uplands of Cithaeron, Pentheus and I –  
I went as his attendance – and the foreigner  
Who was our guide to the spectacle we were to see.  
Well, first we sat down in a grassy glade. We kept  
Our footsteps and our talk as quiet as possible,  
So as to see without being seen. We found ourselves  
In a valley full of streams, with cliffs on either side.  
There, under the close shade of branching pines, the Maenads  
Were sitting, their hands busy at their happy tasks;  
Some of them twining a fresh crown of ivy leaves  
For a stripped thyrsus; others, gay as fillies loosed  
From painted yokes, were singing holy Bacchic songs,  
Each answering other. But the ill-fated Pantheus saw  
None of this; and he said, “My friend, from where we stand  
My eyes cannot make out these so-called worshippers;  
But if I climbed down a towering pine-tree on the cliff  
I would have a clear view of their shameful practices.”  
And then I saw that foreigner do an amazing thing.  
He took hold of a pine-tree’s soaring, topmost branch,  
And dragged it down, down, down to the dark earth.  
It was bent  
In a circle as a bow is bent, as a wheel’s curve,  
Drawn with a compass, bends the rim to its own shape;  
The foreigner took that mountain-pine in his two hands  
And bent it down – a thing no mortal man could do.  
Then seating Pentheus on a high branch, he began  
To let the tree spring upright, slipping it through his hands  
Steadily, taking care he should not be flung off.  
The pine-trunk, straightened, soared into the soaring sky,  
Bearing my master seated astride, so that he was  
More visible to the Maenads than they were to him.

He was just coming into view on his high perch,  
When out of the sky a voice – Dionysus, I suppose;  
That foreigner was nowhere to be seen – pealed forth:  
“Women, here is the man who made a mock of you,  
And me, and of my holy rites. Now punish him.”  
And in the very moment the voice spoke, a flash  
Of dreadful fire stretched between earth and the high heaven.  
The air fell still. The wooded glade held every leaf  
Still. You could hear no cry of any beast. The women,  
Not having caught distinctly what the voice uttered,  
Stood up and gazed around. Then came a second word  
Of command. As soon as Cadmus’ daughters recognised  
The clear bidding of Bacchus, with the speed of doves  
They darted forward, and all the Bacchae after them.  
Through the torrent-filled valley, over the rocks, possessed  
By the very breath of Bacchus they went leaping on.  
Then, when they saw my master crouched high in the pine,  
At first they climbed the cliff which towered opposite,  
And violently flung at him pieces of rocks, or boughs  
Of pine-trees which they hurled as javelins; and some  
Aimed with the thyrsus; through the high air all around  
Their wretched target missiles flew. Yet every aim  
Fell short, the tree’s height baffled all their eagerness;  
While Pentheus, helpless in this pitiful trap, sat there.  
Then, with a force like lightning, they tore down branches  
Of oak, and with these tried to prize up the tree’s roots.  
When all their struggles met with no success, Agave  
Cried out, “Come, Maenads, stand in a circle round the tree  
And take hold of it. we must catch this climbing beast,  
Or he’ll disclose the secret dances of Dionysus.”  
They came; a thousand hands gripped on the pine and tore it.  
Out of the ground. Then from his high perch plunging, crashing  
To the earth Pentheus fell, with one incessant scream  
As he understood what end was near.

His mother first,

As priestess, led the rite of death, and fell upon him.  
He tore the headband from his hair, that his wretched mother  
Might recognise him and not kill him. “Mother,” he cried  
Touching her cheek, “It is I, your own son Pentheus, whom  
You bore to Echion. Mother, have mercy; I have sinned,  
But I am still your own son. Do not take my life!”  
Agave was foaming at the mouth; her rolling eyes  
Were wild; she was not in her right mind, but possessed  
By Bacchus, and she paid no heed to him. She grasped  
His left arm between wrist and elbow, set her foot

