

From Myth to Empathy: The Rebirth of Dionysian Ecstasy in The Inanna Project

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By Zhou Yiwen (2024 Project Critic)

The Inanna Project is the latest work by the theater group, Theater No Theater, bringing the story of the priestesses of Inanna from Sumerian mythology to life through a cross-cultural performance. The three-hour-long production consists of five epic poems and three hymns, all presented through singing.

The word 'Project' in the title suggests an experimental quality in the production. The director, acting as the guiding voice of the chant, provides prologues and interpretations between transitions. The six other performers come from different corners of the world—France, the United States, Spain, and South Korea—each infusing the play with their native languages, cultural traditions, and singing styles. This interplay transcends time and space, reimagining Inanna's transformation from mortal to deity while reflecting on profound themes of life, death, and love.

By staging the world's oldest epic, the theater company demonstrates an ambition to explore humanity's deepest and most primal essence. The performance, while crossing cultural, racial, and temporal boundaries, retains a strong traditional aesthetic. This approach ensures that audiences are not influenced by any single ideology but can instead engage with the material on a direct level, challenging modern perspectives and shaking the dominance of excessive rationalism in contemporary thought.

The Dionysian Spirit: A Collective Ecstasy That Breaks Boundaries

With its multicultural and multiracial creative background, The Inanna Project clearly aims to explore the modern relevance of mythology. Through powerful and penetrating chants, the performance evokes the imagery of the 'chorus' from Greek tragedies, compelling the audience to feel and reflect: When different cultural traditions intertwine on the same stage, does it create conflict or fusion?

Philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche, in 'The Birth of Tragedy', discussed the opposition between Apollo and Dionysus in theatrical art. Apollo represents reason, order, and individuation, striving for harmony and restraint in art. In contrast, Dionysus embodies irrationality, ecstasy, and fusion, using music, dance, and ritual to dissolve individual boundaries, allowing people to merge with nature and the collective 'primal life force'. The diverse and layered structure of The Inanna Project reflects this 'chaotic harmony' of Dionysian rituals.

Dionysian ecstasy dissolves individual distinctions—race, gender, class—into a boundless collective celebration. I believe the director intentionally uses song and dance to lead participants toward a spiritual unity during the performance. By leveraging the actors' 'intercultural bodies', the production breaks free from the rigid frameworks of modern rational society. This aligns perfectly with Nietzsche's critique that the downfall of ancient Greek tragedy resulted from philosophers like Socrates excessively promoting rationalism at the expense of life's expressive power. The repression of Dionysian spirit, Nietzsche argued, reduced drama to a superficial form.

Transformation of Life: The Intersection of Modern Humanity and Ancient Myth

As I watched the performance, I couldn't help but wonder: If we attempt to project this 5,000-year-old myth onto modern life, how do these fragmented glimpses of humanity resonate with us today?

Inanna rescues a drifting 'Huluppu' tree from the turbulent waters of the Euphrates and plants it in her sacred garden. This act mirrors how we, as individuals, seize fleeting 'possibilities' in the river of life and nurture them in our inner gardens. Later, with the help of the hero Gilgamesh, she removes serpents and monsters, confronting the unknown, overcoming chaos, and achieving rebirth. She then battles Enki, the god of wisdom, stealing divine decrees to construct civilization. Having attained everything, she begins to long for love and embarks on a passionate yet tragic romance with the shepherd Dumuzi (also known as Tammuz). When Inanna descends into the underworld, her love and passion are nearly extinguished—yet in the depths of loss, she finds the key to rebirth and returns to the mortal world, embodying the eternal cycle of life and renewal.

Upon deeper reflection, this structure closely mirrors the states we encounter in modern life: From birth, we continuously explore, seek, and grow, yearning for achievements and desires while facing the unknown and experiencing setbacks. When confronted with pain, we often fall into an abyss of loneliness. Yet, it is precisely the unpredictable sweetness and bitterness of human emotions that allow us to shed old illusions and reexamine the meanings of 'love' and 'life'. Just as Inanna is reborn through fire and returns to the world with newfound strength, we, too, can rediscover ourselves after experiencing suffering and disorientation.

This mythic journey—of knowledge, love, and loss—reflects the modern transition from pure rationalism to emotional entanglement, ultimately leading to self-transformation. It demonstrates that the meanings embedded in ancient myths continue to shine in the present: We are all searching for a place to root ourselves, grasping at fleeting opportunities, and shaping a future that truly aligns with our inner selves.

By interweaving poetry and song, The Inanna Project brings the myth of Inanna to life in a three-hour performance that leaves a powerful impact. The cross-cultural nature of the production is presented through diverse artistic forms. As part of the director's design, lighting is intentionally cast upon the audience, integrating them into the performance itself. This technique unites epic storytelling, performers, and spectators, breathing life into the theater.

In doing so, the production revitalizes a millennia-old story to challenge the excessive rationality of the present, restoring theater as a space for critical reflection.

The Inanna Project

- Performed by: Theater No Theater
- Date & Time: January 19, 2025, 3:00 PM
- Venue: Shell Warehouse Building C, Tamsui Cultural Park