

Review

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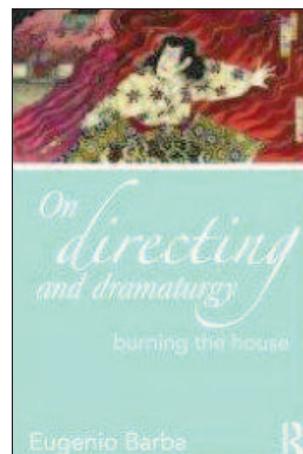
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1986 – 2011
CELEBRATING 25 YEARS OF REVIEW
1986 – 2011

- 3 On African American Dramaturgy
Martine Kei Green responds to *Review's* Special Issue (21.1)
- 6 “The Revolution Will Not Be Televised,” But Can It Be Theatricalized?
by Dalia Basiouny
- 10 Excerpts from *Tahrir Stories*
by Dalia Basiouny
- 12 Eugenio Barba and Odin Teatret, Holstebro, Denmark
An introduction to the work of Eugenio Barba
by Annelis Kuhlmann
- 14 Eugenio Barba’s *On Directing and Dramaturgy: Burning the House*
Reviewed by Amy Jensen and Shelley Orr
- 19 *Servant of Two Masters — or 3 or 4 or More...*
Business Advice for Dramaturgs Working in Virgin Territory
by Sydney Cheek O’Donnell



PEER-REVIEWED ARTICLE

- 22 Bryan Doerries’s Theater of War:
A New Incarnation of an Ancient Ritual
by Heidi Nelson



Theater of War in performance.

Photo: Phyllis Kaufman



**LITERARY MANAGERS
& DRAMATURGS
OF THE AMERICAS**

Bryan Doerries's Theater of War

A New Incarnation of an Ancient Ritual

BY HEIDI NELSON

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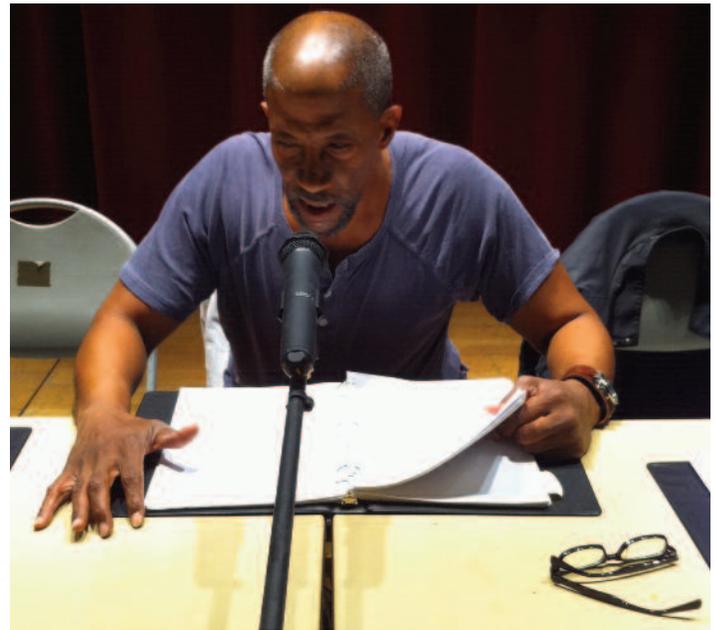
"You're not a coward." This was one marine's response to a young civilian man's expression of shame and guilt for not volunteering to serve in the military, as many of his friends and family members had. "This is our job" the marine continued, declaring that it is not everyone's duty to serve in the armed forces. Then, a woman asked how she should help a friend about to deploy. "Be there for him," said one veteran, "just talk to him." Several other marines spoke about their experiences coming home to a civilian population that could not understand what they had gone through overseas or in some cases simply pretended they did not exist. Meanwhile, civilians piped up about the challenge of not knowing how to relate to those who have served. It was an unusual conversation — a couple hundred people, both civilian and military, gathered in a theatre to talk about the experience of war, the hardships experienced by combat veterans, and civilians' reactions to those in uniform. What prompted this rare and illuminating discussion? A staged reading of selections from two ancient Greek dramas by Sophocles: *Ajax* and *Philoctetes*.

The evening was one of many organized and presented across the US and abroad by Theater of War, a program headed by theatre director and translator Bryan Doerries that includes play readings, a panel discussion, and a town hall-style conversation. Doerries organizes these sessions for military service members, the medical community (usually at universities or military medical centers), and mixed groups of service members and civilians in an effort to help communalize soldier experience, de-stigmatize combat trauma, and begin the healing process for those suffering from the psychological and emotional effects of warfare. The exchanges described above took place at the second of two Theater of War readings (guest

directed by Ellen McLaughlin) in March 2011 at the American Repertory Theater (A.R.T.) in Cambridge, Massachusetts, but my initial experience with Theater of War was in the spring of 2009 while working on my master's thesis — an examination of plays about combat soldiers. On April 2, 2009, from the back of a large, raked lecture hall at Uniformed Services University of the Health Sciences (USUHS) in Bethesda, Maryland, I watched as four actors gathered around a small table at the front of the room. Doctors, nurses, and military personnel milled about, many in uniform, several in scrubs, and some casually chatting with the performers — three with prominent film and television credits (Michael Ealy, David Strathairn, and Lili Taylor) and one former marine lance corporal, studying acting at Juilliard (Adam Driver). Eventually, a crowd of around fifty people amassed and seated themselves behind the long tables of the classroom, as the actors looked over their scripts. After being introduced by one of his military hosts, Doerries began the afternoon by explaining the format of the gathering and its intended purpose.

