



sing to me again of Dionysus

# ***The Bacchae of Euripides***

By Wole Soyinka

Directed by Prof. Judyie Al-Bilali

Dramaturgy by Prof. Megan Lewis

## **STUDY GUIDE**

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## DIRECTOR'S NOTE

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*Dionysus and his magnificent initiates, the Bacchantes, have come back for me. I met them twenty years ago when I directed this same adaptation by distinguished Nigerian Nobel Laureate, Wole Soyinka. I embraced his vision as it foregrounds the social and political transformations inherent to the ancient drama, and now two decades later, Soyinka's script rings even more true as we face unprecedented environmental, ecological, and spiritual challenges.*

*A play is relevant after 2,400 years because it illuminates primal forces, notable*



*among them, sexuality. Dionysus, called by many names including 'The Liberator' has often symbolized gender fluidity. In the rigid caste system of ancient Greece, his devotees included slaves, women, and foreigners -- allowing those usually excluded to participate in the annual Dionysian festivals.*

*Our play is set in 2020, just across the threshold into the upcoming decade, at the pivot point of a new era in human history. Our location is Gaia, the mythological Greek name recognizing our beloved and beleaguered planet Earth as a sentient, living goddess. Right now, Gaia demands our attention. She calls us*

*beyond ideology to unity, a call we must heed for our survival as a species.*

*Myth is how we navigate and ultimately evolve both individual and collective psyches. Myth must change for us to grow. Artists are the antennae for society and we are re-imagining Euripides' myth of Dionysus to address our need for balance between reason and passion. This timeless play tells us where to look for balance in a world twisted by the desire for power and control. The Bacchantes say look to ecstasy, to creativity, to beauty, to joy, to theater. Lose control. The timing is divine for the return of Dionysus and his wild celebrants. As our audience, you are sitting in one of their temples: a theater. Now they are coming for you.*

*Judyie Al-Bilali*  
Director

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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**Akinwande Oluwole Babatunde Soyinka** (born 13 July 1934), known as Wole Soyinka (pronounced: WO-lay soy-YINKa) is a Nigerian playwright, poet, and essayist. He was awarded the 1986 Nobel Prize in Literature, the first African to be honored in that category. After studying in Nigeria and the UK, he worked with the Royal Court Theatre in London. He took an active role in Nigeria's political history and its struggle for independence from Great Britain. In 1972, he became a political prisoner and was put in solitary confinement for 22 months. He kept writing in prison - on any form of paper he could find. Soyinka has been a strong critic of successive Nigerian governments, especially the country's many military dictators and corrupt politicians, as well as other political tyrannies such as the Mugabe regime in Zimbabwe. His plays include: *The Lion and the Jewel* (1959), *A Dance of the Forests* (1960), *The Strong Breed* (1964), *Kongi's Harvest* (1964), *Madmen and Specialists* (1970), *The Bacchae of Euripides* (1973), *Death and the King's Horseman* (1975), *A Play of Giants* (1984), and *The Beatification of Area Boy* (1996). His prolific writing also includes novels, memoirs, poetry, and scholarly works.



## KEY FIGURES & CONCEPTS

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**GAIA.** Earth, sentient living goddess. Gaia is the ancestral mother of all life: the primal Mother Earth goddess. She is the immediate parent of Uranus (the sky), from whose sexual union she bore the Titans (themselves parents of many of the Olympian gods) and the Giants, and of Pontus (the sea), from whose union she bore the primordial sea gods.

**DIONYSUS** (pronounced: **DIAN-ISIS**) is the god of the 1) grape-harvest, winemaking and wine, of 2) fertility, ritual madness, religious ecstasy, and 3) theatre in ancient Greek religion and myth. Also known by his Roman name, **Bacchus**, or as **Bromius** (meaning "noisy," "roaring," or "boisterous") or **Zagreus**, the frenzy he induces is often referred to as a bacchanalia. Dionysus is the son of a mortal woman, **SEMELE** (pronounced: **Sem-EH-lee**), and Zeus. When Zeus' wife Hera discovered his affair with Semele after she became pregnant, Hera convinced Semele to demand that Zeus reveal himself in all his glory as proof of his divinity. Semele was consumed in the lightning-ignited flame of Zeus' thunderbolt. Just before she died, Zeus rescued the fetal Dionysus, and sewed him into his thigh. A born. Hence Dionysus is When he grew up, Dionysus and she became a goddess name *Thyone*.



few months later, Dionysus was often called "the twice-born." rescued his mother from Hades, on Mount Olympus, with the new



Dionysus carries a symbolic staff known as a **thyrsus** <<< – a giant fennel bulb covered with ivy vines, sometimes topped with a pine cone or by a bunch of vine-leaves and grapes or ivy-leaves and berries, and dripping in honey (all fertility symbols). Dionysus was banished and rejected by the Olympians and wandered the Arabian peninsula and Africa seeking followers who would affirm his status as a god. was sometimes identified with a god worshipped by the followers of Orphism, the “first Dionysus,” a son of Zeus and Persephone, who was dismembered by the Titans and reborn.

