

Double Take:
Elevator Repair Service's *Highway to Tomorrow*
and Euripides' *Bacchae*

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In May 2002, Mark Russell, former artistic director of New York City's acclaimed performance venue P.S. 122, surveyed in the *Village Voice* the growth and maturation of a generation of artists making theater that "[moves] under the radar of our American culture," theater that is "influenced by hip-hop, burlesque, dance, and the experiments of longtime renegades like the Wooster Group, Mabou Mines and Richard Foreman." He termed the work by artists such as Richard Maxwell and Elevator Repair Service "performance theater" because in the spirit of those "longtime renegades," it "[focuses] on the joy and power of presence, the act of performing and witnessing the act."

Elevator Repair Service (henceforth ERS), like the Wooster Group, claims "hi-fi sound" as a production hallmark, but the flip side of that is ERS's dedication to "low-tech design" (a marked contrast to the Wooster Group's technically elaborate stage constructions). However, what again links both companies is their focus on presence – which necessarily relies on intimacy with an audience. By shining the spotlight on "the ambiguity that exists between the actor and the character and the setting and the theater," ERS explores the tension between "the real and the pretend" (ERS Artist's Statement). Much like The Wooster Group in their Performing Garage, ERS works with the exigencies of the rehearsal and performance space, and will design a show predicated on the physical reality of their workspace. There is no call to imagine anything outside "the girdle of these walls," as we hear in *Henry V*; in an ERS play, what you see is what you get, and what you see is in and of itself noteworthy. ERS falls under Russell's rubric because they

“reduce the theatrical experience to the basics,” and through their “fascination with the presence of the performer and the act of acting,” acknowledge artifice – the basis of their work and the key to their success.

By now, ERS has become a stalwart of New York’s experimental theater scene. Like the Wooster Group, ERS is a collective of artists who make devised theater, developing their work over lengthy periods of time (even continuing to shape the material throughout the course of a run). Also like the Wooster Group, the membership of the collective has changed over time (causing cast changes within a run), yet the company continues to project a strong aesthetic profile through its artistic directorship. Since ERS’s founding in 1991, executive director John Collins has helmed each project, with company member Steve Bodow joining him as co-director in 1997. Collins, a sound designer as well as a director, has worked with Foreman and The Wooster Group. Sound cues function as lines in the script or gestures in the choreography, and the sound operators work in total parity with the actors. As with a Wooster Group show, sound design is built into the very fabric of an ERS show – there are no cue sheets. It is not difficult to detect the influence of this earlier generation of artists in ERS’s work: in a review of their 1996 show *Shut Up I Tell You (I Said Shut Up I Tell You)*, Artforum’s Steven Drukman hailed the commingling of “the mind-bending perception play of [Foreman] with the hi-tech [sound] hijinks of the [Wooster Group].”

Since its debut with *Mr. Antipyrene, Fire Extinguisher*, ERS has produced eight shows, and at the time of writing were working on their tenth, *Room Tone*. Earlier productions focused on topics as far-ranging as Salvador Dalí’s mythical lost screenplay for the Marx Brothers (who have been a constant source of inspiration for Elizabeth LeCompte), an infamous bar (McGurk’s *Suicide Hall*) in late nineteenth century New York, to the peculiar life and mindset of Andy Kaufman. These shows theatricalized abstract ideas through found objects (i.e. carpet remnants with tape markings) and found texts (i.e. physics lectures). In 1996, ERS for the first time embraced a text written specifically for the theater, using Tennessee Williams’s *Summer and Smoke* as the basis for *Cab Legs*. They “translated” Williams’s play into a loosely contemporary text by paraphrasing his words (leaving room for moments of improvised dialogue), around which they performed dances inspired by Bollywood musicals and Betty Boop cartoons (which also feature in *The Wooster Group’s House/Lights*). In their next show, *Total Fictional Lie*, ERS returned to found text by mining a number of documentaries on vaudeville, serial killer Aileen Wuornos, Paul Anka, turkey hunters, and traveling Bible salesmen. *Total Fictional Lie* is concerned with how

people present themselves in seemingly non-fictive moments; ideas of presence and presentation were turned inside out (and literally upside down) in this show. Prefiguring their transformation of the *Bacchae*, the company plumbed the differences in varying versions of truth: In a documentary, can we believe the omniscient narrator? Can we believe seemingly objective witnesses? Or are they, as much as anyone, subject to a misrecognition of their own subjectivity and impulses? Questions like these highlighted the relative conjunction and disparity between performers and the personae they present to their audience. *Total Fictional Lie* caromed back and forth from dance to appropriated documentary dialogue, eschewing text-driven narrative logic and relying primarily on the show's singular choreography for structural cohesion.

