

These are men whose minds the Dead have ravished: Theater of War.

Article in *Arion - Journal of Humanities and the Classics* · March 2009

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“These are men whose minds the
Dead have ravished”:
Theater of War / The Philoctetes Project

PETER MEINECK

Always they must see these things and hear them,
Batter of guns and shatter of flying muscles,
Carnage incomparable, and human squander
Rucked too thick for these men's extrication.

—Wilfred Owen, “Mental Cases”

A reading of scenes from two Greek plays would not normally warrant a great deal of attention, but in April 2009 at the Lucille Lortel Theatre in New York a small group of well-known actors mounted a stage reading of Sophocles' *Ajax* and *Philoctetes* to an audience of veterans, providing something very rare in contemporary performances of Greek drama: a profound and moving experience, and for me an entirely new way to experience these ancient plays.*

Theater of War: The Philoctetes Project is the brainchild of Bryan Doerries, a young theater director who uses *Ajax* and *Philoctetes* to create what he calls “town meetings” aimed at veterans, current service personnel, their families, and support groups. At the Lortel, under the umbrella of the National Endowment for the Humanities Page and Stage program, he assembled Academy Award-nominated actor David Strathairn (*Good Night and Good Luck*), powerful Broadway stalwart Bill Camp (*Coram Boy*, *Beckett Shorts*, *Homebody/Kabul*), the ferocious talent of Elizabeth Marvel (last seen at the Lortel in *Fifty Words*), and Adam Driver, a

**Theater of War: The Philoctetes Project*, translated and directed by Bryan Doerries and presented by Aquila Theatre. Lucille Lortel Theatre, New York, ny; 13 April 2009.

young Juilliard graduate and former Marine. The structure of the evening was a directed reading of several key scenes from both plays followed by incisive and astute comments from a panel of military officers, veterans, representatives from veteran's organizations, and classicists. But the most striking aspect of the event occurred at the end, as one by one the audience members stood up and started to relate their own experiences of war to the plays they had just witnessed.

In attendance were veterans from the current wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the Gulf War, Vietnam, and Korea. There was a large group from a shelter for homeless veterans in Long Island City, family members of veterans, and even a group of young ROTC students. As spectators they were both active and vocal, as the events portrayed in the plays on stage resonated with their own experiences. In the discussion that followed many were shocked that drama, any drama, let alone *ancient Greek* drama, could so aptly reflect their own thoughts and feelings. Their responses were confessional, poignant, and moving. One got the distinct impression that much of what was being shared had never been uttered before and certainly not in public. An important artistic choice was to leave the house lights on during the performances, which allowed actors and audience to connect in a way that is usually impossible in the modern theater. The acts of watching and being watched became essential to the shared experience that unfolded, and were an important factor in facilitating the remarkably free expression that followed.

In his recent book *Democracy and Knowledge* (Princeton 2008), Joshua Ober notes that the radical democracy of fifth century Athens created spaces that he describes as “inward facing circles” for public meetings, legal cases, and performing arts. In such spaces “each spectator can simultaneously observe the event and the reactions of the other spectators as they commonly observe the event” (199). Knowledge flowed back and forth and information was affected by the responses of those watching. This visual dimension of Athenian culture, particularly in the theater, was a vital element which is often

