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The Bacchae 2.1

by CHARLES L. MEE

based on the play by Euripides

Dionysus,
a transvestite in a white pleated linen skirt,
combat boots,
an orange silk blouse or tunic,
a cut-off woman's nylon stocking on his head, knotted at the top,
a gold cigarette holder
five days' growth of beard
enters the stage at a dignified pace,
takes his place in the pool of light,
turns front,
holds for a moment.
Then he begins to whirl very slowly, like a dervish,
at center stage,
— in silence.

After some time, we hear a lone flute play.

A woman enters and walks with simple strides to another slowly appearing pool of light on stage, turns front, holds for a moment.

Then she begins to whirl slowly.

These women have many qualities, as we will see in the course of the piece, but all of them must, first of all, be artists: dancers, singers, operatic singers, players of musical instruments, Butoh performers, animal trainers, herders of peacocks or

herons, or possessed of other extraordinary and highly developed arts that they perform with such power and beauty as to break your heart with that alone.

These women are related—politically, historically, and spiritually—to the agrarian, democratic, matriarchal Minoans, who were always shown bare-breasted in Minoan art. Whether or not these women are bare-breasted, they should have large, flowing skirts of spectacular colors, wonderful hair, hundreds of bright ribbons in their hair, astonishing necklaces or other pieces of jewelry.

So they are not just women, not just third world women, not just people from the revolutionary periphery, not just artists, but Dionysian artists.

It might be thought politically incorrect to bring women from other countries into this piece, treating them as "other" and "exotic"—and better to cast modern American urban women instead. I could be wrong, but I think that is a cop-out. These women should be foreign; they bring something profoundly different, alien into the world of this piece—deep passions from origins unknown to the world of the play. This was Euripides' intention, and mine. And it may be too easy for audiences today to think they understand modern American urban women even when they don't. In any case: these are foreign women; we don't know them.

It would be best if the women were accompanied onto the stage by a live orchestra that played flutes, drums, Indonesian gongs and bells, donkey jaws, the kora, balaphon, sitar, cymbals, and other instruments. And if some of them played instruments themselves.

We should hear a beautiful song in keeping with the trance-like whirling, something related to soul music.

Or one woman might enter now, step to a microphone and sing a torch song.

Slowly, Dionysus moves toward the periphery and then exits.

And then the whirling Bacchae
erupt in an ecstatic dance.

Leaps, shouts, clapping
to Zulu Jive music.

The dancers take turns with solos
while others are at the side singing and clapping.

An invigorating, sensual, sexual piece,

filled with intense pleasure
soaring spirits, joy.

Tiresias comes in, haltingly, at the end of this music.

The Bacchae part to let him take center stage.

He is an old man, and blind, with a white cane.

LIGHTS COME UP ON THE WHOLE STAGE, REVEALING CHANDELIERS

18TH CENTURY STRAIGHT-BACKED, SILK-UPHOLSTERED CHAIRS

Tiresias wears a gray pinstripe Brooks Brothers suit—and a flamboyant saffron tie and saffron handkerchief in the breast pocket of his suit jacket.

He keeps shuffling forward as he speaks.

TIRESIAS

Kadmos!

I'm here!

Excuse me.

Would you say: Tiresias is here!

We agreed to meet.

He's not a shy man.

He would speak up if he were here.

KADMOS (entering)

Tiresias!

(He wears the same suit and hat as Tiresias and the same flamboyant orange tie and breast pocket handkerchief.

He is older than Tiresias and bent almost double.

Kadmos and Tiresias are old liberals; they speak well and truly, with understanding, and tolerance; they are blissful, voluble, bubbling over with happiness, irrelevant. They are not old, slow-speaking men; they are garrulous; their talk rolls on rapidly.

Here I am!

(They shuffle toward one another to embrace, speaking all the time.)

They say to me: you're an old man, take it easy.

I say to them: what am I saving it for?

There are two sorts of people:

Those who say bring it on

TIRESIAS

I say bring it on.

(They embrace, hold one another for a moment with great affection, patting one another, then turn with only that moment's break and begin shuffling out together, resuming their non-stop talk.

As they move toward one another, the Bacchae all slowly move back and to the periphery, to stand or sit, and watch.)

KADMOS

Rather join the women in the mountains than stay here with the men.

TIRESIAS

Do what we please.

KADMOS

Bake bread.

TIRESIAS

Sing songs.

KADMOS

Bathe a woman's feet.

TIRESIAS

Eat olives.

KADMOS

Drink wine.

And think about those times
when men and women worked together in the fields
in the summer afternoons
and in autumn harvesting the grapes
the wheat and olives
a picnic in the fields at midday
telling stories
lying down together in the shade
to make love in the afternoon
and then go back to work in early evening
side by side
till dark
and time for some small supper
some wine, and friends,
dancing and sweet sleep together.

[He continues lightly.]

We gave up so much of life when we went to war.
I pray the gods may save us
from the life we've made on earth.

TIRESIAS

Yes. Well.

In the end,
we don't come through life
as we come through each experience along the way—
enriched or changed,
wounded or restored;
in the end we are all
each one of us
no matter who we are
completely
consumed by life.

[Kadmos looks at Tiresias in total incomprehension.]

(Pentheus enters. He wears a blue pinstripe Brooks Brothers suit with a rep stripe silk tie, a white pocket handkerchief.

The contrast between the white establishment male and the chorus of women of color should be immediately striking.

And, while the men talk, the Bacchae are seen from time to time brushing one another's hair, bathing one another's feet, putting oil and perfume on one another—very quietly, dreamily—or, at other times, agitated, and pacing, or PROWLING around the periphery of the stage.

Pentheus is accompanied by two aides, in blue suits, with sunglasses.)

PENTHEUS

Kadmos.

Tiresias.

(They turn to him.

Much of what Pentheus says in the following scene could be spoken with deep anger and, later, fear. But I think it would be best to think of him as a man who considers himself intellectually superior and charming. His rage and fears are repressed. They come out in the form of wit, sarcasm, scorn, banter, mockery, joking. Only occasionally, in a word or a phrase, is the dark side revealed— and then quickly covered by a smile or some other form of recovery. And only later, when he is more seriously threatened, does the dark side come out fully as dark.)

What are these orange things you're wearing?

Are these the colors of Dionysus?

TIRESIAS

They are.

PENTHEUS

And have you brought these women into our house with you?

[SILENCE]

Is this your doing, then, Tiresias,
goaded on my grandfather
to join the latest fashion in spirituality?

They say that Dionysus is a god.
But we know that his mother was as human as we are;
and to say that his father was divine,
well, surely this is a slander against the gods,
to accuse them thus of adultery with a woman of questionable reputation.
And now some disciple of this—fatherless son—has come to town
to preach to us
And what does he have to tell us?
That we should prefer instinct to knowledge.
Prefer passion to wisdom.
Prefer whim to plan.
Is this the advice the gods are giving us these days?

So.
Will a man who succumbs to every urge for immediate gratification
be capable of painting a portrait of Madame Claud Monet
reading on a summer afternoon,
her feet resting lightly on a pillow
embroidered with a peacock?

PENTHEUS' FIRST AIDE
Let's call a spade a spade.

PENTHEUS' SECOND AIDE
If I were the chief of police, I'd get a hundred good men, give them each a baseball
bat, and have them walk down Duval Street and dare one of these freaks to stick
his head over the sidewalk. That's the way it was done in Key West the days that I
remember.

PENTHEUS
I acknowledge my instincts.
I enjoy my passions.
I like to indulge a whim.

But there are other pleasures, too.

The pleasure of a well-ordered society that guarantees us peace in our homes and in our streets.

The pleasure of living not in mud huts with roofs of thatch but in buildings of marble that may take some careful planning to design, some sense of balance and harmony so that they are built to stand, some years of labor to complete, some sense of understanding to appreciate.

There is the pleasure of harmonious music.

The pleasure of elegant dance.

The pleasure of uncommon food, uncommonly prepared, and served.