Perhaps in reaction to the lack of conventional theatrical components in *Total Fictional Lie*, namely a narrative structure built on plot and character, ERS's next project, which would become known as *Highway to Tomorrow*, showed a renewed interest in tackling dense text. In fact, ERS increased the stakes of the challenge, selecting F. Scott Fitzgerald's novel *The Great Gatsby* as their source text. Both Bodow and Collins felt that the best way for the company to engage with text was to attack an abundance of words, hence the choice of a novel.

This first version of *HTT* (*HTT1*) was performed in an August 1999 workshop. Actors sat at a table and manipulated a motley assortment of hand-made puppets (a shoe and a mallet both with sunglasses taped to them, a thermos with a pair of self-adhesive googly eyeballs) while they read aloud from segments of the novel. When *HTT* was next mounted in November 1999 (*HTT2*), the company had switched its source text to Fitzgerald's *The Last Tycoon*. Two of the five actors from *HTT1* were replaced; likewise, only some of the puppets from *HTT1* remained in use, most notably the thermos.

Rehearsals for *HTT3* resumed in the Spring of 2000 with the intention of revising and expanding the piece. Steve Bodow suggested yet another shift in text, to Euripides' *Bacchae*, and the company agreed that it was a challenging idea for them to tackle a Greek play. Their encounter with the novels had shown that the most fecund texts were those replete with material resistant to dramatization. Greek drama, wherein large-scale action is often heard about but neither physicalized nor seen, met the working parameters established in *HTT1* and *HTT2*. Moreover, the *Bacchae*'s inherent examination of theatricality itself, was in perfect consonance with one of ERS's long-standing concerns, the presence of the performer. The play offers, in the character who is Dionysus to the audience but who "acts" the "role" of the stranger from Lydia to the other characters, a deliberate confusion between actor and character. The work continued in the Fall of 2000.

Fordyce

In its final guise *Highway to Tomorrow* is a representation based on the *Bacchae*, but it does not try to be an exact reproduction of Euripides' play. ERS recognizes the necessary disparity between source and copy, and rather than try to diminish that difference, the company expands upon the possibilities offered by such doubling. *HTT* is a "double take" on Euripides' *Bacchae* in both a metaphorical and literal sense. Metaphorically, *HTT* uncannily doubles the *Bacchae* by offering a seemingly familiar classical text at some points, a strangely contemporary adaptation at others. Literally, ERS often stages *HTT* in such a way as to tell and then retell Euripides' *Bacchae* in two versions of the same story from slightly different perspectives. Moreover, when these narrative doublings occur, characters often perform the literal gesture of a comic "double-take," looking at another character or the audience twice, playing up the humorous failure or shock of not being able to see a thing clearly the first time round.

HTT had two directors, John Collins and Steve Bodow, and this double direction, along with the basic multiplicity of perspectives offered by working with a company, may be one basis for the interesting tensions in interpretation created in *HTT*. On the one hand, Collins has professed some skepticism about language's ability to be transparent. His early work with ERS was often distinguished by finely executed physical comedy that played with the border between the intelligible and the absurd. On the other, Bodow has expressed more of an interest in texts, yet, as mentioned, it was Bodow who suggested Euripides' drama in part because the text resists easy theatricalization.

In regard to the *Bacchae*, this dual attitude of resisting and engaging with text yields an interpretation in *HTT* that often seems most authentic to Euripides when it is most skeptical about the production's ability to cut through the centuries and see its classical, tragic source in a transparent way. Indeed, one of the most rewarding aspects of *HTT* is its humor, a skeptical humor that forthrightly acknowledges the strangeness of Euripides' ancient world, but that also curiously succeeds in revealing a strangeness already immanent in the *Bacchae*'s relationship to the tragic genre. Is the *Bacchae* after all, ERS seems to ask in *HTT*, a tragedy? Or is it more like what T.S. Eliot called "savage farce"? Or is the play a comedy of mistaken identity where the audience laughs at Pentheus because he confuses the god with a charlatan? Additionally, if Dionysus is the god of both tragedy and comedy, then how does that affect our reading of this self-referential Greek tragedy about Dionysus? Is this tragedy also, at times, a travesty of tragedy?

Bleha

Of the many thematic and performative through-lines in ERS's aesthetic that have developed over the past decade, an emphasis has emerged on the company members' shared sense of humor and on a literal conception of "play" – in their view, both fundamentals of theater. Bradley Glenn, a veteran of many ERS shows, has joked about the company's "love-hate" relationship with theater.

