The Guide
A Theatergoer's Resource

Table of Contents

Synopsis ................................................. 2
About the Artists .................................... 3
Meet the Characters ................................. 4
World of the Play
  Say It Like You Mean It ........................... 6
  Preface of The War That Killed Achilles .... 6
  Tragic Heroes ....................................... 8
Discussion Questions .............................. 10
Bibliography ........................................ 10

An Iliad
Adapted from Homer by Lisa Peterson and Denis O'Hare
Translation by Robert Fagles

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An empty stage. Dim light. Slowly, we become aware that there's a figure standing in the dimmest, darkest corner. He walks toward the audience, puts down the suitcase and sits at a table as if waiting for someone else to arrive—or is he fixing his gaze on us? The old man shakes his head, takes off his hat and begins to mumble a forgotten tune.

This is the opening scene of Lisa Peterson and Denis O’Hare’s play production, An Iliad. Adapted from Homer’s The Iliad and the translation by Robert Fagles, An Iliad combines the classic hexameter verse of Homer’s classic with modern speech. The Iliad tells the story of the great Trojan War between the Greek States and the Trojans. The war begins nine years after the start of the war, when the Achaeans capture two beautiful maidens, Chryseis and Briseis. Agamemnon takes Chryseis and Achilles, the most powerful Achaeian warrior in the epic poem, claims Briseis. After Chryseis’ father requests the return of his daughter and the Achaeans refuse, Chryseis’ fathers plagues the Achaeans. Defeated, Agamemnon agrees to return Chryseis to her father but expects Achilles to give him Briseis as compensation for his sacrifice. Achilles is enraged by Agamemnon’s request and refuses to continue to fight for the Achaeans. An Iliad provides further insight into the fight between Agamemnon and Achilles and Achilles’ battle with Hector, the strongest Trojan soldier. The main character of An Iliad, the old poet, retells great battle scenes involving the warriors as if he is an ageless soul who lived and experienced the Trojan War but instead of attempting to retell every detail of the story, he narrates the drama so that it is not just history.


Lisa Peterson

Lisa Peterson, Director. New York: The Model Apartment by Donald Margulies (Primary Stages); Slavs! by Tony Kushner, Traps and Light Shining in Buckinghamshire by Caryl Churchill (Obie Award for Direction). The Waves adapt. from Virginia Woolf (two Drama Desk nominations), all at New York Theatre Workshop. The Scarlet Letter adapt. by Phylis Nagy (CSC, world premiere). Regional: Collected Stories by Donald Margulies (South Coast Rep, world premiere, DramaLogue Award); Ikebana by Alice Tuan (East West Players, world premiere, DramaLogue Award), The Battling Cage by Joan Ackermann, July 7, 1994 by Donald Margulies, Tough Choices for the New Century by Jane Anderson, Slavs! by Tony Kushner, Trip’s Cinch by Phylis Nagy (Actors Theatre of Louisville Humana Festival, world premiers); Good Person of Setzuan adapt. by Tony Kushner, Triumph of Love adapt. by James Magruder, Arms and the Man by G.B. Shaw, The Swan by Elizabeth Kglloff (La Jolla Playhouse); A Moon for the Misbegotten by O’Neill, My Children! My Africa! by Athol Fugard, Slavs! by Kushner (Baltimore Center Stage); Fefu and Her Friends by Irene Fornes (Yale Rep), Redclaws by Craig Lucas (Harford Stage). New Play Development: Sundance, The Playwrights’ Center, New Dramatists, Young Playwrights’ Festival, Taper New Works Festival, Audrey SkirballKenis, New York Stage and Film, Royal Court London. Graduate of Yale College, member of Ensemble Studio Theatre and the Drama Department, and currently Resident Director at the Mark Taper Forum in Los Angeles.

About the Artists

Lisa Peterson

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The Trojan War was fought between the Achaeans (also known as the Argives or the Danaans) and the Trojans. Gods and goddesses also played a role in the war and sometimes took sides, either aiding the Achaeans or the Trojans.

**THE ACHAEANS**

Achilles  Achilles is the son of the military man, Peleus, and the sea nymph, Thetis. The most powerful warrior of the Achaeans, Achilles commands the Myrmidons, soldiers from his homeland of Phthia in Greece. Proud and headstrong, he takes offense easily and reacts with blistering indignation. Achilles' wrath at Agamemnon for taking his war prize, the maiden Briseis, forms one of the main subjects in *An Iliad*.

