Ancient Voices in Contemporary Theatrical Forms: The Case of The Bacchae by Kneehigh Theatre and Eurydice by Sarah Ruhl

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Introduction

In one of his seminal essays, Roland Barthes defines myth as "a mode of signification, a form."[1] In our highly desacralized postmodern societies and amidst the fragmented timeframes of our multiconnected existence, this signifying form continues to provide the utopian promise of a unified meaning, whereby the mysteries of the world around us might be (re)interpreted. Myths have permeated all kinds of discourses since their inception. Whereas religion, philosophy, and art have been their traditional realms, modern theories of sociology and psychology have adopted such discourses in order to explain certain mechanisms that govern or condition societies and their individuals. In the Western world, it is Greek mythology that has proved almost a universal guidebook for those disciplines in their respective examination of human nature. As the psychologist Dan P. McAdams contends, the protagonists of the Greek pantheon "personify basic human needs and propensities that are still exemplified and played out today in personal myths and human lives."[2] The everlasting and multitemporal frame that is offered by Greek mythology has also attracted contemporary artists and writers, who have discovered in some of the foundation narratives of their tradition both a source of humanistic questioning and a site of formal experimentation. If, in her study of modern drama, Angela Belli affirmed that "myth makes art possible,"[3] it can also be stated that classical myths sustain postmodern forms of artistic representation.

Of all the arts, the theatre is the one that can be most closely related to the fluctuating temporality of the myth. With the trace of Dionysian cults at its origins, contemporary Western theatre maintains its ties with the past through its frequent resort to classical mythology, while at the same time absorbing new stage systems and reformulating its codes. In today's European and American theatres, it is possible to find experimental companies and playwrights who return to Greek myths

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as the main source material for their avant-garde dramaturgies. Even though this phenomenon is hardly a new one, as demonstrated by the neoclassical trend that provided, in Angela Belli's words, "some of the most exciting moments in [mid-] twentieth-century drama,"[4] its perpetuated occurrence in the theatres of the new millennium is worth pondering.

Analyzing re-creations of ancient myths in contemporary plays enables the observation of the cultural (dis)continuities that define our time, and more specifically, of the societies that are represented in those texts. The dialogical relationship between classical and postmodern culture can be detected through the reformulation of the plays' symbols as well as through their focus on certain mythic stories which nurture their main subject matter. As Christiane Sourvinou-Inwood explains, in the same way that the original Greek tragedies "were cultural artifacts embedded in the society that generated them . . ." and were understood "through the deployments of perceptual filters shared by . . . their contemporary audiences,"[5] present-day theatricalizations of classical myths articulate polysemic meanings that speak directly to their viewers, while revealing the formal, thematic and, ultimately, philosophical concerns of contemporary authors in the postmodern world.

This essay will explore the dramaturgical strategies of two plays that were inspired by Greek dramaturgy, and which were published in the first decade of this century, namely, Sarah Ruhl's *Eurydice*[6] and Kneehigh Theatre's *The Bacchae*.[7] The authors of both texts can be considered relevant names for contemporary English-language drama. The fact that Ruhl and Kneehigh resorted to mythic stories in two of their best-known plays enables a comparative study of the interaction between ancient narrative forms and contemporary codes in present-day Western theatre. Besides the semiotic consideration of the plays' formal devices, the comparison between the two texts also throws light on the re-construction of allegedly universal themes in postmodern reworkings of myths. All in all, this article will look at the presence of the past in two plays that represent some of the new voices of English-language theatre on both sides of the Atlantic.

Eurydice: **The Poetic Potential of an Eclectic** *Naiveté***, or a Woman's Underworld**

Sarah Ruhl's *Eurydice* presents a renovated re-telling of Orpheus and Eurydice's classical story. The original myth centers on the plight of Orpheus, the gifted minstrel who descends to the Underworld in order to rescue Eurydice, his deceased wife, yet disobeys the King of the Dead's prohibition and looks at her before returning to the land of the living, thereby losing Eurydice forever. Ruhl's play, however, focuses on the nymph's love for Orpheus and her final journey to Hades, while introducing a dead father figure that becomes as important as the mythic musician. *Eurydice* first premiered as a workshop production at Brown University in 2001, and then received its official world premiere two years later at

Madison Repertory Theatre, in Madison, Wisconsin.[8] Since then, it has received several American and international productions, and earned successful reviews from theatre critics worldwide, contributing to Ruhl's renowned reputation as one of the main new talents of contemporary American drama. One of the main attractions of Ruhl's modern version of the Orpheus' myth is the connotative power and poetic depth of its apparently straightforward style, which has become one of the hallmarks of this prolific playwright. Another distinctive trait of this play is the dramaturgical focus on Eurydice instead of Orpheus to re-tell this story—in opposition to classical poets such as Virgil, composers like Monteverdi or Offenbach, and modern filmmakers such as Cocteau and Camus—which enables the re-orientation of the central themes of the myth through the modern lens of gender specificity. [9]

