

***Prepublication text***

*Performing for Soldiers: 21st Century Experiments in Greek Theater in the U.S.*

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Stage productions of Greek tragedy in the U.S. have addressed thoroughly contemporary experiences of war at least since Michael Cacoyannis' production of Euripides' *Trojan Women* at New York's Circle in the Square in 1963 and Judith Malina's production of Brecht's *Antigone* for The Living Theater in 1968-69 delivered searing attacks on the Vietnam War. More recently, Aeschylus' *Persians* by Robert Auletta and Peter Sellars (1993, 2003, 2004, 2005 and 2006) offered a stirring, some thought jolting, statement about the use of American military power in Iraq. All these productions were innovative theatrically as well as provocative politically. However, they reached only a "limited, educated, primarily urban audience that might be expected to respond... favorably to them."<sup>1</sup> On the other hand, two American actors organized The Lysistrata Project, simultaneous public readings and performances of Aristophanes' *Lysistrata* in 1,029 locations on 3 March 2003 as a "peace action" in protest of the impending U.S.-led invasion of Iraq. An estimated 225,000 people in 59 countries and all 50 U.S. states participated<sup>2</sup>. In this chapter, we report on new ways in which theater professionals working in the U.S. have turned to Greek drama specifically to be part of urgent public discourse about war.

In particular, we observe the emergence of sustained theatrical work with Greek tragedy that does not make a partisan statement about American foreign policy but rather engages American servicemen and women's experiences of deployment, battle and homecoming. These new projects aspire to facilitate compassionate understanding of the experiences of and related to military service, including the challenges facing active duty troops and veterans as the result of war-related trauma and the widening gap between military and civilian society. As we will detail, this work involves theater professionals conversant with the ancient sources experimenting with new formats and creating events for non-traditional venues and diverse audiences. Two projects have national profiles: Outside the Wire's ongoing commercial enterprise called "Theater of War" and the non-profit Ancient Greeks/Modern Lives' project called "Homecoming: The Return of the Warrior," which draws on the members of the Aquila Theater company of New York. Theater of War presents dramatic readings from Sophocles' *Ajax* and *Philoctetes* followed by guided town hall style discussions with audience members. Theater of War has performed all over the country and overseas on military bases for active duty personnel as well as in civilian settings for mixed audiences of medical personnel, active and veteran military and the general public. Aquila Theater's Homecoming presents scenes adapted from Sophocles' *Ajax*, Homer's *Odyssey*, Euripides' *Heracles* and Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* accompanied by workshops and town-hall style discussions. They perform in spaces such as public libraries across urban and

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<sup>1</sup> Foley 2012: 159. Auletta and Sellars addressed American militarism more broadly in their staging of Sophocles' *Ajax* (1986) and Sellars took on international refugee crises with his Euripides' *Children of Heracles* (2005). See Foley 2012: 139-158, 259-262 for detailed account of the performance history.

<sup>2</sup> Cite essay in this volume, "Democratic Associations: *Lysistrata* and Political Activism." Also see <http://lysistrataprojectarchive.com/>.

rural America for audiences of veterans and the general public. As their three-year project comes to a close, Aquila is now experimenting with using video of contemporary veterans speaking about their own experiences to voice the chorus in a full-length production of Euripides' *Heracles*.<sup>3</sup>

Theater and performance artists have addressed soldiers in other extended projects,<sup>4</sup> and veterans and official military sources have embraced the usefulness of theatre.<sup>5</sup> Outside the Wire's Theater of War and Ancient Greeks/Modern Lives' Homecoming programs are distinct for their insistence that ancient Greek sources can anchor projects with such ambitions. Helene Foley has written compellingly on twentieth and twenty-first century attempts to address current social or political issues through performances of Greek tragedy, pointing out that "the evolving relation between the plays and the U.S. stage...reflects and illuminates important changes in the country's sense of itself. Greek tragedy has generally served progressive aesthetic, cultural, and political agendas, from transforming outmoded theatrical conventions to serving identity politics or promoting peace."<sup>6</sup> As Foley describes, such trends are illustrative of the multiplicity evident in the reception of classical work and our understanding of the sources themselves. Our aim in this essay is to turn to theoretical work on theater as social practice to examine each project's uses of ancient sources to create deeply affecting theater experiences about utterly contemporary matters for new kinds of audiences. We explore the nature of these artistic interventions and their intended audiences, including methods of theatrical engagement. We will argue that these projects "democratize" Greek drama in multiple senses. They presume a primary audience other than a theatre-going elite, mobilize interpretations of texts to address unseen or neglected public interests, disrupt the format of traditional full-length performances of Greek texts, amplify certain voices in the sources and occasion public discourse and moments of commonality.<sup>7</sup>

### *I. The Perspective of "Social Theater"*

Outside the Wire's Theater of War and Ancient Greeks/Modern Lives' Homecoming programs do not necessarily self-identify as "social theater" and we do not intend to label these activities as representative of a movement.<sup>8</sup> But we do suggest that a theory of social practice provides a lens through which to examine these projects' distinguishing characteristics. "Taken as a whole," leading theorists have explained, "social theatre stands alongside of, and sometimes

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<sup>3</sup> Performed at Brooklyn Academy of Music, May 2013. Mendelsohn 2013.

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, K.J. Sanchez and Emily Ackerman's *ReEntry* (<http://www.amrec.us/reentry/>); Jonathan Wei's *The Telling Project* (<http://thetellingproject.org/>); and internationally, James Thompson, Michael Balfour, and Jenny Hughes' *In Place of War Project* (<http://www.inplaceofwar.net/>).

<sup>5</sup> The Department of Veteran Affairs recognizes drama, along with visual art, creative writing, dance, and music as "one form of rehabilitative treatment to help Veterans recover from and cope with physical and emotional disabilities," sponsoring an annual National Veterans Creative Arts Competition (<http://www.va.gov/opa/speceven/caf/index.asp>). In the past decade alone, veterans have created theatrical works that engage their experiences as service members and formed companies. For example: Baltimore-based Veteran Artist Program (VAP), Minneapolis' Veterans in the Arts, Los Angeles' United States Veterans' Artists Alliance (USVAA) and Veterans Center for Performing Arts (VCPA), San Francisco's Veteran Artists, and Ohio-based Vet Art Project.

