correspondents at large

On Finding Ajax in Iraq

ELLEN McLAUGHLIN

I NEVER INTENDED TO WRITE AN ADAPTATION OF SOPHOCLES'S *AJAX*. I DIDN'T THINK I'D EVER BE ABLE TO COPE WITH THE HORROR OF THAT opening image—Ajax's crazed slaughter of animals and particularly his torture of them while he is in the grip of his delusion that he is killing and torturing the men he thinks have betrayed and shamed him: his generals, Agamemnon and Menelaus, and Odysseus, the man he thinks unjustly won his rightful trophy, the armor of the dead Achilles. Though we don't see Ajax at his butchery in that first scene—we only hear him obscurely in the tent center stage—I've always found the image of what he is doing in there more abhorrent than any other brutality the Greek tragedians conjured.

Sophocles hurtles us into the thick of that savagery at the start of the play, having the sun come up on it after Ajax has been at it all night. We are invited to look at the closed tent, listen to the grunts and ax blows, and imagine what must be going on inside for the whole opening scene as the goddess Athena discusses the events of the night with the horrified Odysseus, who followed the trail of blood in disbelief and now stands outside his former comrade's tent. Our first glimpse of Ajax is as a blood-crazed man interrupted in his butchery when Athena calls him out of the tent to speak to her. She wants to exhibit the mania to which she has driven him to the very man Ajax thinks he is torturing: Odysseus. She expects Odysseus to share her pitiless glee in the abasement of an enemy who hates him, but Odysseus disappoints her by wanting to be spared from seeing the wretched transmutation of a man who so recently was his trusted, steady comrade and one of the greatest heroes the world had ever known. When Ajax begs to be excused from his audience with Athena so that he can get back to the work of torture, Odysseus is left alone with his patron goddess, who questions him again, wondering why he is so squeamish about seeing Ajax's madness when it saved his life. He says that while human beings must look like mere shadows to the gods, the vision of the glory of humanity degraded to that extent is unbearable to him.

ELLEN McLAUGHLIN is an actor and playwright. She has taught at Yale School of Drama, Breadloaf School of English, and Princeton University and has been a professor of playwriting at Barnard College since 1995. Her plays have been performed off-Broadway, regionally, and internationally. She is the winner of the Susan Smith Blackburn Prize, the Lila Wallace–Reader's Digest Writer's Award, and grants from the NEA, among other honors. As a playwright, she has received particular acclaim for her adaptations of Greek plays, including *The Persians* (National Actors' Theatre, New York), *Helen* (Public Theater, New York), and *Iphigenia and Other Daughters* (Classic Stage, New York). Her other off-Broadway productions include *Septimus and Clarissa* (Ripe Time, New York) and *Tongue of a Bird* (Public Theater). As an actor, she is best known for originating the part of the Angel in Tony Kushner's *Angels in America*, playing it in every production in the United States through its Broadway run.

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And so it has always been for me.

But when I took it on myself as a playwright to address the American military presence in Iraq, I found myself returning to Sophocles's Ajax—his sense of betrayal, his disgrace, his descent into insanity, and finally his bitterly clear-eyed suicide. I went back into that thorny thicket of a hero, almost against my will, precisely because his claims on me are so hard to honor.

My play *Ajax in Iraq* was born of a particular moment in the Iraq War—2007 and 2008—and a particular group of collaborators, the class of 2009 at the ART/MXAT Institute for Advanced Theater Training, a program operated by the American Repertory Theater and the Moscow Art Theater School at Harvard University. Though I have written many adaptations of Greek plays, when I went into the process at ART, which was funded by a grant from Theatre Communications Group and the National Endowment for the Arts, I did not intend this play to be one of them. All I knew was that I wanted to write about the Iraq War, which I felt compelled to address as we entered its bloodiest year and there seemed no end in sight.

I wanted to collaborate with the graduate acting students not just as actors but as fellow artists, partly because I needed their help with the material. It seemed to me that the current war was their war rather than mine in the sense that my generation was essentially sending their generation to fight its battles. I knew what I felt about it all but wanted to know what it meant to them, and I told them that I would work with the material they generated to make something that addressed their ideas as much as my own.

