

THOMAS G. MCGUIRE

---

## Bryan Doerries Discusses the Theater of War & the Palliative of Shared Suffering

In ancient fifth-century Athens, if you had something of vital importance to say, you wrote a play. The most consequential utterances on the Attic tragic stage, commentary encompassing all manner of life and death issues, very often came from the mouths of characters and choruses created by soldier-playwrights such as Aeschylus and Sophocles. During a century in which Athens found itself at war for over eight decades, one of the most pressing preoccupations of soldier-playwrights was the urgent, existential need to investigate the human toll of Athen's military adventures.

Fast forward two millennia to an embattled twenty-first-century America. In early 2008, an unknown, thirty-something theater director and translator of ancient Greek drama named Bryan Doerries runs head-on into a slew of articles detailing the devastating mental health problems and vexing reintegration challenges that significant numbers of troops find themselves facing upon return from America's recent wars. Doerries begins asking complex questions about the costs and consequences of America's protracted overseas conflicts.

In response to these troubling newspaper accounts, Doerries does not try his hand at writing his own modern-day tragedies. Instead, he sets about the translator's task by not only giving the ancient wisdom of Aeschylus and Sophocles an afterlife in translation, but also finding a viable way to share these tragedians' insights into loss, grief, shame, and suffering with military audiences. Hence, the birth in 2008 of Doerries' Brooklyn-based theater project called Theater of War. A self-described

“evangelist” for classical literature, Doerries formed Theater of War based on the hunch that intense, hard-driving performances of his clipped, precision-tuned versions of Greek tragedy could spark vital conversation about the psychological and physical wounds inflicted upon warriors by war. His intuition was spot on. WLA recently connected with Doerries to discuss how he transformed that hunch into the phenomenal success story that Theater of War and Doerries’ numerous other social impact theater spin-offs have become.

Doerries details various aspects of that story as well as the larger narrative of tragic theater’s origin in two new books—a memoir, *The Theater of War: What Ancient Greek Tragedy Can Teach Us Today*, and a collection of translations, *All That You’ve Seen Here is God: New Versions of Four Greek Tragedies*. We asked Doerries to take time out from an intense schedule to discuss not only his books, which are getting exceptional reviews in places like the *Science Times* and *The New York Times Book Review*, but the reception of his various ground-breaking social impact theater projects, his views on ancient tragedy, and the relevance of this ancient art form for the military community in the wake of our recent wars.

Since its inception, Theater of War has delivered more than three hundred dramatic readings of Greek tragedies to military and civilian audiences. In venues across the globe, upwards of sixty thousand people—including active duty troops, their families, veterans, and civilians—have experienced Theater of War’s potent dramatic readings of *Ajax* and *Philoctetes*, two tragedies written in the fifth century by the Athenian general, Sophocles.

It may, at first glance, seem improbable, even bizarre, to imagine battle-hardened Soldiers, Sailors, Marines and Airmen sitting through, let alone caring about, a program of long-winded hexameter soliloquies from oddly named characters like Neoptolemus and Tecmessa. They typically do not, as Doerries is quick to note. They do not begin caring until they are somehow invited to see a reflection of themselves in the characters on stage. That is the point of the innovative dramatic reading formula he created to bring wounded warriors and their families the transformative experience of viewing and talking about Sophoclean tragedy. Doerries deploys a dramatic delivery system that takes its cue from fifth-century Athens. Consisting of dramatic readings drawn from the ancient texts Doerries has translated, readings which are then followed by lively discussion, Theater of War riffs on the experiential model of Attic tragic theater. As Doerries explains in his introduction to *All That You’ve Seen Here is God*, his inspiration for Theater of War was the performance dynamic created by Greek tragedians, particularly Sophocles, who was not only a twenty-four time winner of the Theater of Dionysus prize for

best tragedy, but a *strategos* who used tragedy to help Athenian citizens process the pain of protracted war:

Sophocles' ability to speak to veterans and their families nearly twenty-five hundred years after his plays were first performed is no coincidence. It is well established that he served as a general . . . during a century in which Athens saw nearly eighty years of war. His plays were originally performed for an audience of some seventeen thousand citizen-soldiers. To be a citizen at that time meant to be a soldier. Even the actors were likely to have been combat veterans. Many of the hard-won insights of ancient Greek tragedy were forged in the crucible of war. (xii)

What Doerries has created in Theater of War, then, is essentially a modified replica of the Theater of Dionysus. In his translation and staging of Sophocles' plays, Doerries handles tragedy like the transformative instrument of healing it was meant to be, a powerfully humanizing tool developed by soldier-poets like Sophocles to help Athenian troops navigate the trauma and suffering that accompanies going to and returning from war. Like the ancient Greeks, Doerries establishes, in this updated version of tragic theater, a space that allows for the "communalizing of war experience" (to borrow a pivotal phrase from Jonathan Shay which Doerries quotes at key junctures in the interview). In his translator's introduction Doerries explains why tragedy is so well suited to the creation of a communal experience: "Tragedy is an ancient military technology, a form of story-telling that evokes powerful emotions in order to erode stigmas, elicit empathy, generate dialogue, and stir citizens to action" (xiii). (To watch Theater of War in action go to PopTech Talk at [http://poptech.org/popcasts/bryan\\_dorries\\_theater\\_of\\_war](http://poptech.org/popcasts/bryan_dorries_theater_of_war))