Though presenting plays to a military audience may seem an unusual goal for an American theatre practitioner, ancient Greek dramas often dealt with some aspect of warfare, whether it was conflicts between warriors and their commanders (*Philoctetes*), sacrificing familial duties for soldierly ones (*Iphigenia*), or the toll of warfare on non-citizen, civilian members of society (*The Trojan Women*). According to Thomas G. Palaima, a classics professor at the University of Texas, “Homer’s *Iliad*, Greek tragedies [...] and the comedies of Aristophanes [...] portray war, political opinions about war, and the effects war has on citizens and combatants on both sides with graphic and frank honesty” (Palaima 14). After all, classical Greek plays were produced, performed, and watched by soldiers and veterans, because military service was compulsory for all citizens — free, adult males (Goldhill 109), who dealt with almost constant military conflict. Soldiers also served as playwrights — the great tragedians Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides all fought in battle — and would frequently compose dramas on war and its repercussions.

What is unusual about Doerries’s position on these plays is that he believes the ancient Greeks practiced and watched theatre not as entertainment or political commentary but as purification after combat, acknowledging psychiatrist Dr. Jonathan Shay’s writings on this subject. Shay specializes in treating post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) in Vietnam veterans and has written two books (*Achilles in Vietnam* and *Odysseus in America*) relating ancient epic poetry to contemporary experiences of combat trauma. While many scholars have written about the prevalence of war-related themes in ancient drama, Shay has a bold theory on why the Greeks wrote, performed, and watched plays about war so frequently. He states in an article for *Didaskalia* that “the ancient Athenians re-integrated their returning warriors through recurring participation in rituals of the theater” (“Birth of Tragedy”). Shay’s research and work with veterans suffering from PTSD has shown that “the process of healing from combat trauma lies fundamentally in communalizing it” (“Birth of Tragedy”). Through performing and watching theatre, Shay proposes that ancient Greek combat veterans were able to share in one another’s traumatic experiences, promoting communal understanding and a degree of psychological healing. He explains how the chorus of Greek tragedy — the voice of morality, piety, and reason —



Reg E. Cathey playing Ajax at 29 Palms.

Photo: Phyllis Kaufman

“comprised the polis’ innocent nineteen-year-olds who had not yet seen heavy, prolonged combat [...]. They chant words of the settled moral consensus of their community” (“Birth of Tragedy”). He cites the research of John J. Winkler who interprets “the role and movement of the tragic chorus as an esthetically elevated version of close-order drill” (Winkler 22) and establishes evidence “that the chorus members were young men in [...] military training” (Winkler 57). Shay finds significance in the fact that the lead actors in tragedies were more mature soldiers and their characters’ actions in the play were usually transgressions — possibly the consequences of unhealed combat trauma.

In answer to Shay’s call for “our own new models of healing which emphasize communalization of the trauma” (“Achilles in Vietnam” 194), Doerries is using an old form in a way entirely new to today’s soldiers and civilians. Shay wishes that “combat veterans and American citizenry [could] meet together face to face in daylight, and listen, and watch, and weep, just as citizen-soldiers of ancient Athens did in the theater” (“Achilles in Vietnam” 194), and through Theater of War, Doerries creates community events that bring people together for these activities.

During his introduction for the USUHS audience, Doerries likened these plays to a message in a bottle that the ancient general, Sophocles, wrote down for subsequent generations. In America’s time of crises, its soldiers and citizens are discovering what that message means. Doerries then swiftly introduced the first play: *Ajax*. During the ninth year of the Trojan War, the great warrior Ajax is angered by his commanders, Agamemnon and Menelaus. The two generals have awarded a great honor — the armor of the fallen Achilles, who was the greatest Greek warrior — to the sly Odysseus, rather than Ajax, whose talent for fighting is now unrivaled. Doerries fleshed out Odysseus’ character by drawing a contemporary parallel: Odysseus was secretive and cunning, more like a CIA strategist than a military man. In a rage over the sleight, Ajax plots the murder of his commanders, as well as Odysseus; however, the goddess Athena inter-



Gloria Reuben, and Jeffrey Wright performing *TOW* at St. Vincent's Hospital (NYC).

Photo: Paxton Winters

venes, dims Ajax's sight, and deceives him into slaughtering a herd of sacrificial animals, instead of his intended targets. Sophocles' drama begins with an encounter between Athena and Odysseus.

The goddess (read by Lili Taylor) calls to Odysseus (David Strathairn), who has followed a trail of blood to Ajax's tent, and tells him of Ajax's intentions, boasting of the madness that she inflicted upon him. As Odysseus, Strathairn was horrified by Athena's tale and moved to pity for Ajax's predicament. On the other hand, Taylor's Athena was cold and commanding — a powerful goddess exacting vengeance on the mortal who displeased her and warning Odysseus of the consequences of hubris. Doerries translated Athena's description of the slaughter in vivid and gory terms, favoring a raw and straightforward style, rather than poeticism. Because fighting and death are a horrid business, the words used to describe them are suitably free of ostentation: "He descended upon them with full fury, ripping out horns with his hands, slitting throats and snapping spines, at one point squeezing the life from a general, then taking the lives of other officers, or so he thought, trembling with contamination" (Theater of War 5). Doerries rendered the disturbing events in appropriately gruesome terms for an audience of combat veterans who know firsthand the hideousness of warfare.