In rehearsal we have always joked about something Richard Foreman said, to the effect that "A jar rolling across the stage... could qualify as theater." Although we joke about that, since the beginning the group has always asked time again "What is Theater?" and I think the most successful shows offer several options and answers.¹

In conversation with LeCompte, Foreman once said that what made theater interesting for him was "only the distractions...only the suggestion that life goes off in a million different directions at all moments...provide[s]...an interesting subject for art" (139 in Rabkin's reprint for Johns Hopkins). Proving themselves true disciples of Foreman's and LeCompte's "found" theatre, ERS thrives on distractions as it seeks to answer its own question: What is theater?

Once rehearsals for a new show commence, all available company members and occasional guest artists assemble, and from this conjunction of minds and bodies are planted the seeds of a play. Projects proceed from a kind of a *tabula rasa*, as if the artists have to review and relearn how to build a show. Taking seriously mundane questions – "What do you want to see?" "What takes up an hour?" – someone starts "playing" with an object, a text or a sound source. Here is where the fun begins, as the ludic tone that pervades every ERS piece is teased to the fore during the rehearsal process. Because of this commitment to the possibility of chance and change, it is difficult to predict from an ERS play's inception what it might be "about" in more than a general sense or indeed how it might ultimately look and sound.

ERS answers its fundamental question – "What is theater?" – by privileging experience over narrative. Perhaps this is why they emphasize humor; laughter is a physical response and experience, an embodied experience. Laughter is an immediate, palpable response that

¹ Interestingly, Glenn then says that he thinks *Language Instruction* (1994 & 1999) was not wholly successful "because of the lack of a cohesive story line that [the] audience could hang their sensibility hat on while indulging the group in its pursuit of that question 'What is theater?'" To a lesser degree, the same could be said for *Total Fictional Lie*; while it was a crowd-pleaser, one could appreciate the individual vignettes and dances more readily than any inherent dramaturgical logic which tied the scenes together.

reminds us of our own corporeality even as it reflects the theater's corporeality. Such performance work elicits from its audience a reaction in the present tense: an instinctual response, a response unmediated by familiarity and expectation. Although not explicitly cited by ERS as an influence, Brecht's dictum that theater should "be turned from a home of illusion to a home of experience" certainly informs their theatrical philosophy.

Fordyce

"A jar rolling across the stage . . . could qualify as theater." Foreman's image suggests how simple, even poor the means of theater can be. It also implies how the notion of an "actor" need not always be human. To test this credo, ERS used a jar as a central character in *McGurk: A Cautionary Tale*. In a further example of thrifty, downtown theatricalism, the opening scene of *HTT4* presents a similarly simple, yet elegant meditation on the nature of theater, in this case through the figure of an animated thermos. The scene serves as a useful emblem for ERS's serioludic practices generally and for its reinterpretation of the *Bacchae* specifically.

When the lights rise at the beginning of *HTT*, they reveal a bare, monochrome brown, chest-high flat in the upstage right corner of the stage. From behind this flat a silver thermos floats up, on which two large googly eyes are attached. Although it may not be apparent to the entire audience, the thermos is an intentional mistranslation, a visual and aural pun based on one of the *Bacchae*'s major textual symbols. It also echoes the Wooster Group's doubling of a microphone stand as sceptre and viper in *House/Lights* (1998), a magic feat in which John Collins participated (Callens, 2001: 395). In place of the ritual appearance of a *thyrsis*, the emblematic fennel-stalk staff of Dionysus and his Bacchantes, ERS presents a *thermos*. The phallic *thyrsis* entwined with fertile vines is replaced by a phallic *thermos*, later shown to be full of an intoxicating potion. While the audience may not register the linguistic game at work, the thermos's anthropomorphic, googly eyes hint at its divinatory associations with the figure of Dionysus: thermos as ecstatic seer. More pronouncedly, the thermos begins to reveal its Dionysian, as well as theatricalist, agenda when from behind the flat it draws up and reads from a book entitled *Hypnotism for Everybody*.

Foreshadowing the moment when Dionysus hypnotizes Pentheus into cross-dressing, a moment represented in *HTT* by his donning a pair of googly eyes, the thermos reads from its book and then tries to hypnotize the audience. However, the audience laughs at the thermos; this is a skeptical, savvy, resistant audience of interpreters, not yet willing to lose their "I"'s as Pentheus ultimately will. The thermos goes

back to reading its book, and then redoubles its efforts at hypnosis by shaking its eyes and straining out towards the house. This time, after several seconds of intense staring, the thermos falls over in a daze. Apparently the thermos has succumbed to its own auto-suggestion and hypnotized itself. The audience laughs again; the thermos awakes and exits in seeming embarrassment; the show goes on.

ERS seems to be telling the audience to be skeptical of its own performance's ability to hypnotize them. At the same time, the audience's very laughter at the thermos suggests a vestigial form of theatrical seduction and suspension of disbelief. Although the audience may laugh at the anthropomorphism of the thermos and the hubris of its attempts to hypnotize them, they *get the joke*. The audience may be wryly skeptical of a stage world in which a thermos stands in for the god Dionysus, but underlying their skepticism is a basic faith in the doubling stage of representation itself, where signifiers come to stand in for signifieds and other signifiers. The thermos may fail to hypnotize the audience, but it succeeds in *signifying* its failure.