**Fawn skin**, costumes worn by the **Maenads**, (**pronounced: MAY-nids**) the female followers of Dionysus (also known as **Bacchantes (Bak-ANTI)** or **Bacchae (Bak-KAI)**). The Bacchae were inspired by Dionysus into a state of ecstatic frenzy through a combination of dancing and intoxication. Often written off as “mad women,” they are actually sacred worshippers and holy priestesses.



**TIRESIAS**, (**pronounced: Tie-REE-sias**) a blind prophet of Apollo in Thebes, famous for clairvoyance and for being transformed into a woman for seven years. Often referred to as the “blind seer,” he is also known for his ambiguous and plural gender.

**PENTHEUS**, (**pronounced: PEN-THI-us**) king of Thebes. His name means “Man of Sorrows.” His father was Ichoin (Echion), the wisest of the Spartoi. His mother was Agave, the daughter of Cadmus, the founder of Thebes, and the goddess Harmonia. His sister was Epeiros. He died at the hands of his mother, Agave, who tore him to pieces in a Dionysian frenzy.

**AGAVE**, (**pronounced: A-GAA-vay**) Pentheus’ mother, third daughter of Cadmus. Her sisters are: Autonoe (**pronounced: Aw-TON-o-wee**), Ino (**pronounced: I know**) and Semele (**pronounced: Sem-EH-lee**).



**KADMOS** (aka **Cadmus**; **pronounced: CAD-moss or CAD-miss**) was the founder and first king of Thebes. He was the first Greek hero and, alongside Perseus and Bellerophon, the greatest hero and slayer of monsters before the days of Heracles. With Harmonia, he was the father of Semele, Polydorus, Autonoe, Agave and Ino. Their youngest son was Illyrius. He is considered the ancestor of Illyrians and Theban royalty. **Dragon’s teeth**: Kadmos killed the dragon that guarded Ares’ sacred spring. Then he sowed the dragon’s teeth and they yielded spartoi, fierce warriors who sprang from the earth. The spartoi battled each other and the five survivors founded Thebes with Kadmos: Ichion (Pentheus’ father and Agave’s partner), Udaeus, Chthonius, Hyperenor and Pelorus.

**SLAVE CHORUS, OLD SLAVE & SLAVE LEADER**. These are all Soyinka’s additions to the original story. Read against the history of colonialism in Africa, these additions add a revolutionary political element to Euripides’ original. In the context of American history, the inclusion of slaves takes on added political resonance.

**Carceral state**. Refers to the system of mass incarceration present in the contemporary United States. The jail and prison population has increased from less than 200,000 in 1972 to 2.2 million today through systemic racism, the failed War on Drugs, and a for-profit prison system.

The United States has 5 percent of the world's population but nearly 25 percent of its prisoners. See Michelle Alexander's *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* and Ta-Nehisi Coates' articles in *The Atlantic*.

**Stop & Frisk.** Police practice of temporarily detaining, questioning, and at times searching civilians on the street for weapons and other contraband. The program became the subject of a racial profiling controversy as the vast majority of those stopped are people of color.

**Law & Order.** Political rhetoric that demands a strict criminal justice system and stricter criminal penalties. Also referred to as "tough on crime" or the "War on Crime/Drugs." The phrase has a history of use by conservative political leadership. Its logic has been critiqued for its racist overtones.

**Flogging or Flagellation,** refers to the act of beating the human body with special implements such as whips, lashes, rods, switches. Usually, it is a form of corporeal punishment but it can also be submitted to willingly, or performed on oneself, in religious contexts.



<< **Thebes (pronounced: THEEBS)** a city in **Boeotia**, in Central Greece (also referred to as **Hellas**). The city was a major rival of ancient Athens, and sided with the Persians during the 480 BC invasion under Xerxes. It is also the site of many Greek myths: Cadmus, Oedipus, Dionysus, Heracles and others. **Kithairon (pronounced: Sith-A-ron)** is a mountain in this region, where Dionysiac festivals were celebrated.