The pleasures of civility.

KADMOS

I enjoy these pleasures, too.

PENTHEUS

I must admit, I find some satisfaction in elegance, precision, exactitude, discipline, a certain rigor of intellect, a certain clarity of mathematics, the grandeur of the law, the rules of perspective, the game of whist, the deep and uniformly green lawns of the quadrangles of Exeter and Andover, the Dow Theory, the traditional brown brogan for men, the wool cardigan, the crystal paper weight, the finely crafted automobile, the sound of a footfall on parquet floor, the touch of green baize, the leather armchair. But more than this: the lucidity of Haydn, the satisfaction of a syllogism, the human suffering of Beethoven transmuted to the instruments of a symphony, the act of forethought in a game of chess or contract bridge, the invention of the wheel, the glass lens, the electric light, of cybernetics.

These are not contemptible artifacts of human existence.

KADMOS

On the contrary, I'd be the first to say....

PENTHEUS' FIRST AIDE

This is not sleaze. This is not a bullwhip up your ass. This is not squash beetles on your chest. This is not suck my dick. This is not put your dick in piss. This is not we want Rudi, especially in the nude. This is not touch my discharge. This is not plant your field with two kinds of seed. This is not wear clothing woven of two kinds of material. This is not cut your body for the dead. This is not eat your meat with blood in it. This is not take a shit.

KADMOS

No doubt.

And yet,

one never has a grasp of the whole truth
instantaneously.

One arrives at the truth by learning a little here, a little there.

I speak as a man of the world,
don't you know.

PENTHEUS

You speak of shifting with the breeze,

KADMOS

No, no.

PENTHEUS

The politician's day:

waking up every morning and asking yourself first thing:
now where can I compromise today?

PENTHEUS FIRST AIDE

Whose dick can I suck?

KADMOS

No, no, not that, but:

Let the other fellow in.

PENTHEUS' SECOND AIDE

Let the other fellow in.

PENTHEUS

Shall we accept any sort of behavior at a dinner party nowadays just because
what's done is done?

Shall we spit the prune pits out into our hands at the breakfast table now?

Would this be what you mean by flexibility?

KADMOS

And yet, there is a human truth in politics.

PENTHEUS

Put both feet on the slippery slope.

TIRESIAS

Rather place your life in the hands of others

where it rests in any case,

and learn to trust.

You can't defend yourself

against life itself.

PENTHEUS

Tiresias, my old friend,

I must tell you,

these are lovely sentiments,

but do you know what the women in the mountains say about you?

These women who left their homes

their husbands and their children

left the law behind them

and went out to live with one another,

women with women in the wild.

They say that men like us—all men, in fact, all men—are incapable of empathy, love, friendship, affection, or tenderness, that a man is an isolated unit, a half-dead, unresponsive lump of flesh, obsessed with screwing, that a man will swim a river of snot, wade nostril-deep through a mile of vomit if he thinks there'll be a friendly cunt waiting for him at the other end. That a man, finally, is a creature whose sensitivities will allow him to fuck mud.

Men should be extinguished, these women say, crushed and stepped on, utterly extinguished.

Think of the dwarf rose

miniature roses of all sorts

tea roses, cabbage roses, moss roses,

their colors of vibrant oranges, delicate pinks,

deep crimsons, unique lavenders

tiny, exquisitely formed flowers
perfectly sculpted buds
that can vary in shape
from a kernel of corn
to a thumbnail-sized teardrop
unfolding with quiet grace
or exploding into a riot of color
a mass of tiny red petals.

Do you think these are the product of nature?

No.

They are the creatures of culture,
of care and nurturing,
of hybridization
at the hands of patient human beings.

FIRST AIDE

Of pruning.

SECOND AIDE

And training.

FIRST AIDE

Of taking care to remove the suckers, water sprouts,
crossed limbs, dead limbs
any growth that appears to be crowding out a healthy plant
or departing from a plant's normal shape

PENTHEUS

And what do you suppose the women are doing in the mountains?
Do you know they tell stories of the husbands they have left behind, and what they
would do to them if these men came out among them,
how they would like to have the dead bodies of their fathers
to hang them by the wrists from wires
choke them, choke them
till they come again and again

PENTHEUS FIRST AIDE

bite off their penises and burn them.

PENTHEUS

Civilization is a treasure!

It is complex, not simple.

One doesn't annihilate it out of impatience,
something that took hundreds of thousands of years,

the lives of millions known and unknown

to create

building from the blood and bone of generations

if you would download a human brain into a computer

you could hammer and throw

you could code and generalize

you'd have an array of right-handed actions

judging each scenario against memory

calculating utility estimates for each combination

switching from the Variations on a Theme mode

to the Choral Mode

by loading the same sequence

into all the serial buffers

so that

where there is a pair of sequences of basic act-types

Epsilon sub 1 and Epsilon sub 2

such that if S sub 1 wanted outcome e

and if S sub 2 wanted outcome not-e,

then S sub 1 would perform Epsilon sub 1 at certain times between t sub 1 and t
sub n

and S sub 2 would perform Epsilon sub 2 at certain times between t sub 1 and t
sub n,

and if S sub 1 were to perform Epsilon sub 1 at these times, and so

forth as you can see, then e would occur at t sub n

This is not something that an ape conceived of in a day

and you would sweep all this away.

Because now you know,

in this moment,

what you didn't know a moment before,

that it is all wrong.

And you are certain of it!

This is the wisdom that comes with age nowadays?

Do you think there haven't been times I've wanted to dress in lace panties to be taken by a gang of strong men?

Do you think I don't remember having coitus with a dog while the housemaid laughed at me?

Do you think I don't remember my brother falling from the window?

Do you think I never dream that my mother and father are killed and burned, and it is a matter of absolute indifference to me?

Do you think I don't remember in my own family there have been candles on the dinner table made from the marrow of the human shin bone, from human fat, from children's fingers?

Do you think I don't know that every time I move my hand this way to my side that I must move it back again exactly as I moved it out— and yet, stay on the path, not pour kerosene on the derelict and set him on fire, that for certain things such as this you will never be forgiven?

I have known days myself when my mind has been shut up in a deep, dark cave where nothing lives but slimy things, where here and there a bluish light flickers and only the moans of animals break the silence.

Do you suppose there is anything that would make me seek out such a world intentionally?

I prefer a world of light!

SECOND AIDE

These woman could be menstruating.

FIRST AIDE

Right.

SECOND AIDE

They say that if a menstruating woman will hold a flower in her hand, it will wither faster than otherwise. Or if a menstruating woman kneads bread dough, the dough won't rise. That in places where there are silver mines, a menstruating woman is not allowed to enter the mine for fear the silver will disappear. And that may seem far-fetched—in fact, that may *be* far-fetched, but the toxins in the saliva of

menstruating women has been measured, and the toxins are 85% in menstruating saliva and 53% in normal saliva, which is probably why the breath of a menstruating woman will cause a blight on carnations and primroses and sweet peas.

FIRST AIDE

And tulips.

SECOND AIDE

And tulips.

KADMOS

Nonetheless.

Are there not women who are athletes.

TIRESIAS

Of course.

KADMOS

And others who are not.

TIRESIAS

Most assuredly.

KADMOS

And are there not women who are eager to learn, and others who hate learning, women who are courageous and women who are cowards?

TIRESIAS

There are.

KADMOS

Women who are guardians, and women who are not. And did we not select the nature of our male guardians in this way, by reasoning concerning their various qualities?

TIRESIAS

We did.

KADMOS

And if women and men have the same nature insofar as these qualities are concerned, and these are the qualities necessary for the guardianship of the city, should not these women share the duties of guardianship with the men, since they are capable and similar to them in their nature?

TIRESIAS

Absolutely.

KADMOS

And should we not seek out their company as one would seek out the company of any who possess such qualities?

TIRESIAS

Certainly.

KADMOS [to Pentheus]

So you see:

We are going up to join the women in the mountains.

PENTHEUS

These are not wise guardians of the home and the state.

