

DIDASKALIA 

The Journal for Ancient Performance



photo: P. Winters/Theater of War

Didaskalia is an electronic journal dedicated to the study of all aspects of ancient Greek and Roman performance.

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About Didaskalia

Didaskalia (διδασκαλία) is the term used since ancient times to describe the work a playwright did to teach his chorus and actors the play. The official records of the dramatic festivals in Athens were the διδασκαλῖαι. *Didaskalia* now furthers the scholarship of the ancient performance.

Didaskalia is an English-language, online publication about the performance of Greek and Roman drama, dance, and music. We publish peer-reviewed scholarship on performance and reviews of the professional activity of artists and scholars who work on ancient drama.

We welcome submissions on any aspect of the field. If you would like your work to be reviewed, please write to editor@didaskalia.net at least three weeks in advance of the performance date. We also seek interviews with practitioners and opinion pieces. For submission guidelines, go to didaskalia.net.

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Note

Didaskalia is an online journal. This print representation of Volume 8 is an inadequate approximation of the web publication at didaskalia.net, which includes sound, video, and live hyperlinks.

Interview: Theater of War

by **Amy R. Cohen** (*Randolph College*) and **Brett M. Rogers** (*Gettysburg College*)

Introduction by **Brett M. Rogers**



**Part One: Bryan Doerries and Elizabeth Marvel
in conversation with *Didaskalia***
[youtube.com/watch?v=_gPGAEPuYRs?version=3&hl=en_US](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_gPGAEPuYRs?version=3&hl=en_US)



**Part Two: Bryan Doerries
in conversation with *Didaskalia***
[youtube.com/watch?v=hwj3-6EYDk?version=3&hl=en_US](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hwj3-6EYDk?version=3&hl=en_US)

Introduction

To describe *Theater of War* (hereafter *ToW*) as ‘theater,’ or ‘a theatrical event,’ or even a ‘performance’ is to surely miss the point. Working from the argument that Attic Greek drama was primarily (though not exclusively) a mode of performance “by veterans, for veterans,” Bryan Doerries—*ToW*’s creator, creative director, and one of its producers—focuses the event on multiple activities that dramatize the experience (and costs) of warfare and provoke discussion about them.¹ The event itself falls into three stages. First, four to five professional actors sit at a table on a bare stage—no costumes, no props, no sets, no make-up, no special lighting—and perform a reading of Sophocles’ *Ajax* or *Philoctetes*. Next, the actors are replaced by another small group, made up of citizens, including veterans, often a veteran’s spouse, and usually a therapist with experience treating combat veterans, all of whom offer their own comments and experience. Finally, Doerries (in the role of emcee) invites the audience to talk about their reactions to the performance and comments, passing the microphone around. The entire event lasts approximately two hours, although discussions linger afterward.

In other words, *ToW* sits at the interstices between theatrical event and social tool. It is part classical homage, part Sophoclean revival, part town-hall meeting, part therapeutic group session, part social-impact project. Were it not for Doerries’s careful management of the audience, always steering the audience conversation back to the text of the performance, there is no little risk that *ToW* could also become part heated—even explosive—public debate on contemporary American military policy. In the open discussion, audience members speak thoughtfully, tearfully, passionately, even angrily. There is a simmering of communal emotion among the audience reminiscent not of the darkness of contemporary theater, but rather of the colorful, emotion-filled anecdotes found in the *vitae* of the Attic dramatists themselves. In short, *ToW* is a unique kind of event, a compelling amalgam of artifice and grassroots activity that asks (and answers) how ancient drama can serve society more than 2,400 years after the genre’s initial apogee.

We do not offer an extensive review of *ToW* here, in part because it is an ongoing, traveling event that

changes as its locations, cast members, and audiences change. Since its inception in 2009, there have been over one hundred and fifty performances at multiple hospitals, military bases, theaters, and universities—including recently (and perhaps significantly) Guantanamo Bay.² Rather, given its protean nature, *ToW* seems a better subject for an *interview* that offers a glimpse of the production as it moves from military communities and increasingly into the public sphere. One of our main lines of inquiry in our conversation with Doerries and regular actor Elizabeth Marvel (“Tecmessa” in *Ajax* and ‘Ajax’ in the female version of *Ajax*) addressed how *ToW* has developed and changed over time in terms of format, meaning, and impact. Those who wish to read written reviews of *ToW* can find a complete list of reviews on the *ToW* website,³ and we encourage readers to consult in particular Meineck 2009 and Nelson 2011.⁴

We hope that this interview will appeal to a wide variety of audiences: classicists, thespians, theatergoers, veterans, and those interested in *ToW*. Our goal was to create a conversation that might have both general and specialist interest. Part One (featuring both Doerries and Marvel) may appeal more to a general audience, while Part Two (featuring Doerries) probes more deeply into questions of interest to those engaged in ancient performance.