The director Scott Zigler and I led the actors through a series of workshops over six months. Initially, I simply asked the actors to bring in theatrical material of their own devising that related to war in any way at all. Their research led them from the mythology of war and the history of the military to current soldiers' blogs and *YouTube* videos. I also asked them all to do interviews. Some spoke with their grandparents, who told them stories the students had never heard before about living through World War II. Others interviewed homeless Vietnam veterans on the street, or returning soldiers, some of them the students' relatives or childhood friends. The presentations ranged from scenes and monologues to dance pieces to various forms of performance art. Much of the work was beautifully realized, subtle, and smart. After the first round of workshops, the students had generated about thirty hours of material so wildly diverse in subject and tone that I was overwhelmed and unsure how to structure the piece. For many years now, when in doubt, particularly about structure, I have turned to the Greeks. And as we began to look directly at the war in Iraq, I found that Ajax's terrible story resonated best with the brutal mess we were investigating.

Much of the research material dealt with the psychological toll the current war was taking on its veterans. We identified a trend, now an epidemic, of suicide by soldiers, occurring sometimes during their tours of duty, sometimes after they'd returned to civilian life. Military psychiatrists use the term *moral injury* to describe the common experience of soldiers crippled less by the trauma of battle than by their feelings of shame and guilt related to the damage done to their deeply held beliefs about right and wrong. Besides suicide, this psychological crisis can lead to "berserking"—soldiers' turning on innocent civilians, prisoners in their care, or, increasingly often, their own troops. A common theme of many of these suicides and psychotic breaks seemed to be a loss of faith in commanding officers, a sense of betrayal, and, most important, a feeling of having been shamed—"thrown away," one soldier's suicide note said—by the American military, which they had once been proud to serve.

Possibly because there were more women than men in the group, we also started

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learning about the rampant predation on female soldiers by their commanding officers or their comrades, especially sexual harassment and rape. Rape as an act of suppression and domination is an unsurprising if horrific outcome of the aggression that war can unleash, as all military history teaches us, but it has acquired a new virulence now that so many women soldiers (one in seven of the active military) serve on equal terms with men and expect to be treated as comrades. "Command rape" or "rape by rank" is peculiarly traumatic since the victims suffer at the hands of people they have to obey and on whom they depend for their survival. It is the rawest form of betrayal. In one interview after another, women spoke of having been drawn to the military as an unambiguous field on which to seek honor but then finding that in Iraq they were viewed as sexual objects to be used and shamed by the men with whom they served.

Another theme that kept coming up was confusion. Civilians looked like insurgents, and insurgents looked like civilians, which meant that soldiers were bound on occasion to, as they put it, "kick in the wrong doors," leading to yet more hostility in the communities the soldiers were attempting to control. But the greatest confusion for the soldiers in Iraq concerned their mission. No two soldiers interpreted what they were doing in the same way. A soldier who worked almost exclusively driving trucks of army meals at high speed ultimately felt that he'd been putting his life at stake for a lot of refrigerated soda. Driving trucks, something women soldiers often did, was one of the most dangerous things you could do in Iraq because of the explosives planted in roadsides, which caused far more of the worst injuries in the war than did direct combat. Dealing with this danger left soldiers again feeling betrayed by superiors, since the best protection from such weaponry is better intelligence, in every sense of the word. You need commanders who know the risks and don't ask soldiers to take them unnecessarily, but above all you need adequate armor, full "battle-rattle," equipment that was shockingly late in coming to soldiers in Iraq, if indeed it ever arrived.

All these themes—a sense of confusion and injustice, shaming, and betrayal by one's own side, driving soldiers to isolation and suicide—led me to Ajax. But even though the fit of the material to that classic text was obvious, I found that simply making a modern version of the play with a female Ajax (whom we called A.J.) just didn't seem sufficient to the gravity of the original text somehow, nor did a relatively straightforward new version of the Sophocles play do justice to the complexity and specificity of the Iraq War and of the ways we were trying to address it. So I decided to combine two equally weighted, intertwining narratives, classic and modern, each enriching the other as we saw how they reflected and deepened each other. I found that I liked the shimmer of the female-male, modern-ancient, vernacular-poetic double resonance of the tragedy when the two streams were braided together in counterpoint.

