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DANCE

A moment from Morphoses' production of *Bacchae*.

Kyle Froman

## Metamorphosis

*The evolution of dance company Morphoses*

BY SUSAN REITER

The company's name is familiar and the time of year is the same. But when Morphoses opens at The Joyce next week, it will be a very different enterprise than the one that had October seasons at City Center from 2007 to 2009. Much evolution has led to the world premiere of *Bacchae*, a "choreographic staging" of Euripides' tragedy by Luca Veggetti.

The production represents the beginning of a new focus and model for Morphoses, which was founded in 2007 by Christopher Wheeldon and Lourdes Lopez. While it offered dances by a number of choreographers in its first three years—often Europeans less known on the New York scene—it was strongly identified with Wheeldon, one of today's leading ballet choreographers, and was a showcase for his new and recent ballets.

When Wheeldon opted out of Morphoses in early 2010, many wondered whether the venture had lost its *raison d'être*. But Lopez, a longtime New York City Ballet principal dancer who had directed the Balanchine Foundation, did some serious re-examining and consulted with many in the field. She felt strongly that Morphoses could, and should, continue to pursue its original mission.

"When we first started, the whole idea really was about new work, collaboration and different choreographers. I spoke with the board and they felt that the mission

of the organization hadn't changed," Lopez said last week. In late February of last year, she answered questions about where Morphoses was heading with an announcement that "Morphoses will adopt a curatorial model in which the company will invite artists from various disciplines to take on the role of resident artist for one season, leading the company's artistic vision for that year."

Last November, Veggetti, an Italian choreographer and stage director

based in New York who works primarily with contemporary music, was named Morphoses' first resident artistic director. *Bacchae* was a project he had been envisioning for quite a while, and when he brought the idea to Lopez, she sensed an ideal fit with her company's new direction. He proposed it as a collaboration with composer Paolo Aralla and dramaturg Luca Scarlini, with whom he had worked on multiple earlier projects.

"I was impressed that he had already envisioned and planned this, and that it was truly collaborative," Lopez said. "Luca's vision was very clear, and it was very much what we would hope to do with Morphoses—to give an artist time to fully produce a substantial work. There's an

artistic seriousness and purpose behind his wanting to create *Bacchae*."

The 11 dancers performing in the work, which Veggetti describes as "a play for dancers," were chosen by audition last March. They range from New York City Ballet soloist Adrian Danchig-Waring (who portrays Pentheus, the Theban king) to Morphoses veteran Gabrielle Lamb to Alvin Ailey alumni Willy Laury and Yusha-Mari Sorzano; other dancers have a more postmodern background. "I look for dancers who are skilled and who are open to an experience, to working together in one direction," Veggetti said.

The ensemble performs mainly as a chorus, but at times individual dancers are identified with specific characters in the drama. Veggetti has Frances Chiavarini, a long-limbed, powerful dancer who has worked with him often, portraying Dionysus, citing that Greek god's androgynous nature.

Asked if he would identify his *Bacchae*—in which the dancers sometimes speak and generate elements of Aralla's electronic score through their movements—as dance-theater, Veggetti laughed and hesitated, seeking the ideal description. "I think it's a theater piece that is enacted by dancers. It's experimental in form. My inspiration came from different sources, including the origins of Greek drama, which was basically a form of dance theater." He also cited aspects of Japanese and Indian theater, as well as Renaissance masques, as entering into his process.

Veggetti created his own stage design and says he tends to be wary of sets. "I like to design the stage and the space. That's where I start from; everything else comes from that initial idea about the design for the stage."

When they initially met to discuss *Bacchae*, Veggetti and Lopez found an unexpected common ground. Both, it turned out, had been examining and drawing inspiration from Jerome Robbins' years running the American Theater Laboratory in the mid-'60s, an experimental ensemble of dance and theater artists who focused more on process than on finished performances. "I'd had that in mind because it was very intriguing to me," Veggetti said. "Robbins wanted to experiment without any pressure. The idea of assembling performers with that goal seemed interesting to me. And incidentally, one of the projects that Robbins worked on with that group was *The Bacchae*." ☞

### *Bacchae*

Oct. 25–30, The Joyce Theater, 175 8th Ave. (at W. 19th St.), www.joyce.org; \$19+.

Morphoses dancer Frances Chiaverini in *Bacchae*.