<sup>6</sup> Foley 2012: 3.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Hardwick and Harrison 2013 on the "democratic turn" in classical reception work by artists and scholars.

<sup>8</sup> "Social practice" is used across a variety of fields in the context of exploring what has been termed a "social turn" in contemporary art. See Jackson 2011.

in place of, ‘aesthetic theatre’ (including art theatres, experimental theatres, university theatres, regional theatres, and commercial theatres).” Drawing this distinction is not meant to deny “either the social aspects of aesthetic theatre or the aesthetic aspects of social theatre but rather point out differences of purpose, audiences, venues, and production values.”<sup>9</sup> The scholarly literature on this development in theater practice also employs terms such as “applied theatre,”<sup>10</sup> “engaged theatre”<sup>11</sup> and “civic practice.”<sup>12</sup> There is no clear consensus in the literature regarding the terminology. None of these terms are restrictive definitions. They all point to an effort to examine theoretically “socially related” theatre practices that depart from traditional theatrical productions in both intent and process.<sup>13</sup>

Social theater refers to events that may forge partnerships among artistic and civic groups and address specific issues of importance to these communities.<sup>14</sup> Social theater “combines aesthetics and politics” and is “inter-relational, embodied, and durational.”<sup>15</sup> For example, Sojourn Theater’s Michael Rohd views social practice as a term “which covers a tremendously varied and large body of work” all of which is in some way marked by the inclusion of non-arts partners and focused attention to felt community needs.<sup>16</sup> The particulars of the social practices may vary according to the extent of the emphasis placed on the role of non-arts partners in the collaboration and the specific nature of individual projects (e.g., The Living Stage Theatre Company’s Program for Teen Mothers<sup>17</sup> to the Prison Creative Arts Project<sup>18</sup> to Cornerstone Theater’s traveling residencies performing *Winter’s Tale: An Interstate Adventure*<sup>19</sup>). But in all cases of social practice, Rohd stresses, “the leading impulse and guiding origin energy is from the artist.”<sup>20</sup>

The idea of social theater also calls attention to the character of the public discourse that the theater events prompt. It is informed by a tradition of inquiry in political theory inaugurated by Jurgen Habermas and developed by many others on the “public sphere.”<sup>21</sup> In social theater performers and audiences at times form temporary communities that “model new investments in and interactions with variously constituted public spheres.”<sup>22</sup> “The idea of the public sphere,” philosopher Nancy Fraser explains, “designates a theatre in modern societies in which political participation is enacted through the medium of talk. It is the space in which citizens deliberate about their common affairs, hence, an institutionalized arena of discursive interaction. This arena is conceptually distinct from state; it is a site for the production and circulation of discourses that

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<sup>9</sup> Thompson and Schechner 2004: 11.

<sup>10</sup> Blatner 2007.

<sup>11</sup> Cohen-Cruz 2010.

<sup>12</sup> Rohd 2012.

<sup>13</sup> Many note the influence of Brazilian theatre practitioner Augusto Boal’s “Theatre of the Oppressed.” See Cohen-Cruz and Schutzman 1993, and Emert and Friedland 2011.

<sup>14</sup> See Taylor 2003; Prendergast and Saxton, 2009; Prentki and Preston, 2009; Thompson 2009.

<sup>15</sup> Jackson 2011: 11-12.

<sup>16</sup> Rohd 2012.

<sup>17</sup> Haedicke 2001.

<sup>18</sup> Alexander 2010.

<sup>19</sup> Kuftinec 2003.

<sup>20</sup> Rohd 2012.

<sup>21</sup> This literature is large. Key contributions include Habermas 1989, Fraser 1990 and Calhoun 1992.

<sup>22</sup> Dolan 2005: 10.

can in principle be critical of the state.”<sup>23</sup> Fraser refers to “theater” metaphorically. The viewpoint of social theater theory explores this connection. It stresses the possibility that theater arts events can occasion and help sustain alternative deliberative spaces or “public spheres” and it directs us to observe precisely how theater professionals can leverage their technical skills to advance this goal when crafting their projects.

We will also propose that Victor Turner's idea of *communitas* can illuminate a key feature of Theater of War and Homecoming programs understood as social theater, specifically, the riveting moments of story-telling by audience members during the town hall sessions. In explanation of *communitas*, Turner asks:

Is there any of us who has not known this moment when compatible people -- friends, congeners -- obtain a flash of lucid mutual understanding on the existential level, when they feel that all problems, not just their problems, could be resolved, whether emotional or cognitive, if only the group which is felt (in the first person) as ‘essentially us’ could sustain its inter-subjective illumination.<sup>24</sup>

Turner proposes that this shared realization, a fleeting moment of understanding another’s very different experience, ideally generates concrete action. We suspect that Turner's view can help us understand the significance of features of these projects, such as when a civilian physician openly wept during a Theater of War session, confessing that she would never again deliberately dismiss patients who complained of PTSD symptoms because of a misguided desire to avoid complicity in the war.<sup>25</sup>

## *II. Theater of War and Homecoming Viewed as Social Theater*

Social theater projects frequently utilize nonconventional venues instead of traditional theaters and performance spaces. The projects we detail here indeed follow this practice. But the venue is not what defines them. Instead, the key factors are their partnerships and collaborations, attention to social goals and arts-driven processes. In these programs, theatrical and aesthetic choices are made to advance the social goal and sustain the partnerships.