These are women who have abandoned all notions of civility.

These are wild women.

KADMOS

My daughter, your mother, is among these creatures.

PENTHEUS

Yes, your daughter is out of her senses.

TIRESIAS

Or in her senses.

Which is to say:

sensible at last.

PENTHEUS

Is it not strange, Tiresias—
think of it—

that our eyes invariably deceive us,
even when we have excellent sight.
You look at the sun every day
and you see a bright disc some few inches in diameter,
when in truth
we know, in our minds,
because the sun is so distant from us,
we know it is hundreds of thousands times larger than our senses comprehend.
The gods have built error into our senses, Tiresias.
It is our reason on which we must rely for true knowledge.
Study optics
you will see how the gods have deceived you—
No—
Cursed you with your senses—
for your senses cannot perceive in any other way
but falsely.

What do you think?

Do you think it takes nothing to maintain a fresh coat of white paint
on a house built in 1790 or 1791
to have its lawn well trimmed
to enjoy some sense of quiet peace
some restful sense of dignity and wellbeing
when you walk down the streets of such a village?
And to maintain such harmony
such perfect, weightless balance
without a struggle
without a feeling of debilitating labor
but with perfect ease
to have it so at home in one's being
as though this work of gentle civility were absolutely innate
as though it were as natural as a pond or lake
is this what you would discard
as though it had no more value than a used paper coffee cup
an empty beer can?

[PENTHEUS SITS DOWN AT THE PIANO AND PLAYS A MEDLEY OF COCKTAIL
BAR SONGS:

Cole Porter, Gershwin, etc.—

and, perhaps before he is finished playing, he begins speaking:]

Shall I be charged with a belief in moderation?

I plead guilty.

What do you think of kissing, for example?

In the ancient days it was a mere form of salutation.

Before the conspirators killed Caesar they kissed his face, hand, and breast.

It was once the custom to kiss the statues of the gods.

At the mysteries of Ceres, initiates kissed one another as a sign of concord.

The kiss was sacred and symbolic.

But there is a danger in kissing

since there is one nerve, the fifth,

which passes from the mouth to the heart

and thence even lower,

thus has nature prepared everything

with delicate industry!

And the little glands of the lips

their spongy tissue

their velvety paps

their fine, ticklish skin

produce in them an exquisite and voluptuous sensation

which is not without analogy to a still more hidden

and still more sensitive part—

and for this reason

for the consequences

that may result unbidden

from so simple a thing as a kiss

does a man of foresight counsel moderation.

[He plays another song, lost in the music,

finishes, sits quietly for a moment,

then turns to his first aide;

speaking calmly, in control, without rage]

Go now. Go at once.
Take some men
and find this effeminate stranger
who preys on our women.
Bring him to me.
We will judge him here.

[Pentheus bolts from the piano and exits as his aides scatter in different directions.]

TIRESIAS
Is he gone, then?

KADMOS
There's no way to stop him.

TIRESIAS
Then there's nothing to do
but to pray for him
and pray that prayers matter.

The boy doesn't know there is a history here.

KADMOS
With ancient gods who served
ancient civilizations
and
in the end
taken all in all
served them well.

TIRESIAS
Or not at all.

[They are gone.]

The Bacchae remain behind, motionless for some moments, in the space that has become their possession, and then one or several of them perform a piece. This could be the place for a Butoh performer, or an Indian dancer.]

Pentheus enters, followed momentarily by his two aides who have the chained Dionysus between them.

PENTHEUS

Bring him to me here
where I can look at him in the light.

FIRST AIDE

Here he is.

SECOND AIDE

He gave up at once.

FIRST AIDE

Held his hands right out.
Never flinched.

SECOND AIDE

Even smiled.

FIRST AIDE

Stood there smiling
as I put the chains around him.

SECOND AIDE

He didn't care.

PENTHEUS

Take his chains off.

[the aides look at one another]

Take them off.
He's going nowhere now.

[looks Dionysus over]

So.
A lovely dress.
The color suits you.
Lovely skin—very pale—
a complexion cultivated in the darkness,
not the light of day, am I right?
Lovely hair.
Not the coiffure of a wrestler.

DIONYSUS
Did you want to wrestle?

PENTHEUS
So you'd flirt with me, would you?

Where do you come from?

DIONYSUS
I come from the East, from Mount Tmolus.

PENTHEUS
In the ridge of mountains round the city of Sardis.
A place on earth.
Not the birthplace of a god.

And who is this god whose worship you bring with you?

DIONYSUS
Dionysus, the son of Zeus.

PENTHEUS
The son of Zeus. You have some evidence of it.

DIONYSUS
Yes.

PENTHEUS

What does this mean, I wonder,
to speak of evidence of the existence of a god.
Do you speak a language where the word "exists" is an ordinary word
like "round" or "blue" or "woman's dress"?
Or something else?

I'm told he's a drunk.

DIONYSUS

Oh, I think that's a nasty rumor.

PENTHEUS

How did you see this god? In a dream, was it?

DIONYSUS

In daylight. Like today.

PENTHEUS

Indeed.
And what form did he take?

DIONYSUS

Whatever form he liked.

Do you wear rubber?

PENTHEUS

Rubber?

DIONYSUS

You know, rubber, like rubber skirts, or, in the summer, rubber shorts or rubber
stockings, or even—you know, rubber underwear.

PENTHEUS

No.

DIONYSUS

I thought you might.

(silence)

You send your linen out, do you?

PENTHEUS

To the laundry.

DIONYSUS

Yes.

PENTHEUS

You mean personal linen.

DIONYSUS

Underwear.

PENTHEUS

Yes.

DIONYSUS

Of course you know what they do with it.

PENTHEUS

I think I do.

DIONYSUS

I mean that they rent it out.

PENTHEUS

Rent out underwear?

DIONYSUS

To the locals. The underwear of most of the people who patronize the laundry is so clean when it gets to the laundry that the launderers rent it out to the locals and then, when they get it back dirty, they wash it.

PENTHEUS

Do you mean my underwear is rented out when I send it to the laundry?

DIONYSUS

Well, if it's clean it is.

[silence]

PENTHEUS

You know, I have the power to put you in a prison cell and leave you there.

DIONYSUS

Leave me, yes, but not keep me.

PENTHEUS

Not keep you?

DIONYSUS

I'd come out whenever I wanted.

PENTHEUS

You believe in miracles, do you?

DIONYSUS

Of course I do.

SECOND AIDE

This is a fellow who has no sense of where he is.

FIRST AIDE

No sense of self-restraint.

SECOND AIDE

I don't just indulge myself every time I want. Stick my fist up some fellow's ass, put my dick in someone else's business. Sit on his face.

Get my blood on the sheets.

Sometimes you see women when they're dressing, putting on their underclothes, whatever, and you can wonder whether this is a woman who is open or shut, you know, and whether you have the key, they get dressed very quickly, but you see them anyway, they> might wear a jewel case, you know, a reticule here, you know, around their waist, just at their quim, and sometimes they'll stretch out, lie down on

the sofa in the afternoon and talk and play with it while they talk, open it and shut it, put a finger in it, move it around, take it out, they don't even know they're doing it, and you think, well I'd like to get *my* finger in that jewel case.

DIONYSUS [to the second aide, calmly]

These human beings:
what unfathomable creatures.

There are places in the south, I am told, where there are so few people, and such limited resources, that everything must be very carefully planned. And so, if there is a shortage of boy babies, they take some girls and raise them as boys—train them in all the masculine skills and temperaments and habits of mind—so that, in time, these girls become fathers, and they raise male daughters. Because these people—whom some might think are backward kinds of people—know that gender and genitals are two entirely different things. And there are places in the world that I have seen where there are 8 different genders or even more.