Taking the ancient Greeks' lead on another score, Doerries insists that Greek tragedy is no mere literary artifact. To treat it as such is to stifle its transformative potential. In his books and interview reflections, Doerries explores this view at length, from several different angles, and he is emphatic on this point: Greek tragedy lacks vibrancy and relevance sitting on a book shelf. Tragedy comes fully alive and transforms our being only through the tactile, lived experience of performative art. "[Tragedy is] a blueprint for felt experience," Doerries tells me at one point. "Tragedies don't mean anything. They do something—physically, biochemically, spiritually—to us. They move us out of our heads and into our guts. They frame our response to ethical issues with emotions that help us to see more than one perspective. They make us profoundly uncomfortable in the presence of

others, thereby forging a new way of connecting and relating with people who may not typically share our views.”

From start to finish, a Theater of War performance not only exploits, but expands upon tragedy’s inherent ability to stimulate powerful emotional and intellectual responses. But Doerries brings something extra to the tragic table. The performance formula he has perfected serves up high-voltage theater the likes of which most people have never experienced. Housed in Doerries’ innovative, hard-driving two-stress or three-stress lines, the gravitas of Sophocles’ wartime wisdom unfolds with an economy of expression and violent urgency one might more readily expect from a Flannery O’Connor story rather than an ancient Greek play. Like lightning bolts out of a clear blue sky, the explosive energy of Doerries’ productions jolts viewers into a higher state of awareness about the visible and invisible wounds warriors carry home with them. “This is not your grandmother’s reading,” Doerries says in the interview, “but a reading on steroids, in which spit is flying, tears are flowing, vocal cords are being shredded. It is a full-on assault.” (see Academy Award-nominated actor Paul Giamatti go for broke as an enraged Philoctetes at <http://www.npr.org/player/v2/mediaPlayer.html?action=1&t=1&islist=false&id=97413320&m=97444860> )

The Theater of War assault aims to stop people in their tracks so they can take stock of their own afflictions as well as the pain of others. At the heart of Doerries’ conception of tragic theater is the conviction that shared suffering is suffering attenuated. To this end, Theater of War temporarily stakes out a kind of demilitarized zone—a hospitable rather than a hostile space, a healing space, where suffering and wounded troops can begin talking about their own visible and invisible injuries by sharing with one another their gut responses to the war stories dramatized on stage, tragic stories that grapple with the kinds of existential issues soldiers have grappled with from time immemorial: isolation, grief, loss, guilt, anger, fear, mistrust, betrayal, the list goes on. Family members and other civilians in the audience also contribute to the dialogue by sharing their own stories about the way war has affected them and those they have sent off to war. (Watch the Theater of War trailer at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RHTVBq5nkj8>)

When I asked Doerries why he thrusts audiences and readers into such a bold confrontation with the problem of pain, his reply was immediate and emphatic: “Another person’s pain is profoundly isolating and ultimately unknowable. But through the mediation of tragedy, we can use our imagination, our empathy, and our shared sense of discomfort to experience suffering together. This brings

us closer, and out of isolation, and into profound communion. And that is our mission.”

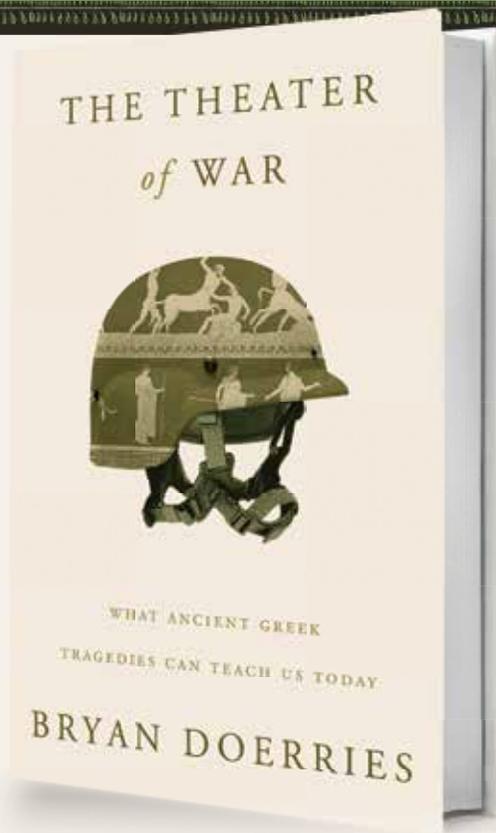
If the genius of Theater of War owes its success to Doerries’ gift for identifying correspondences between the ancient and modern world, it is important to note that this poet-translator’s gift goes well beyond an ability to connect the experiences of ancient warriors with those of twentieth-century soldiers. Doerries is a kind of master bridge builder, a visionary who sees correspondences and linkages where others might see only differences. Drawing upon a lifetime of reading the classics, Doerries knows that suffering is what unites human beings across cultures, across time. He also knows that people need not bear their affliction alone. He leverages the power of tragedy to spread the idea that it is only through a shared acceptance and embrace of one another’s pain that we can succeed in overcoming tragedy.

