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DEEP DIALOGUE: Director Bryan Doerries introduces his play, 'End of Life,' starring Renzo Ampuero, Jay O. Sanders and Kelley Green at the Harvard Medical School's Walter Amphitheatre.

Theater of the mind, heart and spirit

By Peter Gelzinis

The voice is mesmerizing.

It belongs to veteran New York actor Jay O. Sanders, and it fills an amphitheater at Harvard Medical School with the anguished screams of the dying Greek warrior, Philoctetes.

The scene was written by Sophocles 2,500 years ago. Yet, it is timely enough to move a doctor - attending this event at a recent medical ethics seminar - to stand up and admit it's provoked within him a serious reconsideration of euthanasia.

“This is what the character’s gut-wrenching screams are all about,” the doctor says. “And the request is no different today. Yes, we may be better equipped today to mitigate the pain with drugs. But it doesn’t eliminate patients asking us: ‘Can’t you make this end?’”

“And just like the characters in the play,” the doctor sighs, “we must decide, how do we respond to these final requests?”

Beyond the hysteria of last summer’s health-care forums and the demagoguery that fueled chatter about death panels, “End of Life” is a compelling, thoughtful exploration of an issue we are all loathe to confront . . . but unable to avoid.

Bryan Doerries, a New York-based director, has combined his love of Greek literature with his passion for the theater to create a project that he hopes will “inspire a cultural shift within the medical system and society to reconsider how to deal with issues of chronic suffering and mortality.”

Doerries, who lost a loved one to a grueling struggle with cystic fibrosis, conceived “End of Life” with no agenda beyond “having the medical establishment come to devote an equal amount of resources to those exiting this world as they do to those entering it.”

“End of Life” grew out of Doerries’ acclaimed “Theater of War” production. Using the same template of ancient Greek plays to stimulate discussion about everything from post-traumatic stress to suicide and combat tactics, “Theater of War” has criss-crossed the country’s military bases on a \$3 million Department of Defense grant.

The military brass already has discovered what the medical establishment is about to realize: The process of watching top-flight actors such as Jay Sanders, David Strathairn, Charles Dutton, Jeffrey Wright and S. Epatha Merkerson breathe life into timeless themes is both riveting and cathartic.

Two weeks ago at Harvard, a young man in the last row of the amphitheater spoke hauntingly of the eight months spent at the bedside of his first child, a son born severely premature. The man said all his prayers, but all the genius of doctors at Children’s Hospital were not enough to save his baby, or to help him let go.

After performing two scenes as Philoctetes and Heracles, the actor Charles Dutton felt moved to confess his own regret about over-ruling the last wish of his brother, succumbing to AIDS triggered by years of heroin abuse, to die in his childhood bed.

“I was angry at him and thought I was protecting my mother,” Dutton said, “but I ended up having my brother leave this world cursing me.”

“If you want a truly empathetic discussion of issues like war or how we face death,” Bryan Doerries said, “start with a piece of drama. The intensity of a live performance brings an honesty to the conversation that is heartfelt.

“Besides, we owe it to those who are suffering not to politicize their pain.”