The point may seem slightly sophistic, but it is an important one. Skepticism about particular representations still relies on a faith in the feasibility of representation in general, so that the efficacy of the splittings and substitutions accomplished by representation requires a provisional acceptance of the holism of representation as a system. At the same time, a sense of identity within representation requires a certain suspension of disbelief in the splittings and substitutions of representation. Without identification across the splits of representation, the self would become inert. Excessive and ecstatic over-identification with an endless, substituting stream of representations becomes hysteria.

In his essay on "The Mirror Stage," Lacan suggests that the child's illusory recognition of its wholeness, its *Gestalt*, in the differently-sized and reversed image of the mirror is basic to the formation of the phantasmatic, symbolic unity of the ego. Lacan rests the development of the ego on a premise of "*méconnaissance*," on the premise that the symbolic recognition of truths is ineluctably predicated on misrecognizing one's self as whole in the substituted and split-off form of one's mirror image. Lacan's model is pertinent to understanding the *Bacchae* and particularly the character of Pentheus since we can understand Pentheus' hubristic fall as emerging, to some degree, from his initial, excessive faith in and misrecognition of his ego's wholeness. He believes himself master of Thebes, and more importantly master of himself. Faced with Dionysus whose provenance is the world split and substituted – the god of wine, theater, madness, ecstasy, and even of death, in some of his figurations – Pentheus can only distance himself

from Semele's son. He cannot recognize his cousin as anything but alien to himself.

Unlike Pentheus, who cannot recognize his own capacity for misrecognition, ERS's interpretative strategy self-consciously plays with misrecognition. The substitution of a thermos for a thyrsis is a "mis-translation" with intent. *HTT4*'s opening scene with the thermos comically sends up for the audience the way in which both religious and theatrical belief are kinds of signifying hypnosis. Moreover, the scene establishes one of the basic interpretive techniques – comic and intentional misrecognition – underlying ERS's approach to Euripides throughout *Highway to Tomorrow*.

Bleha

One of the first things the company did was to rename the people and places of Euripides' play to something contemporary and geographically recognizable. In doing so, they welcomed an absurd dissonance between matter and nomenclature. Thebes became St. Louis, the "stream of Dirce/ and the waters of Ismenus" (ll.5-6) become Susquehanna. Teiresias morphed into Teri the Seer, Cadmus into Carl, Pentheus became Paul (the name of the actor), and his mother, Agave (Rinne Groff), was re-named Holly. Interestingly, Dionysus, the focal point of the play, remained Dionysus. During the runs of *HTT3* and *HTT4*, the audience found this playful "misnaming" quite humorous, but their laughter masked how the new nomenclature underscores the textual distinction between the god and the other characters, yet highlights a consonance between the actor Paul and the character Paul. Just as the *Bacchae* subverts and simultaneously reinforces the paradoxical theatrical conventions of disjunction and communion, so do ERS's tactics in *Highway to Tomorrow*.

Some of the most interesting examples of the slippage in identification and meaning came from the group's effort to work the pre-*Bacchae* elements into the new framework (thereby following an incremental method recognizable from The Wooster Group). In *HTT2*, the company had transcribed actions from a scene in the film version of *The Last Tycoon* (1976, dir. Elia Kazan) where Tony Curtis's character is trying to explain his impotence to Robert de Niro. Movements culled from this scene congealed into the dance named, appropriately, "Impotence." Selected gestures of de Niro and Curtis were copied by the group in real time as best they could. The video monitor was in a corner of the room, forcing the performers to refer to it while executing the moves and circulating in the space according to Collins and Bodow's direction. As they did this, Collins videotaped them. The performers' being caught between monitor and camera again recalls The Wooster

Group practice. “Impotence” opened *HTT3* but moves taken from taped earlier rehearsals had been copied, expanded, and subsequently “translated” by the company into a new dance sequence. Like images from an infinite mirror, second- and third-generation moves filtered through the performer’s body exponentially expanded the roster of gestures.

A repeated action in this version of “Impotence” was to look at the position where the video monitor had been in the room for *HTT2*; onstage, this translated to the down right corner. This move became a foundational step in the dance, with the performers all trying to retain a sense of fidelity to the experience of their (or their earlier counterpart’s) looking to the monitor for guidance. Of course, the audience had no knowledge of the monitor’s ever existing, but in performance, the dance’s potency stemmed from a sense of latent anxiety as the actors craned their necks towards downstage right. The dance thus became a celebration of high-energy that was also fraught with tension, a perfect opening gambit for the *Bacchae*. As in the Wooster Group’s work, ERS’s strategic uses of video as a layering device deepened the dramatic resonance.