Athena, goddess of war, the coolly terrifying instigator of Ajax's insanity, presides over both the classic and the modern streams of my play. She frames the action, speaking directly to the audience with a knowing, cynical power. In the first moments of the play, while we watch the closed tent and listen to the muffled cries coming from within, Athena enters in full regalia and addresses us:

> You don't want to go in there. Terrible stuff happening in there. Can you hear it? Not really, right? But you can imagine. He's been at it all night.
>
> It's O.K., no one's going to make you go in there. Well, I won't anyway.
>
> You've been outside this tent before, haven't you? It's familiar, isn't it? The not knowing, the not wanting to know.
>
> Still, every now and then, you can't help it, you get a glimpse. Some grainy, jumpy hard-to-see thing taken from somebody's point of

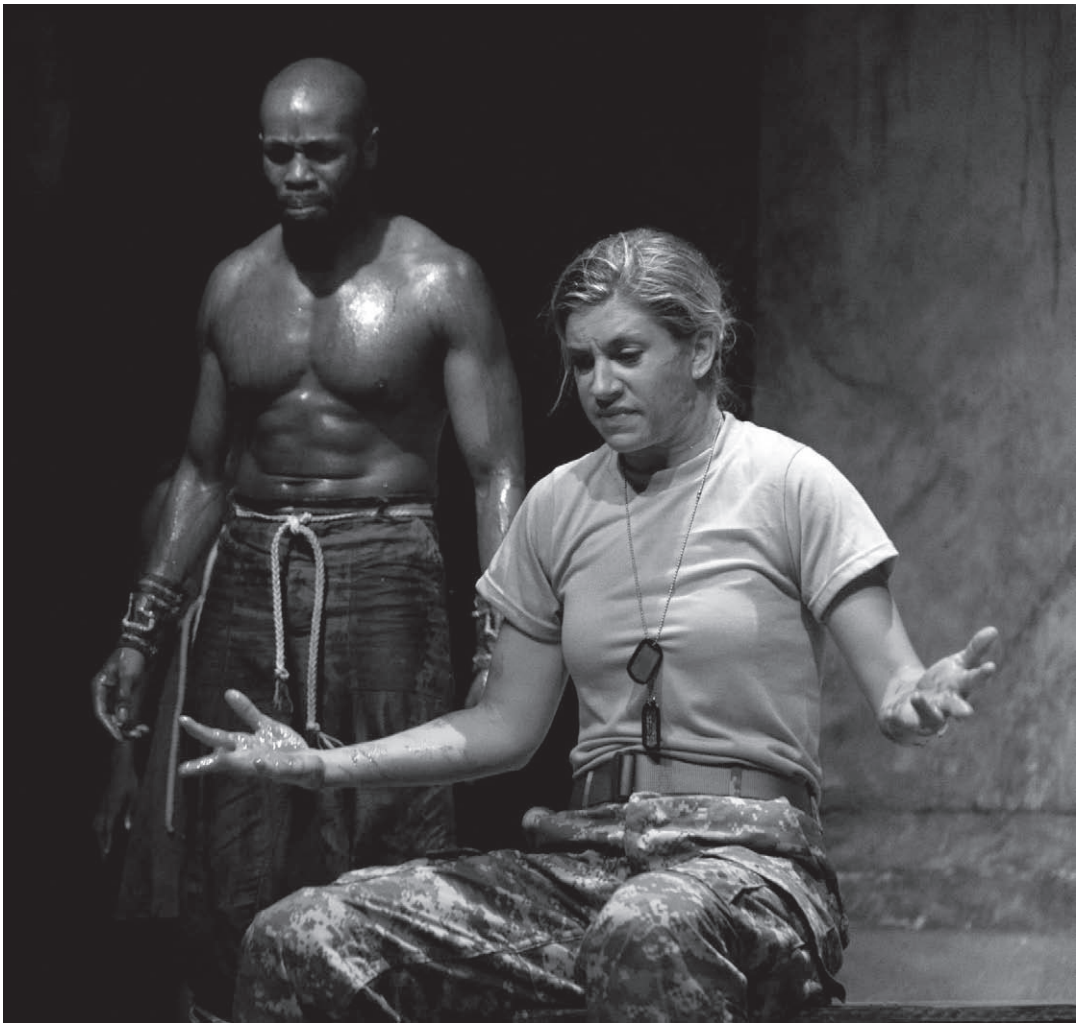
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view. It's never long, just a few seconds. And even though you can't really hear, not quite, what anyone is saying, and you can't see what *exactly* is going on, it's enough for you. Isn't it? That's all you need to know. *(Sound from within.)* Screaming? You think? Nah. Could have been something else. Any number of things. *(Sound from within. She smiles.)* O.K., so that was, *had* to be . . . what the heck is going on in there? That's what you're thinking. Or rather, that's what you're trying *not* to think. Who wants to think about this stuff? What's going on right now? Nobody.

