



THEATER OF WAR

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By Christina Wood

Nobody understands the strains of war and the toll long deployments can take on a servicemember better than a fellow servicemember. That's why Outside the Wire LLC, an organization based in New York, relies on plays written by a battle-hardened general to get people talking about the challenges faced by members of our armed services and their families.

Playwright Sophocles fought his battles more than 2,000 years ago, which only adds an interesting dimension to the conversation.

Theater of War, launched in 2008, is the brainchild of Bryan Doerries, a cofounder of Outside the Wire. Before then, Doerries says, "I didn't know what sacrifice was." Since then, more than 150 staged readings of Sophocles' plays *Ajax* and *Philoctetes* have been performed for military communities across the country and in Europe. Each reading has been followed by a discussion that might be life-changing for someone in the audience.

"Last year, after one of our performances in New York City, a veteran walked up to me and said, 'Knowing PTSD goes back to B.C. gives me the feeling that I'm not totally alone,'" Doerries says. "I guess that's our message: If you have served or [have] cared for someone who has served, you are not alone in this room, you are not alone across the country, and most important, you are not alone across time."

Timeless tales

As part of a contract with DoD, Theater of War was presented at the U.S. Naval

War College in Rhode Island last spring. Capt. Sharon Campbell, USN, chief of staff, Joint Task Force, Guantanamo Bay, Cuba (JTF-GTMO), was in the audience that day. The production made an impression. In June, Doerries traveled to Guantanamo Bay with his coproducer, Phyllis Kaufman, and a small group of actors to present Theater of War and Prometheus in Prison, a sister program that uses dramatic readings of Aeschylus' *Prometheus Bound* as a catalyst for discussions related to the challenges of working with prisoners. Long after the actors have left the stage, the conversation continues at Guantanamo Bay. "By presenting these plays to military audiences and family members, the goal was to destigmatize psychological injury and open a safe space for dialogue about the day-to-day challenges faced by servicemembers [and] veterans and their caregivers and families," says Rear Adm. Jeffrey Harbeson, USN, commander, JTF-GTMO. "It is an innovative approach to dealing with the modern-day challenges facing our military and a nation at war for nine-plus years."

Leading actors from television and film, such as Brian O'Byrne (*Million Dollar Baby*, *Oz*), Elizabeth Marvel (*True Grit*, *Nurse Jackie*), and Oscar-nominee David Strathairn (*The Bourne Ultimatum*; *Good Night, and Good Luck*), breathe new life into ancient tales of the Trojan War. They tell the stories of wounded warriors struggling to maintain their dignity, identity, and honor in the face of physical and psychological injuries. The words might have been written thousands of years ago, but the themes are achingly familiar to modern military audiences. "No one returns from combat or a detention mission without being affected," Harbeson says. "The program provides troops a safe place to talk about their experiences, seek care, and start to heal."

"Suffering in silence is not a sign of strength," Doerries says. "It is a courageous act to seek help and to make meaning out of your experiences by telling your story."

And, as Harbeson notes, "Hearing leaders talk about these issues helps enable others to come forward and seek help if necessary."

Center stage

The 105th performance of Theater of War was presented last year in a dimly lit, air-conditioned auditorium at Patrick AFB, Fla. The audience was dressed in fatigues and flight suits, with a sprinkling of cotton shirts and summer dresses thrown in. It wasn't your standard theater audience. And that's OK, because as Jay O. Sanders (*Green Lantern*, *Law & Order: Criminal Intent*), who portrayed the Greek warrior Ajax that day, points out, "This is not your standard theater experience."

After an official and enthusiastic welcome from the leadership, Sanders and his fellow actors Frank Harts (*Salt*), Maryann Plunkett (*The Good Wife*), and T. Ryder Smith (*Law & Order*) took the stage. Dressed casually and comfortably, they sat behind a table, with their scripts before them. Sanders likens the format for the performance to a radio drama, which invites audience members to use their imagination. "It gives them room to enter into it," Sanders explains. Some of the officers seated in the cushioned comfort of the Patrick AFB auditorium fidgeted as raw emotion propelled the story of the mighty Ajax and his rival Odysseus forward; others sat unblinking, staring intently at the stage. "Sometimes you can feel the electricity in the room," Sanders says. At other times, it is the silence that speaks volumes.

When the applause died down after the reading, a panel of two veterans, an active duty enlisted servicemember, a mental health professional, and the wife of a currently serving officer took their places on the stage to discuss the performance. "Ajax had a breakdown," a World War II veteran remarked. "Today, we call it PTSD; in World War II and Korea we called it battle fatigue." Fighting tears, he went on to share his own debilitating experiences in the wake of the Battle of Riva Ridge, Italy. As his words filled the auditorium, it was the actors from New York who sat, rapt, in their seats.

The discussion soon expanded to include the audience; a microphone was passed from hand to hand as the conversation ranged from the snow-clad slopes of Italy to the skies over Vietnam and the roadways in Afghanistan. Men and women spoke of homesickness, survivor's guilt, fear and rage, and love and loneliness.

Doerries asked the audience why an ancient general might write such plays for his troops. A hand shot into the air. “I think he was trying to do what you’re trying to do today,” the airman said. “Help people cope, get issues out into the open, and get a dialogue started.”

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