Also in the manner of The Wooster Group, the play had not been cast, at least not in the traditional sense, at the time work began on “Impotence” in *HTT3*’s rehearsals. Actors had merely been trading reading assignments. Character relationships were grounded only in the contingencies of a particular rehearsal. Once the show was cast, the choreography reflected these relationships. Paul/Pentheus and Randy/Dionysus faced off at one point in the dance, as Paul and Dionysus did later in the play. Even the title “Impotence” prefigured the dissipation of Paul’s power throughout the course of the play, his failure to thwart Dionysus, his inability to effectively rule his city, and ultimately his disgrace as a fallen son, murdered by a mad mother.

A similar example of what the company terms “dance translation” can be found in the choreography for “Butt Dance.” Also created without an idea of where and how it would fit into the play, it was inspired by a text from the 1960s brought in by Bodow, which showed exercises prescribed for facial muscles. Company members then transferred the facial moves south to the *gluteus maximus* (and its surrounding muscles), basing the dance on the spontaneous flexing of these muscles in isolation from the rest of the body. Notwithstanding its name, the dance also retained (exaggerated) versions of the source book’s facial poses. Used to set the tone for the Maenads’ mountainside activities, it was termed an “ecstatic ritual” in the scene breakdown of *HTT4*’s program.

Fordyce

In *HTT4*, the “Butt Dance” follows Dionysus’ prologue to the audience in which he summarizes his life-story and foreshadows his coming maneuvers in Thebes. As Dionysus, Rand enters wearing a tan, vaguely Country-Western style shirt, a pair of metallic silver-blue disco pants, and shit-kicker leather boots. He is the image of a rurally-styled urban dancer who is ready for a fight. He walks to a small table mid-stage left, sits, and proceeds, with a childlike smile on his face, to scatter a pile of books neatly stacked on the table. Then he introduces himself into an amplified microphone on the table as “Dionysus, son of Zeus.”

Like the opening scene with the thermos, the physical action of scattering the books is an elegant and deceptively simple piece of action. It suggests Dionysus’ unruly, disorganizing character. At the same time, the action neatly points to the meta-level of interpretative strategy that ERS is pursuing in relationship to the *Bacchae*. Like Dionysus, ERS eschews a neatly ordered image of literary history. Indeed such an image would seem to be merely a misrecognition of a more basic complexity. Instead, through selective uses of disorder and misrecognition (similar to The Wooster Group’s deconstructions), ERS self-consciously embraces the potential for comedy in acts of representation.

While critics have frequently debated the merits of seeing comic elements in the *Bacchae* (Seidensticker), *HTT* is the rare performance that embraces the generic fluidity of Euripides’ play and does so convincingly. One of the more widely acknowledged comic episodes in the *Bacchae* occurs between Teiresias and Cadmus, where the two old men debate with Pentheus the use-value of pledging their faith to the new god Dionysus. ERS retains the humor of sophistic argumentation contained in the episode, but they subtly shift its source in several ways. Firstly, the text of Cadmus’ character is basically cut, although his presence is represented in other ways, as will become clear later. Secondly, Teiresias’ long rationalizing argument in favor of respecting Dionysus is replaced by the story of how Teiresias was turned into a woman, then back into a man. And thirdly, perhaps most importantly, the scene is no longer played to Pentheus, but to the audience. Although ERS may appear to be playing fast and loose with their literary history here, the company’s substitution of Teiresias’ story of gender change neatly fits the thematic patterning of Euripides’ original, since the story succeeds in foreshadowing Pentheus’ own ultimate gender travesty. Better even, the way in which ERS performs the scene develops a pattern of character-audience relationship which is vital to their reinterpretation of the *Bacchae*.

As Teri the Seer (Teiresias), Susie Sokol delivers her monologue directly to the audience, frequently pausing with just the right sense of comic delay so that the audience can savor the outrageousness of her story of not one, but two magical sex changes. S/he seems to understand how skeptical the audience is about the truth of her story, yet earnestly perseveres in trying to communicate the mythic truth of the gender play. In a sense, Teri is setting up the audience in the role of Pentheus, the cult's uninitiated who requires patient explanation and persuasion. So while Dionysus' disposition towards disturbance and play sometimes seems to align with that of ERS (albeit not exclusively), on other occasions *HTT* appears to imply how the audience's point of view may align with Pentheus'. The audience is forewarned: do not be too skeptical about Teri's stories of sex and gender fluidity; do not, like Pentheus, misrecognize ego or gender as stable and whole.

