THE BACCHAE 2.1

SET DESIGN

by

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Abstract

This paper is a report of the process of the set design by Natalia María González Ruíz, for the play *The Baccahe 2.1*, which was produced by The University of British Columbia at the Frederic Wood Theatre in January 2015.

The set design was the thesis project of Natalia González for the MFA Design for Theatre program at The University of British Columbia.
Preface

This report presents my set design for the play *The Bacchae 2.1*, a contemporary adaptation of Euripides’ *The Bacchae*, written by Charles Mee in 1993, and produced by The University of British Columbia at the Fredric Wood Theatre January 2015. This paper describes the creative process of the set design and how the set contributed to the general concept of the play, reflects upon the teamwork involved, the practical requirements, the limitations, and describes the construction and the execution of the set.
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To my parents and those loyal friends who supported me day and night in this long and tough path.
The Bacchae 2.1

*The Bacchae 2.1* is a contemporary adaptation of Euripides *The Bacchae*, written by Charles Mee and first premiered at the Mark Taper Forum’s Festival of New Work in 1993. Although the play dates from ancient Greece, Mee’s version is narrated in a modern language. The play tells the story of Dionysus and his worshipers, the Bacchantes women. Agave is their leader and also the mother of Pentheus, the young king of the city of Thebes. Pentheus’ pride and resistance to worshiping the god Dionysus will end with his tragic death at the hands of his own mother.

![Figure 1: The Bacchae 2.1 Poster.](image-url)
Production Cast

Dennis Gupa  
*Director*

Curtis Li  
*Stage Manager*

Natalia Ruiz (Natalia Gonzalez)  
*Set Design*

Kiara Lawson  
*Costume Design*

Eric Chad  
*Lighting & Media Design*

Kate de Lorme  
*Sound Design*

Jim Ferguson  
*Set Construction and TBA.*
Conceptual Overview

“To reach a closer understanding of both these tendencies, let us begin by viewing them as the separate art realms of dream and Intoxication, two physiological phenomena standing toward one another in much the same relationship as the Apollonian and Dionysian”.

Friedrich Nietzsche

Since the first societies had access to culture and, through it, to an abstract interpretation of the world, the development of the human spirit has been conditioned and defined by a dialectical, contradictory, and tilting reasoning. This dialectic is located between two poles, which are known by many names: reason and heart, chaos and order, Eros and Thanatos, Polis and Polemos, left and right, Yin and Yang, and of course Dionysus and Apollo. All this is part of the central theme of Euripides’ classic work, The Bacchae.

In that order, duality and dialectic are perhaps the most recurring themes in this adaptation of The Bacchae by Charles Mee. Duality between two worlds, two universes, two sexual genders, two forces, and two gods: Dionysus and Apollo.

In the words of Dennis, director of this production:

“The dervish, trance-like dance signify the Dionysian revelry of illogical, raw, sensual explosion of ecstatic joy. Women holding musical instruments and engaging in intense pleasures of dancing and singing is a powerful act of redressing the dominance of the Apollonian logic and reason. The tension between the individual and the collective, reason versus emotion, logic against instinct is clearly articulated in this play. These dichotomies are marked by the characteristics of Apollo and Dionysus, both sons of Zeus. So, if Apollo is the god of the sun, the symbol of dreams and reason, Dionysus on the other hand is the god of fertility and wine, of excesses, intoxication and ecstasy. These two gods are the template of Mee's characterization of Pentheus whose reason brought him to a tragic end, and the Stranger as the Dionysian deity who craved for revenge and

1 Nietzsche, F (2000), (1 ed., P.45)
freedom

The script plays with these dualities, sometimes in a poetic way, in some other cases in a harsh and crude way: reason – emotion, man – woman, west – east, profane – sacred, gods – humans, vengeance – moderation, etc.

As Nietzsche wrote in *The Birth of Tragedy from the Spirit of Music*, the secret of the tragedy, as a performing act, focuses on this tension between Apollo and Dionysus. Author Douglas Burnham, explained in this way:

“Nietzsche claims that the Apolline and Dionysiac are essential for understanding art. Immediately, we should be asking questions, such as: What Kinds of thing are these – a few line later Nietzsche calls the “drives”. Those are the fundamental nature of human beings and their activities and forms of human life. Insofar as these result in artistic activity or cultural productions, there are these two drivers; Apolline and Dionysiac.”