Similar sets of concerns seem to have motivated the artistic directors of both projects. Bryan Doerries (Outside the Wire’s Theater of War) and Peter Meineck (Ancient Greeks/Modern Lives’ Homecoming program) are both advocates of broad public awareness of the contemporary relevance of ancient Greek literature to today’s civic discourse and artistic practice. Both start from the premise that elements of Greek literature, especially certain stories, figures and scenes from particular tragedies, could be part of the arsenal available to active and veteran military personnel as they tackle the medical, personal and civic challenges posed by the high incidence of war-related post-traumatic stress among the troops. Both Doerries and Meineck have noted that their own knowledge of the fact that great ancient dramatists like Aeschylus and Sophocles were themselves generals and that the audience for ancient theater was full of experienced soldiers prompted them to seek to experiment and take up their respective projects. Both have indicated that they suspected that this material could be used to bridge the widening gap between

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<sup>23</sup> Fraser 1990: 287.

<sup>24</sup> Turner 1982: 48

<sup>25</sup> Bryan Doerries (Artistic Director, Outside the Wire LLC) in discussion with Laura Lodewyck, June 9, 2012.

the experiences of military personnel and the general public.<sup>26</sup> And both directors designed programs that aim to use contact with ancient plays to spark conversations among active duty and veteran military personnel and their families as well as among military people and the general theater-going public specifically conceived of as individuals lacking firsthand experience of the struggles of active duty troops and injured veterans. Their projects have different emphases and but similar overarching social goals.

These directors were also working at a time when the path-breaking books by Jonathan Shay were garnering considerable public attention for suggesting that Greek literature and the record of Greek theatrical practice address what clinicians today call “combat trauma” and related forms of psychological injury and suffering (e.g., **post-traumatic stress**) endured by military personnel and their families.<sup>27</sup> A psychiatrist at Boston’s Department of Veteran Affairs Outpatient Clinic, Shay wrote studies of the Homeric epics that show that they reflect the psychological realities of war as American clinicians had come to understand them from decades of therapeutic work with combat veterans (especially of the Vietnam era). Shay also observed that Greek drama reflects similar themes and was intrigued by contemporary scholarship on Greek tragedy in its civic context that stressed that ancient Greek theater was written and performed by Athenian citizen-soldiers for an audience of Athenian citizen-soldier on the occasion of a grand public ritual event. As a psychiatrist, he considered that “the process of healing from combat trauma lies fundamentally in communalizing it”; he therefore speculated that Greek tragedy served a particular purpose in keeping with the democratic work of Athenian society, arguing that “the ancient Athenians re-integrated their returning warriors through recurring participation in the rituals of theatre.”<sup>28</sup> Shay suggested that the example of ancient Athenian theater could supply advocates of improved military policies and veterans’ services a useful model. The Homecoming unit of Ancient Greeks/Modern Lives and Theater of War both work from the same assumption.

### *II.a. Theatrical format*

The format of Theater of War and Homecoming are similar in many respects. Both programs conceive of their events as having two integrated parts, staged readings of selected scenes from Greek texts and open-ended town hall style meetings in which audience members participate actively, not a performance event followed by a traditional post-show “talkback.” Both programs employ professional performers to conduct the staged readings. Both programs select scenes in which heroic figures from Greek myth struggle personally with the stresses of

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<sup>26</sup> See Doerries 2010; Green 2010; Meineck 2009 and 2012.

<sup>27</sup> *Achilles in Vietnam: Combat Trauma and the Undoing of Character* (1994) and *Odysseus in America: Combat Trauma and the Trials of Homecoming* (2002). Consider the following from 1994 (pp. xx-xxi): “[H]aving honored the boundaries of meaning that scholars have pointed out, I can confidently tell you that my reading of the *Iliad* as an account of men in war is not a ‘meditation’ that is only tenuously rooted in the text... This *is* the story of Achilles in the *Iliad*, not some metaphoric translation of it. This was also the story of many combat veterans, both from Vietnam and from other long wars. The reader will find some of the veterans’ narratives disturbing. I have brought them together with the *Iliad* not to tame, appropriate, or co-opt them but to promote a deeper understanding of both, increasing the reader’s capacity to be disturbed by the *Iliad* rather than softening the blow of the veterans’ stories.”

<sup>28</sup> Shay 1995: n.p.

military service, including suffering wounds ranging from festering physical gashes to psychological injuries that spark going “berserk” and suicide, homecomings full of uncertainty. Both rely on the expertise of professional actors as readers so that the specific words in the passages can be heard and understood and so that the readings provide compelling portrayals of emotions. Both use facilitators to manage the open discussion. Judging from reviews, news coverage and our own attendance at a number of these events, it is not uncommon for the town hall sessions to include spontaneous personal story-telling by veterans or their family members. The aesthetics of the programs are quite different, as we shall see detail below. For example, the Ancient Greeks/Modern Lives program relies on ensemble members of Aquila Theater to perform the selected scenes in various venues across the country. Theater of War, in contrast, contracts with individual actors for specific events, often employing familiar faces from television or film, to deliver unrehearsed readings, script in hand.

The format advances the social goal by employing an unbilled host and panelists during the discussion session. A skillful host/moderator can troubleshoot some potential pitfalls. For example, he can acknowledge audience members’ uncertainties about the contemporary interest of the ancient material at the outset as well as the difficulties that attend public expression of wrenching and heavily stigmatized matters. He can also offer some intriguing historical context to draw in the audience (e.g., the playwright was a general, the ancient audience members were soldiers, the Greek cities was at war for decades), answer questions in a respectful (not patronizing) way and direct the conversation with brief on point comments or points of information. Both Doerries and Meineck perform this role often and provide detailed guides to the others they employ on occasion. Using panelists to introduce the town hall sessions gets the discussions started and can model the diversity of voices and viewpoints welcomed (spouses, clinicians, veterans). Theater of War panels feature individuals with a range of perspectives: for instance, an active duty service member, a previously deployed veteran, a military spouse, and a mental health worker or military Chaplain who has a background in the treatment of combat stress. Theater of War promotional materials specify that, “the panelists are not expected to be experts in ancient Greek drama, philosophy or psychology. In fact, exactly the opposite is true: their comments are the most powerful when they share unprepared thoughts about how the plays resonate with their personal and professional experience.”<sup>29</sup> Ancient Greeks/Modern Lives’ Homecoming programs are hosted by local academic experts (usually a classicist but not always) who moderate the open discussions following the readings. At times their programs use include panelists and for these parts Homecoming turns to veterans (not clinicians), including classics scholars who are themselves veterans (Paul Woodruff, Lawrence Tritle) and Aquila ensemble members who are veterans.