Bleha

The *Bacchae* negotiates several boundaries: the divide between male and female, divine and human, sacred and profane, character and actor, insider and outsider, and the generic modes of comedy and tragedy. Highlighting the comedy, perhaps in a way that is long overdue, *Highway to Tomorrow* is a funny, raucous, silly yet serious, energetic play about Dionysus – and the scheming for and wreaking of revenge on his inattentive family and native city. Yet, it is through the *Bacchae*'s comedy, rather than despite it, that *HTT* achieves tragedy. The story's basic elements – the disastrous competition between god and mortal, the breakdown of a family, the loss of a child – are very much part of the production. The tragic mood caused by the unclear conclusion of these crises is palpable for the audience. The laughter is uneasy: finding humor in the absurd, we also find ourselves laughing at calamities – destruction, exile and death wrought by an almighty temper.

Helene Foley has noted that Euripides transposed many Old Comedy formulae to the *Bacchae*, to stunning effect. Rarely in Greek tragedy “does the meaning of a scene depend primarily on role-playing and on the costume changes that a character makes onstage [but the] reverse is true for Old Comedy.” Here, “the change of costume” works toward “rejuvenation or restoration to heroic status,” goals which are “arguably...essentially more characteristic of comedy than of tragedy.” Thus, in *Bacchae*, “costume change serves as a sign of conversion to Dionysiac worship, and what are largely comic techniques...are used for the first time in a play that has a disastrous outcome.” This “unsettles the audience”: when the two old men, the ex-king Cadmus and the seer Teiresias, “gracelessly but strategically accept the worship of the god by donning his fawnskin and *thyrsis* and adopt a hobbling dance,” the

audience laughs at this moment, one which in fact anticipates the impending tragedy (225). Foley cites Pentheus' "ludicrous fussing" (226) with his costume as another instance of Euripides' "striking merging of comic and tragic stage business" (225), a concept effectively rendered in *HTT4* as Paul wheels himself around on a stool with a puffy pink prom dress awkwardly draped over his lanky frame.

Perhaps most shocking, both to an Athenian audience and to us if we consider its import, is our awareness of Dionysus' comic mask. According to one of Pentheus' men, Dionysus "stood there smiling" (l. 439) and the Chorus can invoke the god with "O Bacchus, come! Come with your smile!" (11018) The implications are moving: essentially, Dionysus is directing a scenario, a play if you will, that is simultaneously a comedy for him and a tragedy for Pentheus, whose very name means "man of sorrow." Pentheus is the hapless, and ultimately useless, *pharmakos*, or scapegoat. There is no comforting promise of knowledge-through-redemption allowed the tragic hero, much less the players, or even the audience, at the end.

The *Bacchae* paves a rough road to catharsis, if there's one to be found at all. In fact, there is no "recovery of tragic vision," as Foley terms it – an ambiguous ending which may have made the play all the more attractive to ERS. Like The Wooster Group in *Nayatt School*, its take on T.S.Eliot's *The Cocktail Party*, ERS is not concerned with providing a pure catharsis in its theatrical output. Rather, their work demands of each audience member its own unique act of interpretation, its own working-out of the problem.

Fordyce

Throughout *HTT*, Dionysus' monologues to the audience, like that of Teri, subtly suggest that he is interpellating them in the position of the uninitiated. Moreover, Dionysus frequently tells a story not once, but twice, in the process calling into question the tragic import of his monologue even as he seeks to reinforce it. Finally, Dionysus' narrative doublings often conclude with a piece of comic business, a physical double-take.

After Dionysus' prologue and the "Butt Dance," Pentheus/Paul gives a speech to the audience that serves as his own competing prologue, a speech that alerts the audience to his fears about the "girl-man" Dionysus and about the "woman-on-woman action" he suspects is transpiring in the hills outside St. Louis. Following Paul's speech, Dionysus resumes material from Euripides' original prologue with the story of his mother's impregnation by Zeus. He dwells on how Holly (Agave), repudiated her sister Semele's story of a divine coupling. Then

he concludes with the legend of St. Louis's founding when King Carl (Cadmus) planted his dragon-seed men.

At first, Dionysus tells these stories in a formal, narrative manner, sticking closely to Euripides' original text, whereupon he encounters a series of laughs from the audience at the apparent ridiculousness of such mythic stories. At that point, Dionysus leans forward and repeats the story of Susan/Semele's impregnation by Zeus, but now in an informal, conversational tone, using everyday, rather than heightened word choice. ("See, in other words, once Zeus hooked up with my mother Susan . . .") Here the comedy of the physical double-take turns into a linguistic double-take, which accentuates the fact that the Greek of Athenian tragedy was never in the first place everyday Athenian speech. Euripides' language demanded that its original audience interpret and translate. More importantly this double translation into two speech registers recognizes, rather than avoids, the basic difficulty of translation posed by performing the *Bacchae* today. And it does so by playing on the way translations *must* misrecognize their originals in order to speak to new audiences with different cultural, historical, and linguistic frames of reference. Finally, Dionysus performs this double translation with the utter seriousness upon which the humor of ERS's presentation depends. When the second retelling also provokes laughter and fails to arouse the audience's respect and awe for Dionysus, the character glances once, then twice over the audience, as much as to remind them that the joke may ultimately be on them, as it will be on the unbelieving Pentheus/Paul.