Such interpretations of Sophocles' language are also intended to make the material more accessible to members of the audience unused to hearing the heightened, theatrical language into which ancient verse is often translated. Of his renderings of the dramas, Doerries noted:

I used "shell-shocked" and "thousand-yard stare" and all kinds of things that are [...] liberties [...] but they're not gross liberties. In the Greek it's "his mind is plagued by a tempestuous disease," and I say "he sits inside the tent, shell-shocked, glazed over, gazing into oblivion" [...]. I'm fully conscious of what I'm doing, translating for this audience [using] our idioms. Why be relegated to (and this is the problem I have with almost every production I see) a 19th century idiomatic linguistic structure

simply because that's when the lexicon was codified for Greek? I mean it all sounds [...] Victorian. It didn't sound Victorian to [the ancient Greeks] (Doerries, telephone).

While the characters and subject matter of ancient dramas may be relatable for contemporary audiences (after all, they are still performed after over two thousand years), older translations begin to sound dated as speech changes, but the language of Doerries's versions is both clear and provocative.

In the subsequent scene, Taylor, as Ajax's wife Tecmessa, tearfully divulged Ajax's ensuing actions — torturing several animals inside his tent — to a shocked Adam Driver, as the chorus of Ajax's troops. Driver's anxious reactions emphasized the chorus's twofold dismay — not only has their friend and leader gone crazy, but as Ajax's subordinates, they are in danger of retribution from the Greek commanders. Explaining that Ajax's fit has passed, and he now sits in horror of his own actions, Tecmessa brushes aside the chorus's anxiety and implores them to focus on helping Ajax. Taylor took a pleading tone, as she begged Driver to speak to Ajax and try to ease his pain. Again, Doerries used contemporary phrasing in his translation of the ancient tale, particularly in Tecmessa's lines. For instance, Tecmessa recounts that when Ajax left the tent to commit the slaughter, she questioned him: "'Where are you going? No messenger has come calling for help. All of the soldiers are asleep. Please come back to bed.' He turned to me and firmly said: 'Woman, silence becomes a woman.' I've heard him say that before, and I know what it means, so I quit asking questions" (Theater of War 18). Doerries's words contrast more stylized renderings, such as John Moore's: "'Ajax, what are you doing? Why do you stir? No messenger has summoned you: you have heard no trumpet. Why, the whole army now's asleep!' He answered briefly in a well-worn phrase, 'Woman, a woman's decency is silence.' I heard, and said no more; he issued forth alone" (Moore 18). Doerries's version of these sentences in particular proved significant to one of his first audience members, Marshelle Waddell, the wife of a Navy SEAL with PTSD. In a post-performance discussion, Waddell said of Ajax's demand for silence, "I've heard that — in other words" (Perry).

In the next scene, Michael Ealy as Ajax railed against his fate, ashamed of his slaughter and desiring his own death, yet still fuming at the generals and Odysseus — Ealy spat their names out, as if they were vermin. Though his troops (a concerned but still apprehensive Driver) try to comfort him, Ajax remains inconsolable. Ealy declared with an ominous determination: "When a man suffers without end in sight and takes no pleasure in living his life, day by day, wishing for death, he should not live out all his years. It is pitiful when men hold onto false hopes. A great man must live in honor or die an honorable death" (Theater of War 28). Resolved to take his own life and unmoved by Tecmessa's frantic pleas, Ajax commands his servants to have his brother, Teucer, take care of his son, then shuts himself in his tent. Taylor's heartrending cries were met with harsh snarls from Ealy's desperate Ajax. In a choral song of grief, Driver shifted from war-weary homesickness to compassionate sorrow over Ajax's plight.

When Ajax later emerges, he tricks Tecmessa and his troops into thinking that he wants to wash the gore off his body and bury his sword in the ground, while his real intention is to "bury" the sword

in his own body, killing himself by falling upon the blade. Suddenly after Ajax's exit, a messenger arrives to warn the chorus and Tecmessa of the hero's true intentions, as prophesied by the Greek seer Calchas. Meanwhile, Ajax speaks his final words, praying to the gods and saying farewell to earthly life. He invokes Zeus and Helios, asking them to bring news of his death to Teucer and his parents, entreats Hermes for a quick and easy death, and implores the Furies to plague Agamemnon, Menelaus, and their armies. Lastly, Ajax says goodbye to the beauty of the earth, the comfort of home, and his friends and family. Ealy exquisitely balanced Ajax's combination of calm resoluteness about his decision, persistent bitterness over the generals' sleight, and momentary reluctance to leave the joys of earthly life. He gave a touching and simple delivery of Ajax's final lines: "Death oh Death, come now and visit me — But I shall miss the light of day and the sacred fields of Salamis, where I played as a boy, and great Athens, and all of my friends. I call out to you springs and rivers, fields and plains, who nourished me during these long years at Troy. These are the last words you will hear Ajax speak. The rest I shall say to those who listen in the world below" (Theater of War 44). Though these words marked the end of selections from *Ajax* included in the Theater of War reading, they occur only about halfway through Sophocles' play.

In the ancient drama, the conclusion of Ajax's earthly troubles coincides with the beginning of conflict between his family and the generals. Agamemnon and Menelaus forbid the burial of Ajax's corpse, as punishment for his attempted murder of them, while Teucer insists that his brother's wrath and madness should not detract from his bravery in battle, fighting for the Greeks for the past nine years. Finally, Odysseus intervenes and convinces the generals that desecrating the body of even a despised man is dishonorable, no matter how ignoble the man's actions in life. Doerries chose not to include the second half of Sophocles' play in his reading, as the first half achieves his purpose of "[painting] a portrait of the psychologically wounded combat veteran, as well as his wife's struggle to keep her family from disintegrating" (Doerries, email). The crucial message Doerries wishes to give his military audience — that psychological trauma has afflicted combat soldiers and their loved ones for thousands of years — is conveyed in the first several scenes.