Against his ribs, and tore his arm off by the shoulder.  
It was no strength of hers that did it, but the god  
Filled her, and made it easy. On the other side  
Ino was at him, tearing at his flesh; and now  
Autonoe joined them, and the whole maniacal horde.  
A single and continuous yell arose – Pentheus  
Shrieking as long as life was left in him, the women  
Howling in triumph. One of them carried off an arm,  
Another a foot, the boot still laced on it. The ribs  
Were stripped, clawed clean; and the women's hands, thick red with blood,  
Were tossing, catching, like a plaything, Pentheus' flesh.  
His body lies – no easy task to find – scattered  
Under hard rocks, or in the green woods. His poor head –  
His mother carries it, fixed on her thyrsus-point,  
Openly over Cithaeron's pastures, thinking it  
The heads of a young mountain lion. She has left her sisters  
Dancing among the Maenads, and herself comes here  
Inside the walls, exulting in her hideous prey,  
Shouting to Bacchus, calling him her fellow-hunter,  
Her partner in the kill, comrade in victory.  
But Bacchus gives her bitter tears for her reward.  
Now I will go. I must find some place far away  
From his horror, before Agave returns home.  
A sound and humble heart that reverences the gods  
Is man's noblest possession; and the same virtue  
Is wisest too, I think, for those who practise it.

*Exit the Messenger*

#### **CHORUS**

Let us dance a dance to Bacchus, shout and sing  
For the fall of Pentheus, heir of the dragon's seed,  
Who hid his beard in a woman's gown,  
And sealed his death with the holy sign  
Of ivy wreathing a fennel-reed,  
When bull led man to the ritual slaughter-ring.  
Frenzied daughters of Cadmus, what renown  
Your victory wins you – such a song  
As groans must stifle, tears must drown!  
Emblem of conquest, brave and fine! –  
A mother's hand, defiled  
With blood and dripping red  
Caresses the torn head  
Of her own murdered child!

But look! I see her – there, running towards the palace –  
Agave, Pentheus’ mother, her eyes wildly rolling.  
Come, welcome them – Dionysus’ holy company.

*AGAVE appears, frenzied and panting, with PENTHEUS’ head held in her hand. The rest of her band of devotees, whom the CHORUS saw approaching with her, do not enter; but a few are seen standing by the entrance, where they wait until the end of the play.*

**AGAVE**

Women of Asia! Worshippers of Bacchus!

*AGAVE tries to show them PENTHEUS’ head; they shrink from it.*

**CHORUS**

Why do you urge me? Oh!

**AGAVE**

I am bringing home from the mountains  
A vine-branch freshly cut,  
For the gods have blessed our hunting.

**CHORUS**

We see it ... and welcome you in fellowship.

**AGAVE**

I caught him without a trap,  
A lion-cub, young and wild.  
Look, you may see him: there!

**CHORUS**

Where was it?

**AGAVE**

                                On Cithaeron;  
The wild and empty mountain –

**CHORUS**

Cithaeron!

**AGAVE**

                                ... spilt his life blood.

**CHORUS**

Who shot him?

**AGAVE**

I was first;  
All the women are singing,  
“Honour to great Agave!”

**CHORUS**

And then – who next?

**AGAVE**

Why, Cadmus;...

**CHORUS**

What – Cadmus?

**AGAVE**

Yes, his daughters –  
But after me, after me –  
Laid their hands to the kill.  
Today was a splendid hunt!  
Come now, join in the feast!

**CHORUS**

What, wretched woman? *Feast?*

**AGAVE** (*tenderly stroking the head as she holds it*)

This calf is young: how thickly  
The new-grown hair goes crisping  
Up to his delicate crest!

**CHORUS**

Indeed, his long hair makes him  
Look like some wild creature.

**AGAVE**

The god is a skilled hunter;  
And he poised his hunting women,  
And hurled them at the quarry.

**CHORUS**

True, our god is a hunter.

**AGAVE**

Do you praise me?

**CHORUS**

Yes, we praise you.

**AGAVE**

So will the sons of Cadmus...

**CHORUS**

And Pantheus too, Agave?

**AGAVE**

Yes, he will praise his mother  
For the lion-cub she killed.

**CHORUS**

Oh, fearful!

**AGAVE**

Ay, fearful!

**CHORUS**

You are happy?

**AGAVE**

I am enraptured;  
Great in the eyes of the world,  
Great are the deeds I've done,  
And the hunt that I hunted there!

**CHORUS**

Then show it, poor Agave – this triumphant spoil  
You've brought home; show it to all the citizens of Thebes.