missing in modern performances where we sit passively and receive the director's conceit or a star actor's performance, choices we then either accept or reject. Paul Woodruff, in his groundbreaking book *The Necessity of Theater* (Oxford 2008), calls this "art theater," a formal, cultivated expression of the art aimed at small audiences. Woodruff finds the drama inherent in football games, weddings, street dancing, and other modern rituals where the audience is actively and visibly *involved*. Likewise, Brazilian theater artist Augusto Boal at tempted to challenge what he believed were misconceptions about Aristotle's views on catharsis and produce theater that forced the audience to take a position and become fully involved. The techniques set out by Boal in his 1974 book *Teatro del Oprimido* (*Theatre of the Oppressed*) were recently demonstrated by Kayhan Irani's Artivista Project in New York. She created a piece of street theater called *The One Manhattan Project* that both inflamed and inspired people on 125th Street in Harlem. Here the actors posed as members of a charity group out on the street seeking support for a new program to unite the distinct districts of New York City by changing the names of Harlem streets. They proposed that Frederick Douglass Boulevard, Adam Clayton Powell, Jr. Boulevard and Malcolm X Boulevard should revert to their former numerical names in order to "better connect" Manhattan. A crowd soon gathered and a public dialogue, frequently passionate and sometimes angry, developed as people on 125th Street stopped to watch the "performance" and then became increasingly engaged in a vociferous debate about what the names of these streets meant to their community. This is an example of the "Invisible Theater" techniques of Boal at work: the artists fully achieved their aim of creating theater that affected its audience by initiating debate and starting a spirited public conversation. Fascinating snippets of this piece of street theater can be viewed at www.artivista.org/oppressed.php.

In this kind of theater the audience member becomes a witness to and participant in an *event*, not just a passive receiver of somebody else's art, and this is just what seemed

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to happen at the Lortel Theatre. The commitment of the actors, the bold and direct translations by Doerries, the nakedness of the performance under stark, open light, and the content of the plays themselves all facilitated some kind of universally understood communal unburdening ritual. In plain sight one could *watch* the words of those ancient Greek warriors as they affected the men and women in the audience, some in uniform, others not; some just back home and others waiting to leave; some who had experienced war almost yesterday, and others for whom it will always seem like yesterday. This is why the Greeks called their theater the “seeing-place”: *opsis* was not just confined to masks, costumes, and movement but, as Aristotle wrote in a famously contested statement, *opsis* is “an intrinsic force with the power to transform the soul.”¹

Veteran’s Administration staff psychiatrist Jonathan Shay made this connection in his 1994 book *Achilles in Vietnam* and in his equally fascinating 2002 work *Odysseus in America*. He asserts that Athenian tragic theater was “a theater of combat veterans, by combat veterans, and for combat veterans,” offering what he terms “cultural therapy.”² Certainly war and violence and their aftereffects are a prevailing theme in many Athenian plays of the fifth century, but what is it about these works that provokes such a strong response from veterans? One of the most frequent comments heard at the *Theater of War* event was that veterans were seeking “restoration”: though they had physically returned home, they were spiritually still fighting their wars and dealing with disconcerting feelings such as survivor guilt, isolation, frustration, anger, and despair. They overwhelmingly identified with the loneliness, despondency, and indignant stance of Philoctetes. When Adam Driver read the part of Neoptolemus and spoke the names of the men who had died at Troy to the incredulous Philoctetes (David Strathairn), the air was sucked out of the theater and nobody dared breathe, lest they disturb the palpable sense of personal loss and pain

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emanating from the audience. Did Athenian drama originally function in this same way and provide a means of restoring citizen-warriors to society by presenting themes

that would resonate with the actual experiences of fighting men? Shay certainly thinks so, and takes on the thorny issue of a definition of *catharsis* in Aristotle by breaking it down into three broad categories directly applicable to combat veterans:

1. The religious purification of a ritual taint;
2. The medicinal purgation of something unhealthy;
3. Mental clarification by means of the removal of obstacles to understanding.

One of the words heard several times during the course of this emotional and astonishing evening was “sacrifice.” To day this term has come to mean a deep personal commitment and a sense of giving up something for the greater good rather than a ritual concerned with a communal offering to a god, as if the act of sacrifice is now purely personal. Yet some of the most powerful sacrificial moments in Greek tragedy also revolve around personal choices like those of Ajax, Iphigenia, Cassandra, the Daughters of Erechtheus, even Oedipus at Colonus, as well as the sacrificial acts of Orestes, Medea, and Clytemnestra. A sacrificial theme certainly does seem to lie at the heart of Greek tragedy. The plays themselves were performed around a sacrificial altar right in the center of the orchestra, and the term *tragedy* may well refer to the sacrificial offering of a goat that was associated with the performance of drama.³