Briseis  Briseis is the war prize of Achilles. When Agamemnon is forced to return Chryseis to her father, he appropriates Briseis as a compensation, sparking Achilles' great rage.

**THE TROJANS**

Andromache  Andromache is Hector's loving wife. Andromache begs Hector to withdraw from the war and save himself before the Achaeans kill him.

Cassandra  Cassandra is the daughter of King Priam and Queen Hecuba and sister to Hector and Paris.

Hector  Hector is the son of King Priam and Queen Hecuba. He is the mightiest warrior in the Trojan army. He mirrors Achilles in some of his flaws, but his bloodlust is not as great as that of Achilles. He is devoted to his wife, Andromache, and son, Astyanax, but resents his brother Paris for bringing war upon their family and city.

Odysseus  Odysseus is a fine warrior and the cleverest of the Achaeans' two best public speakers. He helps mediate between Agamemnon and Achilles during their quarrel and often prevents them from making rash decisions.

**THE GODS AND IMMORTALS**

Aphrodite  Aphrodite is the Goddess of love and daughter of Zeus. She is married to Hephaestus but maintains a romantic relationship with Ares. She supports Paris and the Trojans throughout the war, though she proves somewhat ineffectual in battle.

Apollo  Apollo is the son of Zeus and the twin brother of the goddess Artemis. Apollo is god of the arts and architecture. He supports the Trojans and often intervenes in the war on their behalf.

Aphrodite  Aphrodite is the goddess of love and daughter of Zeus. She is married to Hephaestus but maintains a romantic relationship with Ares. She supports Paris and the Trojans throughout the war, though she proves somewhat ineffectual in battle.

Andromache  Andromache is Hector's loving wife. She supports Paris and the Trojans throughout the war, though she proves somewhat ineffectual in battle.

Cassandra  Cassandra is the daughter of King Priam and Queen Hecuba. She is married to Paris but maintains a romantic relationship with Ares. She supports Paris and the Trojans throughout the war, though she proves somewhat ineffectual in battle.

Hecuba  Hecuba is the queen of Troy, wife of Priam and mother to Hector and Paris.

Hector  Hector is the son of King Priam and Queen Hecuba. He is the mightiest warrior in the Trojan army. He mirrors Achilles in some of his flaws, but his bloodlust is not as great as that of Achilles. He is devoted to his wife, Andromache, and son, Astyanax, but resents his brother Paris for bringing war upon their family and city.

Nestor  Nestor is the King of Pylos and the oldest Achaean commander. Although age has taken much of Nestor's physical strength, it has left him with great wisdom. He often acts as an advisor to the military commanders, especially Agamemnon. Nestor and Odysseus are the Achaeans' most doughty and persuasive orators, although Nestor's speeches are sometimes long-winded.

Patroclus  Patroclus is Achilles' beloved friend, companion and advisor. Patroclus grew up alongside the great warrior in Phthia, under the guardianship of Peleus. Devoted to both Achilles and the Achaeans cause, Patroclus stands by the enraged Achilles but also does Achilles' terrifying armor in an attempt to hold the Trojans back.
The World of the Play

Say It Like You Mean It

The Ancient Tradition of Storytelling
by Ian Chant

Over time, the simplest things tend to be the ones that survive. Nowhere is this fact more clear than in the case of storytelling. Across cultures, across ages, across any demographic you care to name, we began as storytellers, and we continue to be storytellers in one form or another to this day. Whether we find ourselves around a campfire or around the water cooler, on a first date or tucking the kids in for the night, the oral tradition of sharing a tale is so ingrained in us that most of us take it for granted. But the power of our words should give us pause for thought. After thousands of years and countless technological innovations, simply telling a story you’ve told or heard a hundred times before—an urban legend, a nursery rhyme, or an apocryphal piece of family history—remains as relatable as it was millennia ago.

In ancient Greece, the birthplace of the story related in *An Iliad*, few citizens could read, but almost all knew the myths and legends that had been passed down from their ancestors. These stories were told again and again because they meant something important. They were religious fables, ancient histories, myths, and morality tales, many so old that fact and fantasy were indiscernible and inextricable. They were told to entertain audiences and to remind listeners of the values of their society. They were told to celebrate in good times and to distract in bad. They were told to entertain audiences and to remind listeners that were alive, that continued to evolve and reflect the human condition.