Both Theater of War and Homecoming projects focus on the presentation of a set of distinctive scenes. This is of course to some extent in service of practicality. Scene selections concentrate the attention on particular themes, reserve time for group discussion and are less costly to produce. But this format is also absolutely integral to the success of the audience participation part of their projects. The scenes are chosen for their depiction of dilemmas and situations that are familiar to military personal but may be stigmatized today. Theater of War employs three possible performance formats that they can stage in any setting: The Ajax and

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<sup>29</sup> “Identifying and Preparing the Panelists,” in Theater of War Presentation Package, <http://www.outsidethewirellc.com/about/presentation-package>.

Philoctetes Program, the Ajax Program, and the Female Warrior Program (featuring a female Ajax and a male Tecmessa). The Ancient Greeks/Modern Lives' Homecoming unit focuses on the stories surrounding specific characters -- Philoctetes, Herakles, Ajax and Tecmessa, Penelope and Odysseus. The stories are entry points for discussion of "irresolvable, extreme situations without being crudely topical."<sup>30</sup> For instance, the Messenger's speech from *Herakles* reveals the horror and violence of the warrior's madness, while Agamemnon's sacrifice of Iphigenia is used to illustrate devastating decisions that must be made in the course of war.

Doing discrete scenes is consistent with the tradition of Augusto Boal's stance against Aristotle's "coercive" dramatic arc, a foundational idea in theater for social change. In *Theatre of the Oppressed*, Boal proposed a system that rebels against "Aristotle's coercive system of tragedy," which he believed purges the spectator of characteristics undesirable to society, through one's vicarious experiences of the protagonist. Through a play's dramatic arc, "the spectator experience[s] three changes of a rigorous nature: *peripeteia*, *anagnorisis*, and *catharsis*;<sup>31</sup> he *suffers a blow* with regard to his fate (the action of the play), *recognizes the error* vicariously committed and *is purified of the antisocial characteristic* which he sees in himself".<sup>32</sup> Boal theorized that theatre of this nature upholds oppressive institutional forces and persuades the individual not to act against them. By disrupting the dramatic arc and preventing a fluid conclusion to a central narrative, selective scenes heighten Greek drama's applicability to contemporary concerns and encourage responses to the unresolved situations presented in the tragic text. In the Theater and War and Homecoming projects, audiences are expected to connect with the power of the language of the texts and the intensity of the immediate situation being performed. They are also expected to express that connection through their own story telling, comments and attentive listening during the discussion sessions. Meineck has invoked Boal to discuss the connections between the staged readings and town hall style meetings. He suggests that Boal's "invisible theatre" technique stirs dialogue and debate: "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."<sup>33</sup> We suggest likening this connection between audience and readers to Turner's *communitas*. When Aquila actors perform chilling scenes from *Herakles* in which an honorable returning warrior violently attacks his own family, they do so only a few feet from their audience, not separated from them by an elevated stage or theatrical lighting. The format encourages the room to unite in recognition of the reality of these situations.<sup>34</sup>

Staged readings are not typically considered finished theatrical products, or rather, products with their own intentional aesthetic; instead, the staged reading is often used in service of the development or promotion of a full-scale production. In these cases, in contrast, the attributes of the staged reading as a theatrical form contribute substantially to the needs of the projects, consistent with the traditions of social and civic practice. But these performances differ from projects that similarly use scene work in the service of other social goals. For example,

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<sup>30</sup> Foley 1999:2.

<sup>31</sup> This interpretation of catharsis, as a structured tension and release that manipulates the audience, differs from his view of catharsis in 1995's *Rainbow of Desire*, in which he uses his theatrical techniques as a therapeutic method intended to help individuals. The catharsis suggested later in Boal's career is "a removal of blocks, not a voiding of desires" (Jackson 1995: xxi).

<sup>32</sup> Boal 1979: 40, emphasis in the original.

<sup>33</sup> Meineck 2009:175

<sup>34</sup> Meineck 2009.

Boal's Theater of the Oppressed uses performers to stage scenes based on issues or problems prevalent to that community and welcome audience participants to step onstage to change how the scene plays out. In Theater of War and Homecoming professional actors focus the audience's attention on the words and the situations that they describe. Theater of War and Homecoming are also unlike other politically engaged productions that encourage audiences to talk among themselves only after dispersing and leaving the event. Their format is designed to facilitate lively face-to-face town hall sessions. These programs seek to turn the theater event into a new, albeit temporary, space for open talk and attentive listening regarding acute problems facing military men and women today. When they succeed we might say they contribute to the production of a plurality of "public spheres" in the American polity, a condition that political philosopher Fraser argues is necessary if public deliberation in our expansive and diverse nation is to bend in the direction of more inclusion.<sup>35</sup>

Candid post-performance reactions to the readings can also create moments of shared vulnerability, making space for open talk by the less powerful and demanding active listening by all present. But it is a fragile moment. It can easily be disrupted, Doerries has observed, once normative interactions resume. He explains: "...everyone's been very *activated*. And then all inhibitions, and boundaries, and culture, and hierarchy – just for a small, fleeting moment – have been dissolved. And these things can be said. And expressed. And then it goes away. And then the hierarchy returns."<sup>36</sup> Doerries recalls one stunning example. In this instance the organizers of an Outside the Wire event being held at a nursing school chose to alter the usual format, preferring to disperse into small breakout sessions right after the performance and prior to coming together for the town hall-style discussion. When they all gathered back together, Doerries reported, in contrast to other group discussions he has facilitated, the most powerful individuals in the room dominated the conversation:

Normally, what we see when we do the play in a medical setting is that mostly the nurses speak first – the women, mostly. And the women are the ones who can't speak in the normal context. They are the ones who are disempowered. But also because they are the ones who are in front of suffering, who know suffering, who are in the presence of it, who know what it means – what the power of presence mean ... but all these groups went away, and there was only one or two male doctors in every group, and the rest were nurses, and they all came back... and [the respondents] were *all* men, and it was like the hierarchy – just by leaving the room after the performance – had reified itself.<sup>37</sup>

The format of actor readings thus does not only encourage engagement with the text, but a particular *kind* of engagement with these stories. The stories come from the stage, but they also come from the audience. In this immediate and charged moment, the audience considers and comments on complicated, potentially divisive issues. Ideally, these comments generate dialogue that culminates in empathy and understanding across diverse individuals, and perhaps even initiates action that will continue outside the room.