With regard to the seeming plainness of Ruhl's symbolic universe, one could start by saying that it is partly founded on a blend of essential elements from the classical narrative with modern details that narrow down the vast atemporality of Eurydice and Orpheus' story, thus bringing it closer to the world of contemporary audiences. The (post)modern character of Ruhl's dramaturgy is identified, in the first place, through the numerous anachronisms of the play. These range from Orpheus and Eurydice's swimming outfits from the 1950s and Eurydice's elegant suit, evocative of a 1930s style, to the reference and appearance of other elements, such as traveler's checks, a BB gun, a telephone, or a Christmas memory.[10] The anachronistic references sprinkled throughout the text signify a mid-twentieth-century atmosphere by means of different stage signs and, hence, establish anew the simultaneous reference "to the past, the present, and the future" with which Lévi-Strauss defined "the permanent structure" of Greek myths.[11] The presence of anachronisms is not a sign of dramaturgical (post)modernity *per se*; in fact, as suggested before, early twentieth-century theatrical adaptations of myths resorted to the same "zooming device," in Sourvinou-Inwood's words, to push "the audience into relating the play directly to their own experiences."[12] However, it does point to the subjective presentation of temporality that characterizes modern and postmodern art, while at the same time signaling the temporal elasticity of myths themselves.

Ruhl demonstrates the flexibility of Orpheus and Eurydice's story by manipulating its spatiality too. The playwright binds the indeterminate space of the dramatic action to an imaginary fictional landscape that has a distinctively American personality, as mirrored in the allusions to cowboy boots or a ranch, specific geographical references such as Illinois or the Mississippi River, and the use of hit songs from the 1940s such as "Don't Sit Under the Apple Tree."[13] The popular and American character of Ruhl's imagery, which is also manifested in other plays by the author,[14] may be regarded as another zooming device that appeals to the audience's world—one that is familiar in geographical and mythic terms to both American and non-American spectators or readers. Significantly, the American elements aforementioned create either a direct connection with

Western narratives, or with a period of American history that is often fictionalized with nostalgia;[15] in other words, they evoke a more specific, yet at the same time diffused kind of spatiality.

The play's "presentational space," to use Gay McAuley's categorization of theatrical spaces,[16] offers a similar dual effect. On the one hand, the giant loft space of the Mysterious Man—who causes Eurydice's first death in Ruhl's version—as well as the elevator that takes Eurydice to the Underworld after she has died, establish a direct connection with the minimalistic and mechanized aesthetics of (post)modern architecture and theatrical scenery.[17] By contrast, the "rusty exposed pipes" that constitute the general set and the "old-fashioned glow-in-the-dark globe" that is used in some of the scenes, create an aged ambience throughout the piece.[18] Juxtaposed, the different presentational spaces of Ruhl's piece absorb the past and the present into a symbolic nonspace, which is enhanced by the emptiness of the unfurnished loft, the conceptual River of Forgetfulness, and the visual paradox of having rain inside the elevator that takes Eurydice to the land of the dead.[19]

In line with John R. Stilgoe's statement that "space can be poetry,"[20] Ruhl not only creates poetic spatializations through referential and physical atmospheres that intermingle past and future, and which connect the possible with the impossible, but also introduces intertextual connections that augment the literary power of the spaces she devises, as well as the multiple temporalities and realities they evoke. A clear case is the citation of Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*[21] in the note that opens the text, with which the playwright describes what the atmosphere of the Underworld should look like.[22] The Child's appearance on a red tricycle in this space, together with his shrunk costume and props,[23] are a visual reminder of the Wonderland universe that the author has imagined for her postmodern Hades.[24]

Some props are a prominent spatial sign whereby the aesthetics and intertextual function of other spatial properties can be reinforced, especially when the austere design of the playing arena underlines their nuances. This is the case of the volume containing the collected works of William Shakespeare, which Orpheus manages to send to Eurydice in her Underworld cabin using a long string attached to it. Having forgotten her prior existence, Eurydice does not recognize the value of the object when she receives it, let alone its contents. Consequently, she interacts with it in all sorts of inappropriate ways: she drops it, becomes wary of it, shouts at it, stands on it, and finally throws it at the Chorus, until her Father picks it up and reads a passage from *The Tragedy of King Lear* to her, thereby transforming her into a kind of silent Cordelia in need of reading lessons.[25] This apparently iconoclastic sequence of actions in fact invests the book object itself with a doubly symbolic value: not only does the unreadable volume signal Eurydice's death both as a woman and as a reader, but it also becomes the poetic border that separates the realm of the living from the world of the dead.