PENTHEUS

For the sake of argument:

Suppose a brain—like any organ of someone killed in an accident—a kidney, a liver, a heart—were kept alive by being suspended in some sort of soup and kept in a jail cell, as if awaiting surgical transfer to some other recipient. Suppose we knew enough about brains to apply mild electrical stimulation, so that we could furnish it with "experiences." Suppose we furnish it with the experiences it would have had if the man who once possessed it had lived: if he had returned to consciousness, thinking he had had a narrow escape. Let's say he is a scientist; he returns to his laboratory, makes a discovery that brings him many rewards, the Nobel prize perhaps, and lives a rich life, loves and marries the partner of his dreams, has children, watches them grow, dies a meaningful death, speaks his last words to weeping friends and mourning family.

And, after having done this, we switch off the current. It is only on the organ of the brain that we have evoked various electrical potentials. And yet, from "inside," as it were, it is just as it would have been had the owner of the brain undergone the experiences himself. So the experiences themselves carry no guarantee of their authenticity. And it is perfectly clear at this point that there is almost nothing that experience justifies us in believing.

Now you might say "X is good," or "X is a good thing," but that would be entirely meaningless, except insofar as it expresses some feeling on your part. It would be like poetry, wouldn't it, it would simply be a refined way of giving vent to an emotion, a sophisticated way of emitting sounds like oh, oh, or ha-ha. But with no more meaning, finally.

DIONYSUS

What makes us start singing, do you think
if it isn't making love?
Why do we make wine?
Why do we set sail on the high seas?
To whom should a girl's heart be opened?
Who is it brings temptation?
These are the things I wonder about.
Where does the English Channel actually start?
Why can't a Ram swim for very long?
What can't a ewe swim for even less long?
Would a bull swim less long than a cow?
Would a nanny swim less long than a billy?
What's the point of this difference?
What is meant by a cliff?

[silence]

PENTHEUS

If I get a sensual feeling about a man, the man I have that feeling about must become extremely submissive, do you know what I mean? And, in truth, I get a dizzy feeling as though I'd like to punch these men or strangle them or strangle their genitals rather than do anything else with them. Have you ever had that feeling? I'd like to pull off their genitals, tear them off, in fact, and enjoy the pain I'd caused. Do you ever have that feeling?

SECOND AIDE

I have that feeling.

FIRST AIDE

I'd like to strangle them with my legs around them and I'd like to see the pain on their faces. I get a real charge out of this.

SECOND AIDE

Right.

FIRST AIDE

I have a lot of very angry feelings within me...

SECOND AIDE

Right.

So do I.

FIRST AIDE

and all this facade of being nice to people, it's all an act.

SECOND AIDE

I feel like crying and I feel awful, and the hate is getting more and more about all the things that have happened to me and I guess I've wanted to kill someone for a long time.

FIRST AIDE

I want to choke a fellow with my legs around him or my hands around his neck just the way I wanted to choke my mother. I substitute a man for her. I want to choke her by shoving my penis so far down his throat that he's choking and gasping for breath. I get pleasure out of that.

DIONYSUS

Sometimes I feel the shudder of death pass through me. Do you know that feeling? I think there are things that everyone feels at least once every fifteen minutes: embarrassment, for example, or humiliation, from nowhere, without apparent cause, sudden grief, anxiety, dread, distraction—as though a spirit or a monster of some kind had passed overhead—regret, impatience, hatred, an unreasoning rage. It's not the same for everyone. Some people I know feel none of these things, but instead, every fifteen minutes they feel sorrow or resentment, they feel slighted, they feel vengeful, jealous, they are immobilized by envy, a longing to possess something or someone, greed, lust, a wish to put something in their mouths. These are all things I feel—along with the knowledge of death that is always with me now, and that makes me shudder, and brings tears to my eyes.

PENTHEUS

Everyone is aware that life has no interpretation.

That lead is the parody of gold.

That air is the parody of water.

That the brain is the parody of the equator.

That coitus is the parody of crime.

A rotten tooth, an abandoned shoe, the cook spitting in the soup of his masters, a dog devouring the stomach of a goose, a vomiting woman, a seminarian, the marrow of a young boy's pelvic bone, the taste of a dead girl, a jar of mustard: these are the roots that nourish love.

Put him in chains.

Put him in a cell.

Put him out of my sight.

I don't want to touch him.

Then take some men and bring those women back down from the mountains.

And, as for these women,

I'll have them sold off as slaves

or put them to work at my own hearth,

sewing, and knitting, and cooking,

since our own wives seem to have such little interest in their duties.

[Pentheus turns and leaves]

DIONYSUS (to the aides, with a smile)

I guess I'll be coming with you.

[They exit.

The women don't move.

We hear beautiful sitar music—very sweet—
an antidote to what we have just seen;
and we watch a beautiful and gentle dance of South America or Bali.]

AN EAR-SHATTERING SHARP, SIZZLING THUNDERBOLT

AN INCREDIBLE FLASH OF LIGHTNING

A BLAST OF THUNDER THAT MAKES THE ENTIRE THEATRE SHAKE AND
TREMBLE

THUNDER RUMBLES AND ROLLS AND FADES INTO THE DISTANCE

AND DIONYSUS ENTERS, COVERED IN SNAKES

DIONYSUS

[very lyrically, not rushed, savoring each image, getting lost in it,
letting it drift]

I have entered into certain things wonderfully deep
I have gone into the deep shadows.
I take this knowledge in my hand and squeeze it hard like an orange,
to get the sweet, sweet juice from it.

My soul goes blindly seeking.
I cry out after some unknown Thing.
I shall go mad.

I shall go mad.
I shall be filled with pleasure so deep
and pain so intense
I will go drunk with the fullness of Life.

THE ENTIRE THEATRE RUMBLES WITH A PROLONGED EARTHQUAKE

A PROLONGED SHOWER OF ROSE PETALS FROM THE FLIES

DIONYSUS

When my happiness is given me,
life will be
a nameless thing.
It will seethe and roar;
it will plunge and whirl;
it will leap and shriek in convulsions;
it will quiver in delicate fantasy;
it will writhe and twist;
it will glitter and flash and shine;
it will sing gently;
it will shout in exquisite excitement;
it will vibrate to the roots
like a great oak in a storm;
it will dance;
it will glide;
it will gallop;
it will rush;
it will swell and surge;
it will fly;
it will soar high—high;
it will go down into depths unexplored;
it will rage and rave;
it will melt;
it will grovel in the dust of entire pleasure;
it will sound out like a terrific blare of trumpets;
it will chime faintly, faintly;
it will sob and grieve and weep;
it will revel and carouse;

it will go in pride;
it will lie prone like the dead;
it will float buoyantly on the air.
When it comes my turn to meet face to face the unspeakable vision of the Happy
Life I shall be rendered dumb.
But the rains of my feeling will come in torrents.

[Music resumes.

The Bacchae watch as

Dionysus dances with snakes

accompanied by something as miraculous as the earthquake
something that another performer does
or a group of performers
or an animal
a white horse, without a trainer, trots in circles around him
or a circle of fire burns around him
something incredibly beautiful, sensuous, amazing, and wild.]

Pentheus enters slowly through the rubble, followed by his two aides, carrying
torches, taking the same path Dionysus has just taken.
He sees Dionysus.

PENTHEUS
So here you are.
Who let you out?

FIRST AIDE
It wasn't us.
We had him chained against the wall.

[Pentheus gestures to silence his aide.]

DIONYSUS [lightly]
You know,
walls can't contain me.

PENTHEUS
If I catch the one who set you free
I'll nail him to the wall myself.

[TONY ULASEWITZ, a spy, enters furtively. He wears torn clothes. His face is scratched. He speaks Pentheus's name in a near whisper, repeats it a little louder.]

NOTE: this character of Tony can be divided in two and performed by a pair of actors reporting to Pentheus.]

TONY ULASEWITZ
Pentheus.
[looks around]
Pentheus.

PENTHEUS [turning to him]
Yes?

TONY ULASEWITZ
I've seen the women in the mountains.

PENTHEUS
Yes?

