Theater of War: Dramatic Reading and Discussion of Sophocles' *Philoctetes*

Since its founding in 2009, Theater of War has provided a compelling participatory experience that demonstrates the relevance of ancient Greek tragedy to some of the most pressing social and health-related issues of our time. Developed by artistic director Bryan Doerries to address the challenges facing veterans returning from military service to civilian life, Theater of War provides readings from Sophocles' *Ajax* and *Philoctetes* and town hall discussion of how these plays speak to the consequences of combat, not only for veterans but also for their families and communities. Audiences include combat veterans, family members and caregivers, health care and social service professionals, and community members seeking to become better informed. Supported by grants, gifts and public funding, the program has to date offered more than 350 performances to a combined audience of more than 70,000 in the United States and abroad.

Over the last several years, Theater of War Productions has enlarged its repertoire of tragedies (adding, e.g., *Bacchae*, *Heracles*, *Prometheus*, *Women of Trachis*) and the issues it explores to include "combat-related psychological injury, end of life care, police/community relations, prison reform, gun violence, domestic violence, substance abuse and addiction." It drew national acclaim for its recent production 'Antigone in Ferguson,' an adaptation of Sophocles' play that sought to bring understanding and healing to communities affected by the 2014 shooting of Michael Brown. Theater of War Productions employs a three-part format designed to promote the participatory and experiential nature of the event and the opportunity it presents for open dialogue, multiple perspectives, compassion and understanding: (a) Performance-reading of the text, in whole or part, by professional actors. Doerries has been successful in building a company that includes some of the country's most talented and well-known actors. (b) A panel of members of the local community, from different backgrounds and professions, to offer brief responses to the reading and suggest connections with relevant issues. (c) Extended and vigorous discussion by the audience as a whole, with Doerries taking the microphone into the audience to solicit responses and questions.

Having attended several of its presentations, I believe that Theater of War would offer a valuable experience for members of CAAS, one that would be personally and professionally enriching and provide an introduction to a program that successfully combines classics and community outreach. The proposer has approached Doerries about the possibility of a performance at the 2017 meeting and he has indicated his availability—Theater of War has given performances at a number of such professional conferences. For Doerries, it is critical that the audience becomes invested in the topic and engages in serious discussion—that they have "skin in the game." The event intends to generate not academic discussion 'about' Theater of War but authentic participation *in* the performance. To that end, Doerries asks the following. First, that the designated text be Sophocles' *Philoctetes*—he has found this text and its core theme of isolation particularly effective in engaging general audiences in discussion of "visible and invisible wounds, the challenges of witnessing suffering, the difficulty of reintegration, and the humanity we all share." Second, that the panelists represent the diversity of our community and understand that their brief remarks should not be narrowly academic or professional but respond to the immediacy of the performance. Third, that

audience discussion be the primary component of the presentation, with a goal of "radical candor," to use Doerries' expression.

Doerries will provide actors for the cast (to be identified 6-8 weeks before the performance) and has provided technical details and requirements. Preliminary overtures have been made to several potential panelists. Scheduling details have been shared with the Program Coordinator. The timeline for the 90-minute event would be as follows.

- Introductory remarks by session chair (Proposer: 2 minutes)
- Introductory remarks by TOW director/facilitator (Doerries: 3 minutes)
- Performance of *Philoctetes* (Actors TBA: 30 minutes)
- Brief (3-4 minute) responses by panelists (Panelists TBA: 15 minutes)
- Facilitated audience discussion and closing remarks (40 minutes)

If the proposal is approved by the Program Committee, the proposer will submit a request for financial support to the CAAS leadership. The Executive Committee is aware of this proposal and that a request for funding will follow.

Bibliography

Theater of War Productions website: http://theaterofwar.com

"Bryan Doerries' Theater of War" (Pop Tech talk, 2011):
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bAfOgmUUprI

Review in *New York Times*, November 11, 2009:
"The Anguish of War for Today's Soldiers, Explored by Sophocles"
http://www.nytimes.com/2009/11/12/theater/12greeks.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0

Wyatt Mason, "You Are Not Alone Across Time: Using Sophocles to Treat PTSD," *Harper's*, October 2014, pp. 57-65*
http://harpers.org/archive/2014/10/you-are-not-alone-across-time/

Bryan Doerries, *The Theater of War: What Ancient Greek Tragedies Can Teach Us Today* (Vintage, 2015)
Review in New York Times, September 28, 2015:
"'The Theater of War': Applying Greek Tragedies to Our Own"
http://www.nytimes.com/2015/09/29/science/review-the-theater-of-war-applying-greek-tragedies-to-our-own.html?_r=0