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Erika Fischer-Lichte, *Dionysus Resurrected. Performances of Euripides' 'The Bacchae' in a Globalizing World. Blackwell Bristol Lectures on Greece, Rome and the Classical Tradition.* Malden, MA; Oxford; Chichester: Wiley–Blackwell, 2014. Pp. xvii, 238. ISBN 9781405175784. \$94.95.

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[Preview](#)

We are all familiar with the significance of Euripides' *Bacchae* for the contemporary history of classical performance reception, thanks to the positioning of Richard Schechner's *Dionysus in 69* as a watershed production in Hall, Macintosh and Wrigley's *Dionysus Since 69*.¹ Erika Fischer-Lichte takes this production as the starting point for her monograph *Dionysus Resurrected: Performances of Euripides' The Bacchae in a Globalizing World*, and seeks to explain why in light of the almost complete absence of the play on international stages prior to the 1960s, it has since experienced a resurgence in popularity and has now been staged innumerable times. Fischer-Lichte's book features a concentrated analysis of nine productions, many of which have previously received minimal critical attention and represent neglected geographical locations for the study of classical reception, including, for example, South America, eastern Europe, and Asia. Fischer-Lichte provides a rich and vivid analysis of these case studies, which makes for a clear and readable monograph that will appeal to her broad interdisciplinary readership and will be of use to students and scholars of classical reception alike.

There are two main strands to Fischer-Lichte's argument that permeate her case studies. The first explores how the recent popularity of Euripides' play can be attributed to the globalizing process. Fischer-Lichte argues that the events in *The Bacchae* are analogous to the political, social, and cultural challenges that certain locales experienced between the 1960s and the present, and that this accounts—in part—for the recent popularity of the play.

The second argument stems from this. As Fischer-Lichte explains, classicists and theoreticians began to show a renewed interest in Euripides' tragedy simultaneously with the theatrical rediscovery of the play. Fischer-Lichte consequently draws upon this scholarship, and in particular three interpretations of the play which read the tragedy as enacting—or perverting—a sacrificial ritual, namely those of Walter Burkert, René Girard, and Jan Kott. She uses these interpretations as a structuring device, and divides her nine case studies into three sections, which correspond to the basic interpretation of Euripides' Dionysus that each of the three theorists puts forth: Dionysus is 'a liberating and community oriented god' (Part I), 'a god who destabilizes identities' (Part II), and a god 'who appears as a stranger to bring about a productive encounter or a destructive clash of cultures' (Part III) (22).

Fischer-Lichte argues that the performances she studies achieved these three functions: 'they celebrated liberation and communality, destabilized the cultural identity of their spectators, and performed a productive encounter or destructive clash of cultures' (22). Although these

interpretations of the play have their critics in contemporary scholarship, they are an effective structuring device and are sufficiently justified by Fischer-Lichte as they each position Dionysus as representing what we now regard as the consequences of globalization. This connection between ritual theory and globalization cuts to the heart of Fischer-Lichte's monograph: just as ritual is linked to liminal and transitional experiences, Fischer-Lichte argues that Victor Turner's definition of liminality equally applies to the social, political and cultural states of transition surrounding her productions. Furthermore, she positions the process of staging *The Bacchae* as a form of sacrificial ritual in itself; a *sparagmos* is performed upon the text as it is dismembered by the theatre practitioners; this is followed an *omophagia* where they put it back together by incorporating the remaining text into a performance. These performances create a (temporary) bond between those present and unite them as a community, helping to confirm or renegotiate local identities. It is the deterioration of these identities which Fischer-Lichte demonstrates is one of the three problems of globalization (225). Fischer-Lichte supports this argument in her first section through analysis of Richard Schechner's *Dionysus in 69*, Wole Soyinka's *The Bacchae of Euripides: A Communion Rite*, and Teat(r)o Oficina's *Bacantes*. Fischer-Lichte's decision to open her monograph with the production most familiar to her readership is smart, as it eases the reader in to her theoretical approach. In her analysis of both Schechner's and Soyinka's productions she explores the way that each project began with the hope of demonstrating the shortcomings of old forms of authority and new, alternative ways of living. She consequently positions these productions as an attempt to bring about Marcusean 'cultural revolutions', the former by liberating the audience and reconciling individualism with communality, and the latter by re-appropriating Greek culture into Soyinka's native Yoruba culture and inviting audiences to reconsider colonial ideas about cultural ownership. Fischer-Lichte explains, however, that neither production ultimately fulfilled this purpose; tensions within Schechner's Performance Group and audience resistance during participatory moments—such as during the 'Total Caress'—affected the establishment of communality, and the National Theatre's production of Soyinka's play in fact prompted a counter-revolution which reinforced colonial ideas due to the creative team's 'uneasiness, even indignation' at 'Soyinka's claim to ownership of Greek culture' (64). The Brazilian *Bacantes*, however, is depicted as effectively achieving its purpose of celebrating liberation, bringing about a community between the audience and spectators, and even putting people into a trance-like state by incorporating local rituals and music.

The second part of the book moves the focus to Europe and considers the *Antiquity Project* at the Schaubühne Berlin, Theodoros Terzopoulos' production of *The Bacchae* at Delphi, and Krzysztof Warlikowski's version of the tragedy in Warsaw. Many readers will be unfamiliar with all three of these productions, and Fischer-Lichte provides substantial information about the social, cultural, and political situations surrounding them, alongside extended performance analyses of the productions themselves.