Selections from *Philoctetes*, the tale of an injured fighter abandoned by the Greek army, comprised the second half of the performance. First, Doerries explained Philoctetes's background. Before the Trojan War, he was a valuable asset to the Greek army because he knew the sea route to Troy. When bad winds forced the fleet to land and camp out on a little deserted island called Lemnos, Philoctetes suffered a poisonous snakebite at a shrine to the island's nymph. The resulting wound began festering, smelling foul, and causing Philoctetes great pain, and because it was caused by a supernatural creature, the bite would never heal. The annoyance of the stench and Philoctetes's persistent cries of agony drove the army to desert him on Lemnos, leaving him with only his special bow and arrows — gifts from Heracles that never miss their mark. At the beginning of Sophocles' play, the Trojan War is in its ninth year, so Philoctetes has been marooned for a long time. Betraying his own people, the Trojan seer Helenus has told the Greeks that Troy will never be captured unless Achilles' son Neoptolemus wields the bow of Heracles. Odysseus and Neoptolemus arrive on Lemnos with a plot to deceive Philoctetes into giving up the bow.



A staged reading on a large scale: A view from the back of the audience at the amphitheater in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba.

Photo: Phyllis Kaufman

The Theater of War excerpts from *Philoctetes* open with the first scene between Odysseus and the reluctant young soldier Neoptolemus. Ealy, this time as the clever veteran Odysseus, immediately asserted control of the expedition and, knowing Neoptolemus (played by Driver) to be compassionate and easily moved to sympathy, sternly advised his subordinate, "Whatever strange things are said here today, always remember you came here with me" (Theater of War 78). Odysseus then commands the youth to befriend Philoctetes and pretend to hate the other Greeks to gain his trust: "When he asks who you are, say, 'I am the son of Achilles.' That much is true. No need to hide it. Then you should say you're sailing for home, deserting the army that begged you to come in the first place, their 'only hope' of taking Troy. But when you arrived and asked for the arms of Achilles, they said you weren't worthy of such a birthright and dressed Odysseus in your father's suit" (Theater of War 79). Capturing Neoptolemus's eagerness to please yet bewilderment at this request, Driver looked at his scene partner dubiously. Such trickery is against Neoptolemus's noble nature, and he protests: "...it hurts to hear of things I hate to do. It's just not in me to lie, not in my blood, not in my father's blood....They sent me to help you, sir, but I would rather die honestly than win deceitfully" (Theater of War 80). Odysseus eventually convinces Neoptolemus of the wisdom of this plan, then hides out of sight to avoid discovery by Philoctetes.

Wailing in pain as Philoctetes, seasoned stage and screen actor Strathairn read the next scene with the young, innocent-looking Driver. When Driver as Neoptolemus feigned ignorance of Philoctetes and his fate, Strathairn despairingly cried out one of the most memorable lines in the performance: "I am wretched, hated by the gods, if men don't know my story" (Theater of War 87). This line holds particular significance for Doerries who asserts that

part of the value of the [Theater of War] project is both disinhibiting your audience to tell their stories [during the post-performance discussions] and capturing those stories and bringing them to a larger audience [...]. The nine national [news] stories

we've had [in 2008–09, reported by *New York Times*, *LA Weekly*, *LA Times*, Associated Press, *Washington Times*, *USA Today*, *All Things Considered*, *The Atlantic*, and *Stars and Stripes*] have been really important for the project, but I also think they've been important advocacy pieces for the US Armed Forces, not so much for their commitment to the conflict but in terms of compassion for those who have fought and returned [...], telling and sharing of stories is the integral component of the performance (Doerries, telephone).

While the ancient Greeks (as demonstrated by the content of their dramas and epic poetry) valued the sharing of war stories, Doerries hopes Theater of War will promote discussion of military experiences in American culture. Placing value on their stories is a simple but important way of appreciating soldiers and their sacrifices. Ignorance of these efforts can increase a sense of isolation, just as Philoctetes's anguish over his situation is magnified by the idea that the Greeks never speak of him. As Ajax's resentment of the generals further demonstrates, ancient Greek soldiers took great offense when their labors or suffering went unacknowledged. For Philoctetes, being both forgotten and left behind adds insult to injury.

Neoptolemus listens patiently to Philoctetes's troubles, then offers him news of the Greeks and their fortunes at Troy, using Odysseus' ruse about being angry with the generals over their seizure of his father's armor. When he finishes this narration, Philoctetes asks Neoptolemus to take him home on his ship. Strathairn pleaded piteously, "Put me wherever you like, the bow, the stern, the hull. I won't disturb your men. In the name of Zeus, god of beggars, do this for me" (Theater of War 93). After Neoptolemus agrees to help the poor man, thereby gaining his trust, a messenger disguised as a merchant arrives with news of Odysseus' intentions to bring both men back to Troy to fulfill Helenus' prophecy. Strathairn became agitated and frantic, emphasizing Philoctetes's eagerness to escape the Greeks and sail off with Neoptolemus. Philoctetes gathers his few belongings and grants Neoptolemus permission to hold his bow: "You alone I trust to handle it, and then return it. Your actions, son, are as noble as this weapon, for it was won through kindness, and so you will be the only man to touch it with your fingers" (Theater of War 101). Just when Neoptolemus's goal of obtaining the bow is in sight, Philoctetes's foot is wracked with pain. Strathairn howled in misery, begging the youth to have pity: "it cuts straight through me. Do you understand? It cuts straight through me. I am being eaten alive. There is no I, only it. If you have a sword, chop here. Take my foot. I want it off, I want it off" (Theater of War 103). Strathairn's sharp wails and low growls electrified the air, driving home the wounded soldier's anguish, while Driver's alarmed responses intensified the action. Though effortlessly compassionate at first, Neoptolemus struggles with the dilemma of how to respond to a person driven out of his mind with pain. When his agony finally subsides, Philoctetes beseeches Neoptolemus to take his bow and guard it from Odysseus, as sleep overwhelms him. The chorus encourages Neoptolemus to abscond, bow in hand, but he refuses, determined to find some way to help Philoctetes.