I am not saying anything new here but I do think it worth revisiting that theater may have always been intended to address the experiences of fighting men. Walter Burkert traced this sacrificial trope in Greek tragedy back to Paleolithic cultures and advanced the theory that humans devised rituals of slaughter to help negate their biological responses to killing. In *Homo Necans* (Peter Bing, trans., Berkeley 1983), Burkert developed the early twentieth-century theories of anthropologists like Konrad Lorenz and Karl Meuli and applied them to the Greeks, positing that the essence of tragedy can be found in the fundamental contradiction that man is forced to kill to survive and thrive. If one of the earliest

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ert developed the early twentieth-century theories of anthropologists like Konrad Lorenz and Karl Meuli and applied them to the Greeks, positing that the essence of tragedy can be found in the fundamental contradiction that man is forced to kill to survive and thrive. If one of the earliest

forms of communal *mimesis* was the performance of rites that codified and clarified the act of killing for the hunter and placed the consequences of violence in a religious and societal context, might tragedy have done the same for the warriors of Athens? Does this help explain how ancient drama can still provoke such intense emotional responses from American veterans today?

Burkert extends his thesis into several early myths focused on outcast hunters, which he calls the *Männerbund*. These young men are transformed into wolves or lions and depicted as killing rams and sheep; once blood has been spilled they undergo purification rites, are transformed again, and are reincorporated into human society. He finds this common mythological trope of human-animal transformation in figures like Pelops, Thyestes, Aktaion, Odysseus, Lykaion (wolf-man) and Apollo Lykeios (the wolf). In particular, the myths of the Arcadian heartland are rife with stories of human-wolf transformation. Burkert's werewolf theory might seem to stray into Michael Jackson's *Thriller* territory until one pauses to consider the use of this term to describe warriors across several cultures and how it still relates directly to the experiences of our veterans today. One of the comments heard at the *Theater of War* event was from a Vietnam vet who had been a helicopter gunner. He talked about the energy it took to control his ever-present feelings of rage, what he vividly described as becoming a berserker. In *Achilles in Vietnam*, Shay uses the term "berserk state" to describe "a special state of mind, body and social disconnection" at moments of extreme frenzy in combat. Achilles is his prototype berserker, and Shay connects the moments of Achilles' extreme violence with the experiences of Vietnam veterans both at war and at home.

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There are several berserkers in the *Iliad* in addition to Achilles. Diomedes' mania forces Ares from the battlefield, and Patroclus is gripped by a similar disconnect when he ignores Achilles' advice and flings himself against the walls of Troy before being cut down by Hector. Sophocles shows us the full ramifications of the berserker in *Ajax*, where Odysseus gets to witness the man in the midst of a violent ecstasy hacking at the bodies of the livestock he

fully believes are his former comrades. Solid, dependable Ajax, the shield, the bulwark, has snapped, because he feels totally rejected by the command structure that has made him fight and kill for ten long years. This particular vet, the helicopter gunner, fully understood the rage, delusion, and despair of Ajax. In this respect his training as a modern airborne infantryman was no different from the techniques used to form an ancient hoplite. They were designed to channel violence and recondition the recruit's instincts away from the natural tendency to flee from danger and instead to attack and fight. From a biological perspective, humans are wired to avoid danger, not run headlong towards it and the often nasty, bestial, and brutal practices employed by military training force the recruit to go berserk in order to survive and thrive on the battlefield.

The word *berserk*, from Old Norse, refers to frenzied warriors who went into battle in a trance-like state wearing nothing but animal skins, most often a wolf pelt. Hunters and warriors are depicted clad in animal skins on the Neolithic wall paintings at Çatal Hüyük in southwest Turkey; Plains Indians wore the hides of wolves, coyotes, and buffalo; and Aztec fighters wore animal (as well as human) skins. The greatest of Greek hunter-warriors, Herakles, was depicted wearing the pelt of the Nemean lion, one of the labors forced on him after his own berserk state resulted in his destroying his own family. The myths of Romulus and Remus and the stories found in the Chinese chronicles *Shi Ji* and *Han Shu* of Kun-Mo⁴ also tell of mythical outcasts reared by a wolf. It was the berserk state of Romulus that resulted in his killing his own brother and founding Rome with a human sacrifice.