The fusion of the modern and the classical in Ruhl's piece can also be sensed through the playwright's specification of the mixed acting style in which the characters should be performed. The author's note at the beginning of the text proves useful once more to understand Ruhl's holistic conception of the theatrical text: in this case, she advises the leading actors to "resist the temptation to be classical" in their presentation of Orpheus and Eurydice and imagine, instead, that "they are a little too young and a little too in love." The same kind of specific example is given to the actors playing the Chorus of Stones: in this case, she suggests they should play their roles "as nasty children at a birthday party."[26] As mirrored in these instructions, Ruhl's recommendations on the play's acting register replace the usually dense and even histrionic delivery of classical acting with a fresh and playful approach toward the play's mythic figures. At the same time, her indications are coherent with the minimalist character of most of the text's dialogues, which facilitate a rhythmic and light-hearted exchange of lines despite their multilayered significance. Even the lyrical quality of some of the play's speeches, such as Eurydice's monologue after her death, is tinged with a restrained style that forces the actors to play their role in a contained way.[27]

The abundant actions that are described in the play's stage directions also signal Ruhl's preference for a physical style of acting to the detriment of the purely declamatory. These actions can have a poetic resonance, as with Eurydice's Father's imagining his daughter's wedding in the world of the living through his individual pantomime in the Underworld, or they can emphasize an important episode of the narrative, such as Eurydice's accidental death; they can illustrate a character's contradictory emotions, as with Eurydice's brave-and-coward walk before her second encounter with Orpheus, or explain the complexities of a relationship, as when Eurydice and Orpheus are shown first approaching each other and then moving apart.[28] In combination with the minimalist style of the dialogues, the importance of the actors' movements throughout the playtext brings the piece closer to hybrid forms of theatre and dance that characterise contemporary Western stages.

Besides contributing to the modernity of the text, the actions that are choreographed by the playwright endow the piece with a musical quality that is underscored by other theatrical signs. Hence, *Eurydice* is not divided into acts but into movements, as if it were a symphony.[29] Music itself is present through melodies, songs and even sounds which underline the theatricality of certain events and, in many cases, substitute other stage signs of a more tangible nature, thus increasing the poetic potential of the text.[30] Moreover, the playwright's recommendation to perform the play without an intermission and with fluid transitions between scenes, her creation of slow and silent scenes, and her use of syncopated dialogue to provoke a sonorous climax reflect a specific concern with the play's tempo.[31] Together, these theatrical signs and dramaturgical strategies resume the musical quality of

Greek tragedies—which were structured through songs sung by the chorus—and re-presents it in a renovated dramatic language.

Having looked at the interaction of contemporary and classical codes in Ruhl's reformulation of the Orpheus myth, and at their foundation on symbols which are relevant to the audience(s) she addresses in her plays, at least two other complementary semantic dimensions should be considered in order to comprehend the textual significance of *Eurydice* as a postmodern theatrical construct: as Herrero and Morales contend, these are the antagonistic struggle between forces which polarize human beings' aspirations and which are illustrated by the imaginary ancestral story and, closely related to this, a specific axiology or personal image of the human being and the world that the author offers to the public through the reformulation of the myth.[32]

These two interconnected dimensions underpin Ruhl's re-orientation of Orpheus' myth through Eurydice's particular vision. The story presented in the play retains the universal scope of the ancient narrative in its presentation of the ephemeral nature of human existence, and hence perpetuates the polarity between life—epitomized by the forces of love and youth—and death of the primordial myth. At the same time, though, *Eurydice* underlines the semi-universal perception of its female protagonist, thereby complementing the primordial existential binary. Ruhl's dramaturgical subtlety eludes any overtly feminist statements or modifications of the narrative that could narrow down the mechanisms of universal identification embedded in the myth. Yet, in the chain of signification of certain theatrical signs it is possible to find aspects that evoke the specific history of women's emancipation, as well as their struggle to exist and signify as distinctive individuals alongside their male partners. For example, the 1950s style of Eurydice and Orpheus' outfits at the beginning of the play, and the temporal regression that is suggested by the 1930s design of Eurydice's costume in subsequent scenes, call to mind a time in which the lifestyles and expectations of (Western/American) women were still bound by patriarchal patterns, and yet started to show the seeds of their future liberation. In fact, Eurydice is presented as an innocent young girl who is devotedly in love with Orpheus, but whose inquisitive mind and passion for books contrast with her music-centred fiancé.[33]

In a similar vein, the introduction of Eurydice's Father as a third protagonist of the play has ambiguous implications. After Eurydice's trip to the Underworld—again, evocative of Alice's adventures—Ruhl's tragic heroine is again taught to speak and read by her loving Father: in a way, she moves on from her husband's world of songs to that of her dead Father's books, as if she poetically reproduced, in reverse, the sentimental journey of a traditional woman's life. This ironic re- or de-construction of a woman's place in the patriarchal family both defies and confirms straightforward feminist readings of the piece. On the one hand, Ruhl depicts fatherly love with extreme delicacy throughout the play. In this respect, it

is significant to note that the piece was written after Ruhl's father died, and it is actually dedicated to him.[34] Despite the emotional potential of these biographical associations, on the other hand, Ruhl re-creates a male-dominated order that—albeit tenderly—imprisons Eurydice and which, again, is laden with Shakespearean overtones: in a way, the new intimacy that is gained between the female protagonist and her father in the Underworld evokes Miranda's naive isolation under Prospero's protection in *The Tempest*,[35] whereas the cabin made of strings that Eurydice's Father builds for her daughter in the land of the dead[36] seems to evoke the bird cage which King Lear imagines for him and his deceased Cordelia at the end of their tragedy.[37]

All in all, Ruhl's reformulation of the Orpheus story through the private universe of his departed wife enables the dramatization of a more definite and yet ambivalent axiology that contributes to the vastness and complexity of the original myth. In *Eurydice*, Ruhl modernizes the ancient narrative while at the same time implanting a whole new her-story in the myth itself which is relevant to contemporary audiences.