In the same way, in the classic work *The Bacchae*, Euripides describes the madness and ecstasy produced by Bacchus in the Dionysian ritual acts, and how all this leads to what today is known as Theater. That is why the adaptation of *The Bacchae 2.1* is an invitation to observe the power theater has, and how it influences the lives of artists and actors that are part of the “Dionysian Rituals” to create it (theater).

Finally, another key point in *The Bacchae 2.1* is the tension between man-woman, white man – non-white woman, reflecting the political and social issues behind the dynamics of the dominant white cultures, and how they wield oppression. Once again, paraphrasing Dennis: “ideologies of gender and sexuality, and the politics of power”.

In the introduction, Mee describes this aspect:

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2 I had many production meetings and talks with Dennis about the design and concept of the play. I will make some quotes of these talks paraphrasing what he said.

3 Douglas, B and Martin J (2010), (1ed., p. 27)
“The first world meets the third world, the insiders meet the outsiders, the defenders of the old meet the challenge of the new, the champions of reason meet the champions of passion, the men meet the women”\(^4\).

Set Design (Before)

Before getting deep into the concept of set design, it is necessary to talk a little bit about my relationship with Dennis Gupa, director of *The Bacchae 2.1*, who was also a student in the Master of Fine Arts program at UBC.

My first encounter with Dennis was in 2014 when I was assigned as set designer to one of the plays he was directing for his THTR 520 class. The challenge of this project was to make a set that could be used not only in his play *I Am Not a Laughing Man*, but also in the play *Little One*, directed by graduate student Barbara Tomasic. Two plays, two directors, just one stage, and no intermissions, which implied the set had to be functional for both plays, without having big modifications or having to move the set.

Considering these requirements, I designed a large platform, composed of four wagons (see Figure 2,3). In the first play the four platforms remained fixed forming just one structure, while in the second they were separated and worked as boxes (see Figure 4 - 6).
Figure 3: Photo of Boxes Set up for *My Little One*.

Figure 4: *I Am Not a Laughing Man*. 
Figure 5: Set up for *I Am Not a Laughing Man*.

Figure 6: Scene Change for *I Am Not a Laughing Man*. 
Likewise, from that moment, a beautiful and strong friendship between Dennis and I was born, which allowed us to work in a practical and sensible way during *The Bacchae 2.1*.

My relationship with Dennis was a key element at the moment of developing the visual concept of *The Bacchae 2.1*. We both have something in common, we are foreigners. We come from different countries, Philippines and Colombia, two countries that have many aspects in common, and some differences too. They are places of a world, a third world, where a theater industry has just started to be born. Countries in which improvisation rules and where things are not well planned before being executed, a totally different dynamic opposed to the way things work in the Anglo-Saxon world, but which is closer to what I know and what I am used to.

These two different ways to approach work were recurring topics the first times I met Dennis. We somehow tried to create an atmosphere in which we would feel good about our rustic and improvised work methods, without driving our crew mad, which was mostly composed of Canadians.

We started to materialize all the ideas Dennis wanted to transmit through the play, taking into consideration two important aspects: duality (especially when dealing with the concepts man-woman, human-God and West-East, and domination and filicide), and Filipino aesthetic forms. This second aspect had a profound rationale, remembering that the director comes from The Philippines.

Quoting Dennis’ own words:

“Charles Mee's re-interpretation of Euripides' play finds its resonance to contemporary
social and religious order and to how people encounter deities with fear and veneration. As a work that depicts religious worship and the ways in which god, man/woman and tradition interact and relate”.

The Bacchae 2.1 turns to be the perfect script for examining intercultural interventions because modern Filipino society is still quite attached to religious rituals and fearful of “the avenging God brought on by the transgressions of its leaders”. Dennis sought to strengthen this hybrid reflection on the dichotomies of tradition and modernity, putting together a canonical Western Play with Filipino aesthetic forms.