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Michael Speidel has discovered a connection between these various mythological strands and an early Indo-European folkloric tradition of crazed wolf-warriors dating from around 1500 bce.⁵ The Romans had a special place in their hearts for the wolf transformations of old Arcadia, as evidenced by the appearance of the Arcadian refugee kings Evander and Latinus in Virgil's *Aeneid*. The cave of the wolf, the Lupercal, became a ritualistic focal point of ancient Rome, and the Lupercalia, with its own animal skin-clad bands of semi-naked "warriors" hurtling

around the Capitoline Hill, became one of the most popular festivals in the Roman calendar and was considered an important rite of purification. Greek warrior initiation rites and combat training may have emphasized a dependence on ferocious and animalistic qualities to prepare recruits for warfare. The concept of the outcast wolf-warrior may explain why ephebes tended to be stationed in outlying areas and posted to marginal border zones, as if Greek commanders were fully aware of the need to create a social separation and negotiate the mental transference between deadly warrior and peaceful citizen. When Homer describes the Myrmidons preparing to enter battle after they have been languishing at the camp of Achilles it is as if they are transforming into a pack of hungry wolves:

Think of wolves
Ravenous for meat. It is impossible
To describe their savage strength in the hunt,
But after they have killed an antlered stag
Up in the hills and torn it apart, they come down
With gore on their jowls, and in a pack
Go to lap up the black surface water in a pool
Fed by a dark spring, and as they drink,
Crimson curls float off their slender tongues.
But their hearts are still and their bellies gorged.

Iliad 16.156–63 (Stanley Lombardo, trans.)

If the Greeks expected their warriors to embrace the animalistic tendencies of the wolf or lion, how could they then
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require these same men to return home and reside peacefully and obey the human laws of the city? Plato has his Socrates ask this same question in book 2 of the *Republic* (375 b–e) during a discussion of the correct training of the guardians. Socrates is quite clear on this point: that they must be violent towards their enemies but humane at home, or they will destroy their own city. Panhellenic rituals and mythologies seem to recognize this violence-transformation-restoration motif, but if there is indeed a strong connection between these early rituals and myths and later drama, then why did tragedy flourish primarily in Athens? Perhaps here too there is a military

connection that can shed some light on this question. Ritual sacrifices and the spectacles that surrounded them grew into large-scale and well-organized *theôria*, state-run festivals that both enshrined cult practices and publicized the community to the wider Greek world. One such ritual performance, the Seperion at Delphi, was a theatrical staging complete with *skênê* and circular dancing floor that may have originated in the mid-sixth century, perhaps a kind of proto-tragedy. This show depicted the overthrow of the Delphic Python by Apollo. According to Pausanias, the young ephebic god stalked his deadly chthonic prey to the *skênê* and completed his act of civilization-bringing violence by setting it on fire with burning arrows before entering it himself, flinging over a table, and slaying the beast. He then fled to the temple at Tempe where he received purification for the blood he had shed. When he returned in triumph, ritually cleansed, the Pythian games began.

All over Greece *theôria* included choral performances, athletic competitions, oracle consultations, healing pilgrimages, and initiation rites, the most famous happening at Delphi, Delos, Isthmos, Olympia, Nemea, and Dodona. A common feature was the attendance of foreigners who traveled, often in state delegations, to view the spectacles presented. Barbara Kowalzig writes that theoric cults “are an alternative form of social negotiation and present a form of interaction between

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communities based on a real—or invented—consensus expressed in the worship of a common god.”⁶ Aristophanes makes Theôria a wanton showgirl in *Peace*, parading her naked before the members of the *boulê* seated in their special section of the theater, perhaps a reference to elitism among Athenian *theôria* attendees, a perk of high political office or aristocratic wealth and prestige. She certainly makes it sound exciting with references to sex, shows, celebration, and more sex. Simon Goldhill has already described the festival of Dionysos in terms of a state *theôria*,⁷ and the establishment under the Tyrants of a formalized choral festival open to foreign delegates would have done much to shore up popular support at home and cement Athenian prestige abroad.