TONY ULASEWITZ
I went with a small group.
Very discreet.
But
they wouldn't talk to us.
I mean the women.
Ignored us, absolutely, no matter what we said.
They were there around the trees,
old women and young, some no more than girls,

lying around
like animals
relaxing in the forest
their hair loose,
lying in each other's arms
one young mother,
giving her
breast
to a fawn,
or doing what they pleased
stretched out by the stream
washing each other
I don't know what
I didn't want to know
eating berries
no one in charge as far as we could tell
total hedonists is what they are
kissing
licking
fingers up each other's business
that kind of thing

2ND AIDE

Is this some sort of display they're putting on?

TONY ULASEWITZ

But these women
caught on we were spying on them
all of a sudden they turned on us
with sharpened sticks and clubs.
I gave them an ultimatum
not to use any weapons
but they didn't pay attention
so I gave the order to my men
and we went in
I mean we were not unarmed ourselves
We had bats and we were going to use them,
and the women
with their nails

and rocks
and pointed sticks
fought us back!
I yelled at my men:
all is fair
hold your ground.
But these women fought like hell.
They punched and kicked.
They got hold of one man's arm and would have torn it off if I hadn't slammed one
or two of them myself,
but then my men ran,
ran,
they turned around and ran.
I could have shit right on the spot.
These fucking babies running from the women.
I could have kicked their fucking heads in.
I yelled at them:
come back here you cocksuckers,
but they were gone
I mean in a flash
and I was all alone,
so I ran, too,
and these fucking women are still up in the mountains.

PENTHEUS

I'll send the army.

TONY ULASEWITZ

What?

PENTHEUS

I'll send the army.

It may be these women have never seen what it is to fight. What a man can do when the rules of restraint are taken off. It may be that they don't know, in fact, a man is always on battle alert, always lying in ambush, always straining all his senses, rigid with attention, ready to pounce like bats from dark dungeons when they are aroused.

FIRST AIDE

I remember
lying side by side in the sand
heads raised to look out
at the line of the far horizon
when suddenly the order's given
and we all jump! and run
the earth sliding back away from us
crashing through the brush
the trumpet signal
two notes only
dancing in the morning air
all our thinking drops away like useless ballast
our bodies light and whipped by the wind from behind
the charge rolls out to a tearing pleasure
lungs working hard
the earth smooth and downhill to our goal
one long pathway
and then we're on top of them
the broken panting of that moment before
gives way to a scream, a fearsome scream
every mouth stretched wide
our cheer exploding from blood and bones
hammering into the air
in a raw crescendo, howling
blood shooting through our bodies
tears running down our faces
our own bodies were the storm
the crushing force
exploding on the enemy
our cries meeting the cries of the enemy
merging into theirs
like hearts trembling on the brink of eternity
a cry long forgotten
a cry of recognition
and of thirst for blood
we felt naked in the battle
but our skin was all armor
all steel enclosure

living guns
tanked up motors turned loose with no brakes to hold us
guns wriggling and jerking in our hands like fish
I could feel every jolt that shook the metal of my gun
every jolt a bullet slicing into warm, living human flesh

a wicked pleasure
hangs over war
the voluptuousness of blood
like a red storm-sail over a black man-of-war.
Your feelings blossom in the surging of the blood.
The blood surges through your body
and through their bodies
like torrents tumbling together in a snow-thaw,
like a long-postponed night of love
but this night more passionate
and more furious
the blood bubbling in our hearts like fire.

PENTHEUS

Well, it's all a question where we are touched most deeply.

And you might say, certainly, the anus is a private place.

The phallus is essentially social.
But the anus—that's mostly private.

When you talk of the constitution of a private person, that's the anus.
And the public person, that's the phallus.
So you could say that exposing one's phallus is a shameful act—but a glorious one,
too,
and every man has a phallus
that guarantees him a social place.
And every man has an anus, too,
which is truly his own,
in the most secret depths of his own person.

Every secret is explosive when you get to it.
These are the true mysteries—and no others.
It doesn't so much matter *what* happens
so long as it happens suddenly, like a volcano,
unexpected and irresistible.

There is a kind of ecstasy they say,
a state of mind granted not only to the holy man
to great writers and great lovers
but also to the great in spirit
an intoxication beyond all intoxications
a release that bursts all bonds
a madness without discretion.
And there are those who insist I don't have a hold on
the mystery of life.
A man in ecstasy becomes a violent storm,
he merges with the cosmos
racing toward death's gates
like a bullet to its target.
And should the waves crash purple above him,
he will already be long past all consciousness;
he will be a wave
gliding back into the flowing sea
from which it came.
This flooding into nighttime battle
is something elemental
something that has always been,
something that will long outlive
human lives and human wars.

Bring my armor out to me.
We'll go at once.

DIONYSUS

Your own mother is up in the mountains.

PENTHEUS

Let her surrender.

DIONYSUS

You feel no hesitation?

PENTHEUS

Bring out my armor.

[to Dionysus]

Please,

understand that when I've made my decision

I never take it back.

[silence]

DIONYSUS

In that case,

let me help you.

Take my advice.

Reconnoitre the mountain

before you send troops to battle.

Like any good general,

see what you're up against.

Plan your moves so you are certain not to lose.

PENTHEUS

Send out spies, you mean.

DIONYSUS

Or go yourself to spy.

See with your own eyes

what it is these women do.

PENTHEUS

Without their knowing.

DIONYSUS

Yes.

PENTHEUS

The private things they do among themselves.

DIONYSUS

Such things as men have never seen.

[silence]

PENTHEUS

But what disguise could I wear?

DIONYSUS

You must be invisible.

PENTHEUS

Enough talk of miracles.

How should I become invisible?

DIONYSUS

You'd go as a woman.

PENTHEUS

I go as a woman?

DIONYSUS

Yes.

PENTHEUS

Wear a woman's clothes, you mean?

DIONYSUS

Yes.

PENTHEUS

[really interested in the idea]

Pass for a woman?

DIONYSUS

Yes.

PENTHEUS

Do you think I could be taken for a woman?

DIONYSUS

Yes.

[silence]

PENTHEUS

I don't think I could do that.

I'll scout them out,

I'll stay under cover,

but I will wear my armor.

DIONYSUS

If that's your decision.

I'll help to get you ready.

[The Bacchae gather around
and help strip Pentheus naked.]

As they do, we hear the voiceover
of the first aide, speaking slowly and gently through speakers
with gentle musical background

and Dionysus steps to one side,
helped by one of the Bacchae,
his back to the audience,
put on black leather pants—
stuffing his dress inside—
black boots,
black leather jacket.

If all this cross-dressing is getting too automatic, Dionysus can stay in a dress; and
he and Pentheus will make a couple in their dresses.]

FIRST AIDE [voiceover]

For our battle colors

we chose black

because it is the color of forbidden love between men,

of a dance of death in the dark,

deranged ecstasy—

the ecstasy of a physical body overloaded,
of mutual recognition in armed combat
hand-to-hand.

[When the Bacchae have finished stripping Pentheus,
they clothe him
layer by layer
from perfumed powder
to satin undergarments
stockings
slip
dress
high-heeled shoes
wig
as the voiceover continues.
Dionysus, his own black leather outfit complete,
helps with the finishing touches.
The enchantment of Pentheus is then completed.]

FIRST AIDE [voiceover continuing]
White is the anti-hybrid
brilliant cold
the shroud of devivification.
It is the marble body
of the white countless nurse,
the womb
from which no teeth-gnashing monsters threaten.
Whitewash:
the shot that banishes disorder.

Red is female flesh
wallowing in its blood
a reeking mass
severed from the man.
Red is a mouth dripping blood—
now beaten.

DIONYSUS (voiceover)

There was a time when all I wanted was to be dressed up like a poodle on a leash, a pink poodle on a leash, and to hear someone say, "Oh, yes, I want more," to have my nipples rubbed until I moaned, to have her take out her cock, give me a blowjob, work her fingertips along my inseam until it made the tears come, to have her cuff me on the shoulder, roll me on my back, to taste him in my mouth, to feel a fur bikini across my face, to unzip her leather pants, bring her quickly and lightly to an orgasm, to feel the heel of her boot on my thigh and hear her ask, "do you think that will be enough?", the warm water tap turned on high, her fair skin, her voice saying "this is Marine Corps meat," "I gotta get stoned," "ponies prance, ladies dance," "why don't we make it just once, with one for practice?" "Hold on a minute, take a few deep breaths and let the blood pass from your cunt to your brain." Let's get stoned, because I promise you this, this won't last forever.