**NOTE:** All Soyinka's geographic references are Asian & African. Dionysus wandered here in his attempts to be recognized as a legitimate god worthy of Mount Olympus. Politically, Soyinka is also creating an Afrocentric world.

**Sacred grove,** divine forests throughout West Africa where, in the Yoruba spiritual tradition, ancestral spirits manifest. For instance, the Osun Sacred Grove, on the outskirts of the city of

Osogbo in Nigeria, is the abode of the goddess of fertility Osun, one of the pantheon of Yoruba gods. The Greeks also had sacred groves where maenads worshipped Dionysus and other gods and goddesses.

**Ecstatic state,** an altered state of consciousness characterized by diminished awareness of other objects or surroundings. Religious ecstasy is an elevated state of divine possession or communion and oneness with God/the divine, often accompanied by visions and emotional (and sometimes physical) euphoria. Pentecostal, charismatic and spirit-filled Christianity are often referred to as "ecstatic religions."

**Feast of Eleusis (Eleusinian Mysteries), (pronounced: EL-oo-sees and EI-YOO-SIN-ian)** secretive initiations held every year for the cult of Demeter and Persephone based at Eleusis in ancient Greece. They involved the *descent* (loss), the *search*, and the *ascent* of Persephone into and out of Hades (the underworld) and symbolized the seasonal cycles of nature. Demeter mourns in *Winter* when her daughter is underground in Hades and *Spring* comes again when Persephone emerges from the underworld. **Vestals**, priestesses of Vesta, goddess of the hearth; usually virgins.

**Apollonian vs Dionysian**, a philosophical and literary concept and dichotomy/dialectic, based on Apollo and Dionysus in Greek mythology. Both are sons of Zeus. Apollo is the god of the sun, of rational thinking and order, and appeals to logic, prudence and purity. Dionysus is the god of wine and dance, of irrationality and chaos, and appeals to emotions and instincts. The Ancient Greeks did not consider the two gods to be opposites or rivals, although they were often entwined by nature.

**Cross-dressing**, the practice of wearing clothing of the opposite gender. Historically, when men wear women's clothing it is often considered a debasement, stigma, or humorous, whereas cross-dressing often affords women greater power because they can act as men. These reversals reveal the power dynamics of gender and how we have historically framed men/masculine as powerful and women/feminine as weaker.



**Two suns and a bull**, double manifestation of the god Dionysus. Dionysus was often manifested as a bull. Seeing two suns in the Theban sky is a divine omen.

**Blood and wine**, both symbols of life, sustenance, and vitality. Wine is also a symbol of transformation, as grapes undergo transformation when they are fermented. The shedding of blood (the vital force that sustains life) in ritual sacrifice precedes most ceremonies in which blessings are sought from the

ancestors or divinities. Sacrifice leads to transformation.

**Greek Theatrical Concepts: Hubris, (pronounced: HEW-bris)** excessive pride or self-confidence. Aristotle, in *The Poetics*, explains how Greek theatrical heroes like Oedipus expressed an arrogant confidence that was often their undoing. For Soyinka it is Agave whose hubris gets the better of her. **Anagnorisis, (pronounced: an-ag-NOR-i-sis)** for Aristotle, is a moment in a play when a character makes a critical discovery. The main character either recognizes or identifies his/her true nature, recognizes the other character's true identity, discovers the true nature of his situation, or that of the others – leading to the resolution of the story. **Peripeteia (pronounced: pear-i-pe-TAY-ya)** is the reversal of circumstances, or turning point, in the plot.

## STUDY QUESTIONS

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- We have set our production of this ancient story in 2020. How might the play speak to our contemporary moment or culture? Where did it resonate for you that it was a story about today?
- Theater is a collaborative art form in which many different elements combine to help tell the story. How did you see the choices made by costume designers, lighting or scenic designers, and the director working to tell the story? What moments in the play worked most effectively for you as an audience member?
- Soyinka suggests that sacrifice is needed for a society to transform. What do you think about the sacrifice required in this play? Is it just? Is it fair?
- This is a play about a society out of balance. Do you see any parallels to our own society today? What do you think our culture might require to restore it to balance?
- Both Euripides (the original playwright) and Soyinka (the adaptor) use poetic language to tell this story. How might spoken language and the language of the body (movement, dance) work together to tell the story in our production? What moments in the play worked most effectively for you?
- What questions does this production leave you wanting to answer?