Approaching tragedy in this way, Doerries has cracked the code for spreading the good news of tragedy not just to troops, but to anybody who has been cold-cocked by unspeakable pain. What Doerries is doing is building bridges, forging connections between suffering souls. His success with Theater of War in military communities inspired Doerries to take his insight into the healing power of tragedy to a broader audience beyond the military. Through an initiative called the Soldiers and Citizens Tour, Doerries has worked tirelessly over the last two years to bridge the ever widening civilian-military gap by bringing Greek tragedy to combined audiences of military members and civilians who often have little or no connection to the military.

Doerries has also parlayed insights gleaned from working with wounded warriors into other social impact theater enterprises. Theater of War has since spawned fourteen other theater projects which Doerries carries to a variety of traumatized communities. Each month, Doerries and his cast perform several dramatic readings—mostly of Greek tragedy, but also adaptations of works such as *The Book of Job* (watch the Book of Job Project documentary at <https://vimeo.com/51382808>)—aimed at beginning the healing process in marginalized, forgotten communities which are home to some of society’s most vulnerable members: prison inmates, the terminally ill, and victims of neglect, sexual abuse, and natural disasters.

In all of these bridge building efforts, Doerries is doing something vital, something restorative for hurting individuals and communities across the nation. Theater of War is a model of how we can start opening a space for shared suffering. Through the good news of tragedy, Doerries gives us an invaluable vision of what a truly compassionate nation would look like.

# WHAT GREEK TRAGEDIES CAN TEACH US TODAY



## ALL THAT YOU'VE SEEN HERE IS GOD

“These provocative, hard-driving renderings of Greek tragedy incarnate the enormous learning, keen auditory imagination, and expansive moral vision of Bryan Doerries, a deeply humane poet-translator who has crafted some of the most potent interpretations of ancient tragedy available in the English language.”

—THOMAS G. MCGUIRE,

Poetry Editor, *War, Literature, & the Arts*,  
United States Air Force Academy

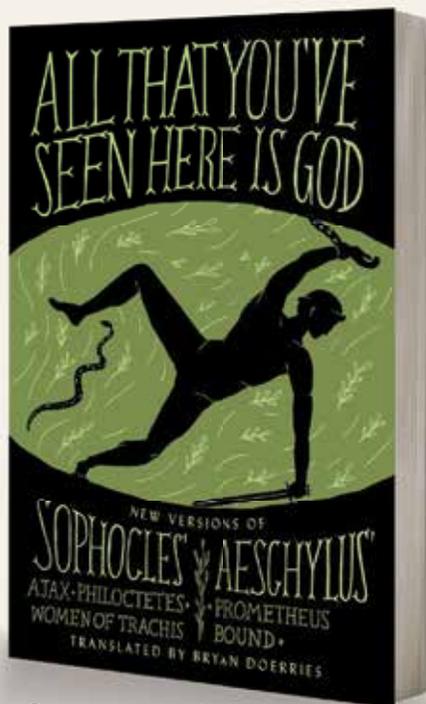
“A brilliant, original, and harrowing work.” —ANDRE GREGORY

## THE THEATER *of* WAR

Theater director Bryan Doerries has for years led an innovative project that produces ancient tragedies for current and returning soldiers and Marines, addicts, tornado and hurricane survivors, and a wide range of other at-risk people in society. This is the personal and deeply passionate story of a life devoted to reclaiming the timeless power of an ancient artistic tradition to comfort the afflicted.

“Enthralling, gracefully written, and urgently important....Bryan Doerries has given us a gift to be treasured.”

—TIM O'BRIEN



PANTHEON



VINTAGE

Interviewer: *September is proving to be a very busy month for you—what with book launches and signings, plus more than a dozen performances of Greek tragedy for military audiences across the country. So thank you for agreeing to discuss your latest publications and Theater of War which you'll be taking from Delaware to Los Angeles with many other performance stops all over the U.S. this month.*

Doerries: Thanks for the opportunity. September, which is National Suicide Prevention Month, is always the busiest time of year for Theater of War. Adding the book events to our already-bustling tour schedule has definitely been a challenge, but it's a great problem to have. As with anything entrepreneurial, the calendar is usually either feast or famine. I'm delighted to say this fall is the former and not the latter.

Interviewer: *Theater of War's remarkable success has been a major driving force behind your work on your two new books, hasn't it?*

Doerries: Yes, the big revelation for me, which is the central argument of my memoir, is that audiences who have lived lives of mythological proportions, who have faced the stakes of life and death, who have loved and lost, and who know the meaning of sacrifice, know more than I ever will about the ancient Greek tragedies we perform. The audience always knows more. It was out of this idea that Theater of War was born, and in many ways the book is the distillation of what I've learned from the audiences for whom we perform—including soldiers, prison guards, doctors, hospice nurses, addicts, and survivors of natural and man-made disasters.