When Cleisthenes initiated democratic reforms that connected the city, coast, and country in an intricate tribal system, he was creating not only a new social structure for increased political enfranchisement but also a highly effective recruitment and training system for the Athenian military. David Pritchard has found a correspondence between the reforms of Cleisthenes and participation in the performance of dithyrambic choruses at Athenian *theôria*.⁸ Around the same time, in the late sixth and early fifth century, tragedy burst onto the scene. The *theôria* of Dionysos had a new and much larger audience, not just the elite or foreign dignitaries but the recently empowered citizen-warriors of democratic Athens. Did those same men, who were recruited from the demes of Attica and stood shoulder-to-shoulder in the phalanx or sat side-by-side on the rowing bench, also share a seating section at the theater? Did tragedy develop from the rituals of the *theôria* into dramas that addressed the social anxieties and combat trauma of Athenian warriors who also made up the voting population and the spectators gathered at the City Dionysia?

This original audiences for *Ajax* and *Philoctetes* knew the horrors of Greek warfare intimately. Hoplite battles were sudden, violent clashes where men hacked at each other with spears and swords, shoving with their shields, trampling the fallen to death, biting, gouging, and punching until one side

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buckled and broke and was butchered on the run. A modern audience may be repulsed by the sight of Ajax covered in blood and gore at the beginning of Sophocles' play, but the original festivalgoers probably felt empathy rather than shock. Any hoplite in the first few ranks who survived the carnage would have been covered from head to foot in the blood of both his enemies and his friends. One can only imagine what kind of reserves of aggression he must have drawn upon to conquer his fear of smashing headlong into the enemy line. It had to have been an incredibly traumatic experience, immersed in mass slaughter, watching friends and possibly family members fall, hearing the cries of the dying and the pandemonium of battle rattling inside the mask-like bronze helmet. (There is a tantalizing link between the mask-like properties of the

Corinthian helmet and the dramatic mask of the Greek theater, both emphasizing a subjugation of individual identity that relates back to the furtive wolf-warriors. Likewise, in the *Iliad*, Hector is a figure of violence and fear to Astyanax until he removes his helmet and reveals his identity.) In hoplite warfare there was nowhere to go but forward, no peripheral vision, ranks pressed on by the men behind, jammed into a swarming mob of death with little or no control over which lines would finally break.

It was no easier for a rower in the Athenian fleet, as Aeschylus so vividly portrays in the messenger speech in his *Persians*, which memorialized the Athenian victory over the Persian navy at Salamis in 480. Ship smashed into ship, crushing men to death or impaling them on the shattered, splintered hulls. Those lucky enough not to be crushed or drowned were speared and gutted like tuna staining the sea red. It was first hand knowledge of these kinds of battle experiences that more than likely led the citizen-assembly to condemn its victorious admirals to death after the naval engagement at Arginusae in 406, when Athenian crewmen were left in the water to die. Fifth-century Greek warfare was bloody, brutal, and horrific, and it is very likely that every single member of the audience of Athenian tragedy knew it firsthand.

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Lawrence Tritle points out that professional scholars usually pay little attention to the darker dimensions of human conflict. A Vietnam veteran and ancient historian, Tritle relates several examples of moments where the soldier in him conflicts with the scholar, especially at academic conferences where he is confronted with papers on American policy in Vietnam. His book *From Melos to My Lai: War and Survival* (London and New York 2000) is one of the few works to tackle the issue of the psychological effects of war on Greek soldiers. One example he cites is the figure in Xenophon's *Anabasis* of Clearchus, a Spartan veteran seemingly addicted to battle and, according to Tritle, displaying all the signs of post-traumatic stress disorder: “Xenophon recognized that, even in surviving battle, survivors carry with them the burden of guilt, and difficulty in living in peace” (60–70). Tritle's work is very personal, a soldier's response to ancient texts, yet his approach sheds light on a largely unexplored aspect of an

cient warfare. Thucydides vividly describes survivor's guilt in his harrowing account (7.75) of the Athenian retreat from Syracuse in 413. Here the sight of unburied dead comrades causes shudders of grief and horror. Even worse were the sights and sounds of the wounded who had to be abandoned. Thucydides describes them pleading with the able-bodied to be taken away, how friends and relatives hung on the necks of their tent-mates and tried to follow until their strength failed, and how they shrieked as they were left to die. He notes that dejection and self-condemnation were rife among the survivors.