The Bacchae: New Voices for Old Fundamentalisms

Only one year after the official premiere of *Eurydice*, Kneehigh Theatre presented *The Bacchae* at the West Yorkshire Playhouse in Leeds. Kneehigh's reputation as one of Britain's experimental theatre companies and, surely, the most international of the Cornish scene, is reflected in their extensive tours, the ample press coverage of their productions, and the number of awards they have received. In particular, *The Bacchae* had shows in Europe and America during its long tour, and won the 2005 Theatre Management Association Award for best touring production.[38] Based on Euripides' tragedy, the piece dramatizes the inescapable spell that Dionysus casts on the female followers of his rites, and explains the god's revenge on all those who doubted his divine origin as Zeus' bastard son. [39] As with *Eurydice* with respect to Ruhl's dramatic oeuvre, *The Bacchae* contains the formal elements that constitute Kneehigh's recognizable theatrical style, and which render the company a relevant name of the contemporary British scene. Also in parallel to Ruhl's transformation of the Orpheus myth, Kneehigh's dramaturgy invests the Euripidean tragedy with modern-day forms of signification that interact with ancient forms.

According to Emma Rice, the company's artistic director, Kneehigh has "no formula to the way [they] make theatre. However, it always starts with the story," or rather, she says, ". . . before then. It starts with an itch, a need, an instinct."[40] Kneehigh's almost primal approach toward the construction of a dramaturgy and, ultimately, a theatrical production, bears clear similarities with Barthes's explanation for the creation of a myth: in his words, "it is the motivation that causes the myth to be uttered."[41] In its published form, *The Bacchae* certainly reflects the company's instinctive approach toward their projects. In particular, it is through a series of anti-

Aristotelian strategies that they make the Dionysian myth manifest itself as a form of theatrical storytelling which is more akin to the mechanisms of the unconscious. Despite the continuities that these techniques present with older theatrical forms, they endow the text and its performance with a dynamic, almost unstable quality that is still recognized as a sign of (post)modernity.

One of these formal strategies is the rupture of the fourth wall, which is used as early as scene two to let Dionysus introduce himself to the audience and explain the motivation of his revenge. After Dionysus' self-presentation, the other main characters and members of the Bacchic Chorus follow his example.[42] Later in the play, characters use this acting device to talk about other figures in a distanced way.[43] Through this form of anti-illusionistic acting, which brings to mind not only the Brechtian tradition but also the discontinuous style of acting of medieval performances, the company adopts a playful approach toward the play's mythic figures, which is ironic for those spectators who are familiar with the them, and clarifying for those who lack the background of the original text. A similar form of didactic dynamism is attained through the rupture of the story's chronology, which is also manifested at the beginning of the play. Specifically in the second scene, the Coryphaeus introduces a flashback sequence in which Zeus' extramarital relationship with Semele, Dionysus' mother and a mortal woman, is revealed and, hence the semidivine, semihuman nature of the play's protagonist, as well as his conflict with the incredulous mortals in his family, are clearly established.[44]

If the rupture of acting and narrative styles brings the text closer to a form of storytelling that does not follow the apparently logical, unified and sequential pattern of classical dramaturgy and responds, instead, to the company's more ludic approach toward theatrical creation, other strategies such as the use of anachronisms emphasize the company's intention to play with the Euripidean text and create, at the same time, formal and conceptual bridges with their contemporary audiences. As in Ruhl's text, Kneehigh disrupts the continuity of fictional time by introducing common modern props on the stage, such as newspapers, a telephone, a wheelchair—which is also referred to as a taxi—or costume styles and complements that could well reproduce a mid-twentieth-century kind of modernity, as with Agave's jacket, headscarf, and sunglasses.[45] Like the multitemporal devices in *Eurydice*, these formal techniques clearly obey Kneehigh's intention to rewrite the original story "with a modern, entertaining and accessible voice . . ." as one of the writers of the piece, Carl Grose, puts it.[46] But, in contrast with Ruhl's poetic subtlety, Kneehigh also underscores the grotesque potential of anachronistic playwriting by making Cadmus wear a colostomy bag, by dressing their Bacchae, played by men, with ballerina tutus, or by signaling Agave's Bacchic transformation through her red and topless torso.[47] Kneehigh's more overtly iconoclastic stage language overtly attempts to underpin the nightmarish, even surrealist feel of the intoxicating cults which are evoked in their piece.