This is the part of the unique charm of tales passed down through storytelling. Over the years, details change and stories are transformed. Like the fish that got away, aspects of the story become magnified. Figures become larger than life, and the tasks they set themselves to become earth-shaking.

The oral tradition also represents one of the earliest types of performance. In creating the tales that had been passed down to them through generations, storytellers often had to take on many roles, attempting to be all things to all people in their audience. Each tale thus became unique not only in content, but in the way it was told.

It’s a testament to the story of *The Iliad* that we are still telling the tale today. But it is just as remarkable that we are still telling it in much the same way. Our lighting is better, certainly, and our scripts more thoroughly edited, but the core of the thing remains the same—one person, better, certainly, and our scripts more thoroughly edited, telling the tale today. But it is just as remarkable that we are still telling it in much the same way.

But prior to this, the tales of *The Iliad* were stories like any other, passed down through generation after generation. They were stories that changed continually, remaining dynamic over the ages. They were stories that were alive, that continued to evolve and reflect the character and style of each successive generation.

The Iliad is generally believed to have been composed around 700 B.C. and has been in circulation ever since. The reason for this is not difficult to fathom. In addition to being a poem of monumental beauty and the origin of some of literature's most haunting characters, *The Iliad* is first and foremost a martial epic, its subject warriors and war. If we took any period of a hundred years in the last thousand, it has been calculated, we could expect, on average, ninety-four of these years to be occupied with large scale conflicts in one or more parts of the world. This enduring, seemingly ineradicable fact of war, is, in *The Iliad's* wide and sweeping panorama, as intrinsic and tragic a component of the human condition as our very mortality.

Today headlines from across the world keep Homer close to us. The dragging of the bodies of U.S. Rangers behind their killers’ jeep through the streets of Mogadishu evoked the terrible fate of the Trojan hero Hector. A young American widow was reported as saying that she has tried to close the door against the soldier who appeared at her home in dress greens, believing that if she could keep him from speaking his news of her husband in Iraq, she could keep his news at bay—a small domestic scene that conjured that heartbreaking words of Hector’s widow, Andromache: “May what I say come never close to my ear; yet dreadfully I fear…” *The Iliad’s* evocation of war’s devastation, then, is as resonant today—perhaps especially today—as it was in Homer’s Dark Age. Now, as at any time, Homer’s masterpiece is an epic for our time.

The Iliad is the foundation of Greek studies in the schools of the Western world. When the Roman Empire split in the sixth century A.D., knowledge of Greek, which flourished Byzantium, or the Eastern Empire, all but vanished in the West. The Iliad itself was forgotten, and in its stead stories about the war at Troy flourished, which, along with romantic sagas about Alexander the Great, formed the most popular “classical” material of the Middle Ages. The primary sources for these post-Homeric renderings of the matter of Troy, as the body of romance came to be called, were the Latin prose works of Dictys of Crete and Dares of Phrygia, dated to the third and fifth or sixth centuries A.D., respectively—both of whom were fancifully believed to have been eyewitnesses to the Great War at Troy. In these Latin renderings, Achilles, the complex hero of Homer’s Iliad, stripped of his defining speeches, devolved into a brutal, if heroically brave, action figure. In the hands of the medieval writers, sentiment hardened further against him. The twelfth-century Roman de Troie takes pains, in thirty thousand lines of French verse, to ensure that Achilles is depicted as in all ways inferior, even in martial prowess, to the noble ‘Troyan hero, Hector. Such interpretive touches would remain potent down the ages, arguably into the present time.

Knowledge of Homer was brought to Rome in the third century B.C., by one Livius Andronicus, who composed Latin versions or imitations (as opposed to faithful translations) of the Odyssey, Homer’s sequel to *The Iliad*, as well as of the works of the Athenian playwrights. Perhaps more important, he established a curriculum of study of the Greek language and letters, of which Homer’s epic poems took pride of place. The centrality of Homer’s epics to the education of the Roman elite was never displaced, and indeed, the works of Homer formed the foundation of Greek studies in the schools of the empire. Young Octavian, the future emperor Augustus, is reported to have quoted *The Iliad* following the death of his uncle Caesar—“I must die soon, then, since I was not to stand by my companion / when he was killed.” Horace and Pliny knew Homer, Cicero criticized him, while Virgil’s epic imitation borders at times on plagiarism.