To be wounded in battle and then abandoned is a fundamental fear among soldiers; to be wounded, to return home, and then to be abandoned is a reality for many of our contemporary wounded warriors. Some wounds are visible and some are not, but all of the veterans gathered at the Lortel understood the plight of Philoctetes. A warrior is struck down in the line of duty and his reward is to be secluded from his fellow men, dumped on the uninhabited island of

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Lemnos, and forced to fend for himself. The vile smell and horrific cries caused by his festering wound become a constant reminder of the realities of war to the men who abandoned him. War wounds are supposed to be carried with endurance and honor. We are presented with images like that of John Wayne in the 1962 movie *The Longest Day*, gritting his teeth and soldiering on despite a broken ankle, chomping down on his cigar, and leading his paratroopers from a hand cart, brimming with fighting spirit. While the real Lt. Colonel Benjamin Vandervoort served with distinction, John Wayne never served in the military and was booed offstage in World War II by wounded Marines in a military hospital in Hawaii when he arrived dressed as a cowboy.⁹ It is striking that Greek tragedy serves up no John Waynes; its mythic warriors are conflicted, damaged, and, to an audience of service personnel and their families, very real. The myth of war is that soldiers die a glorious death and the wounded wear their infirmities with honor. Philoctetes flatly contradicts this, his festering, putrid wound a visceral reminder of the horrendous physical and psychological effects of combat:

Don't go. Please. Don't go.
You understand. You know.
Ahhhhhhhhhh. Stay with me.
I wish they could feel this,
Odysseus and the generals.
DEATH! DEATH! DEATH!
Where are you? Why, after
all these years of calling,
have you not appeared? Son,
my noble son, take my body,
scorch it on a raging fire,
as I once burned the owner
of the bow that you now hold.

Philoctetes 789–804 (Bryan Doerries, trans.)

Philoctetes' exile is presented as a type of mental and physical torture, the ultimate solitary confinement. *Ajax* too
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deals with torture as the warrior goes berserk on the captured livestock:

With one quick
chop, he severed
the head of a
white-footed ram
and let it drop
to the floor,
then grabbing
another by the
throat, he tied
it down and
ripped out
its tongue,
then he lashed
it with his harsh
whip until there
was nothing
left to lash,
all the while
spewing vile
words that
must have
come from

from a god.

Ajax 231–42 (Bryan Doerries, trans.)

Plutarch describes something similar occurring at Samos in 440, when Pericles was said to have put down a rebellion by lashing men to posts in the marketplace and leaving them for ten days, after which he ordered them clubbed to death and their bodies left exposed for all to see. The photos of Abu Grahیب come to mind, and the fragmentation of moral codes when leadership proves ineffective. Greek literature does not shy away from the cruel realities of war: mutilation, rape, torture, and extreme violence. There is no real difference between Homer's account of Achilles dragging Hector's corpse

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around the walls of Troy and the news footage of the dead bodies of brave young American soldiers being dragged through the streets of Mogadishu in 1993. This image had the power to change American policy, so deeply unsettling was its vivid reality. Achilles' dragging Hector shows the depravity of a man completely consumed by the rage of war. Likewise, Ajax has been overwhelmed by the violence of combat and has sought solace in codes of honor and respect obliterated by his former allies. This complete dislocation of all the man has known and fought for drives him to take his own life, a moment that was passionately rendered by Bill Camp's powerful reading of Ajax's suicide scene.