The jocular or even unpleasant character of Kneehigh's theatrical nightmare is manifested through other dramaturgical effects that underline the dark side of the human being in an uncanny festive mode. Hence the play's short and impressionistic scenes, their quick-witted and often childish dialogues, the overt display of indecorous or violent actions—as with Zeus' making love to Semele or Pentheus' ritualistic beheading—and the intermittent use of choreographic movement, music hall numbers, and songs which mingle rap and poetry, generate a noisy, vibrant and also impudent atmosphere which, nevertheless, contains tragedy at its core.[48] The dramaturgical playfulness of Kneehigh's theatrical score has some elements in common with that of Ruhl in *Eurydice*; yet, its horrendous ending, enacted by Agave's leaving the stage with her son's head in her hands after she has unconsciously killed him in one of the Dionysian rites, tinges the whole play with a gloomier tone. The cello music that is heard at the end of the piece sharply transforms the dramaturgic orgy into an elegiac representation which can only be partly comprehended through the silence that remains afterwards.[49] As Bernadette Bricout contends: "Myths are always a game of light and shadows . . . they can be naïve and complex at the same time, transparent and enigmatic"); but myths always play with us, since between the questions they pose and their answers there is always place for silence. From *mythos* to *mutus*, as Bricout indicates, distance is minuscule.[50]

Although the spaces for silence are indeed miniscule throughout Kneehigh's vibrant piece, and between their shocking last stage image and the audience's applause, the rich and composite theatrical language of the Cornish company succeeds in conveying various ideas in form, in the same way that myths themselves signify different concepts through their narrative appearance. As with Ruhl's *Eurydice*, the interaction of old and new signifiers in *The Bacchae* entails a combination of universal and specific signifieds. On the one hand, the play has psychological, cultural, and political resonances that have traveled more than two and a half thousand years since Euripides wrote the original text; through Kneehigh's adaptation, they continue to speak to modern audiences about religious intolerance, power abuse, and savage forms of essentialism, which in the play are epitomized by Pentheus, Dionysus, and the Bacchae, respectively. In this vein, Grose relates these transhistorical and transcultural themes to very recent events of our time such as Guantanamo Bay's prisoner abuse or the Beslan school siege, as well as with global phenomena like "the shadow of religious and political fundamentalism looming large in the Middle East and the American Right."[51]

These particularizations of the universal drive in *The Bacchae* continue to create, even though from specific angles, "a terrifying glimpse at the beast in us all," to borrow from Emma Rice's words.[52] However, Kneehigh's reworking of these general themes also contains distinctive concepts which are more directly connected with present-day discourses of identity, and in particular with those related to

markers of gender, ethnicity, and age. In a way, the three of them are different manifestations of Otherness inasmuch as they remain sources of marginalization in many cultural spheres. In this respect, they reveal once again Kneehigh's re-creation of the Greek myth from a contemporary prism, in the same way that all Greek deities are, at the end of the day, historicized and sociocultural constructions. As Richard Seaford sustains, Greek myths and divinities elicit the following question: "in what social circumstances did human beings need to imagine [them]?"[53]

In the first place, Kneehigh's Dionysus seems to answer this question from the perspective of the foreigner who, due to the pervasiveness of racism and cultural intolerance, continues to be categorized as uncivilized and fear-provoking. In their re-telling of *The Bacchae,* Kneehigh politicizes Dionysus' role by making him speak Hungarian and determining his origin in Eurocentric terms: as he says in his self-translated introduction, he comes from "the far, far east."[54] In this light, the opposition between Pentheus' obsession with re-establishing the former order of his kingdom and Dionysus' belief in the dismantlement of the boundaries of his cousin's territorial domain, suggests current debates about European crosscultural and socioeconomic relations, and evokes northern and central Europe's hegemonic perception of its southern and eastern Others.[55] Through this reading, Kneehigh's Dionysus becomes further humanized: even if his reconstruction as the ostracized alterity of an apparently monocultural society or territory does not alter the violent ending of the original tragedy, in which Pentheus is clearly the victim, his plea to be believed as Zeus' son and accepted as part of Pentheus' family is tinged with a renovated message about intercultural coexistence.