The importance of the scene-based format to the social goal is in evidence in the following examples. Both programs perform scenes that they think invite women affected by war to speak out during the discussion. The Ancient Greeks/Modern Lives program tries to engage

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<sup>35</sup> Fraser 1990.

<sup>36</sup> Bryan Doerries (Artistic Director, Outside the Wire LLC) in discussion with Laura Lodewyck, June 9, 2012.

<sup>37</sup> Bryan Doerries (Artistic Director, Outside the Wire LLC) in discussion with Laura Lodewyck, June 9, 2012.

issues of importance specifically to women by choosing scenes that focus not only on Ajax's suffering but also on the reality of his wife Tecmessa's vulnerable situation as well as her personal strengths. Meineck reports that these scenes prompt discussion of the specific challenges facing military wives and civilians impacted by war both in war zones and back at home, but also by active duty female service members. He recounted one instance in which a woman Air Force veteran spoke out about a male colleague's violation of trust. She explained that a fellow soldier whom she had always respected told her, during a mock attack, that he would kill her rather than let her fall into the hands of the enemy because *he* could not endure what might happen to *her*.<sup>38</sup> Theater of War has tried a different approach. They developed a program that adapts scenes from *Ajax* for performance by a female actor in the lead role. The project's aim seems to be to present a jolting image of a forceful female warrior from Greek mythology -- a female Ajax -- to unsettle conventional views of women's distance from combat situations in the American military and to highlight the particularities of their experiences of upending psychological trauma. We attended two performances of this program and observed something striking. In contrast to other programs in which veterans in the audience identified with the struggles of the mythic characters and found these portrayal validating, female veterans who spoke out during the discussion after the female Ajax program expressed *both* amazement at how honestly the words and emotions in the texts read by the female actor captured soldiering *and* great irritation with what they perceived to be the text's utter lack of attention to any of the kinds of difficulties that are specific to female soldiers. Since they were unfamiliar with the Greek play or myth and were not prompted at the outset to recognize that this was an imagined re-write of an ancient source, a number of these speakers expressed delight in learning that venerable Greek mythology included a female warrior and felt validated to that modest extent. But, their stinging disappointment in the scene's shortcomings really stood out. They were struck by the absence of any mention of sex-related belittling and other tensions, including sexual violence, inflicted on female soldiers by their fellow troops, as well as the particular kind of stigmas female veterans suffer in civilian life. Their perception of this gap and eagerness to name it and to bear witness to things not said in the staged readings created powerful moments in which those present -- female and male veterans and civilians alike -- had to listen to female soldiers' accounts of sexual harassment, sexual assault and forms of psychological wounds psychiatrist Jonathan Shay has called "moral injuries."<sup>39</sup> Some in the audience who knew the plays found the re-write nearly impossible to enjoy as theater (present authors included). Knowledge of the play interfered with our ability to see some important details in these scenes. We were caught up in trying to figure out how a specific change would play out in the rest of the drama. However, it is beyond question that these adapted scenes elicited strong reactions from the veterans in the audience and a spirited public airing of normally hidden and overlooked facts of life for women in the military.

## *II.b. Aesthetics*

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<sup>38</sup> Meineck 2012: 16.

<sup>39</sup> In Shay's experience counseling veterans, the greatest devastation is inflicted when soldiers feel that they have been neglected or betrayed by their superiors. Shay argues that "moral injury is an essential part of any combat trauma that leads to lifelong psychological injury. Veterans can usually recover from horror, fear, and grief once they return to civilian life, so long as 'what's right' has not also been violated" (*Achilles in Vietnam*, 20).

As theatrical events, the performances of Ancient Greeks/Modern Lives and Theater of War are intentionally scaled down. As staged readings, these performances do not employ a set, costumes, or props; they feature actors who appear in regular street clothes, scripts in hand. The staging is limited, with actors usually seated when they are not performing, or acting the entirety of the piece seated from behind a table or standing at a podium. Theater of War, in fact, outlines a brief list of basic technical requirements for all performances: a long table and five chairs, with five microphones; two wireless handheld microphones for the audience; and house lights up for the entire event, with no theatrical lighting necessary.<sup>40</sup> These practices challenge the divide between performer and audience, and between the ancient and the modern.

The two programs' performance styles are distinct, even though they follow similar formats. Theater of War takes the attributes of the staged reading to the extreme by investing in the aural power of the text and pursuing an intentionally “raw” performance. Theater of War's staged readings involve little to no rehearsal among the temporary cast assembled for each particular event. Doerries comments:

So there is the economic reality, but there is also – as I learned - extreme value in it being rough and raw and under-rehearsed and... auditory... the note that I give to all actors who work on all of our projects, before they go onstage – and there have been about 120 who have passed through in the last three years, is: “make them wish they'd never come”. Now that may not be a genuine feeling – I don't want people to actually walk out, but I want people to *almost* walk out.<sup>41</sup>

This engagement with the text is a direct reflection of the text's status as catalyst, rather than a product intended purely for aesthetic consumption. Theater of War directly confronts traditional expectations about theatre and aggressively alerts the audience that the performance is not staged for their pleasure or entertainment. This is especially apparent when the audience is not primarily veterans. Commenting on the expectations of the audience of a performance staged at an academic conference attended by scholars familiar with the sources Doerries said:

A lot of people came up to me and said, “Oh that was too loud, that was too fast, it was too...” - and that's fine, you know, that's true – if we were doing it for *them*. But when I've got a thousand marines in front of me, it has to be an assault...it's an aural assault. It's loud – what we do is loud – it's fast, it's not what people typically think of as reading. And no stage directions, obviously – so you know, it's a radio play on speed.<sup>42</sup>

In accentuating these qualities of the staged reading -- little rehearsal, the focus on the auditory, no movement or stage directions -- Theater of War embraces an aesthetic that employs performance and skilled professional actors without submitting to contemporary expectations about how Greek drama should be performed. Further, he objects to the idea that these performances are even “for” a traditional theatergoing audience. Instead, the project invests fully in the needs of the communities for which the event is designed. Civilians, if present, are there to listen and to be challenged.