Interviewer: *We invited you to discuss your two new books, but for our readers who aren't familiar with Theater of War, perhaps it would be useful for you to share a bit more about the genesis of this project and your involvement as its founder and director.*

Doerries: I founded Theater of War in 2008 on a hunch that ancient Greek war plays, written by a general named Sophocles, would speak powerfully to contemporary military audiences, creating a safe space and vocabulary for openly discussing the visible and invisible wounds of war. Our first performance was for 400 Marines and their spouses in a Hyatt Ballroom in San Diego. At the time, I knew no one in the military. That August, I travelled to California with four New York actors—including Jesse Eisenberg and David Strathairn—and we presented a dramatic reading of six scenes from Sophocles' *Ajax* and *Philoctetes*. We had

scheduled a 45-minute discussion after the reading, but the discussion lasted several hours and had to be cut off late into the night. Following the performance, dozens of Marines and their loved ones stood up, approached microphones in the aisles, and proceeded to quote lines from Sophocles' plays (from memory) and then used them as a point of departure for sharing deeply personal, harrowing stories. We knew that night that we had uncovered a very powerful tool, but nothing would ever prepare us for what happened next.

Interviewer: *Tell us what happened next. How did Theater of War evolve from its humble origins into what it has become?*

Doerries: Within a few months of that first performance, I found myself sitting in a general's office in Virginia, just down the road from the Pentagon, fielding questions about what it would take to bring Theater of War to scale. The general began the conversation by saying that she envisioned presenting the project in football stadiums for 30,000 soldiers at a time. Of course, that wasn't the right scale for an intimate discussion, but that was the scale of the problem the military faced at the time—with PTSD, TBI, the skyrocketing suicide rate, and the stigma that stood in the way of service members seeking help. Out of that conversation grew one of the most ambitious partnerships between artists and the Department of Defense in American history. Since that time, we have presented more than 320 performances of Sophocles' war plays for over 60,000 service members, veteran, their families, and concerned citizens all over the world. And out of Theater of War fourteen other projects have grown, which all use literary texts—mostly ancient plays—as a catalyst for helping communities that have been visited by trauma begin to heal.

Interviewer: *A few hundred performances to over 60,000 people—that's a lot of time on the road and many different stops along the way. Can you give us an idea of the different places you've taken Theater of War performances?*

Doerries: We've performed Theater of War in hundreds of locations all over the world, from military installations throughout the US, to Japan to Germany to Denmark to the detention camps in Guantanamo Bay, and in settings as varied as the Pentagon, homeless shelters, VA hospitals, universities, chapels, museums, and theaters such as Brooklyn Academy of Music.

Interviewer: *Along with Bryan O'Byrne, as Philoctetes, and Benjamin Busch, as Odysseus, you brought Theater of War to the Air Force Academy earlier this year and performed Philoctetes for over 2000 people. About a quarter of those attendees were present in response to a course requirement, but I'm happy to report nearly three-quarters of that audience voluntarily attended. But from what I understand, Theater of War doesn't generally play to a high percentage of audience members who've freely chosen to come. Can you tell us who comes to see Theater of War on military installations and why they come?*

Doerries: We present Theater of War on military installations as training events, in which case the audience is typically composed of hundreds of service members who have mandatorily been made—or “voluntold,” as is said in the military—to watch our renderings of Sophocles' plays. We also perform in public venues for very diverse, mixed civilian/military audiences, with the hope of bridging the ever-growing divide between those cultures.

Interviewer: *I'm curious how playing to such an audience generally works out. Do you encounter resistance from “voluntolds”?*

Doerries: I love resistant audiences. As far as I'm concerned, the lower the audience members' expectations are, the better, because that means they have further to travel—emotionally and intellectually—over the course of a performance. That being said, I also revel in performing for very diverse audiences, where the discussion can be extremely rich and surprising. One of my most favorite audiences was in Cambridge, Massachusetts, where we had in attendance an amazing array of people: veterans of all ages and their families, soldiers in uniform, anti-war activists, conscientious objectors, middle eastern women, Tibetan monks, and concerned citizens, all sitting shoulder-to-shoulder, engaging in incredibly powerful dialogue about the cost of war, but without the usual defenses and judgment, and framed by shared discomfort and compassion.

Interviewer: *Contemplating what you've written and observing the way you frame Theater of War performances, I've concluded that your work essentially comes down to what might be called a serious confrontation with the problem of pain. Is it correct to speak this way about your “mission”?*

Doerries: Yes. That is the central concern of my work. Another person's pain is profoundly isolating and ultimately unknowable. But through the mediation of tragedy, we can use our imagination, our empathy, and our shared sense of discomfort to experience suffering together. This brings us closer, and out of isolation, and into profound communion. And that is our mission.