The Bacchae also receive a distinctive treatment as transvestite representatives of unruly women. In a similar way to the gender-specific implications of Ruhl's *Eurydice*, the female characters in Kneehigh's play not only encompass the universal themes aforementioned, but also personify the rebellion of different women against several forms of male domination. As mentioned before, Agave's 1950s style, like Eurydice's, evokes a time in which most Western women were still trapped in the traditional roles and stereotypes generated by their patriarchal environments. Monstrous as it is, Agave's transformation into a Baccha hence represents a radical step in her personal liberation. The Bacchae themselves are given the opportunity to explain their gender-specific predicament to the audience: if, together, they are perceived as a savage tribe, individually, the spectator can listen to a teenage Baccha who now celebrates her sexuality; a menopausal member of the Chorus who is happy to abandon her social invisibility; and Grandmother Bacchae, who abandons the granny role that had been imposed on her and finds a way to assert her ever-changing identity as a woman and a human being.[56] Alongside with the Baccahe's feminist speeches, Kneehigh's play underlines the construction of gender roles and sexual identity through the male bodies of the mythic Chorus, while at the same time introducing other female characters like Pam, Pentheus' assistant, who represent a more conservative stance.[57] Through the ideological scope that

all the female characters create, ranging from traditional and monolithic visions of femininity to radically liberated and plural positions, Kneehigh also subverts the classical association between the Bacchae and inexplicable madness and, consequently, between femininity and the irrational.

Closely connected with this approach, and as announced by Grandmother Bacchae, Kneehigh's play also includes a contemporary perspective on aging, whereby elderly characters can rebel against the clichéd visions of their identities which are more imprisoning than their physical infirmities. Like the Grandmother, Cadmus—Pentheus' grandfather and former King of Thebes—and Tiresias—the mythic blind prophet—feel attracted toward the Dionysian rites through the cathartic promise of self-expression they entail. As a result, they do not hesitate to join the Bacchae in their ecstatic parties in order to get rid of the roles of passive, self-restrained, and even wise men that they have been given because of their old age.[58] Without diminishing the mystery of Dionysus' spell in the original tragedy, Kneehigh thus incorporates new readings of agedness in their play which are rejuvenating not because they imply a second childhood, as another stereotype of old age would state, but because they recognize the liberating reality of plural experiences of aging which the revolution of longevity has made possible in the Western world since the second half of the twentieth century. By the same token, traditional conceptions of youth and old age are challenged in Kneehigh's piece insofar as Pentheus, the young character, represents an old vision of the elderly, as reflected in his rebuking Cadmus and Tiresias by saying, "I thought you two were supposed to be the city elders?" or "Have you lost your faculties? /Are you completely deranged?"[59] Cadmus and Tiresias, by contrast, incarnate a modern vision of aging as a period in which self-growth and renewal have been given a new opportunity.

On the whole, Kneehigh's re-interpretation of the Euripidean myth through these distinctive identity markers not only addresses the eternal struggle between "the wild and the tame" in Rice's words,[60] but also explores the elation of breaking the rules when these emerge from marginalizing and repressive contexts, as well as the possible radical actions to which perpetuated forms of oppression can lead. In a way, they continue to testify what Euripides himself transmitted through his tragedies, namely, "the empirically observable fact that the world is cruel, and people suffer," as Sourvinou-Inwood puts it.[61] Besides particularizing this verification through its contemporary discursive and poetic elements, Kneehigh's *The Bacchae* celebrates what Richard Seaford has defined as "a precondition for drama," namely, "the transformation of identity."[62]

Toward a Conclusion: Dionysian Dramaturgies for Postmodern Chimeras

The transformation of the Self and of society is a conceit that pervades in Ruhl's *Eurydice* and Kneehigh's *The Bacchae*. Ultimately, one could say that this shared feature is derived from the Dionysian origin which unites the two

dramaturgies beyond the boundaries of their plotlines: after all, Orpheus eventually dies at the hands of the Bacchae in the original myth. Considering this overriding intertextual link between the two plays, the return of the transformative, yet ultimately annihilating, Dionysian impulse to the contemporary stage through these two texts should be considered. To quote Barthes once more, "myth is a type of speech chosen by history: it cannot possibly evolve from the *nature* of things."[63] The manifestation of the Dionysian in Ruhl's and Kneehigh's playtexts certainly throws light on the perplexing scene of our unremitting yet exhausted postmodern era. In this case, T. S. Eliot's affirmation that myths are "a way of controlling, of ordering, of giving shape and a significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history"[64] is validated by the mythic substratum of Ruhl's and Kneehigh's postmodern plays. In particular, to borrow from Eliot's words, the plays refer to the "futile and anarchic panorama" of our postmodern societies through at least three tropes which infuse both dramaturgies.

One of them is the notion of forgetfulness, which operates as symbolic isotopy in the two texts. Loss of memory is an unsettling component of Eurydice and Orpheus' relationship, as well as of Eurydice's own development as a character; and it becomes the final source of tragedy in Orpheus' last amnesic actions, which render oblivion equal with death at the end of the play.[65] Forgetfulness is also present in Kneehigh's piece as part of the Bacchae's ecstasy and as a catalyst of tragedy: after she has killed her son, Agave is forced to look at what she has done, and the memory of her unconscious yet murderous ritual comes back to her mind.[66] Beyond its specific dramatic functions, the presence of oblivion in the two plays can be deemed a symptom of our time. Indeed, several authors have associated the literary motif of forgetfulness to contemporary anxieties related to our fluid identities, digitalized existences, obsessed individualities and certain ahistorical philosophies.[67] Indeed, all these features of the postmodern era can lead to an additional interpretation of Eurydice's final sleep (or death), or of Agave's atrocious amnesia; or even of Dionysus' resentful obsession with remembering those who did not accept him as he is. By making Eurydice "dip[-] herself in the River [of Forgetfulness],"[68] Ruhl creates a new Every Woman or Every Man of our unstable and self-eroding times; Agave's submission to an orgy of oblivion dramatizes the perils of a self-centred individuality or nation; and Dionysus' excessive remembrance, the destructive resentment of those who have been forgotten for too long.