Though Theater of War verbally “assaults” the audience in order to gain their attention, the performers do not physically enact the trauma vocalized. Though their bodies and voices are

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<sup>40</sup> “Theater of War Technical Rider”, in Theater of War Presentation Package, <http://www.outsidethewirellc.com/about/presentation-package>.

<sup>41</sup> Bryan Doerries (Artistic Director, Outside the Wire LLC) in discussion with Laura Lodewyck, June 9, 2012.

<sup>42</sup> Bryan Doerries (Artistic Director, Outside the Wire LLC) in discussion with Laura Lodewyck, June 9, 2012.

engaged with the emotion of the text, the performance lacks the specificity that a designer or director's vision would lend a production. With no stage lights or sets, the focus of the performance is not on spectacle or an attempt at a measure of verisimilitude. There is no intention of illusion, or effort to present a fully realized representation of an ancient Greek warrior. As a "radio play on speed," Theater of War audiences of veterans relate the text more fully to their own experiences, undistracted by the details of a full-scale production. For some, this may also serve to instigate but not overwhelm, as military audiences may already viscerally relate to the horrors of the text.

Leaving the house lights also empowers audience members to publicly share their personal reactions within the context of the communal event.<sup>43</sup> At one early Theater of War event that employed Aquila members as readers (it predated the Ancient Greeks/Modern Lives project), the audience included numerous military veterans of wars in Iraq, Afghanistan, Vietnam, Korea. Recalling this event, Meineck observes the "confessional, poignant" nature of the commentary that followed the readings from *Ajax* and *Philoctetes*. He offers that "[t]he 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."<sup>44</sup> The connections between audience and performers and among audiences members recalls, Meineck suggests, what Josiah Ober refers to as the "inward facing circles" character of fifth-century Athenian theater spaces; they facilitate an exchange of knowledge among the spectators based on the ability to observe and react to others' responses. The Greeks' "seeing-place" is literally in the daylight of the open theater. The act of performance is also a metaphoric "watching," in sense of bearing witness to, and sharing in, another human's story.<sup>45</sup>

The Ancient Greek/Modern Lives' performances are rehearsed and prepared by a touring ensemble affiliated with Aquila Theater of New York. While still utilizing distinguishing aspects of the staged reading (e.g., script-in-hand, little to no blocking, street clothes, minimal physical distance from the audience), the Homecoming project does offer something more akin to a snippet of a traditional performance. This is crucial for their project because they do not rely on a captive audience on a military base or the professional interests of clinicians and other veterans' advocates to people their audience. Homecoming seeks out the general public, both usual theatergoers and others who might not be inclined to travel to or pay the ticket price for a full-scale performance of a Greek play in a traditional venue. They specifically seek out audiences who might not be aware of the challenges facing active duty and veteran military personnel and to expand the civic community alert to the concerns of these fellow citizens.

Though lacking the trappings of a full-scale production, staged readings are quality work. As Jan Cohen-Cruz has advocated, we should not presume an automatic aesthetic/utilitarian divide in socially engaged practice.<sup>46</sup> She disavows the connotation that productions that partner with communities in non-traditional ways may be presumed to be "amateurish." Aesthetics and intent are intertwined in social practice (or as Cohen-Cruz terms it, "engaged performance"):

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<sup>43</sup> Meineck 2009: 173-4.

<sup>44</sup> Meineck 2009: 174.

<sup>45</sup> Meineck 2009: 174; see also Woodruff 2008: 18, 22-24, 141-3.

<sup>46</sup> Cohen-Cruz 2010. See also Thompson 2009.

Aesthetics generally refers to a way of judging the qualities of an art experience, traditionally in such terms as beauty and good taste. Engaged artists do not seek to lower aesthetic standards, but rather to attain qualities of art appropriate to its goals...in contrast, some art-making systems to be devoid of content, and instead focus rather on a general idea of beauty. Such criteria would be unproductive measures of an art form focused on local meaning and identity...singularity about aesthetics is another drawback of some mainstream arts training.<sup>47</sup>

Likewise, as socially and civically focused practitioners have argued, process- or community-oriented work is still “good theatre”. However, differing processes that serve the meaning of the project may mark this kind of theatrical work.

### *II.c. Target audience and partnerships*

Outside the Wire and Ancient Greeks/Moderns Lives cultivate different kinds of partnerships between arts with non-arts groups. Their funding models reflect this. Ancient Greeks/Modern Lives performs in venues that welcome civilians and veterans and tries to use its performances to foster new connections among the various members of its own audiences, including with the managers of the venues (chiefly public libraries and community centers), the local community and scholars at area institutions. Ancient Greeks/Modern Lives’ stated objectives include: disseminating quality humanities programming; building new audiences for such events; fostering a public interest in classical literature; and providing opportunity for veterans and families to discuss and examine their experiences, facilitated by the context of classical work. By partnering with libraries, they also aim to invigorate community interest in library resources as well as public and cultural programming, and provide an example of successful partnerships between libraries and arts centers.<sup>48</sup> They leverage Aquila Theater’s “bold reinterpretations of classical plays for contemporary audiences” that “free the spirit of the original work and recreate the excitement of the live performance.”<sup>49</sup> The Ancient Greeks/Modern Lives project received support from the National Endowment for the Humanities and the attention of the National Endowment for the Arts and Onassis Public Benefit Foundation.