Interviewer: *As a college teacher, I'm keenly aware of the bum rap slapped on Greek tragedy. Many people have sadly never been exposed to the healing power inherent in Greek tragedy. But you've clearly developed a recipe for talking about Greek tragedy and staging it in a way that's not only resonating with contemporary audiences, but also moving them profoundly. So what is it that explains the distaste people sometimes have for Greek tragedy and how does the Theater of War experience combat negative perceptions of tragedy?*

Doerries: I think many of the translations that students encounter in school present barriers to the direct experience of Greek tragedy. Tragedy isn't simply a literary artifact of the fifth century BC. It's a blueprint for felt experience. Tragedies don't mean anything. They do something—physically, biochemically, spiritually—to us. They move us out of our heads and into our guts. They frame our response to ethical issues with emotions that help us to see more than one perspective. They make us profoundly uncomfortable in the presence of others, thereby forging a new way of connecting and relating with people who may not typically share our views. Tragedy must constantly be reinvented and imbued with new life if it is to work. And so I think tragedies get a bum rap because they require of us a great deal of interrogation and imagination in order to remain fresh. It's for this reason that so many translations, productions, and classroom experiences can feel so deadly.

Interviewer: *Theater of War will soon be eight years old. Can you single out any aspect of the plays or your approach to staging them that might help explain Theater of War's enduring appeal?*

Doerries: When service members, veterans, and their families see their own private struggles reflected in a 2,500-year-old story, it seems to bring them relief. Relief to know that they are not alone in their communities, not alone across the country and the world, and not alone across time. That being said, the plays are only half of the equation. The restorative, healing properties of Greek tragedy do not reside in the plays, but in the audience that comes together—as a community—to bear

witness to the truth of what the plays transmit to us across millennia. People often ask me, where is the hope in tragedy? The hope is in our facing it together.

Interviewer: *Can we switch to your fine memoir now? One of many the strengths of Theater of War: What Ancient Greek Tragedies Can Teach Us Today is the way it details how your sense of tragedy helped you navigate the terrible loss of your girlfriend to cystic fibrosis and your father to diabetes. You show you have skin in the game when talking about the way Greek tragedy can help anybody work through personal tragedy and pain. Part of your apologia for tragedy rides on the wings of Aristotle's description of the genre in the Poetics, but you carry your reading of Aristotle's tragic paradigm further by providing concrete examples of audience responses to your performances. Without giving away too much of the book, would you mind sharing a few memorable moments from what we might call your Theater of War highlights reel?*

Doerries: The beauty of Sophocles' plays is that they lend themselves to seemingly limitless interpretation. Theater of War is not about fixing meaning, but opening it up. So whatever people say during the discussions, I try to find a way to validate it, because anything that is said is, in fact, a valid response, which needs to be acknowledged or heard, no matter how ugly or challenging it may be.

We've had audience members stand up and say, "This is my tenth time seeing Theater of War," and then go on to convey fresh, earth-shattering insights based on how they are responding to the plays in that very moment. One of the reasons I suspect the project is working is that people keep returning to it, over and over, reporting they experience it differently each time.

One of the first people to speak at a Theater of War performance—that night in San Diego—was a military spouse, who said, "Hello, my name is Marshelle Waddell. I am the proud mother of a Marine and the wife of a Navy Seal. My husband went away four times to war, and each time he returned, like Ajax, dragging invisible bodies into our house. The war came home with him. And to quote from the play, 'Our home is a slaughterhouse.'" This has always stuck with me, because it exemplifies how military audiences usually respond, weaving Sophocles' plays into their personal stories.

I could list countless examples like this, but would prefer people read the book to find out more.

Interviewer: *I've witnessed the positive therapeutic effect these plays can exert on troops and veterans. Your book is particularly strong as you recount how you've seen*

*this happening again and again with service members, but I wonder if you could speak about the salubrious effects the plays have on the communities where military members and veterans find themselves, in the families and towns where troops are trying to put their lives together after war.*

Doerries: We've had audience members contact us and say: "I spoke to my wife for the first time about my war experiences after the performance. Theater of War saved my marriage." Or I had a young enlisted Marine show up to a performance on the west coast, after recently seeing one on the east coast. When I asked him why he'd come again, he said, "Last time, I recognized myself in the characters and the next morning checked myself into a 28-day treatment program. The play saved my career and my life." I had a teenage girl contact me to say that Theater of War had saved her family, after her parents began talking openly about the impact of the war in their home. There was even an act of violence that Theater of War averted, when a soldier came forward during a performance to say that he had been plotting an act of violence against his unit members, who had been teasing him mercilessly about his wife's infidelity. The plays seem to help service members to see themselves and their struggles, giving them newfound perspective and resolve to pursue healthier choices.

Interviewer: *Some of our readers may not know the cornerstone plays of Theater of War, Ajax and Philoctetes. But even if readers have some familiarity with them, they will probably not be as familiar with these two plays as they are with Sophocles' big three—Antigone, Oedipus Rex, and Oedipus at Colonus. Can you boil down Ajax and Philoctetes into their bare essentials to help readers understand their appeal to contemporary audiences?*

Doerries: *Ajax* tells the story of a warrior who slips into a depression near the end of The Trojan War, after losing his best friend, Achilles. Feeling betrayed, when passed over for an award, Ajax attempts to murder his commanding officers, fails, and—ultimately—takes his own life. The play tells the story of the events leading up to his suicide, as well as the story of his wife and troops' attempt to intervene before it's too late. Finally, the play depicts the devastating impact of Ajax' suicide upon his family and chain of command.