[When they are finished,
Pentheus speaks as a
simpering female.

Music up.

Dionysus and Pentheus dance.]

PENTHEUS

I think it's more blessed to give
than to receive,
and yet
I find it hard to resist
if someone wants to give me
some little thing
an invitation to play tennis
a postcard of the Sistine Chapel
Estee Lauder self-action tanning creme.
A smile is easy to wear.
Mini-skirts are another matter.

DIONYSUS

I'd say you've got it.

PENTHEUS

I don't mind an alluring silhouette
a sun-washed color,

a loose, easy fit
a world that's pale, bleached by salt and sun,
something that buttons up the front
sheer, or boxy
something nice for layering,
something topstitched
with double darts
button-through flap patch pockets,
a drop waist pleated skirt
or something with a little attitude.

DIONYSUS

Come with me, then.

I'll take you to the mountains.

PENTHEUS

Joy makes you open and light.

Joy counteracts the pull of gravity.

Joy banishes the consciousness of self.

This joy is more than contentment,
more than happiness.

Joy has something of the sacred in it,
something we should all have every day.

DIONYSUS

Come with me.

I'll take you to it.

Music.

The Bacchae part to let Pentheus and Dionysus exit—
a couple just like Kadmos and Tiresias.

And then the Bacchae dissolve from the stage in all directions.

Leaving a single member of their chorus on stage.

This solo performer dances
and performs a striptease to the music
to reveal a satyr
a naked woman with a huge, bright red dildo,
and a horse's tail
she might also have an animal mask.

And now, after the dance,
we enter the land of Cockaigne—
a world of extreme unfamiliarity
and extreme possibility.

Women lie about.
These are the Bacchae still, but now transformed.
This is not a world of women;
it is a world of particular women.
It does not represent women;
it presents several unique women
who do not stand for anyone else.
It is not a utopia,
an idyllic, cooperative, communal female world.
It is a strange world.

One woman hangs suspended in midair.
She is naked, pierced in various places,
and hanging by wires attached by fishhooks to her piercings.
Her hair is a vast corona of fire.

A woman at center stage
stands with a meat cleaver
at a large chopping block table.
From her belt hangs a string of severed heads.
She is a cook.
She wears a black leather executioner's helmet with a bird's beak.

Another woman, naked, her body painted entirely orange,
like the body painting used by actors in India
or in paintings of Indian gods and goddesses—
lies in the lap of another woman painted entirely lavender.

Another woman, a tattoo artist,
is applying a tattoo to her companion,
who has three heads and four arms.
All three heads are of someone extremely spaced out.

The tattoo artist has the head of a small boy.
One woman is apart from the others: Agave.
She is dressed out of the pages of Vogue magazine.

ORANGE WOMAN

I have within me an unusual intensity of life.
I can feel.
I have a marvelous capacity for happiness and for misery.
My brain is a conglomeration of aggressive versatility.
I am convinced of this: I am an odd person.
I know myself
oh
very well.
I have attained an egotism that is rare indeed.
I have gone into the deep shadows.

I have hunted for even the suggestion of a parallel
among the several hundred persons I call acquaintances.
But in vain.
There are none to compare to me.
There are people of varying depths and intricacies of character

but none to compare to me.
If I chance to give others
but a glimpse of the real workings of my mind
they can only stare at me in dazed stupidity—uncomprehending.

Along some lines I have gotten to the edge of the world
A step more and I fall off.
I do not take the step.
I stand on the edge.
I do not take the step.

And yet I have entered into certain things marvelously deep.
I know things.
I know that I know them
and I know that I know that I know them
which is a fine psychological point.

It is, I think, magnificent of me to have gotten so far with no training other than that
of the sand and barrenness

Very often I take this fact in my hand and squeeze it
hard
like an orange,
to get the sweet, sweet juice from it.
I squeeze a great deal of juice from it every day.

My soul goes blindly seeking.
I cry out after some unknown Thing.
I shall go mad.
I shall go mad.
I shall be filled with pleasure so deep
and pain so intense
I will go drunk with the fullness of Life.

LAVENDER WOMAN

When my happiness is given me,
life will be
a nameless thing.
It will seethe and roar;

it will plunge and whirl;
it will leap and shriek in convulsions;
it will quiver in delicate fantasy;
it will writhe and twist;
it will glitter and flash and shine;
it will sing gently;
it will shout in exquisite excitement;
it will vibrate to the roots
like a great oak in a storm;
it will dance;
it will glide;
it will gallop;
it will rush;
it will swell and surge;
it will fly;
it will soar high—high;
it will go down into depths unexplored;
it will rage and rave;
it will melt;
it will grovel in the dust of entire pleasure;
it will sound out like a terrific blare of trumpets;
it will chime faintly, faintly;
it will sob and grieve and weep;
it will revel and carouse;
it will go in pride;
it will lie prone like the dead;
it will float buoyantly on the air.
When it comes my turn to meet face to face the unspeakable vision of the Happy
Life I shall be rendered dumb.
But the rains of my feeling will come in torrents.

ORANGE WOMAN

It is a remarkably hard thing to do
to probe my soul to its depths
to expose its shades and half-lights.

There are elements in one's mental equipment,
I find, so vague,
so opaque,

so undefined—
how is one to grasp them?
I have analyzed and analyzed,
and I have gotten down to some extremely fine points—
yet still there are things upon my own horizon
that go beyond me.

There are feelings that rise and rush over me
overwhelmingly.
I am helpless,
crushed, and defeated before them.
It is as if
they were written
on the walls of my soul chamber
in an unknown language.

These human beings:
what unfathomable creatures.
What they are capable of.

LAVENDER WOMAN

What makes us start singing, do you think
if it isn't making love?
Why do we make wine?
Why do we set sail on the high seas?
To whom should a girl's heart be opened?
Who is it brings temptation?
These are the things I wonder about.
Where does the English Channel actually start?
Why can't a Ram swim for very long?
What can't a ewe swim for even less long?
Would a bull swim less long than a cow?
Would a nanny swim less long than a billy?
What's the point of this difference?
What is meant by a cliff?

ORANGE WOMAN

My soul goes blindly seeking, seeking, asking.
Nothing answers.

I cry out after some unknown thing
with all the strength of my being
every nerve and fiber in my young woman's body
and my young woman's soul
reaches and strains in anguish.
At times waves of intense, hopeless longing rush over me,
my heart, my soul, my mind go wandering, wandering
groping with helpless hands
pursued by a demon of unrest
I shall go mad
I shall go mad
I say over and over to myself
but no.
No one goes mad.
The demon of unrest does not propose to release any of us.
He looks to it that our senses are kept fully intact.

TATTOO ARTIST

We used to take a girl, fourteen, fifteen years of age, take her into a tent filled with steam, you have rocks in a campfire and pour oil and water on them, and you braid her hair, and then the girl's mentor cuts her thigh, three clean slices in each thigh, and then all women rub oil and juices into the girl's thighs, and the way you get the juices is the girl's mentor has to have a lover, and all the other women use her lover to get their juices flowing, they get it in their hands and rub it on the girl's thighs so she grows strong.

TATTOOED WOMAN

There are women, when they menstruate
they all get together and dance
so they will all bleed together at the same time
they talk to each other
until their thighs are wet with blood
and they eat raw flesh and earth and chew arsenic
until there are sulphur and flames around their mouths

TATTOO ARTIST

I've known women who lose blood from their legs,
or from their ears.

And they didn't worry about the bleeding.

What they worried about is that it would stop.