This serio-comic double-take by Dionysus receives its most elaborate performance in his last speech before he takes Paul up the mountain to meet his fate. In this speech, Dionysus anticipates Paul's coming sacrifice, as well as the exiles and transformations in store for Holly and Carl. Unlike in Euripides' drama, however, in *HTT* Dionysus keeps spinning his tale, suggesting that Thebes' travails will not end once his rites have been instituted. He recounts how one of Carl's dragon-teeth men, Laius, will come to rule and have "a son named Oedipus who. . . ." In one of those virtuoso pauses difficult to convey on the page, Rand here holds back until he receives a laugh of recognition from the audience. Perhaps its reaction derives from the recognition of the over-determined quality of suffering in Thebes, its banality as it strikes not only Cadmus' family, but also Laius'. Perhaps the audience is laughing at the stubbornness of storytellers in promulgating such tales of grotesque misery. In any case, Dionysus waits out this first laugh by the audience, scans the audience left to right, very slowly, and then he himself laughs.

In an embodiment of the cunning infelicity of the gods, which Nietzsche saw as prompting a cheerfully haughty pessimism in sixth and early fifth-century Greeks and which he suspected was lacking in the so-called Socratic rationalist Euripides, Dionysus seems to laugh at the audience's laughter, neither joyfully nor wryly or caustically, but with a laugh that is long, belly-deep, and uncannily silent. This Dionysus seems deeply comfortable with whatever drives him to assert the "I" of being Dionysus. He is neither the vaguely sinister or vaguely feminine or vaguely atavistic mystery which so many productions of the *Bacchae* resort to; nor is he the rationalizing, sophisticatedly rational, Apollonian degeneration of Dionysus that Nietzsche projects onto the poet Euripides. Instead, Rand and ERS present a Dionysus as *raisonneur*, yet one who also appears skeptical about reason; a very New York Dionysus who is also, perhaps, not totally alien to the skeptical culture of urban Athens.

Bleha

Aside from the replacement of the thermos for the *thyrsis*, another substitution took place in *Highway to Tomorrow's* rendition of the *Bacchae*. Like The Wooster Group, ERS allows aspects of the rehearsal space to resonate in the performance space. This means that even its limitations can serve as fodder for invention. HERE, the downtown arts center where all versions of *HTT* were presented, has a big pole upstage center of the playing area. One early casting decision in *HTT3* (that remained for *HTT4*) was to cut the character of Cadmus – or at least, to “deanimate” him. Instead, some of his lines were given to other characters, and more interestingly, a static persona, christened Carl, was born out of the pole in HERE's space. During the performance, two plastic googly eyeballs were affixed to it by James Hannaham, and the pole, like the thermos, was thus quickened into theatrical life. Bodow and Collins struggled with staging the scene in which Cadmus and Teiresias dress up to join the Maenads, given the obvious problem that a pole cannot converse, let alone dress itself. In the show's bittersweet comedic highlight, Susie Sokol (adept at being and playing eccentric) as Teri the Seer comes to meet Carl. She calls out Carl's name from offstage, then enters, calling his name again. She looks around, finds him, walks up to him, and greets him. Expecting an answer, she's treated to silence. Sokol then goes through a comic routine where she taps Carl, pokes him, waits for long moments, and even pulls out her script to show him where they are in the play, hoping he'll be prompted to say “his” lines. She finally surrenders, commencing her monologue to the audience described above. In this moment, the actress is as prominent as the character, and in fact it is hard to tell who is in

possession of the limelight. Sokol was present as both herself and as a character, and it was difficult to say who was standing in for whom. When the line between performer and character elides, the presence of the performer (and the tension between performer and character) must be acknowledged.

Fordyce

While ERS persuasively developed the comic elements of the *Bacchae* in *HTT*, they needed to return their presentation and their audience to a tragic frame of mind at the production's conclusion. To avoid falling into a reductive parody of the play, they needed to represent as tragic the doubled *anagnoreses* in which Holly (Agave) recognizes first that her son is dead and second that she was his murderer. As usual, the company's staging and acting of this scene was thrifty, elegant, and sure-footed. Since the audience had been so thoroughly convinced of the comic potential of the *Bacchae*, however, it is open to question whether they entirely joined the company in this sharp turn at the end of *HTT*.