*Philoctetes* tells the story of a decorated warrior who is abandoned on a deserted island because of mysterious chronic illness that he contracts on the way to the Trojan War. Nine years later, the Greeks learn from an oracle that in order to win

the war they must rescue him from the island. When they finally come for him, the wounded warrior must overcome nine long years of festering resentment and shame in order to accept help from the very men who betrayed him.

Interviewer: *In other words, Ajax and Philoctetes depict soldiers being thrown to the curb by their commanders, their comrades, and even the larger community. Is Sophocles' thematic preoccupation with the issues of abandonment, betrayal, and isolation one reason the plays resonate with military audiences? Do you find troops are talking about these matters in terms of their personal experience?*

Doerries: One of the core themes of *Ajax* is betrayal. Through the play, it seems Sophocles is asking us to look at how betrayal can radiate out from a single point of impact to poison an entire community. I am not a mental health professional, but I would argue that one of the signature wounds of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan is betrayal—both on the battlefield and the home front—what Jonathan Shay and others are now calling “moral injury.” Also, anyone who has worked in a complex hierarchy, such as the military, has felt betrayed or devalued at one point or another. So military audiences need not have deployed to conflict zones to relate to Sophocles' *Ajax*.

Interviewer: *What about Philoctetes? This play explores the problem of betrayal, but it shows how trauma complicates the rebuilding of trust and a fostering an authentic sense of responsibility to others. Is that one of the reasons this play speaks to so many troops nowadays?*

Doerries: *Philoctetes* may be more relevant now than it was in 409 BC, when it premiered in Athens. Through modern warfare and modern medicine, we have developed the ability to abandon veterans on islands of chronic illness for far longer than nine years. We have created an unprecedented, vast subclass of people who in any other conflict would have lost their lives to the injuries they incurred, but will now live on with grievous, sometimes catastrophic physical and psychology injuries for decades to come. Through *Philoctetes*, Sophocles seems to be asking us, “How we are going to get them off their islands?”

Interviewer: *In your two books and during Theater of War performances, you draw implicit and explicit parallels between the circumstances faced by Sophocles and his audience and our own predicament as a nation which has been at war for decades now.*

*How does a historical sense of fifth-century Athens help us appreciate what Sophocles was up to with these plays? Is such a sense necessary?*

Doerries: It's not the only lens through which Sophocles' tragedies should be viewed, but it's a crucial one for understanding the thoughts and concerns of Athenian citizens in the fifth-century. We know that Sophocles was elected general twice in the Athenian army. We know the actors would have been combat veterans. We know that Sophocles' audience was composed of as many as 17,000 citizen-soldiers in a century in which the Athenians saw nearly 80 years of war. Through this lens, it is hard not to see Sophocles' plays as a military technology, developed and honed for the purpose of, as Shay puts it, "communalizing the experience of war." And like any good piece of technology, one that was built to last, when you plug Sophocles' war plays back into the type of audience for whom they were intended, the plays seem to know what to do, and so does the audience.

*Interviewer: You've already discussed the psychological impact these plays can have on contemporary audiences, but to help readers understand more fully the Theater of War experience, it's probably instructive to explain the structure and flow of a Theater of War performance. What I'm especially interested in hearing why you insist on audience involvement in the performance and how you manage to elicit such involvement.*

Doerries: The objective of a Theater of War performance is to create the conditions for a conversation that would not have occurred otherwise. Everything that comes before the discussion is a pep rally, so to speak, for what happens in the audience. Theater of War is a project that, in an attempt to forge a new relationship between theater and audience, privileges the audience response over the plays. We start with a reading of scenes from Sophocles' plays—not your grandmother's reading, but a reading on steroids, in which spit is flying, tears are flowing, vocal cords are being shredded. It's a full-on assault. After the reading, we invite four members of the community in which we are performing—typically a service member, a spouse, a veteran, and a mental health professional—to come up and respond for a few minutes, from their hearts and guts, to what they heard and saw in plays that resonated with them personally and professionally. Then, when they are done with their brief opening remarks, I go out into the audience with a wireless microphone and ask questions that are designed to spark open, honest dialogue. If I had one word to define Theater of War, it's permission. How many different ways

can we give you permission to share your story or to relate your experiences to an ancient narrative? So the questions begin with themes like: “Why do you think Sophocles—a general—wrote these plays and staged them for his community?” and then extend to opportunities for more personal moments of reflection, such as: “If Ajax was someone you knew, and you had a chance to be with him when he was thinking about killing himself, what would you say or do?”

One of the most effective tools of Theater of War is distance. By presenting ancient plays, we’re not putting the audience on the defensive by saying, “This is you.” We are simply asking audiences to reflect upon what they see of themselves in the ancient plays we perform.