Outside the Wire defines its mission as “social impact entertainment”<sup>50</sup> and their various programs address public health goals. The project’s stated “mission” is to create safe spaces for dialogue, foster candid communication among audiences, elicit understanding across individuals with divergent backgrounds, enable individuals to respond directly to issues within their own community, and circulate knowledge of resources on social or public health topics.<sup>51</sup> It is from this perspective that Theater of War engages active duty military and veterans’ communities. Their funding history, for example, includes support from the Defense Centers of Excellence for Psychological Health and Traumatic Brain Injury (a U.S. Department of Defense organization) and the National Institutes of Health. For years Theater of War collaborated directly only with

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<sup>47</sup> Cohen-Cruz 2010: 168-9.

<sup>48</sup> “Ancient Greeks/Modern Lives Press Release,” Aquila Theatre Company, <http://aquilatheatre.com/home/ancient-greeksmodern-lives-press/>

<sup>49</sup> <http://aquilatheatre.com/about/history/>

<sup>50</sup> This phrase is from their promotional literature. Doerries works together with a producer, Phyllis Kaufman.

<sup>51</sup> “Mission,” Outside the Wire LLC, <http://www.outsidethewirellc.com/about/mission>

formal military organizations and performed exclusively for military population. With a grant from the Stavros Niarchos Foundation, Theater of War began training regional theater companies across the country to present Theater of War to mixed civilian and military audiences. They aimed to teach the theater partners "how to leverage the resources regionally and nationally so that everyone new walked away with something, whether it was psychological help or how to get involved as a civilian."<sup>52</sup>

The composition of audiences affects the shape and meaning of the events. Compare, for example, Doerries' reflections on events staged for mixed groups with a large civilian component and those staged on military bases. Regarding the former, Doerries stresses that the exact proportion of military to civilians in the audience can make a big difference. He explains:

Sometimes when you're performing for a large group of civilians and only a small number of veterans are there, it feels like the project back in the direction of what most theater does, which is makes us feel good about our own values and makes us feel more intelligent than we actually are, and sort of pats us on the back for wanting to have this experience. And I'm more interested in people coming into an experience where their presumptions, their judgments, their – the story they tell themselves about who they are and what they believe is confronted and sometimes upended, some by the performance, but mostly by what they hear, by the people sitting right next to them in the audience, and that can only happen when we have a critical mix of people in the audience.... Just coming together in a room and sitting together for two hours is *something*. I'd say ten percent of the audience being the 'other', so to speak, for the civilians, is enough...but when there is a critical enough mass on both sides and both sides open up, it's really powerful.<sup>53</sup>

Regarding events that are closed to the public and staged at sites such as the U.S. Naval Academy, Camp Pendleton, Schreiver Air Force Base and Guantanamo Bay,<sup>54</sup> Doerries stresses that different kinds of breakthroughs occur. In particular, he stresses that these events temporarily break down hierarchies and grant the troops the freedom to publicly share what are often "tremendously disturbing" personal stories. In Doerries estimation, this is reflective of ancient theatre in that the General is required to "sit up front, and hear the perspective of the hoplite in some way."<sup>55</sup> For instance, on one occasion a service member who had been openly resistant to the entire exercise of attending the performance broke down during the town hall discussion and confessed that he had been planning violence against members of his own unit because he felt they had betrayed him. Doerries explains, "It's creating that contained safe place where there are also the mental health professionals there to respond."<sup>56</sup> At another event where there were numerous spouses in attendance, a panel composed entirely of military wives matter-of-factly recounted stories of their husbands returning from war, often with traumatic brain injury and post-traumatic stress, and fearing for their family and spouse's safety. One of the men's lives had already ended in suicide. The final panelist stated that she was only able to attend the event because she had someone at home watching her husband. She could not leave

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<sup>52</sup> Bryan Doerries (Artistic Director, Outside the Wire LLC) in discussion with Laura Lodewyck, June 9, 2012.

<sup>53</sup> Bryan Doerries (Artistic Director, Outside the Wire LLC) in discussion with Laura Lodewyck, June 9, 2012.

<sup>54</sup> "Past Dates," Theater of War, Outside the Wire, LLC.

<http://www.outsidethewirellc.com/performances?format=past&month=07&yr=2013>

<sup>55</sup> Bryan Doerries (Artistic Director, Outside the Wire LLC) in discussion with Laura Lodewyck, June 9, 2012.

<sup>56</sup> Bryan Doerries (Artistic Director, Outside the Wire LLC) in discussion with Laura Lodewyck, June 9, 2012.

him alone, and she could not trust him with their children. One woman in the audience raised her hand and said that while she was moved by the play, she most connected with the panelist who spoke of her husband's mental disintegration and suicide. The same thing happened to her husband, she reported: "he killed himself, and it was just like him, and it was just like Ajax." Women throughout the audience began raising their hands and commenting on the overwhelming similarity of their own experiences, as the General present watched, "his face...just ashen." Doerries was convinced that Theater of War would never be invited back. A few weeks later, he received a call from Walter Reed Army Medical Center reporting that the General had arranged a meeting there, and related that after hearing from his community at the Theater of War event, he realized he needed more resources for the families and spouses of his service members. Doerries recounts that though there was substantial risk in uncovering these realities within that community, it was the first time he was aware of Theater of War affecting a change of such magnitude.