Before Holly's customary final entrance with the head of her son, ERS has her make a number of fleeting entrances and exits in which she pursues and finally drinks from the thermos/*thyrsis*. In one of the show's most literal representations of Dionysus' ecstatic powers, the scene evokes the money shots of porno films as Holly shakes and strokes the thermos until it explodes on her, whereupon she laps up the dregs of its liquor. Whether the scene is to all audiences' tastes seems less important than the question of whether it is useful to show Holly before her usual final – and only – entrance. (A similar distinction between taste had dramaturgical use has been made about the hard core porn in *Route 1 & 9 (The Last Act)*, through which The Wooster Group foregrounded Wilder's repression of sexuality in *Our Town*.) While it can be argued that having Holly enter previously detracts from the power of her final entrance, making her visible throughout *HTT* usefully deflates the hyperbolic fantasies that Paul/Pentheus has about the Bacchic rites. In contrast to his commingled desire and fear about “woman-on-woman” action going on in the hills above St.Louis, the audience sees Holly's actions. Her relationship with the thermos, whether it represents getting drunk, or having sex, or both, may be ecstatic, but it is visibly ecstatic for all to see, thereby removing some of the sense of danger attached to representations which remain bottled away in the imagination. As a result, ERS avoids the problem of treating what Dionysus represents as merely exotic or mysterious. They retain a sense of his possible threat, but as a threat within this world, not outside it.

In the presentation of the *anagnoreses* surrounding Paul's death, ERS continued to pursue this strategy of making things visible that would customarily be unwritten or offstage in Euripides. Most obviously, the murder of Paul occurs onstage. As Holly, Rinne Groff wears a pair of googly eyes, like those of the thermos, to show that she is outside herself, that she has succumbed to the ecstatic embrace of Dionysus. She takes a red picnic cooler and twists it around her son's head. Once it has twisted enough to hide Paul's face, we hear the sound effect of a painful cracking, and we infer that the warrior Maenad has snapped the neck of her prey. Whereas Greek tragedies assiduously stage violence offstage, ERS moves Pentheus' death onstage, obscured only by a blood-colored cooler.

However, as part of ERS's partly comic, partly serious deflation of Holly, she is treated less as a warrior than as a mad society woman. She has returned from the hills in a rain slicker over her brown velvet evening dress. So while Paul is feminized in a pink prom dress, Holly is not equally masculinized. She does not wield her thermos as a mace, for example; nor does Holly perform her lines in a particularly bellicose manner. The interpretation is convincing given the production's pattern of quasi-mythical Americanizations and modernizations of names, place-names, and costumes. It is, however, one instance where ERS does not play Euripides' gender inversions to the hilt.

After starting to talk Holly down from her high, Teri then persuades her to look at the supposed lion cub in her cooler. Tentatively she sticks her head into the cooler. Although Paul's murder is revealed in *HTT*, the moment of Holly's first *anagnorisis*, the recognition that the captured head belongs to her child, not to an animal, is hidden. Quietly and modestly, the production makes a tragic gesture towards representation's failure in the face of terror. When Holly rises from the cooler again, her intoxication has dissipated, her googly eyes have disappeared and her sight has cleared, but her understanding of the situation remains obscured. When she asks Teri how her son has died, she experiences the second *anagnorisis*, the revelation that she herself has killed her son. At that point, still confused, she asks Teri, "But where is his body?" In a comic deflation that stops shy of cruel irony, Teri points down at the body of Paul and says in shock, "It's right there." The audience laughs.

Throughout the *Bacchae*, Pentheus misrecognizes his identity as cohesive and authoritative, so when the Bacchantes finally tear him apart, there is an awful sense in which they have held up a radically dissolving mirror to him, as though to teach him just how split apart his self has always been. By maintaining the wholeness of Paul's body at the end, ERS forgoes, to some degree, their customary comic splintering

of the *Bacchae*. Since that splintering has worked to such comic effect previously, it may be necessary at this point to turn away from that mode in order to move towards the play's tragic denouement of Holly's and Carl's exile from St.Louis. And those final moments of leave-taking, quiet and unforced, do succeed in conveying the unredeeming and utterly unheroic loss that Dionysus has inflicted on Holly, Carl, and the community of St.Louis. Yet it is hard to say what lies behind the audience's final laughs. Perhaps some of the audience still reads the work as comic hyperbole. Perhaps others are laughing at a kind of truth, a laugh at that which is unhappy. Perhaps still others are laughing in a kind of grim and defensive baring of the teeth against an aggressive world. And perhaps some of the laughs turn and double back on themselves in the recognition, at such a uselessly cruel moment, that it is impossible to laugh and impossible to do anything but laugh.