The remainder of the play, detailing Neoptolemus's admission of his deception and Philoctetes's resentment of the betrayal, is not included in the Theater of War selections. In guilt and shame for his lies, Neoptolemus offers the bow back to Philoctetes, hoping he will

be persuaded to willingly sail with his fleet to Troy: "You will never find a cure for the snakebite until you return with us to Troy and meet with the sons of Asclepius. There — at long last — you will receive relief from the burden of your illness, and together, with your famous bow, you and I will topple the Trojan towers" (Theater of War 127). Philoctetes stubbornly refuses, abhorring the idea of seeing those who abandoned him face to face once more. He convinces Neoptolemus to flee the Greek army, upholding his original promise to take Philoctetes home. Doerries explained for the audience that the situation ultimately gets resolved through a *deus ex machina* — Heracles appears and commands Philoctetes to sail with Neoptolemus to the Greek forces, promising the healing of his wound and glory for both men in bringing down Troy.

As with *Ajax*, Theater of War only covered approximately the first half of Sophocles' drama. Though Philoctetes's bitterness and stubborn mindset are perhaps better conveyed through his insistence on avoiding the Greeks at all costs and in spite of Neoptolemus's promise of healing, Doerries favors the earlier, more expository scenes between the two characters. The turning point at which Neoptolemus agrees to betray the Greeks by honoring his promise to take Philoctetes home also raises the stakes of the situation (both would be deemed traitors), but is omitted from the readings. Doerries's justification is twofold. He showcases only "the first half [...] of *Philoctetes* to paint a portrait of the physically wounded and abandoned combat veteran. The scenes [that he and the actors] present also foreground Neoptolemus's inner-conflict as Philoctetes's unwitting caregiver" (Doerries, email). Philoctetes's suffering, Neoptolemus's initial struggle to obey orders, and the tenuous alliance that these two men form are more critical elements to Doerries than the most emotionally intense scenes of the play. Portraying the outcome of the characters' situation is less crucial to Doerries than establishing the relationship between them. He also cites an equally important reason for cutting the readings short — time constraints would not permit him and his colleagues to read all the plays' scenes: "If we performed the plays in their entirety, we would not have time for the town hall meeting [which] is the most important aspect of the event [...]. We are using these ancient plays to create the conditions for a conversation that otherwise would not be possible" (Doerries, email). The ancient Greek plays are a means to an end; therefore, presenting them in their entirety is unnecessary. As long as the sections performed facilitate audience dialogue, they serve their intended purpose.

Another element that makes these readings so provocative, despite their brevity and simplicity, is the high caliber of actors that Doerries enlists to present the readings. In addition to the four mentioned above for the April 2009 reading at USUHS, Theater of War performers have included: Bill Camp, Reg E. Cathey, Larry Coen, Patch Darragh, Nathan Darrow, Keith David, Charles S. Dutton, Jesse Eisenberg, Giancarlo Esposito, Frankie Faison, Peter Friedman, Paul Giamatti, April Grace, Josh Hamilton, Brent Harris, Arliss Howard, Terrence Howard, Elizabeth Marvel, Brian O'Byrne, Linda Powell, Maryann Plunkett, Gloria Reuben, Jay O. Sanders, Tamara Tunie, John Ventimiglia, Isiah Whitlock Jr., and Jeffrey Wright, among others. Involving accomplished, respected, and recognizable actors from both theater and film adds weight to the event, especially when audience members are not frequent theatergoers. Also, with the actors'

high levels of professionalism and talent, they can quickly render fully dimensional characters and deliver emotionally rich performances without the aid of full-scale production. Sans extensive rehearsals, lighting effects, props, sets, or staging, these actors paint vivid portraits of their characters, making stories about soldiers and their loved ones from thousands of years ago come to life as if they had happened yesterday.

Equally important as the staged reading portion of Theater of War, the subsequent town hall-style forum begins with a panel discussion. The actors quietly leave the stage, as the panel members take their places at the table. Doerries is careful to focus the conversation on the panelists' reactions to the play, rather than having the actors stay and discuss their experiences performing the material. While traditional post-performance talk backs often include curious audience members' questioning of actors about the rehearsal process or their interpretations of the play, Theater of War discussions are driven by the listeners' experiences and responses. The panel at USUHS included two members of the university's community: Dr. Lyuba Konopasek, Associate Professor of Pediatrics, and Dr. Glenn Burns, Assistant Professor in the Department of Military and Emergency Medicine. Dr. Burns also served combat tours in various locales, including Iraq, and spoke touchingly about how the plays had moved him. Once the momentum of a discussion had been established by the comments of the panelists, spectators (made up of military doctors, officers, and soldiers) began joining in. They talked about the need for companionship among those who have been in combat — several agreed that only other combat veterans are capable of understanding one another's emotions. Others compared Neoptolemus's decisions about obeying or disobeying Odysseus' orders to modern dilemmas of insubordination — sometimes disregarding orders is the more ethical decision. One speaker cited as an example the case of prisoner abuse at Abu Ghraib, where soldiers unquestioningly adopted immoral interrogation tactics from military intelligence officers (White). Others recognized the prevalence among psychologically distressed troops of Ajax's attitude that the only way to deal with humiliation is death. A military man and scholar in the audience reminded everyone that Tecmessa was not Ajax's honored wife, but rather his war bride and therefore a slave, but several soldiers responded that her low social status does not detract from her closeness to Ajax, love for him, and suffering over his distress. They found Tecmessa and Ajax's interactions analogous to a contemporary familial relationship. This dialogue lasted for just an hour, which is atypical. While Doerries's usual audience consists of greater numbers of lower-level enlisted men or infantry veterans, who might be willing to stay and talk for hours, the crowd at USUHS was mostly made up of higher-level officials with busier schedules.