Yeah, it's bad. In fact it's worse, it's worse than what you're imagining right now. Or even right now. I don't blame you for not going in. Who in their right mind would?

What's his name? Ajax. It's a play by Sophocles. It's about what I did to him. Because I could.

I've always been fascinated by the idea that the Greeks believed that war, that most masculine of enterprises, would have as its primary divinity a female deity. (Ares wasn't taken seriously by gods or men.) I have also always been intrigued by the idea that Athena is the goddess of mind and therefore presides over madness as well—rational thought and thus necessarily the absence of the rational: insanity. What she gives—insight, strategy, cunning—she can just as easily take away. The more we explored post-traumatic stress



Stephen Conrad Moore as Ajax and Christina Shipp as A.J. in Ellen McLaughlin's *Ajax in Iraq*. Photo by Isaiah Tanenbaum (www.isaiahtpd.info).

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disorder and the more I studied the Sophocles play—in which Athena is a terrifyingly capricious force—the more it seemed right that she should frame the material. And since we had more women than men in the cast, we were investigating women's particular relation to violence and specifically to war, so Athena should have sway. It is, after all, as she keeps insisting, her play.

Athena is our guide as we watch two great warriors—a modern one and an ancient one—descend into the ignominy of berserking. Ajax's breakdown, as in the classic text, comes at the beginning of the play, A.J.'s at the climax of it. A.J. has just performed heroically in an attempt to save her comrades in a firefight, but afterward, when she reports to the sergeant who has been coercing her into sex, he does not reward her for her bravery but instead rapes her, causing her to go mad and kill a flock of sheep. Once released from their bloody delusions, both warriors—Ajax and A.J.—are sickened by shame, and the two narratives, which have been running parallel, unite at the end of the play when the female and male Ajaxes are alone onstage together. They don't acknowledge each other, but they share a monologue as they prepare to die. As they calmly speak, Ajax sharpens his sword, then buries its hilt in the sand; A.J. cleans and prepares the M16 she is about to point into her mouth. A slash (/) indicates the point at which the next speaker begins to speak, overlapping the current speaker so that at times the characters speak in unison:

AJAX. In the end of it, shame . . .
A.J. Shame is just one of the things I say goodbye to. / There is also . . .
AJAX. There is also the river I fished that morning,
A.J. tossing the light around on its surface as it rushed over everything it contained. / And . . .
AJAX. And there is the smell of the fire cooking what you will eat.
A.J. There is also the sound a baby makes when it wakes up in the morning / and nothing is wrong.
AJAX. and nothing is wrong. There is the day I saw hail . . .
A.J. Hail / for the first time
AJAX. for the first time
A.J. and my mother put a battered ball of whiteness in my mouth,
AJAX. so I could taste,
A.J. so I could taste, she said, / the sky.
AJAX. the sky.
A.J. These things are also part of me.
AJAX. These things are also true. I thought
A.J. I thought . . .
AJAX. I thought I was protecting them
A.J. I was protecting them.
AJAX. But they . . .
A.J. But they were protecting me. I lose them now
AJAX. I lose them now
A.J. I lose them now
A.J. AND AJAX. in order to keep them.
(*AJAX stands, about to jump on the sword.* A.J. *puts the gun in her mouth. They both inhale. Sudden blackout. Silence.*)

Ajax's quiet suicide, performed by an actor alone onstage, was, as far as we know, an innovation in Greek drama when it happened in Sophocles's play; nothing like it exists in the earlier classical literature we have. It is no less shocking and poignant today than it was then, as we mourn the loss of so many disillusioned former soldiers, who die in the same solitude and bitterness. Their lonely deaths mark the end of their attempts to make sense of the wars and the countries they feel have betrayed them. Their shame, like Ajax's, prickles inside all of us who have let them walk off into the wasteland of despair alone.

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