*Interviewer: My suspicion is that the tragedies likely appealed to ancient audiences for similar reasons. The plays didn't directly speak to a fifth-century Athenian by saying, "This is you." Rather, they gained intellectual traction and emotional buy-in as a result of the safe distance provided by the representation of mythic characters and situations. So you're capitalizing on a kind of safe zone already built into the plays. But even as the plays hook contemporary audiences in this way, the rapid-fire pacing and sense of urgency you've written into your translations (plus the inherent locomotion of Sophocles' plots) pushes the characters headlong and relentlessly toward disaster—and the audience is on the same boat as the characters, just waiting for the Titanic to sink. What I'm suggesting is that Theater of War productions somehow manage to crank up the expansion and release of tragic tension. What kinds of moves have you made in your approach to translation or your staging of the plays that help to produce the kind of tension I'm talking about?*

Doerries: A veteran’s court judge who attended a performance of Theater of War in Michigan remarked that watching *Ajax* unfold was like “watching a 747 fall out of the sky and crash at his feet in real time, while not being able to do anything about it.” That’s what I’m going for in my translations. Drama, as Aristotle points out in his *Poetics*, is action. And, as a director and translator of ancient Greek tragedies, my aim to render the action as clearly as possible—from moment to moment—laying bare the tremendous urgency with which the characters are speaking, and the life and death stakes of every line, of every word—not just for those on stage, but for people sitting in the audience. When people are fighting for their lives, or for the life of someone they love, they don’t have time to breathe. My translations are designed to take the unnecessary air out of the text and out of the room.

Interviewer: *Exactly, you don't leave any extra fat on Sophocles' already lean bones. As a result, palpable energy radiates from your translations, both on the page and as they come to life on stage. I have a hunch that some of this energy comes from a special quality unique to your renderings: the innovative, hard-driving two-or-three stress lines in which you've housed the dialogue. There's no excess breath or extra air in any of your lines or the space between lines. But apart from the propulsive power of your compressed poetic lines help me understand what else it is about your distinctive translation and presentation of Sophocles' plays that makes Theater of War performances so dynamic. Are there other ways audience participation revs up the Theater of War experience?*

Doerries: All it takes is a few people in the room who have skin in the game to reframe how the rest of the audience sees and hears the plays. Those people don't have to be on stage. In fact, it's more powerful when they're in the audience. This reframing doesn't just happen during the discussions, but subtly and almost imperceptibly during the performances themselves. We are highly sensitive beings. When someone in the room is listening or reacting to a performance—even in silence—with a heightened level of attention, like a tuning fork, we pick up on the vibration and our collective level of attention is heightened. I've seen this happen with an audience that is 90% civilian and 10% military, and I still marvel at it every time. Though I have no way of proving it, I suspect that this is what it must have been like in ancient Athens in the Theater of Dionysus—those who hadn't been to war (such as the hoplite cadets) picking up on the reactions and vibrations on those who had, and then receiving the plays in a different, more heightened and urgent, way.

Interviewer: *You discuss the idea of "audience as translator" in your books. Because this notion is an essential part of the Theater of War experience, I wonder if you could explain it, please.*

Doerries: The military communicates in a highly coded manner. My notion of the "audience as translator" is that some of the codes that service members and their loved ones use to communicate today can act as a cipher for cracking the code that ancient warriors used to articulate and describe the experience of war. This decoding takes place during the discussions that follow Theater of War readings. In many ways the translation and performance onstage are simply a catalyst for an act of translation and performance that takes place in the audience. In this way, though I translated the plays from ancient Greek, I am reliant upon military

audiences to help translate the plays for me, and for other civilians who are lucky enough to be in the room.

Interviewer: *You suggest that these plays would have allowed fifth-century Athenian soldiers a chance to work through the kinds of existential issues combatants have had to grapple with from time immemorial: loss, grief, trauma, fear, isolation, anger, despair, the list goes on. But you've also emphasized the importance of the communal experience of Greek tragedy. Fast forward to today: What is it about the experience of communally speaking one's grief, one's sense of isolation, one's nightmares that is so liberating, so cathartic?*

Doerries: It's not adaptive or safe for a warrior to be weeping during a battle or a firefight. However, the Athenians knew that it wasn't adaptive to bottle those feelings up forever, either. There has to be a safe, public space for grief, loss, isolation, betrayal, and despair to be collectively expressed and acknowledged. What I see at every Theater of War performance is a palpable sense of relief, and sometimes even joy, come over the faces of audience members, when they see their own private and seemingly unknowable struggles reflected in an ancient story. The emotions that follow the trauma of war can be extremely isolating. Tragedy seems to have been designed to bring warriors together and give them the much-needed permission to feel things again, in the presence of their community.

Interviewer: *I wonder whether your efforts to open a space for this kind of utterance in a military setting has been criticized or resisted. During my twenty-four years of military duty, I often witnessed a "suck it up" dynamic at work in the various Air Force units in which I served. Speaking about suffering was often interpreted as weakness. I know from my joint assignments, too, that this kind of thinking prevails in the other service branches. Given its countercultural approach to the problem of pain, was Theater of War difficult to sell to the military at first?*

Doerries: Certainly, there are many people in and out of the military who feel that talking about emotions is both dangerous and a sign of weakness. Theater of War aims to shift that attitude in a new direction. We're not going to reach everyone, but—as I said—I am most gratified by performing for resistant audience members who, 45-minutes into an event, open up and surprise themselves and each other by speaking the truth about their experiences of war and military service.