In contrast, the civilians and service members who made up the audiences at two Theater of War sessions at A.R.T. last March continued each conversation for around two hours. Topics ranged from stress that family members undergo when a loved one is deployed, to service members' frustrations upon coming home, to civilians' difficulties



Elizabeth Marvel and Bill Camp perform TOW at Juilliard.

Photo: Howard Korn

with knowing what to say (or what not to say) to those in uniform. Gillian Snowden, panelist and spouse of combat veteran First Lieutenant Evan Bick (also a panelist), shared the fear and anxiety that she felt for her husband while he was deployed, her guilt over not being stronger for him, and her frustrations with her friends and medical school classmates, who often failed to offer support or even acknowledge her situation. Panelist William Donoghue, a Vietnam veteran and father of a marine on a tour of duty, spoke of how a line from *Ajax* had moved him. When addressing the chorus, Tecmessa declares that “twice the pain is twice the sorrow.” For this father, harkening back to his own painful experiences in combat and knowing firsthand the psychological and emotional impact of witnessing casualties made his fear for his son's safety and wellbeing even greater.

The way Donoghue used a line from the play to articulate his own experience demonstrates how Theater of War creates an environment in which difficult topics can be shared, acknowledged, and communalized. To encourage soldiers and military families to voice their experiences or thoughts about the plays, Doerries's post-performance panels always include military service members or veterans from the surrounding community who function as a “quasi-chorus,” speaking onstage shortly after the readings to offer their own comments to get the discussion going. Doerries emphasizes the importance “that the chorus [functions] in a similar way to a Greek one, which is to say it allows the audience or invites the audience to lens their experience through the chorus and into the play [...] to help draw those connections” (Doerries, Telephone). Though these comments are often very personal, Doerries never asks anyone to share anything outside her or his comfort zone — the discussion is framed by questions about what participants think about various aspects of the plays, such as “Why would Sophocles, a general, present a play about a soldier's madness and suicide to an audience of combat veterans and cadets?” Or, in the case of Donoghue's response, “What does Tecmessa mean when she says, ‘Twice the pain is twice the sorrow?’” If participants wish to share personal information as Donoghue did, they are free to do so, but Doerries is careful to guide the discussion in a safe way,



David Strathairn, Gloria Reuben, Jeffrey Wright, and Bryan Doerries.

Photo: Paxton Winters

keeping the lines of communication open by using the plays as a focal point and also a filter — if the conversation veers off topic or becomes very tense, Doerries can redirect it to a line or aspect of the drama. On the other hand, those who do wish to speak more deeply about their personal experiences can articulate their thoughts by relating them to circumstances and dialogue in the play, rather than through sharing details that might be too painful. When these sessions are successful and audience members relate to the readings, “a reticent, stoic, completely cut-off military population, seemingly unwilling to admit these issues [of psychological and emotional trauma], now are facing [them] all of a sudden, connecting the words and stories of these plays, connecting with larger ancient warrior culture to which they obviously belong in terms of their values of sacrifice and courage” (Doerries, Telephone).

Though Doerries has developed specific facilitation guidelines and an effective structure for Theater of War events, he did not initially design the project for a military audience at all. The readings evolved from sharing his translation of *Philoctetes* with medical students. The first time Doerries held a session with a non-theatre-going audience was at the prompting of a doctor, who had seen a staged reading of Doerries’s version as a part of the Culture Project in New York City. Another doctor (Lyuba Konopasek, who was also on the USUHS panel) arranged a reading for medical students at Cornell, and Doerries was amazed at the response. While he had known that the play “was about care-giving and [...] chronic illness” (Doerries, interview), the Cornell students saw a parallel between the characters’ situation and how doctors-in-training “are being desensitized to the larger aspects of doing things that are good for the hospital, potentially not great for the patient psychologically, and learning to adopt the detachment that most doctors develop as a defense mechanism over time” (Doerries, Telephone). Neoptolemus was compared to a medical student in a quandary over whether to do what is best for his bosses or for his patient, *Philoctetes*. The response was a revelation for Doerries, who had never before noticed this contemporary parallel.

The Health section of *The New York Times* ran an article about the Cornell reading, and shortly afterward, in February 2007, a scandal broke surrounding circumstances at the Army’s main medical facility, Walter Reed Army Medical Center. The media reported on appalling conditions, disorganization, and understaffing in Walter Reed’s outpatient facilities (Priest and Hull). Suddenly, the experience of *Philoctetes*, an injured man abandoned by his own army, had new resonance in American society. Convinced that soldiers would respond to the play, Doerries was determined to find a military audience. It was not until he read a *New York Times* article stating that “in an online course for health professionals, Capt. William P. Nash, the combat/operational stress control coordinator for the Marines, reaches back to Sophocles’ account of Ajax” (Sontag and Alvarez) that Doerries recognized the connection between Ajax’s story and PTSD. He composed his own translation of that play and then contacted Nash about finding a military audience for both *Ajax* and *Philoctetes*. Nash offered Doerries a plenary session at the US Marine Corps

Combat Operational Stress Control Conference in San Diego, and the play readings had such an impact that the *LA Times*, *LA Weekly*, and Associated Press all ran stories on the event.

