



THEATER OF WAR

By Bryan Doerries

► Soldiers of a Helicopter Battalion Practicing With Live Ammo. Photo: Department of Defense Public Domain.

Hailed by Department of Defense (DoD) officials as a “revolutionary public health campaign,” Theater of War presents readings of Sophocles’s *Ajax* and *Philoctetes* to military audiences to promote awareness of post-deployment psychological health issues and to inspire open, constructive dialogue about the timeless challenges faced by service members, veterans, their caregivers, and family members.

Theater of War was inspired by the work of Dr. Jonathan Shay (MacArthur Fellow and author of *Achilles in Vietnam*), who has suggested that ancient Greek drama was a form of storytelling, communal therapy, and ritual reintegration for combat veterans by combat veterans. In short, Sophocles himself was a general. At the time Aeschylus wrote and produced his famous *Oresteia*, Athens was at war on six fronts. The audiences for whom these plays were performed were undoubtedly comprised of citizen-soldiers. Also, the performers themselves were most likely veterans or cadets. Seen through this lens, ancient Greek drama appears to have become an elaborate ritual aimed at helping warriors prepare for battle and

return to civilian life, during a century that saw eighty years of war.

Given this context, it seemed natural that military audiences today might have something to teach us about the impulses behind these ancient stories. It also seemed like these ancient stories would have something important and relevant to say to military audiences. It’s as if these rarely produced plays were written in a code that we civilians could not understand and that military audiences had to explain to us.

Over the past year, Theater of War has delivered more than 100 performances at more than fifty military sites throughout the United States and Europe. Nearly 25,000 service members and veterans of every rank, from high-level DoD and Veterans Affairs officials to Special Forces and Army and Marine Infantry have attended these performances.

Theater of War is presented in the style of a town hall meeting. The house lights always remain up (if there are house lights), and we often present the project in spaces where people work, congregate, and live, such as chapels, cafeterias, drill halls, homeless

shelters, VA hospitals, vet centers, field houses, basketball courts, and movie theaters.

The underlying principal behind Theater of War is this: People who live lives of mythological proportions, who confront the darkest aspects of our humanity and face life and death stakes on a daily basis, have no trouble relating to ancient myths. It is for this reason, I’m convinced, that infantry Marines, Navy Seals, and homeless veterans have offered the most compelling and insightful comments that I have ever heard about ancient Greek drama.

The reactions of military audiences to Sophocles’s plays are immediate, visceral, and emotional. A woman stood up during one of our early performances and memorably said, “I am the proud mother of a Marine and the wife of a Navy Seal. My husband went away four times to war, and each time he came back—like Ajax—dragging invisible bodies into our house. The war came home with him. And to quote from the play, ‘Our home is a slaughterhouse.’”

During a recent town hall discussion, a soldier stood up and said, “I think watching tragedies, like *Ajax*, makes us feel real. I think

Sophocles wrote these plays to help his soldiers feel real again." After another performance, a Vietnam veteran quietly approached me and said, "Knowing P.T.S.D. goes back to B.C. gives me the feeling that I'm not totally alone."

In direct opposition to the structure of most theatrical performances followed by "talk backs," Theater of War privileges the discussion over the performance, presenting readings of select scenes from Sophocles's plays as a catalyst for the conversation to come. In other words, we perform these plays to create the conditions for a conversation that otherwise would not be possible. When individuals see their lives and their struggles in an ancient story, they take the long view and open up, sometimes sharing stories in public for the first time.

The performance begins with Sophocles's plays and ends when the last person in the audience has finished speaking. These audience discussions are meta-theatrical extensions of the performances, in which service members, veterans, their caregivers, and family members speak out, bravely and openly, about their experiences dealing with combat stress, survivor's guilt, psychological injury, suicide, and the impact of war on families.

Theater of War presents a rare opportunity for artists to be directly of service to a population that serves our country and to do something socially meaningful with our craft. Since founding Theater of War, I have directed film and stage actors such as Paul Giamatti, Terrence Howard, David Strathairn, Jesse Eisenberg, Lili Taylor, Charles S. Dutton, Jeffrey Wright, Gloria Reuben, Tamara Tunie, April Grace, Bill Camp, Elizabeth Marvel, and Michael Stuhlbarg in readings of these ancient plays for military audiences.

The feedback that these actors receive after the performances informs their future performances. In some ways, the real direction of the plays comes not from me, but directly from the audience's comments during the discussions and sometimes afterward, when audience members approach the actors privately and share their thoughts and stories. Recently, after a performance of Theater of War on a U.S. Army base, one of our actresses, April Grace, said, "I never felt that I was doing more good telling a story."

Over the next year, under a generous grant from the Stavros Niarchos Foundation



▶ Bryan Doerries.
Photo: Howard Korn.



▶ Elizabeth Marvel and Bill Camp performing Theater of War. Photo: Howard Korn.



▶ Chad Coleman performing Theater of War at Schofield Barracks, Hawaii. Photo: Theater of War Productions.

**Monday, Feb. 28 and
Monday, March 7 at 7 p.m.**

A.R.T. will present two performances of Theater of War. Each reading is followed by a town hall discussion.

These events are free and open to the public. For more information and tickets, visit www.americanrepertorytheater.org/TOW.

in collaboration with the United Services Organizations (U.S.O.), Theater of War will be expanding in scope to engage mixed civilian-military audiences in dialogue about the seen and unseen wounds of war and the impact of war upon communities at prominent theaters and universities throughout the United States. By widening and diversifying the audience, our aim is to engage sub-communities that would rarely, if ever, sit in the same space, in healing dialogue and calls to action during the ninth year of the current conflicts.

It is our belief that true healing cannot begin until such crucial meetings and conversations take place. We are grateful to the American Repertory Theater for opening its doors to the project and to the audiences we serve, and we look forward to bringing Theater of War to Cambridge.

Bryan Doerries is the Artistic Director of Theater of War Productions. Phyllis Kaufman is the Producing Director of Theater of War Productions. For more information about Theater of War Productions, visit: www.theater-of-war.com

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Performances of Theater of War at the American Repertory Theater are made possible by generous support from the Stavros Niarchos Foundation in collaboration with the United Service Organizations.

