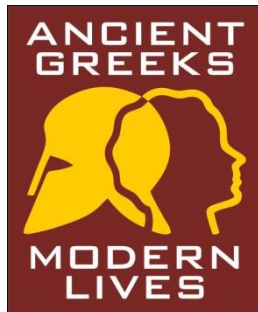


Combat veterans, the tragic mask and neuroscience

By Natasha Merkouri, Athens, Greece



Euripides' *Herakles*

Aquila Theatre Group

Translated and adapted by Peter Meineck

Directed by Desiree Sanchez

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"Michael Cacoyannis" [Foundation](#), Athens, Greece

Euripides' *Herakles* is the play Peter Meineck and Aquila Theatre chose to adapt to American contemporary war reality. In Euripidean tragedy *Herakles*, the mythic hero, returns home after the completion of his last labor. He descended the Underworld and brought the guard dog Cerberus to light. During his absence at Thebes a civil war was raging and Lycus came to the throne. *Herakles'* family was condemned to death. *Herakles*, against all odds, came back to Thebes to protect his family and restore the order. But Iris and Lyssa, under Hera's command, drove *Herakles* mad and made him kill his family. When he got his senses back, his father Amphitryon explained everything and only after his committed friend Theseus offered help and hospitality *Herakles* left the city. Amphitryon was assigned to bury the dead.

The performance is part of "[Ancient Greeks/Modern Lives](#)", a national program of the National Endowment for the Humanities, which has been led since 2010 by the Aquila Theatre and includes several events. Ancient Greek texts are stage read and followed by open discussions. The aim of the program is to engage modern audiences to a dialogue with the classical texts about issues which the American society deals with. The combat trauma Iraq and Afghanistan veterans have experienced -a part of war consequence - stand at the proscenium of America's contemporary reality. Families, friends and the communities around the U.S.A. have been facing difficulties in helping veterans rehabilitate. Soldiers are diagnosed with PTSD symptoms such as social withdrawal, isolation and suicidality, depression, insomnia or fragmented sleep, hyperactivity, alcohol and drug abuse, rage, acts of violence etc. What is vital for combat veterans is to feel welcome and to be encouraged to tell their stories, to speak their truth, to communalize their trauma.

Ancient Greek drama becomes the medium that facilitates the communication between the traumatized and their environment. Jonathan Shay's book [*Achilles in Vietnam: Combat trauma and the undoing of character*](#)ⁱ provides theoretical frame for the project. The author argues that primary purpose of ancient Greek theater was to reintegrate warriors into a democratic society. Ancient Greek Drama is a form of storytelling and healing. The same applies for Aquila Theatre and the adaptation of *Herakles*. The project intends to make American audiences "war literate", to inform people about war and its consequences and to heal "The painful paradox [...] that fighting for one's country can render one unfit to be its citizen (Shay 1994: xx). "Herakles may be an extreme mythic example but we must all live with the consequences of sending young men and women away to fight, whether or not we agree with the reasons for the wars or the politicians who sent them. Herakles is an ancient message from a society traumatized by years of brutal war. In this respect the Greeks still have much to teach us."ⁱⁱ In our case the reception of Ancient Greek drama becomes a political interpretation of a wounded modern society and acts as a means of social intervention.

It is worth mentioning the way veteran voices and physical presence were implemented to the performance. Instead of using the Chorus, Peter Meineck drew questions of each choral ode, addressed them to World War 2, Vietnam, Iraq and Afghanistan veterans and filmed their answers/testimonies. The screening replaced the Chorus. Although videos were quite extent and at times to the detriment of the performance rhythm, the communication of the ancient message to a modern audience became explicit. It was striking obvious that older veterans had deeply processed their war experience; therefore they could narrate and also come to conclusions in articulate thought and speech. On the contrary the younger one, although a University graduate, failed to communicate a well-structured sentence, typical of a man who has not come to terms with his traumatic past. Theseus part was assigned to a Vietnam veteran, Brian Delate, whose testimony was also filmed and integrated to the performance.

Masks especially made for the performance were used. Peter Meineck has been researching on this topic.ⁱⁱⁱ In his paper "Neuroscience and the tragic mask" he proves that the tragic mask operates only if its expression is *ambiguous* because it "challenges normal human neural responses and produce a higher cognitive experience" (Meineck 2010, 1.2). The study of the [*Pronomos vase*](#) led him to conclude that tragic masks do not have fixed characteristics. On the contrary, ambiguity is what activates the mirror neurons. The angle from which one sees the mask, its manipulation by a skilled actor

along with the foveal and peripheral vision of the spectator engages his/her gaze urging him/her to “make emotional and situational judgments” (Meineck 2010, 6.7).

The use of mask dictates the movement, the location on stage, the speech (voice and spoken word), and the music. It favors frontal acting and demands an amplified way of acting so as to communicate effectively the emotion and the *mythos*. Meineck believes - and this was strongly underpinned during the workshop - that when wearing the mask, one can only speak the truth of the emotions. When an actor uses the mask, he/she is ‘forced’ by it to tell the truth with his body. For example, anger in words and facial expressions looks milder to the audience than anger bodily enacted. The mask frees the actor from cerebral activity, urges him/her to use the ‘raw material’ of his/her body so as to make the truth of the characters and the text visible. The director in order to follow what the mask dictated used physical theatre techniques to enhance corporeality and build up enactment.

Modern Greek audience although unfamiliar to belligerent war culture and combat trauma (last war Greece was involved in was the Civil War that ended in 1949) especially in the way American soldiers suffer from it, received very well the experiment of Aquila Theatre. There were vivid discussions following the performances where spectators made challenging remarks, for example, on the concept and the efficacy of the project, the reception within American communities, American audiences’ knowledge of play and Ancient Greek Drama in general etc.

To sum up, *Herakles* was an innovative production, orientated to the interaction between the past and the present, classic authors and modern spectators, narrators and audiences, individuals and community, art and life.

Pictures were drawn by Aquila Theatre’s Facebook page.

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ⁱ Shay, J. (1993), *Achilles in Vietnam: The Undoing of Character*, New York: Scribner.

ⁱⁱ See [webpage](#) for more information on the production. See also uploaded filming of the press conference and the promo.

ⁱⁱⁱ Meineck, P. (2010), “The Neuroscience of the Tragic Mask”, [paper](#) presented at *The Athens Dialogues*, 24-27 November, organized by [Alexander S. Onassis Public Benefit Foundation](#), in Athens, Greece [accessed 7/8/2012].