Scholars may rightfully wonder whether *ToW* offers any meaningful insight into ancient performance. With its clear social aim, does *ToW* belong rather to the annals of contemporary theater history or reception studies? In Part Two, Doerries at one point suggests that part of his aim with *ToW* is in fact archaeological, to “excavate” and uncover the emotions and ideas of an ancient Athenian (male, citizen-soldier) audience.⁵ Doerries’s claim places him somewhat in league with a contemporary scholarly trend to examine the role of emotion in classical drama.⁶ We leave it to others to ask at least two further questions. First, how would we go about substantiating such a claim? Second, does or should this claim change the way we read, study, and perform Attic drama?

The interviews were recorded on April 4th, 2011, at Transition Productions in New York City. Bryan Doerries and Elizabeth Marvel are interviewed by Amy R. Cohen (editor, *Didaskalia*) and Brett M. Rogers (editorial board, *Didaskalia*). *Didaskalia* would like to offer thanks to Ian Dempsey and Mitch Cheney for producing this interview.

notes

¹ In conversation, Doerries (among others) attributes this observation to the clinical psychiatrist Jonathan Shay, whose work repeatedly draws connections between Greek epic and drama and the communalized experience of soldiers and veterans; see *Achilles in Vietnam* (1994), *Odysseus in America* (2002), and, for our purposes here, “The Birth of Tragedy—Out of the Needs of Democracy” (Autumn 1995) in *Didaskalia* 2.02.

² For a full list of the production history and locations for *ToW*, see <http://www.outsidethewirellc.com/projects/theater-of-war/overview>.

³ See <http://www.outsidethewirellc.com/projects/theater-of-war/press>.

⁴ P. Meineck, 2009, ““These are men whose minds the Dead have ravished”: Theater of War / The Philoctetes Project,” *Arion* 17.1, 173–191. H. Nelson, 2011, “Bryan Doerries’s Theater of War: A New Incarnation of an Ancient Ritual,” *Review: The Journal of Dramaturgy*, 21.2.22–31.

⁵ Doerries seems to assume that the primary audience for Athenian drama is composed of adult male citizen-soldiers, and some of his subsequent projects with Outside the Wire use Greek drama to confront the emotions of other possible identities that we know existed in one form or another in antiquity (the aged, the incarcerated). It is not clear, however, whether Doerries’s notion of “excavating the ancient audience” is meant to include such populations as women, children, metics, or slaves, whose presence at

Athenian dramatic performances is uncertain. Nor is it clear how excavating the audience takes into account ancient non-Athenian audiences. For more on these issues, one may consult (e.g.) S. Goldhill, 1997, "The Audience of Athenian Tragedy," *The Cambridge Companion to Greek Tragedy*, P. E. Easterling, ed., Cambridge, 54-68; M. Revermann, 2006, "The Competence of Theatre Audiences in Fifth- and Fourth-Century Athens," *Journal of Hellenic Studies* 126.99-124; P. Wilson, ed., 2007, *The Greek Theatre and Festivals*, Oxford; M. Revermann and P. Wilson, eds., 2008, *Performance, Iconography, Reception*, Oxford. It would have been interesting to ask Doerries whether he has seen any variations in audience responses based on age, class, gender, race, or geographical location.

⁶ See (e.g.) D. Konstan, 1999, "The Tragic Emotions," *Comparative Drama* 33.1-21; W. V. Harris, 2001, *Restraining Rage: The Ideology of Anger Control in Classical Antiquity*, Cambridge, Mass.; D. Konstan and K. Rutter, eds., 2003, *Envy, Spite, and Jealousy: The Rivalrous Emotions in Ancient Greece*, Edinburgh; D. Konstan, 2006, *The Emotions of the Ancient Greeks*, Toronto.