Over the following six months, Doerries received more and more requests from military personnel to bring the Theater of War sessions to their bases. The response from the military community grew so much that in 2009 Doerries and his actors were offered an opportunity to perform two Theater of War readings at Fort Drum, sponsored by the Deployment Health Clinical Center (DHCC) and RESPECT-Mil, which stands for Re-engineering Systems of the Primary Care Treatment (of depression and PTSD) in the Military. One performance was presented to battalion commanders and their spouses, while the other was for primary care physicians in an effort to engage

primary care physicians at the front lines of response to PTSD. The premise is primary care physicians are the first ones to see it because, for a number of reasons [...] many of the men and women who come back, sort of like *Philoctetes*, are a little reluctant to accept medical treatment from the army and don’t go to the VA hospital, so it’s their primary care physician who sees the symptoms, but unfortunately the general civilian primary care physician population is not versed in psychological injury diagnosis [...]. We [came] together [...] to really provide these primary care physicians with some context and some resources (Doerries, Telephone).

The two performances at Fort Drum were also a pilot for a much larger tour — Theater of War received a contract from the Defense Centers of Excellence for Psychological Health and Traumatic Brain Injury (DCoE) for 100 performances at military sites across the United States and Europe. Because every base has a medical command, those in leadership positions at each site can mandate the attendance of their own military medical communities. Engaging with civilian primary care providers initially proved a more difficult task, but Doerries has begun engaging local health organizations as

presenting partners for the readings, as a way to reach an audience of non-military doctors and nurses as well.

The importance of recognizing psychological injury and dealing with the consequences of combat stress has long been neglected by the American military, and the negative stigma associated with psychological and emotional distress is deeply entrenched. Treatment of PTSD symptoms is often inadequate, if provided at all. Doerries notes that

In the last hundred years, we've gone from ice-pick lobotomies as a therapy for PTSD and combat stress to electroshock therapy. The ice-pick lobotomy in World War I and II was basically removing the faculties for speech from those who would speak about their psychological injury, and [...] we've gone from that to electroshock therapy, which is removing the memories of those who would speak about their psychological injuries, to incredibly high levels of sedation and medical treatment, to total marginalization and homelessness and abandonment, to finally crawling up out of the sludge at the end of the 20th century with the naming of Gulf War syndrome, after the Vietnam vets at least paved the way for the use of more iconic and common terms like "thousand-yard stare" [...]. We finally have an acronym [PTSD] to describe what [psychological injury] is (Doerries, Telephone).

For decades, those with combat trauma were suppressed, mistreated, or ignored, until a substantial population of Vietnam veterans began to vocalize their experiences and draw attention to the issue. Large numbers of Vietnam veterans suffer from PTSD: 35.8% met the full criteria during the 1980s, and about twice that many had at least one of the symptoms, according to the *National Vietnam Veterans Readjustment Study* ("Achilles in Vietnam" 168). Even today, veterans not wanting to be perceived as weak, cowardly, crazy, or unfit for further service might ignore, deny, or self-medicate (sometimes with drugs or alcohol) the symptoms of psychological injury. Still others who do admit their symptoms may deal with overbooked military psychiatrists and doctors, who lack the time to thoroughly diagnose or properly treat them with effective medications and counseling. The Army has also been criticized for misdiagnosing hundreds of soldiers as having pre-existing personality disorders — a condition for which the military is not legally obligated to provide care — instead of PTSD (Associated Press). Furthermore, increasing rates of military suicide since the start of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq have alerted American society to the consequences of unhealed combat trauma. With a profession in which some level of psychological and emotional stress is inevitable and acknowledging such stress can result in misdiagnosis and negative consequences, service members have learned to be tight-lipped about such issues.

Fortunately, the US military branches are establishing measures to change the stoicism of the culture, raise awareness about PTSD, offer better treatment to veterans, and keep the lines of communication open. Doerries cites an "incredible cultural shift within the military [...]" that's resulted in 900 million dollars being allocated



David Strathairn, Terrence Howard, and Adam Driver performing TOW at the Shakespeare Theater (Washington, DC).

Photo: Paxton Winters

by Congress to be used by the Pentagon to deal with this issue" (Doerries, interview). Supported by its contract with the DCoE, Theater of War strives to be part of the solution. Though just one of many vehicles that the Armed Forces utilizes to spread awareness and promote healing, Doerries's project is unique because in few (if any) other contemporary public forums do soldiers "pour out their guts" or "say things that are controversial [...] speaking and communalizing [their experiences] in a large setting" (Doerries, Telephone). The play readings create a safe atmosphere for soldiers to both admit traumatic experiences and perhaps begin to heal from war. Speaking about these issues helps de-stigmatize the psychological and emotional stress endured by so many combat veterans. The more psychological injury is discussed, the more veterans recognize that they are not alone in their suffering and that symptoms of trauma are nothing to be ashamed of.