The role of the audience in creating the meaning of the event is also evident in a comparison of two Theater of War events staged within a week of one another in the same city: the first at Chicago's Goodman Theater<sup>57</sup> and the second at the National Veterans Art Museum in downtown Chicago.<sup>58</sup> Both events featured staged readings by members of Chicago's Rivendell Ensemble, the same moderator, and nearly identical panel members. However, the difference in audience composition was striking. At the Goodman, subscribers and theatergoers composed the majority of the audience, many of whom just stood up and left immediately following the performance. They seemed unaware that the town hall discussion was part of the event even though that format was clearly highlighted in the literature and in the opening remarks of the host. Perhaps they expected a traditional, optional "post-show talk back" and were just not interested. The sparsely attended town hall meeting nevertheless occasioned some powerful stories. A male veteran stood up and spoke of being angry when he first came home at the fact that people would say that they wanted to hear about his experiences then "switch off" when he started to talk about his experiences. A female veteran raised her voice to vehemently deny that Ajax's bloodlust was an accurate depiction of the female warrior's experience. A mother calmly recalled that her son was forever changed by his deployment and how the betrayal he felt led to his suicide. The rest of the Goodman audience who remained for the session accepted these stories with polite reserve and quietly filed out to return to their own lives. No lively discussion followed. Doerries considers even this modest reaction a success. "My feeling, some days, is I just want the civilians to listen. Or, I just want those in power to listen to those who have no power – for just 45 minutes. That's all I want. I just want them to actually actively listen with their hearts open, and their minds open."<sup>59</sup> While the event did not elicit a sense of something akin to *communitas*, where the burden of these realities began to be shared across the audience, we cannot assume that individuals were unmoved by these stories.

A few days later many service members attended Theater of War's performance at the

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<sup>57</sup> Theater of War. "A Dramatic Reading of Scenes from Sophocles' *Ajax*: The Female Warrior Program," Goodman Theater, Chicago, IL, January 18, 2012.

<sup>58</sup> Theater of War. "A Dramatic Reading of Scenes from Sophocles' *Ajax*: The Female Warrior Program," National Veterans Art Museum [former location at 1801 S. Indiana Avenue], Chicago, IL, January 25, 2012.

<sup>59</sup> Bryan Doerries (Artistic Director, Outside the Wire LLC) in discussion with Laura Lodewyck, June 9, 2012.

National Veterans Art Museum. The town hall session was lively; many spoke plainly about the obstacles to dealing with post-war stress, in everything from negotiating the bureaucracy of the Department of Veterans Affairs and the jarringly swift timeline in transitioning from deployment to homecoming, to the reality of military sexual assault and the open hostility that Vietnam veterans encountered. On this occasion the small number of civilians in attendance performed a different role. They largely observed the testimony of military personnel themselves and help create a temporary community-- a “safe” space for critical discussion--by being present and alert. Afterwards, many of the veterans, therapists, and civilians came together to interact and continue to talk for more than an hour, acknowledging one another’s experience of the event that had just concluded. Shoulder-to-shoulder in the National Veterans Art Museum's intimate space, a plurality of individuals formed a public sphere where deeply complicated and sensitive topics could be directly and honestly discussed.

The program also leverages some small details of ancient history to bridge the gap between ancient texts and contemporary issues. Both projects highlight the fact that the ancient playwrights were themselves combat veterans. Doerries typically recalls specific details for Theater of War audiences. For example:

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... 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.<sup>60</sup>

When Doerries serves as moderator at Theater of War events, he prompts the audience to reflect on these connections. For instance, after one performance of *Ajax* he reminded the audience that this play was written by a general in a city that had seen eighty years of war, and that it would have been performed for thousands of citizen-soldiers in Ancient Greece. He typically opens the town hall discussion with the query: “What do you think this guy Sophocles was up to? What was his objective?”<sup>61</sup> Pointedly speculating on Sophocles’ intentions, Doerries guides the audience to consider and engage with the social objectives of Theater of War for themselves. Sometimes, the proposition is flatly rejected, such as when a Vietnam commented that he was not good with poetry and therefore, “I think there might be something there that actually confuses us, and it’s actually *not* helpful... [I’d need a] semester’s worth” of information to figure it out.<sup>62</sup> But this reaction creates meaning as well. Consider an incident at a military base where a service member jumped up to comment on how much he hated the performance. He said it was incredibly boring and that he found it to be one of the worst, most ridiculous things he had ever had to sit through. Doerries reports that this response was highly significant.

I found myself just like grinning ear to ear, because I believed him. I actually think he didn’t like it. I don’t think there was anything underlying it. He just hated it. But there

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<sup>60</sup>“Theater of War Overview,” Outside the Wire, LLC. <http://www.outsidethewirellc.com/projects/theater-of-war/overview>.

<sup>61</sup> Doerries, *Theater of War* (“A Pathway Home,” annual meeting of The Soldiers Project, University of Southern California, Los Angeles, CA, June 10, 2012).

<sup>62</sup> Theater of War (“A Pathway Home,” annual meeting of The Soldiers Project, University of Southern California, Los Angeles, CA, June 10, 2012).

was no other context within the military structure where you could go to an event that was mandatory and get up and say, ‘I thought this was fuckin’ bullshit.’”<sup>63</sup>

As long as this is not the overwhelming majority's reaction, in Doerries' view, this kind of feedback actually “validates the dialogue.” We can see this once we recall that at the same event a different service member held up a copy of *Achilles in Vietnam* that he had brought along to the event and related how much both the performance and the Greek example in general spoke to him. Occasioning these two reactions side-by-side is key to building community spaces -- however temporary -- where multiple views may be spoken openly and publicly acknowledged.

### *III. Concluding Remarks*

Viewed as social theater we can see that these projects perform for soldiers in multiple senses. They bring performances of ancient sources to audiences of active duty and veteran military personnel as well as the public. They also mine the material for stories that explicitly engage their experiences of deployment, combat and homecoming, expecting to facilitate both compassionate self-understanding among these military men and women and generous consideration of their struggles among the full audiences which include veterans' advocates and caregivers as well as the general public. These events have successfully worked to form temporary "public spheres" in which both speaking about and listening to theatrical and first hand accounts of highly emotional experiences tied to military service have great political import. Sometimes they even spark experiences of what we have referred to as *communitas*, thus helping to bridge the ever-widening gap between military and civilian society. In doing so these projects have a democratizing effect on Greek theater in America by enacting new answers to the question, "Whose stories do these sources address?"

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<sup>63</sup> Bryan Doerries (Artistic Director, Outside the Wire LLC) in discussion with Laura Lodewyck, June 9, 2012.

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