**AGAVE**

Come, all you Thebans living within these towered walls,  
Come, see the beast we, Cadmus' daughters, caught and killed;  
Caught not with nets or thonged Thessalian javelins,  
But with our own bare arms and fingers. After this  
Should huntsmen glory in their exploits, who must buy  
Their needless tools from armourers? We with our hands  
Hunted and took this beast, then tore it limb from limb.  
Where is my father? Let old Cadmus come. And where  
Is my son Pantheus? Let him climb a strong ladder  
And nail up on the cornice of the palace wall  
This lion's head that I have hunted and brought home.

*Enter CADMUS with attendants bearing the body of PANTHEUS*

### **CADMUS**

Come, men, bring your sad burden that was Pantheus. Come,  
Set him at his own door. By weary, endless search  
I found his body's remnants scattered far and wide  
About Cithaeron's glens, or hidden in thick woods.  
I gathered them and brought them here. I had already  
Returned with old Teresias from the Bacchic dance,  
And was inside the walls, when news was brought me of  
My daughters' terrible deed. I turned straight back; and now  
Return, bringing my grandson, whom the Maenads killed.  
I saw Autonoe, who bore Actaeon and Aristaeus,  
And Ino with her, there among the trees, still rapt  
In their unhappy frenzy; but I understood  
That Agave had come dancing on her way to Thebes –  
And there indeed she is, a sight for misery!

### **AGAVE**

Father! Now you may boast as loudly as you will  
That you have sired the noblest daughters of this age!  
I speak of all three, but myself especially.  
I have left weaving at the loom for greater things,  
For hunting wild beasts with my bare hands. See this prize,  
Here in my arms; I won it, and it shall be hung  
On your palace wall. There, father, take it in your hands.  
Be proud of my hunting; call your friends to a feast; let them  
Bless you and envy you for the splendour of my deed.

### **CADMUS**

Oh, misery unmeasured, sight intolerable!  
Oh, bloody deed enacted by most pitiful hands!  
What noble prize is this you lay at the gods' feet,  
Calling the city, and me, to a banquet? Your wretchedness  
Demands the bitterest tears; but mine is next to yours.  
Dionysus has dealt justly, but pursued justice  
Too far; born of my blood, he has destroyed my house.

### **AGAVE**

What an ill-tempered creature an old man is! How full  
Of scowls! I wish my son were a greater hunter like  
His mother, hunting beasts with the young men of Thebes;  
But *he* can only fight with gods. Father, you must  
Correct him. – Will not someone go and call him here  
To see me, and to share in my great happiness?

**CADMUS**

Alas, my daughters! If you come to understand  
What you have done, how terrible your pain will be!  
If you remain as you are now, though you could not  
Be happy, at least you will not feel your wretchedness.

**AGAVE**

Why not happy? What cause have I for wretchedness?

**CADMUS**

Come here. First turn your eyes this way. Look at the sky.

**AGAVE**

I am looking. Why should you want me to look at it?

**CADMUS**

Does it appear the same to you, or is it changed?

**AGAVE**

Yes, it is clearer than before, more luminous.

**CADMUS**

And this disturbance of your mind – is it still there?

**AGAVE**

I don't know what you mean; but – yes, I feel a change;  
My mind is somehow clearer than it was before.

**CADMUS**

Could you now listen to me and give a clear reply?

**AGAVE**

Yes, father. I have forgotten what we said just now.

**CADMUS**

When you were married, whose house did you go to then?

**AGAVE**

You gave me to Echion, of the sown race, they said.

**CADMUS**

Echion had a son born to him. Who was he?

**AGAVE**

Pentheus. His father lay with me; I bore a son.



**CADMUS**

Yes; and whose head is that you are holding in your arms?

**AGAVE**

A lion's – so the women said who hunted it.

**CADMUS**

Then look straight at it. Come, to look is no great task.

*AGAVE looks; and suddenly screams*

**AGAVE**

What am I looking at? What is this in my hands?

**CADMUS**

Look at it steadily; come closer to the truth.

**AGAVE**

I see – O gods, what horror! Oh, what misery!

**CADMUS**

Does this appear to you to be a lion's head?

**AGAVE**

No! I hold Pantheus' head in my accursed hand.