Interviewer: *So you've seen the whole gamut of possible responses, running from resistance, to rejection, to acceptance. I find it remarkable and heartening that Theater of War has made it onto so many military installations. For this to have happened, a significant number of senior military leaders have not doubt endorsed your approach. That fact is encouraging, isn't it?*

Doerries: This is how culture change happens—one person, one leader at a time. We've had really pioneering military leaders—all the way up to the incoming Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff—go out on a limb for our projects. We've also had many people try to shut us down. The fact that we're still performing so much, I think, speaks for itself. There is a need, a hunger even, for this type of engagement in the military and in our society. As long as we can fulfill that need, we will continue to perform.

Interviewer: *In my work on recent Irish translations of Greek tragedy, I've written about the dialogic nature of Greek tragedy and its role in the ongoing formation of democratic society in Ireland. During the latest round of Northern Irish Troubles many Irish poets and playwrights also took to translating Greek tragedy; they did it as a means of giving voice to various segments of society whose voices had been suppressed, even silenced by sectarian and state-sponsored violence. So it's invigorating to think of your work as having a similar effect in a military setting—giving voice to common soldiers in the middle of environments where they often have very little voice, or no voice at all in some respects. Have you given much thought to the idea that there may be a kind of democratizing cause and effect inherent in your work?*

Doerries: I know that our projects are working when, during a discussion, I hear the lowest ranking member of the audience stand up and speak the truth of his or her experience in front of the highest ranking member—the private in front of the general, the guard in front of the warden, the hospice nurse in front of the dean of the medical school. Tragedy has the power to temporarily dissolve hierarchies and to allow the disempowered and silent to be the ones who are speaking and, most critically, heard. In this way, tragedy is an intrinsically democratic medium, one whose vast untapped power has not been fully realized in contemporary American society. One of the things that I've learned from Greek tragedy is that if you want to have a conversation about something difficult that divides us, start with a powerful portrayal of human suffering first, and then have the discussion. And the exchange that follows will be framed by empathy and not enmity.

Interviewer: *Have your recent efforts to bring military and civilian audiences together for Theater of War performances been inspired by any sort of desire to give soldiers a voice in the larger democratic process?*

Doerries: We're just now wrapping up a two-year twenty-five city tour—called the Theater of War: Soldiers & Citizens Tour—aimed at bridging the ever-growing divide in our country between military and civilian communities. As Dr. Jonathan Shay has pointed out, the objective of Athenian drama may have been to “communalize the experience of war.” To bring the veteran out of isolation and into fellowship with the greater community. The project StoryCorps, which records interviews of ordinary Americans and logs them at the Library of Congress, has the motto “Listening is an act of love.” I would say that for citizens attending Theater of War performances, attempting to listen openly and without judgment to the stories of service members and their families is an act of love. There are so few public spaces in our country for veterans to be heard, and for them to begin the process of reintegrating and healing. Greek tragedy leads the way to a new model for us, one that is desperately needed, which goes far beyond the boundaries of Theater of War.

Interviewer: *That's a beautiful, radical way of framing the possibilities for democracy that can open up through the experience of tragedy. But I'm not at all surprised by your answer. It's no wonder you chose Philoctetes as a vehicle for your message; the play is all about the need for listening to the other's story and helping the other to shoulder the burden of the experience behind the story. What a concept for revitalizing our democracy. At the end of the day, one of the most urgent questions your books and performances have brought into focus is simply the following: “What is the most human and humane response to suffering?” Your thoughts?*

Doerries: I used to think that the adequate response to suffering was the power of presence. Of staying in the room with someone who is suffering and listening. But now I see people—ordinary citizens—stand up after our performances and share the ugliest most morally repugnant parts of themselves and their life experiences with audiences, after hearing veterans do the same. This, I am now convinced, is the most human/humane act of all. To get down in the trenches. To acknowledge our fallibility and collective responsibility for the suffering. To dispense with judgment and moral superiority. To meet veterans where they live and to say, “Though we've had different life experiences, we are humans. We are the same.”

Interviewer: That's a perfect note on which to end. Thank you for so much spending time with WLA at this exciting stage of your career.

Doerries: It has been my pleasure.

---

**THOMAS G. MCGUIRE** has taught war literature and Classics at the United States Air Force Academy for over a decade. A poet, scholar, and translator, he is currently completing a manuscript entitled *Violence and the Translator's Art: Seamus Heaney's Irish Transformations*. He also serves as WLA Poetry Editor.

---

**BRYAN DOERRIES** is a writer, director, translator, and the founder of Theater of War, a project that presents readings of ancient Greek plays to service members, veterans, caregivers, and families to help them initiate conversations about the visible and invisible wounds of war. He is also the co-founder of Outside the Wire, a social impact company that uses theater and a variety of other media to address pressing public health and social issues, such as combat-related psychological injury, end-of-life care, prison reform, domestic violence, political violence, recovery from natural and man-made disasters, and the destigmatization of addiction. Doerries uses age-old approaches embedded in the classics to help individuals and communities heal from suffering and loss. For more information on Doerries' memoir see [\*The Theater of War: What Ancient Greek Tragedies Can Teach Us Today\*](#). For Doerries' collection of Greek tragedies in translation see [\*All That You've Seen Here is God\*](#).