Thus, the preliminary designs were a mixture of several elements of the Filipino rural architecture, like huts and bridges, and also some types of spaces that simulated sacred fields in which Philippine rituals took place. Nevertheless, these first designs lack something. They lack a soul and profoundness.

So Dennis gave us designers the reference of the ancient symbol “Ouroboros”, which shows a snake that bites its own tail, and which forms, with its body, a circular shape. It symbolizes the eternal cycle of things, eternal effort, eternal strife or the useless effort, since the cycle starts all over again despite the actions that are there to stop it. It is also a metaphor of horror and the eventual destruction of kinship and blood relations.

At that moment that Dennis incorporates the meaning and the symbol of Ouroboros in all aspects related to the play, including the narrative structure (see Figure 7) …

\[5\] I had many production meetings and talks with Dennis about the design and concept of the play. I will make some quotes of these talks paraphrasing what he said.
Those images were in a presentation Dennis made for all the designer. He traced that image to show the turning points using the image of the Oroboros. “It looks like an umbical cord that represents the interstitial connection of the relationship, revenge, threats, doubling, power, sensuality, and bestiality all lodge in the story of Bacchae”.

He made something similar with the design concept (see Figure 8).
That is how the final idea came to life. A set that fed the concept: duality, domination, death, combined with Filipino aesthetic references, and which had to be rich, poetically speaking. A simple set to the eye, but one that had to have a strong and concrete subtext (see Figure 9 and 10).

Finally, the aesthetic concept, (let us call it the “style”), is a reference to the Filipino houses that are built out of bamboo.
Figure 9: Preliminary Sketch.

Figure 10: Preliminary Rendering.
The set consisted of three platforms, and taking into account what we had done in *I am not a Laughing man*, we decided that they would be moved all around the stage. When together they would form a large structure, and then when they were detached, their singularity would be exposed. The first platform, which from now on will be called Platform 1, represents Thebes’ palace, the city, the rationality, the logic, Pentheus’ house, and Apollo (see Figures 11 and 12). The third one, Platform 3 represents the mountains in Cockaigne where the Bacchantes organized their rituals. It also symbolizes emotion, lack of moderation, instinct, and Dionysius (see Figures 13 and 14). Finally, the middle unit, Platform 2, represents the duality between these two forces. It is also the bridge, the way Pentheus takes to go from Thebes to the mountains when he decides to go and spy on the women (see Figures 15 and 16).

![Figure 11: Sketch Platform No. 1. “Thebes”](image)
Figure 12: Platform No. 1. “Thebes”.
Figure 13: Sketch Platform No. 3. “Cockaigne”.

Figure 14: Pentheus on Platform No. 3.
Figure 15: Sketch Platform No. 2. “Transition-Bridge”.

Figure 16: Bacchantes on Platform No. 2.
Finding harmony in the composition of the set and the setting was necessary. Even though the platforms could be moved, they were always returned to a balanced position. The movements were dependent on how the director presented the story (see Figures 17-20), and gave the set a functional purpose for the staging.

Figure 17: Setting No. 3.
Figure 18: Setting No. 1.

Figure 19: Setting No. 4.
In addition to the Filipino aesthetic references, finding a simple contemporary look was important. Some of the references that were taken, as inspiration were contemporary minimalistic sculptures, since Dennis and I wanted the set to be sculptural. Even when the platforms’ function was to contribute to the theme of the play, they had to look alive and be pleasing to the eye.

From the very beginning Dennis wanted the set to be white, since he wanted to recreate a “pristine world”. The colour white evokes feelings of tranquility, light, and peace, which would give the play a sense of harmony. While the script is full of heavy meanings, the white colour provided a balance and acted as a “psychological agent”\(^\text{7}\).