TATTOOED WOMAN

There are times when you can put in matchsticks or little wooden objects into your vaginal piercings, and then, after a while, you can put in brass rings or silver rings, gold rings even if you want, then you just, with these women, you just have anal intercourse if you want to use a dildo, lots of people do this, you'd be surprised, in some parts of the world 50% of the population, then you know what it is to be blood brothers and blood sisters.

TATTOO ARTIST

Or you could have tattoos on your labia, all around your genitals, you could have a hooked thorn if you want to lift the skin and make a raised scar, or a razor blade to slice the raised skin and leave a scar, this could be beautiful. You could rub white ash into the cut and make a beautiful raised scar.

COOK

There are people in the world,
so strange,
with tastes so particular,
you think there are one or two kinds of people in the world
men and women
or straight or gay
and then you discover
no
there are hundreds of sorts of people
thousands
with tastes so particular
things to which each one of us responds
a scent
a kind of hair
a kind of shoe
a way
we think:
oh,

that's hot—
and it is incomprehensible,
this thing that is hot
we don't know where this comes from
this thing that makes our heart flutter
when nothing else does
we think:
does this come from my childhood?
from how I was with my mother
or my brother
or my dog—
how could that be?
how could it be so particular?
no
this comes from some deeper place
this comes from my chromosomes, my cells
my synaptic gaps
from a place inaccessible to language
to reason or explanation
a place so deep,
so inexplicable
so irresistible
it takes us and deploys us however it will.

There are women in some places where they have gardens and they grow yams—
and the rule is you can't touch another woman's yam—this is how they do things,
you know—and the women can't eat these yams, because the yams are too
powerful—well, the men can't eat them either, because that would be disgusting,
that's what they think—but if a woman wants to give power to a woman in another
group, outside her own group, then she can give that woman a yam, and that gives
power to that other woman, and that other woman: she can eat that first woman's
yam.

PENTHEUS

Amen.

DIONYSUS

Quiet.

PENTHEUS
I said: Amen.

COOK
Who's this?

PENTHEUS
A visitor.
(takes a tentative step forward)
I'm a visitor come to join you.

LAVENDER WOMAN
Who?

PENTHEUS
A woman.
Like you.

AGAVE
Come ahead then.
Don't hang back.

(He steps forward to join them, and, as he goes to the center, they form an open circle around him, looking him over; Dionysus stays back in the shadows, slowly circling the stage from now to the end.)

So.
(she fixes her gaze on him)
You've come to live with us?

TATTOO ARTIST
What sort of woman would you say you are?

PENTHEUS
Well, a sort of a...usual woman.

TATTOO ARTIST
What's that?
[silence]
Some women, they tell you:

women are close to nature.
Women are nurturing.
Women are communal.
Women are cooperative.
But I ask you:
what kind of talk is this?
I mean: I'm a little sick of this Bambi mentality.

TATTOOED WOMAN
And anyway, is nature good?

TATTOO ARTIST
I don't think so.

TATTOOED WOMAN
There's a lot in nature that is not pretty.

LAVENDER WOMAN
That's the part I like.

TATTOOED WOMAN
I'm the sort of person who likes to put her hand on her crotch
sometimes even when I'm with a man.

LAVENDER WOMAN
Right.

TATTOOED WOMAN
And move it this way and that.

LAVENDER WOMAN
No problem.

TATTOOED WOMAN
Light up a pipe and get real high.

LAVENDER WOMAN
Right.

TATTOO ARTIST

Sometimes a woman likes to lather up her thighs like a barber, she might feel naked underneath her clothes even if she isn't, sometimes you like to feel some power, not to hurt someone.

TATTOOED WOMAN

Right

[All this may be a little frightening to Pentheus, intimidating, and the women may know that, and play with him in this way. This may be performance for him.]

TATTOO ARTIST

But you know you have it, and there is no one in a panic.

TATTOOED WOMAN

No.

TATTOO ARTIST

You say
Slide your ass down here, bitch
And you'll get fucked like you've never been before
You'll be leaning back
bracing yourself on the floor
a taste of salty lips
a taste of fingertips
right out of your denim crotch
I like a woman wet and dangerous
I like a biker woman now and then
I like to swing the bat
You know you shouldn't be ashamed
whether you're a bottom or top
or side by side
You want to take it out
and stay there
let it ride

LAVENDER WOMAN

One time a woman encunted me with her dildo
and just when I was getting into it
I saw this nun across the hall
this goodlooking nun
buggering two young women
while getting herself fucked from the rear.
I caught her eye,

TATTOOED WOMAN

Right.

LAVENDER WOMAN

and pretty soon she was paying more attention to me than to those around her.

TATTOOED WOMAN

I don't blame her.

LAVENDER WOMAN

So we got together,
and I'm saying to her
fuck me, fuck me

TATTOOED WOMAN

Right.

LAVENDER WOMAN

but she had brought these two girls with her,

WOMAN

Unh-hunh.

LAVENDER WOMAN

young things no more then fourteen,
fifteen at the most,

TATTOOED WOMAN

Unh-hunh

LAVENDER WOMAN

she'd lost all interest being with me,

TATTOOED WOMAN

Right.

COOK

Dear Miss Manners

My girlfriend will be moving into my apartment as soon as her lease is up, and I want to do what's proper, hang up my things that I wash out every night, but I don't know if this is right, my mother says it isn't so I'm asking you. And she replies: Miss Manners says you should ask your lady friend. Miss Manners never interferes with intimate actions performed in private by consenting adults.

LAVENDER WOMAN

so I'm saying to her hey! go ahead

do your worst

I'm talking politics.

COOK

(bursting out)

stick it in me,

up my ass,

piss on me,

double up your belt,

make it sting

make me lie still

make me whimper

make me beg

TATTOOED WOMAN

give me an enema

TATTOO ARTIST

We do shit scenes

mustard

yellow

purple

oral, anal
light blue
black

LAVENDER WOMAN

I like to feel some leather
up between my legs
with a little silk
knee up in my crotch
nails down my sides
bone against my clit
a little bit of rubbing

COOK

The old double dildo

TATTOO ARTIST

you've got to like an animal from time to time

TATTOOED WOMAN

rock your pelvis back and forth

LAVENDER WOMAN

playing with my nipples

TATTOOED WOMAN

Oh, baby, fuck me harder.

TATTOO ARTIST

With your fist.

TATTOOED WOMAN

Get it in there
dip it in
make it hurt
bite me, burn me,
spank me, pinch me
(dropping the heated tone for technical advice)
but watch out for the joints, the nerves,

TATTOO ARTIST

Right.

TATTOOED WOMAN

watch out for the blood vessels, you know

TATTOO ARTIST

Right.

TATTOOED WOMAN

I'm taking this for granted,
this will be safe
think about the front of the thigh,
the shoulder, the upper arm,
use a little soap and water,
alcohol, Betadine,
keep it perpendicular to the skin
make a gentle cut
wait a minute before the blood begins to flow
and then another cut or prick
like lightning going through the body
and when it's done
rub it with wine
stain it
leave a mark there
because these marks are here for life
these are commitments being made
we're never going back
never.

COOK

Is that the sort of woman you would say you are?

TATTOO ARTIST

What do you need but
some bandaids
aspirin
smelling salts
sterile cotton

bandage scissors
bolt cutters
spare keys
a marlinspike
ice pack
hydrogen peroxide
rectal thermometer
KY jelly
tweezers

TATTOOED WOMAN

And you could tie me down
so I can't jump when you cut me
you know
Do it slow
then work me over
this is what I like
and tell me bedtime stories
You could powder me.
You could oil me.
You could dress me up.
You could take me out.

SOLO AND A CAPELLA AN OPERATIC ARIA OF GREAT ANGUISH

AFTERWARDS THERE IS A LONG SILENCE.
A STILLNESS, BUCOLIC PEACEFULNESS, RESOLUTION

AGAVE [speaking quietly, taking her time]
After my grandmother died, we dug her up again. This was in Missouri, where we did things like that. We dug down, and—the coffin had disintegrated, [whispering] it was only the skeleton left.
Something like a mummy. It gives you a chill.