After the ending of both pieces, an uncomfortable silence which passes for peace remains; and a second isotopy comes to the surface, namely, the liberating yet at the same time discomforting notion of dissolution, which can be interpreted as another form of death. Either individual or collective, the termination of identity, national, and existential boundaries is present in Ruhl's and Kneehigh's plays, and especially in the latter it acquires apocalyptic overtones which are, once more, closely connected with our period and culture. In *The Vital Illusion*,

Jean Braudillard defines our time as a new apocalypse in which what he defines as the orgy of history, of revolution, of liberation, and of modernity are over. All the excesses described by this philosopher, including the ecstasy of the masses, of the body, of information, of immediacy, of reality, of sex, and of violence, can be easily associated with the Bacchae's unrestrained behaviour, as well as with the end of Orpheus' mythic world, once Eurydice has completely erased its existence through an extreme form of individuation.[69]

Even if the conceits of forgetfulness and dissolution underscore the tragic essence of Ruhl's and Kneehigh's plays, they point, at the same time, to a third isotopy they have in common, namely, the notion of renovation. In this respect, and to finish, *Eurydice* and *The Bacchae* are also postmodern reformulations of an allegedly solid mythic past in which the boundaries between tragedy and comedy, like those between chaos and order, justice and injustice, or even life and death, were more clearly established. This sense of renovation is found, on the one hand, in the use of humor and irony as distancing devices in several scenes;[70] on the other hand, language itself or even the use of different languages and the need for translation, are used in the two plays as a source of comedy, as well as a form of interrogation of the past.[71] In a way, language becomes a mystery that needs to be deciphered to enter a new level of (co)existence; it is, at the same time, an ancient and new form of renewal.

In *The Birth of Tragedy*, Friederich Nietzsche proved that tragic beauty intimates the horror of life but also offers consolation for it; in other words, that art tells us painful truths and, yet, makes it possible for us bear them.[72] In their respective plays, Sarah Ruhl and Kneehigh Theatre resort to the archaic source of the myth to convey the significant continuities of the past and highlight, at the same time, the unsettling, yet also renovating, forces of our discontinuous present. Through their mixed theatrical strategies, their plays offer a poetic compass which may orientate the wandering vision of our days, even if a tragic smile underlies, enigmatically, their eclectic, intertextual, and mythic work, thereby promising a definitive end, and a new beginning.

Notes

1. Roland Barthes, "Myth Today," in *The Routledge Drama Anthology and Sourcebook: From Modernism to Contemporary Performance,* ed. Maggie B. Gale and John F. Deeney, trans. Annette Lavers (London: Routledge, 2010) 774-81 (774).

2. Dan P. Mc Adams, *The Stories We Live By: Personal Myths and the Making of the Self* (New York and London: The Guildford Press, 1993) 123.

3. Belli, Angela, *Ancient Greek Myths and Modern Drama: a Study of Continuity* (London: London University Press, 1969) viii.

4. Belli vii.

5. Christiane Sourvinou-Inwood, "Tragedy and Ritual" in *A Companion to Tragedy.* Ed. Rebecca Bushnell (Malden MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), 7-24 (7).

6. Sarah Ruhl, *Eurydice,* in *The Clean House and Other Plays* (New York: Theatre Communication Group, 2006) 325-411.

7. Kneehigh Theatre, *The Bacchae: A Tragedy in One Act,* in *Tristan & Yseult, The Bacchae, The Wooden Frock, The Red Shoes* (London: Oberon Books, 2005) 63-120.

8. Ruhl 329.

9. Whereas Virgil included the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice in Book IV of his *Georgics,* Monteverdi and Offenbach overtly showed their emphasis on the male protagonist through the titles of their operas, namely, *Orfeo* and *Orpheus in the Underworld*, respectively. The title of Cocteau's drama and film, *Orphée*, also suggests a masculine approach, as with Camus's cinematic version of the myth, entitled *Black Orpheus*. ("Orpheus," in *Encyclopædia Britannica. Encyclopædia Britannica Online*, <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/433177/Orpheus> (accessed 16 October 2011)).

10. *Eurydice* 333, 360, 362, 374, 377.

11. *Reescrituras de los mitos en la literatura: estudios de mitocrítica y literatura comparada,* ed. Juan Herrero and Montserrat Morales (Cuenca: Ediciones de la Universidad de Castilla-La Mancha, 2008) 231.