In this way, the color pallet was composed mostly with white, black and red (see Figure 21)

\(^{7}\) Author Vincent LoBrutto discusses the psychological effect a white color has on set design. LoBrutto, Vincent. By Design: Interviews with Film Production Designers (1992), (1ed., p. XI).
Similarly, it was important the set serve as a neutral background to the colorful clothing (see Figure 22 and 23).
Figure 22: Costumes.
The set was complemented by the light and the video design. Eric Chad did a great job, building and reconstructing the set with his video and lights. The set became a nearly blank canvas, which he knew how to fully exploit (see Figure 24- 28)

Figure 23: Costumes.

Figure 24: Pentheus Singing before Going to the Mountains.
Figure 25: Bacchantes Worshipping Dionysius.
Figure 26: Dionysius before He Is Sent to the Jail.

Figure 27: Bacchantes Talking about Their Wild Life.
Figure 28: Bacchante “Hanging Woman”.
Process

After the final idea of the design was chosen, several important details were still to be determined. During the construction of the set important changes were made, some due to artistic considerations, others due to economic and technical limitations. Also, the process by which Dennis and I work made the construction a little different from what is common in the Theatre Department.

The most significant change had to do with the material that was to be used in the set. At the beginning, we planned to use real bamboo for the platforms’ walls, since that would provide an unmistakable Asian atmosphere. However, the thick bamboo we wanted to incorporate was too expensive, so we decided to use round wood or metal to represent bamboo, but even that solution was outside our budget. Therefore, in the end, thin flat wood cut in strips was used. Even though the solution was effective, it changed the play’s aesthetic radically. Dennis and I later realized that if we had known our budget was not going to be enough, we would have elaborated a different design.

Once white was selected as the only colour we would use in the painting of our set, a conflict with the director arose regarding the treatment of the colour. I was worried that using just one color could produce an excessive sensation of flatness. As a solution I proposed applying textures and / or hues to enrich the expressivity and the design of the set. This proposal was rejected by the director, who thought that projections would work better over a totally flat surface. We had to find a way to reconcile the evident cultural differences and the different conceptions related to our work, which on some occasions led to stressful situations that altered the rhythms and affected our motivation.

During the construction phase, I also had to face a challenge related to the carpenter. Even though this person showed a professional ability to find constructive solutions whenever we got stuck during the development of a certain task, it was hard for him to empathize with our lack of knowledge.
Conclusion

“It is very easy to make films and plays that show off design. The problem is to exert some discipline. Essentially, if we are worthy of the name production designer or set designer, we are the responsible for the main look of the environment of the film. Our concern in interpreting the film or play.”

Robert Boyle

Closing a project involves both physical and psychological processes. With *The Bacchae 2.1*, as with any other play, several important issues had to be faced. One must receive any kind of criticism, either positive or negative, see the play so many times it becomes tiresome, and deconstruct the set after closing. Demolishing the set signifies the end of the physical play, and can be a little painful. However, all this has its poetic side, since theater is about life and death, resurrection and recycling. As Marvin Carson said, “theater is all about Ghosting.- Indeed any regular theatergoer is familiar with the experience of a performance that conjures the ghosts of previous productions.”

Set design dies too, and it is logical to wonder if it really made some contribution to the play. Indeed, it is easy to make a nice design, but very difficult to reinterpret the play, help create its aura, make something that cannot be seen. Personally, I think that objective was achieved in *The Bacchae 2.1*. Not only was the set aesthetically impeccable and attractive, but it helped create a metaphysical world related to the themes in the play. Likewise, I believe this is one of the plays that can be more easily appreciated with the help of a strong set design, since the script is so dense and tough. If the set had not been compelling, it would have been a more difficult play to

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8 Robert Boyle in *By Design: Interviews with Film Production Designers* (1992), (1ed., p. 34).

9 The author Carlson invented the concept Ghosting to described that throughout the theatrical history almost all elements have been recycled on the stage.
attend. Moreover, the set had an almost perfect fusion with the costume design, and the light and video design.

Of course, there were certain aspects of the design ideas that did not see the light, and details in the final staging that made me think; “I would like to change that” or “oh, this shape does not work really well with this movement, why did not I think about that before?” Nevertheless, those are occupational risks, and there will always be little details we will like to change.

Undoubtedly the toughest part of the experience for me, from which I learned the most, was dealing with personal relationships and differences.
Bibliography


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