Doerries declares that for the Greeks, "even the act of sitting quietly through [the] play and tacitly empathizing with the characters [was] also a tacit empathy with everyone else in that audience, and no matter what divisions those people felt, no matter how isolated they might have felt before they came to the theatre, there's no question that they were plagued by psychological injury" (Doerries, Telephone). Because all combat soldiers either witness or endure the physical, emotional, and psychological consequences of battle, plays about these kinds of suffering resonate with military men and women of different backgrounds and beliefs, united by a common experience. Even those who have not undergone physical or mental injury themselves can relate to such characters as Neoptolemus and Tecmessa — the friends or loved ones of combat soldiers. Doerries emphasizes the potential of his play readings to "unify diverse viewpoints within the military and communalize the experience of war. They can de-stigmatize psychological injury, and they can validate that psychological injury is [...] treacherous and dangerous if untreated" (Doerries, Telephone). Just as the ancient Greeks used theatre to promote purgation and healing in its citizens, so Doerries utilizes

play readings and discussion to spread awareness of the need for healing among members of American society affected by PTSD and combat stress.

To that end, Theater of War also deals with knowledge of soldier experience within the civilian community. While the entire citizenry of an ancient city-state was affected by war, just a fraction of the United States population serves or has a family member who serves in the military — veterans and their families make up only twenty percent of Americans (Kelly). As a larger community of civilians, Doerries believes that “we have so much work to do in terms of that other part of the communalization process within a democracy” (Doerries, Telephone). Rather than ignoring veterans’ issues, civilians can facilitate the reintegration of soldiers into everyday life by “not passing judgment on those who’ve served because they’ve served, but accepting alongside them the pollution of what they’ve brought back” (Doerries, Telephone). To include ordinary citizens in the scope of Theater of War, Doerries engages the help of community and resident theatre companies across the country to draw mixed audiences of civilians and military. He hopes that through experiencing these plays together and engaging in discussion afterwards, audiences will “begin to bridge that seemingly unbridgeable gap in culture and viewpoint and come to some common understanding of what the impact of this current conflict is” (Doerries, Telephone). Because leaving all the consequences of war for veterans to deal with can anger soldiers and inhibit their ability to reintegrate into civilian life (Palaima 21–23), educating civilians on soldier experience is a central goal of the project.

The March 2011 discussions at the A.R.T. provide an example of how Theater of War achieves this goal. About half-way through the town hall discussion, the conversation naturally turned to the civilian participants’ difficulty with knowing how to relate to veterans and service members. Some asked the panelists or service members in the audience what kinds of questions were helpful to ask and which topics were off limits — the biggest prohibition of all was asking the sensitive and upsetting question of whether a soldier had killed anyone in battle. During this dialogue about military-civilian interactions, one marine mentioned that even the civilians that come up to say “thank you” to him do not even look him in the eye as they say it. Another spoke of civilians acting put off and intimidated simply by seeing him and fellow cadets in uniform at a Dunkin Donuts. Shortly after, the young man mentioned at the opening of this article piped up to say that while many of his friends and family served in the military, he felt that he was a coward for not doing so himself. He stated his belief that fellow civilians do not often speak to men and women in uniform or cannot look them in the eye out of shame for their own cowardice. This comment and the marine’s conciliatory response to it seemed for a moment to bridge the military/civilian culture gap in the room. Several other civilians expressed that their gratitude toward the armed forces is mixed with guilt over not sharing the burden of warfare. On the other hand, the marine emphasized that he bore no ill will towards those who do not volunteer to fight — he saw his job as protecting and defending the civilian citizenry of the United States. What he and his colleagues asked in return was to be acknowledged and spoken to in an open and respectful manner by others in the community, whether in uniform or out. Though these two hours of conversation did not solve all the problems of reinte-

grating combat veterans into American civilian life, they undoubtedly opened a door to freer communication and raised the level of mutual understanding between the service members and civilians present. And the more people that Theater of War reaches, the more new perspectives that can emerge from these conversations.

The primary value of two ancient plays to today’s society, as conceived by Theater of War, is threefold: to foster awareness of PTSD in the medical community, to engage soldiers and veterans directly by providing them with a forum for discussion and perhaps a degree of healing, and to promote greater levels of understanding among American civilians of soldiers’ combat experiences. Doerries points out that raising awareness of PTSD and combat stress in all levels of society can be a constructive way to respond to the suffering caused by warfare. He observes that “the data set of people coming back with traumatic brain injury and psychological injury from this conflict, which is in the hundreds of thousands, is now informing our medical understanding [...] of these issues [...]. There’s never been a data set of this magnitude, so understanding other types of trauma and their effect on civilians [is] one of the positive offshoots of this really awful situation” (Doerries, Telephone). Through Theater of War, Doerries has revived the practice of confronting the psychological and emotional wounds of war through theatre and breathed new life into *Ajax* and *Philoctetes*. The simple act of sharing stories can have a powerful effect on community, and by performing and discussing these plays, Theater of War builds bridges across communities and across time, today’s soldier stories echoing those from thousands of years ago.

A Note from the Author

Since 2009, when much of this article was written, Theater of War Productions has presented over 150 performances to military sites in the United States and Europe under its contract with the Defense Centers of Excellence for Psychological Health and Traumatic Brain Injury (DCoE). Around 30,000 service members, veterans, and their families have participated. Performances at universities and theaters for combined groups of military service members and civilians are supported by a grant from the Stavros Niarchos Foundation in collaboration with the United Service Organizations. In addition to Theater of War, Bryan Doerries and his producing partner Phyllis Kaufman offer presentations and forums on coping with terminal illness (*End of Life*), imprisonment (*Prometheus in Prison*), and addiction (*The Addiction Performance Project*), and the scope of their projects continues to expand. Information on these productions and Theater of War can be found at <www.outsidethewirellc.com>.

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