12. Sourvinou-Inwood 9.

13. *Eurydice* 374, 402, 462.

14. See, for example, the rest of plays in the collection in which *Eurydice* is included (Ruhl 2006).

15. The hit "Don't Sit Under the Apple Tree" especially contributes to this atmosphere. This was one of The Andrews Sisters' most popular songs, which increased their fame in the US during the Second-World-War period. ('The Andrew Sisters,' in *Encyclopedia Britannica. Encyclopedia Britannica Online*. <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/1299246/The-Andrew-Sisters> (accessed 16 November 2011)).

16. Gay McAuley, *Space in Performance. Making Meaning in the Theatre* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2000) 29-30.

17. *Eurydice* 350, 359.

18. *Eurydice* 331.

19. *Eurydice* 350, 331, 359.

20. Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space,* trans. Maria Jolas (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994) x.

21. Lewis Carroll, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (Oxford: OUP, 2008).

22. *Eurydice* 332.

23. *Eurydice* 380.

24. Ruhl's fascination with Carroll's text receives a more complete reformulation in her play *Dead Man's Cell Phone*, which can be interpreted as a new adventure of a postmodern Alice. See Sarah Ruhl, *Dead Man's Cell Phone*, (New York: Theatre Communication Group, 2008).

25. *Eurydice* 376-77.

26. *Eurydice* 332.

27. *Eurydice* 361.

28. *Eurydice* 334, 356, 395, 399.

29. *Eurydice* 333, 357, 389.

30. *Eurydice* 356, 358, 362, 367, 387, 389, 397, 411.

31. *Eurydice* 332, 367, 401, 397-99.

32. Herrero and Morales 18.

33. *Eurydice* 335-36.

34. Ruhl 327.

35. William Shakespeare, *The Tempest,* in *The Complete Works*, ed. by Stanley Wells and Gary Taylor (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), 1167-89.

36. *Eurydice* 327.

37. William Shakespeare, *The Tragedy of King Lear,* in *The Complete Works*, ed. by Stanley Wells and Gary Taylor (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988) 943-75, 970.

38. 'TMA: Theatre Management Association', in *Theatre Management Association*, <http://www.tmauk.org/awards/nomineesandwinners.aspx> (accessed 25 November 2011).

39. Euripides, *The Bacchae,* trans. and ed. Richard Seaford (Warminster: Aris & Phillips, 1996).

40. Emma Rice, "Foreword," in *Tristan & Yseult, The Bacchae, The Wooden Frock, The Red Shoes* 11-14, 11.

41. Barthes 779.

42. *The Bacchae* 74-78.

43. *The Bacchae* 82, 89, 104, 105.

44. *The Bacchae* 77-78.

45. *The Bacchae* 73, 71, 87*,* 81.

46. Carl Grose, "Foreword: *The Bacchae*," in *Tristan & Yseult, The Bacchae, The Wooden Frock, The Red Shoes,* 65-66, 65.

47. *The Bacchae* 84, 71, 115.

48. *The Bacchae* 78, 115, 65, 82, 65, 82, 97.

49. *The Bacchae* 120.

50. Bernadette Bricou, *Le regard d'Orphée: les mythes littéraires de l'Occident* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2001) 12. The original quote is "Le mythe est toujours jeu d'ombre et de lumière . . . à la fois naïf et complexe, transparent et énigmatique." My translation.

51. Grose 65-6.

52. Rice 11-12.

53. Richard Seaford, "Tragedy and Dionysus" in *A Companion to Tragedy* 25-38, 31.

54. *The Bacchae* 91.

55. *The Bacchae* 100, 109.

56. *The Bacchae* 106, 75-6.

57. *The Bacchae* 87-90, 102-5, 109-11.

58. *The Bacchae* 100-01.

59. *The Bacchae* 85.

60. Emma Rice, "The Bacchae," in *Kneehight Theatre,* <http://www.kneehigh.co.uk/showa/the-bacche/comments.php> (accessed 26 Nov. 2011).

61. Sourvinou-Inwood 21.

62. Seaford 26.

63. Barthes 774. Italics are in the original source consulted.

64. Belli vii-viii.

65. *Eurydice* 394-5, 401, 402, 403, 410-11.

66. *The Bacchae* 117-119.

67. Anne Bastings, *Forget Memory: Creating Better Lives for People with Dementia* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009) 51-2.

68. *Eurydice* 411.

69. Jean Braudillard, *La ilusión vital,* trans. by Alberto Jiménez Rioja (Madrid: Siglo Veintinuo, 2002) 32, 33, 70, 40.

70. *Eurydice* 342, 358, 390, 406-7; *The Bacchae*, pp. 74, 75, 76, 82-3, 104.

71. *Eurydice* 370, 373, 374, 359, 360, 364, 405; *The Bacchae,* 94.

72. Friederich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*. Ed. Michael Tanner, Trans. Shaun Whiteside (London: Penguin, 1993).