One of the panelists at the *Theater of War* event, Brigadier General Loree Sutton, is director of the recently formed Defense Centers of Excellence for Psychological Health and Traumatic Brain Injury. She spoke eloquently about her work and the issue of suicide that haunts both these plays. In addition to Camp's performance, David Strathairn offered a beautiful rendering of Philoctetes' plea for a weapon to take his own life after he realizes he has been betrayed and has lost his bow. Suicide among combat veterans is a real concern, and the performance of these plays created a forum for frank discussion of a subject that is more often than not regarded as taboo in military culture. Recent statistics show that more men of military age are committing suicide than the corresponding civilian population. Tritle also points out that there may be

many more veterans taking their own lives through car accidents, alcohol abuse, and other means that are not recorded as suicides. A 2009 study in the *Journal of Mental Health Counseling* reports that the suicide rate for American males in the age group 15–24 is 10.3 per 100,000, whereas in the US military where 50 percent of males are between 17 and 26, the rate could be as high as 21 per 100,000.¹⁰ A related study in the same journal posits three main variables that contribute to suicide among combat veterans, all of which can be directly related to Ajax:

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1. Perceived burdensomeness: Ajax feels he has dishonored his father and ruined his reputation and will suffer a life of endless misery.
2. Thwarted belongingness: Ajax has been rejected by his former allies and has detached himself from his family and soldiers.
3. Acquired capability for suicide: Ajax seemingly offers to purify himself, but this is a way to separate himself from his *philoï* who will not be able to place him under the suicide watch advised by Teucer. A tainted gift, the sword of Hector, provides the means.¹¹

There is one outpouring of unadulterated joy in *Ajax* that gets to the heart of how theater can not only address the concerns of the warrior but also offer some solace. After the chorus of Salaminian soldiers hear what they believe is Ajax's decision not to kill himself, they dance for sheer delight. They call to the goat-god Pan and sing of dancing the wild and ecstatic Mysian and Knossian steps. It is as if these wild and exuberant dances have the power to soothe the spirit by channeling the berserk state into a collective, endorphin-producing group response. Choral dance and song lie at the heart of all Greek drama, and a close association between military training and the performing arts was a hallmark of Athenian society. The reforms of Cleisthenes in the late sixth century may have been primarily for military recruitment and social cohesion, but they also provided a mechanism for the Attic tribes to actively recruit and train their young men for dithyrambic, and later dramatic, choruses. In book 1 of the *Iliad* the

troops sing and dance to Apollo after the propitiating sacrifice. This act of collective expression soothes the anger of the god, lifts the plague, and reconciles the old priest Chryses with both his daughter and the Greeks. Many dance and song traditions still exist in different military cultures and are an important part of unit cohesion. Traditional songs and chants are performed throughout the training of recruits in the French Foreign Legion. The Soviet military presented

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its soldiers performing traditional Cossack dances to Western audiences in a Cold War version of a traveling *theôria* that purported to foster détente but was really displaying the martial prowess and dedication of the Russian armed forces via song and dance. Gregory Burke and John Tiffany's production of *Black Watch* by the National Theatre of Scotland used traditional Scottish reels and highland dancing along with intricately choreographed drill sequences to heighten the emotional intensity of their piece about young Scottish soldiers serving in Iraq. The dancing was strong, bold, moving, highly sensual, and a large part of the play's continued success. *Black Watch* tapped into real Scottish military traditions of song and dance that pulled the audience into the emotional world of the soldiers. How can anybody not be moved by the sound of bagpipes?

Aeschylus provides a glimpse of the power of Greek song in *Persians*, when the chorus performs the paean said to have been sung by the oarsmen as they rowed into the midst of the Persian navy. In tragedy, the chorus often acts as an expressive conduit reflecting the action of the play and providing a depth of emotion through music and dance that is now generally lost. The members of an Athenian tragic chorus were either young soldiers in training or had already served, and though they more often than not portrayed marginalized social groups, they danced as representatives of the community seated around them.

