

Register-Star

SERVING COLUMBIA
AND DUTCHESS COUNTIES
SINCE 1785

MONDAY, MARCH 24, 2008, HUDSON, N.Y.

VOL. 224, No. 84

50¢



ANNANDALE-ON-HUDSON

War's forgotten wounded topic of Greek play

By John Mason

Hudson-Catskill Newspapers

The play "Philoctetes" is not as well known as two of Sophocles' other works, "Oedipus Rex" and "Antigone," and it's 2,417 years old. But, in its depiction of the suffering and moral dilemmas of a civilization at war, it's extremely relevant to our country and our time.

A reading of a new translation of the play by Brian Doerries was presented Saturday at Bard College's Fisher Center, followed by a panel discussion with five classical scholars.

"Philoctetes," which takes place during the ninth year of the Trojan War, is a play about physical pain. Philoctetes was a leader of the Greeks as they embarked on their assault on Troy. But on the way to Troy, they stop at the island of Chryse, and Philoctetes leads



John Mason/Hudson-Catskill Newspapers

Norman Austin, left, makes a point during a panel discussion about Sophocles' 'Philoctetes' as Daniel Mendelsohn, Bill Mullen, Alice Quinn and Jonathan Shay listen Saturday at Bard College.

the other soldiers into a goddess's temple for a sacrifice.

On the way in, he is bitten by the snake who guards the temple. He is carried in agony back to the ship. But his howls of pain are so loud and bothersome to the others that they leave him in a cave on the deserted island of Lemnos. All Philoctetes has to provide for himself is the bow of Heracles, which never misses.

The play begins nine years later. The Trojan War has raged on with no end in sight. Odysseus, whom Daniel Mendelsohn called "the head of the Greek CIA," has captured the Trojan soothsayer Helenus, who prophesies that the Greeks can never win the

war unless Philoctetes returns to aid them with his bow.

Odysseus and Neoptolemus, the son of Achilles, go to Lemnos. Odysseus persuades Neoptolemus to fool Philoctetes into thinking he is returning home because of his anger at the Greeks, to convince him to come along, and to get him to hand over the bow.

The heart of the play concerns the inner battles of both Neoptolemus and Philoctetes over whether to return home or to go to Troy to aid the Greeks.

All four actors, Jesse Eisenberg, Adam Ludwig, John Schmerling and Michael Stuhlberg contributed to a performance that was moving

and enthralling. The reading was followed by an illuminating and interesting discussion.

For Norman Austin, professor emeritus of classics from the University of Arizona, the play is about sickness and health.

Austin said he was teaching his final course in college Greek when he came to the part in the play where Odysseus tells Philoctetes his cries of pain were so blasphemous they couldn't perform their sacrifice.

"This wasn't like the Presbyterian Church," Austin said. "There were animals being slaughtered. What more would one man's cries add?"

Please see Play, page A8

Play

Continued from page A1

But he was just too toxic: He was being excommunicated. My whole life opened up — I thought about all the screaming I had yet to do from that point.”

Following that, he taught the play to a group of senior citizens. But at the midterm break, he began experiencing stomach pains, contracted a fever, and spent six weeks in the hospital. That happened when they were reading the part of the play at which Philoctetes screams at the top of his lungs from pain.

“It is about sickness,” Austin said. “At the end, he chooses health over sickness.”

For Bard humanities professor Daniel Mendelsohn, the play is about the meaning of a civilized person, and also about theater. Philoctetes, living in a cave on a desert island, without agriculture or wine, has been separated from the coalition that purports to represent civilization by punishing the Trojan transgression. This portrait of a person deprived of civilization is followed by the focus on the dilemmas of what is correct, or civilized, behavior faced by both Neoptolemus and Philoctetes.

But Odysseus’s instructions to Neoptolemus to play a role to ensnare Philoctetes suggest that the subject is theater, Mendelsohn said. And Neoptolemus changes his mind after watching Philoctetes’ suffering, just as tragedy shows us suffering in order to induce catharsis.

Alice Quinn, former poetry editor at the “New York Review of Books,” called it “an interesting moment in the literature of healing.”

For Jonathan Shay, author of “Odysseus in America: Combat Trauma and the Trials of Homecoming,” “Philoctetes” is “an intensely military play.”

“What leads to moral injury?” he asked. “The betrayal of what’s right in a high-stakes situation by someone who holds legitimate power. The betrayal of what’s right is not inevitable, but it happens often.”

“Perhaps the phenomenon of hierarchy is what drives it,” he said. “Odysseus is

Agamemnon’s chief of staff. He’s doing this at the behest of his boss. There’s the sense of what a legitimate mission is. Very often, job one is ‘Make the boss look good.’”

At this time in history, Athens was engaged in war on six fronts, Shay said. “Everyone in the audience was either an actual soldier or a veteran.”

Austin said he was struck by the idea of betrayal.

“Philoctetes feels so deeply betrayed,” he said. “The sense of betrayal is stronger than his physical ailment; that would be exacerbated in a military situation.”

Quinn connected the play to the Easter season.

“The experience of undeserved suffering is itself redemptive,” she said.

“The fifth anniversary of the Iraq War fits into that as well,” said Doerries.

But Bard classics professor Bill Mullens, the moderator, noted that Aristotle said purely undeserved suffering isn’t tragic, it’s just polluting.

“I have a friend who says this is a play he can’t watch,” Mullens said.

Shay suggested looking at the play in the context of “The Body in Pain,” by Elaine Scarry.

“If you are with someone in pain, you are confronted with two choices,” he said. “Either orient yourself totally to the person in pain and shut out everything else, or put up a wall and pretend they’re not in pain, or not there.”

Mendelsohn objected that “there’s a middle term ... an institution that allows you to be a spectator of other people’s pain and derive gratification and edification: It’s theater. It’s not reality.” People wear masks and big boots and sing songs, he said.

“The play is interested in the effect of the spectacle of pain on other people,” he said. “Everything that happens to Neoptolemus happens because of how he’s affected by Philoctetes’ suffering. That’s what theater’s always giving you — you can go home afterward.

“But you ought to have a response,” Mendelsohn said. “This is very much on Sophocles’ mind — we’re in the third decade of an unbelievably destructive conflict. That’s also why the play is military in the larger sense. What does it mean to watch the Vietnam War in our living rooms? It’s not only about the military: It’s interested in this life of the city, which uses theater to examine its own conundrums; for example, what’s right.”

From the audience, a man asked, “The wound is so important. There have been 3,000 deaths in the Iraq War.”

“Four thousand! Four thousand!” cried several voices.

“How does civilization take back its wounded?” the questioner continued. “There’s the feeling of being paraded, of not being able to enter society again. What does society have to say about the reintegration of wounded vets?”

“This is a subject of intense scrutiny and conflict right now,” Shay said. “What is it exactly we are doing for our wounded service members and vets? There’s a whole lot of lying going on. Some wounded, the multiple amputees, are getting everything, but we’ve dropped those whose wounds are not so visible, those with psychological and moral injuries.”

Mendelsohn said the wound that will not heal is a symbol for the war that will not end; Athens was in the 22nd year of the Peloponnesian War. Shay said Homer rarely shows the suffering of the wounded.

One questioner wondered whether the constructs of healing and reintegration into society are false constructs used to deal with the horror of holocaust in a war.

“These people are always estranged until they die,” she said.

Mendelsohn said he was opposed to the pop cultural idea of phony catharsis.

“Tragedy always gives you a picture of pain that cannot be cheaply swept under the rug,” he said.

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