So we threw out the wood, and the straw from this mattress they had put in the coffin, and the clothes and socks that had sort of dissolved. And first of all we took the head, the skull.

The idea is: when you exhume a body then your ancestors return and live with you, you keep them around you, you don't just cut yourself off.

So we put the bones in a bucket, one by one, being careful not to pick up any scorpions or anything like that. Grandma had two teeth...and her eyes...Other than that people are not recognizable, we are all one thing. So, you know, we cleaned the big bones, the arms, the spine, the ribs, and we put the feet in socks up to the elbow. And after we got them out, we spread them out in the sun and cleaned them with vinegar and oiled them and covered them with a white napkin. When you're talking blood and bones, you're talking women's work. Of all human qualities, the greatest is sympathy.

[SOFTLY, HEARTBREAKING MUSIC COMES UP UNDER THE FOLLOWING DIALOGUE.

THIS IS THE EXCEEDINGLY BRIEF MOMENT OF BUCOLIC UTOPIA BEFORE THE MURDER OF PENTHEUS]

PENTHEUS

Or compassion.

AGAVE

Or compassion.

ORANGE WOMAN

For clouds even.

LAVENDER WOMAN

Or snow.

ORANGE WOMAN

I like anything that falls from the sky.

Except sleet.

LAVENDER WOMAN

Or hail.

ORANGE WOMAN

I like hail.

AGAVE

The sound of a flute.

From a distance.

Or when you hear it nearby and then it moves away.

Or the other way around.

And the wind.

A brisk wind.

Or a moist gentle wind that blows in the evenings.

There are things that are near but distant at the same time.

ORANGE WOMAN

Like the course of a boat across a lake.

LAVENDER WOMAN

Like paradise.

AGAVE

The relations between two people.

LAVENDER WOMAN

Or things that give a clean feeling.

ORANGE WOMAN

An earthen cup.

LAVENDER WOMAN

A new wooden chest.

ORANGE WOMAN

I pray

I could see everything once more

everything that I have seen

lived through, suffered,

in the whole of the universe.

Because I am amazed

by the bodies
that are used and abandoned on the earth
in the dung beetle
the seagull
in the stub ash
the driftwood
the spring sky
blue spruce, pale eyes,
in my veins boiling
wet lips
black pitch
open window
from generation to generation

AGAVE

I love a child eating strawberries.

ORANGE WOMAN

A white jacket over a violet vest.

LAVENDER WOMAN

Duck eggs.

ORANGE WOMAN

Or beach parsley.

LAVENDER WOMAN

Club moss.

ORANGE WOMAN

The pear tree.

LAVENDER WOMAN

The earth itself.

AGAVE

Dirt.

LAVENDER WOMAN

The sunlight you see in water as you pour it from a pitcher into a bowl.

PENTHEUS [moved to join in, almost ecstatically]

In spring the dawn.

In summer the nights.

In autumn the evenings when the sun has set and your heart is moved by the sound of the wind and the hum of the insects.

In winter the early mornings, especially when snow has fallen during the night, or the ground is white with frost, or even when there is no snow or frost, but it is simply very cold, and someone hurries from room to room stirring up the fires and bringing charcoal or wood, and then, as noon approaches, no one bothers to keep the fires going, and soon nothing remains but piles of white ashes.

AGAVE

Come.

[taking his wrist, bringing him to her]

Here where we live

a woman's pulse can be

sharp as a hook

fine as a hair

taut as a music string

dead as a rock

smooth as a flowing stream.

How is your heart beating?

What would you say is normal?

A pulse can be

like water dripping through the roof

like a string of pearls

like burning firewood

like leaves scattering

like visiting strangers

like a dry mud-ball

like mixing lacquer

like spring water welling up
like a sword lying flat ready to be used
like a smooth pill
like glory.

[her hand goes to his forehead,
and, as he speaks, she strokes his hair]

PENTHEUS

How many beautiful songs have you heard
that come from all over the world
choirs of all kinds
the worker in the field
piano virtuosos, orchestras, wandering dilettantes
uplifting heart and mind
the voice of God is a hummingbird, or human voice, an orange blossom, or pearl-
rose of India, or the beautiful blue Danube, the white flowers my friend planted
without thinking in my heart.

[A long moment of silence.
We listen to the music.
The wig comes off Pentheus's head into Agave's hand.]

AGAVE [very quietly]
What's this?
This is not your hair?

PENTHEUS
Of course it is.

AGAVE [still quietly]
No.
This is not your hair.
Whose dress is this?

PENTHEUS [quietly]
Please.
Don't touch me.

AGAVE

Are you lying to me, then?
Sneaking into our world
pretending to be a friend,
but all the time
you had some other idea in mind?

[She slams his head suddenly against the ground.
He cries out.]

AGAVE

So,
you had no intention of joining us?
Only of watching us?

[She slams his head onto the ground again.
He cries out again.]

What does this mean?
Didn't we welcome you?
Didn't our hearts go out to you?
Didn't we open ourselves to you?
Didn't we care for you?
And all you can think to do
is to lie to us?
What would you do
if you found someone had deceived you in this way?
What would you do?

[She is on top of him,
slamming his head repeatedly into the ground.]

Was there some way we failed you?
Even though
you gave us nothing?
You accepted what we had to give
and you had nothing to give us in return
except your prying?

Yes,
there is some deep pleasure
in killing
some quivering love of life
some sorrow
some giddiness
some solemn thought
some exhilaration
like no other.

[Kadmos and Tiresias enter.]

KADMOS

Agave.
What's happened here?

AGAVE

Father, we've caught
this
wild
animal,
who thought he could creep in among us,
for whatever he had in mind,
and I've killed him.

KADMOS

Caught a wild animal?

AGAVE

Here in the mountains.
coming right in among us,
thinking he would take us by surprise.

Now, father,
you may be entitled to boast
you have a daughter like a man,
bringing home a carcass
killed by her own two hands.

KADMOS

Agave.

Look what you hold.

A child torn

as one would tear a rag

by the hands of his own mother.

AGAVE [in disbelief]

What do you mean?

KADMOS

Look what you hold.

AGAVE

Is this a riddle?

Do you think I would take his feet and swing him around to crush his head into the side of a truck?

Do you think I would poke sand down his throat with a stick?

No mother would do this to her own child.

KADMOS

Look again, Agave.

AGAVE

This is a bottomless universe,
a great abyss beneath our feet,
we don't understand it.

KADMOS

Look in your hands,
look at what you hold, Agave.

[She looks,

collapses to the ground, her head thrown back in a prolonged silent scream.]

KADMOS

Surely, all this is a dream—only a dream.

[MUSIC]

DIONYSUS

These human beings:

what unfathomable creatures.

In the end,

when they feel themselves suffocating,

covered over finally in a gully filled with rubble,
swallowed up by the earth,
the thought rushes up unbidden:

it's only a dream—

this is the last

hope

we have within us.

[Kadmos puts his arms around Agave, huddling with her.

The Bacchae whirl.

Black ash or black rose petals rain down, beautifully lit, from the flies.

Dionysus comes forward,
a snake wrapped around his shoulders
and he, too,
whirls slowly,
like a Dervish.]

THE END.

The Bacchae 2.1 was developed in collaboration with Greg Gunter as dramaturg and first performed in 1993 in the Mark Taper Forum's Festival of New Work, where it was directed by Brian Kulick.

The Bacchae 2.1 was composed in the way that Max Ernst made his Fatagaga pieces at the end of World War I. It is based on, or taken in part from, among others, Euripides, Georges Bataille, Klaus Theweleit, Wilhelm Stekel, "insane"; texts from the Prinzhorn Collection in Heidelberg, Valerie Solanas's SCUM Manifesto, Joan Nestle's Femme-Butch texts, Pat Califia, Jeanne Cordova, Barbara Duden, Mary Maclane, Aimable Jayet, Sei Shonagon.

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