Burkert's *Männerbund* warriors carried out their killing disguised as wolves; the hoplites covered their faces in Corinthian helmets; whatever headgear we imagine Hector wearing, it had the power to bring his son to tears. The warrior was masked. Like Odysseus in disguise listening to the

songs of Demodocus, the training and uniformity of any military unit lead to a certain submergence of identity, and the experiences of combat can confuse and conceal this even further. Yet it is the art of Demodocus, the singer of tales, that allows the hidden guest to contemplate his experiences, to feel them again, reveal himself, tell his own story, and ultimately

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mately return home. Without the songs of Demodocus, Odysseus would still be stuck in Scheria, telling lies and in disguise. The readings of *Ajax* and *Philoctetes* seemed to have a similar effect that night. The actors’ performances created a spark of compassion and understanding, their expert *mimesis* offered as a humble act of fellowship between artist and warrior. The simple ritual of a performance in a theater under naked light produced a modern *theôria*—a shared spiritual witnessing—and one by one the warriors and their families came forward to tell their tales.

Toward the end of the evening, a young Marine sergeant in full dress blues who was holding a cane appeared to want to get up and speak. He would lean forward but then think better of it and return to the safety of his seat. Finally he was asked to come forward and speak to the audience. He asked if he could read a poem he had written about his feelings on returning from a recent tour of Iraq. He told us he was not a poet but a Marine, and begged our indulgence. This young man, who had braved the extremes of combat, was a little nervous as he read, but grew in confidence as his poem unfolded. It was a remarkable conclusion to a remarkable evening, and he ended his poem with these lines:

This land is my home no more,
My home now is the land I was fighting for.

So I want to go back, where it is all just black and white,
I want to get away from all this strife.

Here in this land, all seems gray,
Sadly it fills me with dismay.

I want to go back where life was simple and free,
I want to go back where I can be me.

I want to not feel alone, so I want to go back,
I want to go back home, home to Iraq.

—Sgt. Jack Eubanks, usmc
Peter Meineck 191

notes

1. Aristotle, *Poetics* 1450b. Malcolm Heath (London 1997) translates: "Spectacle is *attractive*, but is *very inartistic* and is least germane to the art of poetry." Richard Janko (Indianapolis 1987): "Spectacle is something *en thralling*, but it is *very artless* and least particular to the art of poetic composition." (My italics in both places). I take yucagwgikōn to mean "soul-transforming" and ajtecnovtatōn "intrinsic." I believe that Aristotle's comments on *opsis* have been largely misunderstood and condemned generations of theater scholars to regard "spectacle" as some sort of crime against good theater. I plan to address this elsewhere in a forthcoming paper.

2. Jonathan Shay, *Odysseus in America* (New York 2002), 153. 3. W. Burkert, *Savage Energies: Lessons of Myth and Ritual in Ancient Greece*, P. Bing, trans. (Chicago 2001).

4. Namu Jila, "Myths and Traditional Beliefs about the Wolf and the Crow in Central Asia: Examples from the Turkic Wu-Sun and the Mongols," *Asian Folklore Studies* 65.2 (2006), 161–77.

5. Michael P. Speidel, "Berserks: A History of Indo-European 'Mad Warriors,'" *Journal of World History* 13.2 (Fall 2002), 253–90. 6. Barbara Kowalzig, "Mapping out *Communitas*: Performance of *Theoria* in their Sacred and Political Context," in J. Elsner and I. Rutherford, eds., *Pilgrimage in Graeco-Roman and Early Christian Antiquity* (New York 2008), 43.

7. S. Goldhill, "Placing Theatre in the History of Vision," in N. K. Rutter and Brian Sparkes, eds., *Word and Image in Ancient Greece* (Edinburgh 2000).

8. David Pritchard, "Kleisthenes, Participation, and the Dithyrambic Contests of Late Archaic and Classical Athens," *Phoenix*, 58.3/4 (Autumn–Winter 2004), 208–28.

9. Michael A. Anderegg, *Inventing Vietnam: The War in Film and Television* (Philadelphia 1991), 32.

10. J. Martin, Marjan Ghahramanlou-Holloway, Kathryn Lou, and Paulette Tucciarone, "A Comparative Review of US Military and Civilian Suicide Behavior," *Journal of Mental Health Counseling* 31.2 (April 2009), 101.

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