English, as late as the Elizabethan age, was largely Greekless, and the first translation of a substantial portion of the Iliad (ten books) into the English language was made by way of a French text and published in 1581 by Arthur Hall, a member of Parliament until he suffered disgrace for, among other offenses, “sundry lewd speeches” and debt. His translation flirts with doggerel:

And often shall the passers by say, Look who yonder is, The wife of valiant Hector’s, Whos is the field with him? Such fame and great renown do get, when Greekus composed round The great and mighty town of Troy and tore it to the ground.

Then, between 1599 and 1611, George Chapman’s landmark translation of The Iliad appeared, made from Greek and other texts (and Latin translations), and was followed in five years by his translation of the Odyssey. It was the latter that, two hundred years later, Keats, who did not know Greek, read and commemorated
Tragic Heroes

What Today’s Veterans Can Learn from Tales of the Trojan War

by Brian Mockenhaupt

While the play is adapted from Homer’s Iliad from over 2,400 years ago, an Iliad does not solely focus on the past and in fact, alludes to many recent wars and discusses general themes of war that could apply to current conflicts. We have included this article to show students that war experiences transcend time, and experiences from warriors in the Trojan War can compare to soldiers fighting in war today.

Spit flies from the wounded soldier’s mouth and his face pulses, red. “Death! Where are you!” roars Philoctetes, played by the actor Paul Giamatti. “Why after all these years of calling, have you not appeared?” About 200 military mental-health experts watched him spiral into despair as they worked their way through box lunches, squeezed into a suburban-D.C. hotel conference room. “Earth, swallow this body whole, receive me just as I am, for I can’t stand it any longer.” he moans, breathless.

“I am wretched, afflicted, and alone.” says Ajax’s wife, Tecmessa, played by the actress Elizabeth Marvel, of Burn After Reading. “He started to make these low sounds, the kind I never thought I’d hear him make, for he always told me that crying was for women and cowards.” Ajax won fame in the Trojan War as a feared warrior, but he spirals into a rage when his generals give the slain Achilles’ armor to his rival, Odysseus, Ajax plots to kill him, his superiors, and the gods intervene, and Ajax instead mistakenly slaughters a field of cows and sheep. The shame overwhelms him. “Do you see what I’ve done?” the Brodeeds and Hill Camp wails. “I’ve killed these harmless barnyard animals with my hands. What a joke my life has become, my reputation, my sense of honor!” Beyond consolation, Ajax plunges the hilt of his sword into the ground and falls upon the blade.

While Ajax bears warnings about the failure to seek help and the potential importance of caregivers, Philoctetes delivers a measure of hope. The eponymous hero lays bare his anguish and loneliness and asks his comrades for aid. They take him into their care, delivering him from his isolation and pain. War will cause harms, but the severity and duration of psychological wounds can be contained when help is provided and sought. Otherwise, we have Ajax, dead upon his sword.
Discussion Questions and Exploration Activities

1. What does the character of the poet add to the storyline of An Iliad? Do you think it would make a difference if the play had written with a different type of character telling the story? How does his narration give your further insight into the lives of the characters?

2. For the next ten minutes, have students brainstorm their three favorite stories. They can be either fictional stories that have been told to them by friends and family or events in their life that they wish to share. After each student has come up with a couple of stories, have them share their favorite one to a partner or the whole class and encourage them to divulge every detail.

3. Explore the history of the Trojan War. What were the two groups fighting? Which soldiers were fighting and on what side were they fighting? What was the basic timeline of the war?

4. Spend some time having students share their own personal stories about war. Do you know someone who has fought in a war? Has someone that you cared for died fighting in a war? In other words, how has war impacted you?

Original Sources and Links to Further Research

Synopsis
http://www.seattlerep.org/Plays/0910/IL/
http://www.sparknotes.com/lit/iliad/summary.html

About the Artists
http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0641354/
http://workinginthetheater.com/biography/detail/denis_ohare
http://americantheatrewing.org/biography/detail/lisa_peterson/

Meet the Characters
http://www.sparknotes.com/lit/iliad/characters.html

The World of the Play
http://www.seattlerep.org/Plays/0910/IL/DeeperLookSay.aspx#top


Images from the following websites: heritage-history.com, about.com, discovery.com, wikimedia.org, theatlantic.com