These three productions are depicted as destabilizing elements of national identity through performance. Fischer-Lichte argues that Peter Stein and Klaus Michael Grüber's *Antiquity Project*, for example, succeeded in demonstrating that the past is fragmentary, and thus unknowable, and consequently called into question the cooption of ancient Greece as a form of authentication for the German educated middle class. Theodoros Terzopoulos combatted the idea that ancient tragedy has an intrinsic 'Greekness' by incorporating Asian theatre techniques, such as a Kabuki-like physicality, for his 1986 Delphi Festival production, and the complex chapter on Warlikowski's *Bacchae* demonstrates how this version responded to

a transitional period in Polish theatre and provided ‘a searing critique of religion, pseudo-religion, and the transfer of religious attitudes to other fields of society’ (153).

The final section of the book includes chapters on Japanese, Indian, and Chinese versions of the *The Bacchae* respectively. Suzuki Tadashi’s *The Bacchae* has previously been discussed at length by Marianne McDonald;² however, McDonald focuses primarily on the performances of this show in 1981, whereas Fischer-Lichte charts the evolution of the production from 1978 to 2008. The decision to cover the international journey of the production over three decades ties in with the thematic focus of this section by proving how it fused diverse performance cultures and responded to changing cultural environments. Chapter Eight also focuses on cross-cultural encounters, here by examining the Kathakali-style production of *Bacchae* staged at the Delphi Festival in 1998. The focus in this chapter is largely on the negotiations between the Greek committee and the New Delhi-based director, and the more destructive clash of cultures that these negotiations entailed. Fischer-Lichte proposes that the Delphi committee wanted to stage an *agon* between two ancient forms of theatre and imposed restrictions which resulted in a production featuring a transformed Kathakali; nevertheless, the production was appreciated by the performers and some spectators. The final case studied, which was also performed at the 1998 Delphi Festival, includes another destructive clash of cultures, where a collaboration between the New York Greek Drama Company and the China National Beijing Opera Ensemble turned into an act of American ‘cultural imperialism’ by staging the dismemberment of the Beijing opera.

These case studies collectively provide a convincing answer to Fischer-Lichte’s guiding question by demonstrating that the popularity of *The Bacchae* since the 1960s stems from its ability to reflect upon the globalizing process. The performance analyses supporting the chapters are the highlight of the book, particularly in Chapters Three, Four and Ten, which are particularly detailed and enriching. The strong theoretical underpinning makes for an unusually cohesive monograph and is a welcome addition to a field largely dominated by diachronic studies on the performance reception of specific plays. Although there is a place for both, Fischer-Lichte’s attempt to consider ‘Why is this play being staged?’, as well as ‘How is this play being staged?’, extends current scholarship in a welcome direction.

The only potential drawback to this approach is that the overarching argument does, on occasion, appear to slightly homogenize the performance reception of Euripides’ tragedy. It also, at times, distills potentially complex political conflicts between cultures and theatre practitioners into encounters between a ‘good’ local culture being suppressed or overpowered by a ‘bad’ global or colonial authority. I have no doubt that this is sometimes the case, and in all relevant examples no doubt it is, at the very least, a contributing factor — the more positive reception that Terzopoulos’ production received outside Delphi, for example, certainly indicates this. For several other examples, however, there is almost certainly more to the equation. For example, Peter Hall had not yet taken the reins as Artistic Director of the National Theatre during the 1973 production of Soyinka’s *The Bacchae*. Laurence Olivier retained the post until after his final production for the company (*The Party*, which closed 24 January, 1974) and was certainly still in full control during the commissioning of Soyinka’s play.³ The National Theatre leadership transition was clearly a turbulent time for the company, and it is likely that the complexity of this local situation might have had negative repercussions on the current productions and the negotiations between different artistic visions, such as Wole Soyinka’s and director Roland Joffe’s. Bringing out the complex interactions between these local problems at the National Theatre, as well as the more global ideological and political concerns that Fischer-Lichte highlights, might have provided a more

encompassing view of the forces at work and increased the value of this monograph for readers unfamiliar with the material.

Nevertheless, this is an enormously valuable book that is largely error-free. The première of Euripides' *Bacchae* is dated to 406 BCE (3); it is usually dated to 405 BCE and should, at the least, be presented as c. 406 BCE. On the part of the press there is some inconsistency with the presentation of long quotations.⁴ Throughout the monograph the endnotes are brief and very minimal further reading is provided for the reader. This is perhaps a shame given the diverse readership Fischer-Lichte intends to address and the different academic levels and disciplines that will be attracted to the work.

The geo-cultural breadth of the case studies chosen, and the detail provided of the performance culture and socio-political contexts of the productions makes this a rich and resourceful collection. There is no doubt that some readers will feel the absence of certain personal favourite productions of *The Bacchae*; however, as it stands the value of the collection, and the way the examples are theorized collectively, is much more than sum of its parts. This is an important addition to reception studies scholarship and will be of great use to all working on the history of classical performance.

Notes:

- [1.](#) Hall, Edith, Macintosh, Fiona, and Wrigley, Amanda, eds., 2004. *Dionysus Since 69: Greek Tragedy at the Dawn of the Third Millennium*. Oxford. Fischer-Lichte herself contributed to this volume.
- [2.](#) See pp. 59–73 in McDonald, Marianne. 1992. *Ancient Sun, Modern Light: Greek Drama on the Modern Stage*. New York.
- [3.](#) Laurence Olivier was initially meant to step down in October 1973; however, this was still well after the August 2 Press Night of the production.
- [4.](#) Generally, long quotations are in a smaller font, with the reference on a separate line, right justified. Exceptions to this can be found on pages 36, 48, 136, and 206.