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Bakkhai: Freedom and Control

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BAKKHAI: FREEDOM AND CONTROL

Vahri McKenzie



In Greek myth, the Bakkhai are a group of wild and strange women accompanying Dionysos, god of wine and revelry. In Euripides' tragedy, Dionysos returns to his birthplace of Thebes, bearing a grudge and heralding change. But how much freedom is a good thing for Thebes? How much control should a leader exert? We might ask just these questions of artists who collaborate on a shared project like a work of theatre, where each is free to express their personal creative responses, constrained by the need to realise a single multi-authored work. Take the head of Pentheos: a key moment in the play occurs when Agaue, Pentheos's mother, returns to Thebes bearing her son's head on a stick. In the madness wrought on her by Dionysos, she sees it as the head of an Angus bull (in our version). Worse, she is yet to learn that she and her sisters were responsible for ripping Pentheos to pieces during their rituals in the woods. The creative team extensively discussed how to 'do the head', and you can see the results of our creative decision-making in 'The Head of Pentheos'.

But who is the 'author' of this work? The 'battleaxe thyrsos', chosen by Michelle Aslett who played Agaue, was made by Dan Rooney. The horns, which match those worn by the character Pentheos before he lost his head, were made by Sky River. These pieces were joined by props manager Marianne Folland-Myors, who added dripping bloody rags for every performance. The artefact was reflected in drawings for animation by Dan Rooney, to ensure the audience understood the link between the character (played by Nina Smith), his fate (seen in 'The Servant's Tale' animation, with sound by Rachelle Rechichi), and the disembodied head. These decisions were overseen by me, as director, and a sense of the whole is captured in the photograph 'The Head of Pentheos' by Sarah Mills. A similar origins story can be traced for every work in this collection.

Sky River, Dan Rooney, Rachelle Rechichi and Sarah Mills are all graduates of ECU's Bachelor of Arts (South West) who have gone on to further creative arts study and work in the South West community. They are all artists in their own right with whom I wished to work in the realisation of Bakkhai, co-commissioned by Bunbury Regional Entertainment Centre and Culture and the Arts (WA), and presented at BREC in June 2018. Whilst a live work of theatre is over once the season is complete, this disguises the months of development that go into a project before its moment under the lights.

Cultural distinctiveness and regionality were touchstones around which a disparate group of artists (both geographically and in our arts practices) could cohere. 'Thebes of the South West' offered us a potent metaphor, a place of the imagination reflecting both our home in the South West of Western Australia as well as the deep philosophical and cultural history of Western thought and art-making, and the resulting body of work lets us hear and see the sounds and images of the natural world in post-colonial Australia. This exhibition is a conscious act of forging connections between people and places, imbued with an ethos that positions creative activity as both a pleasure and a responsibility that is able to do real work in transforming the ways we relate to one another.