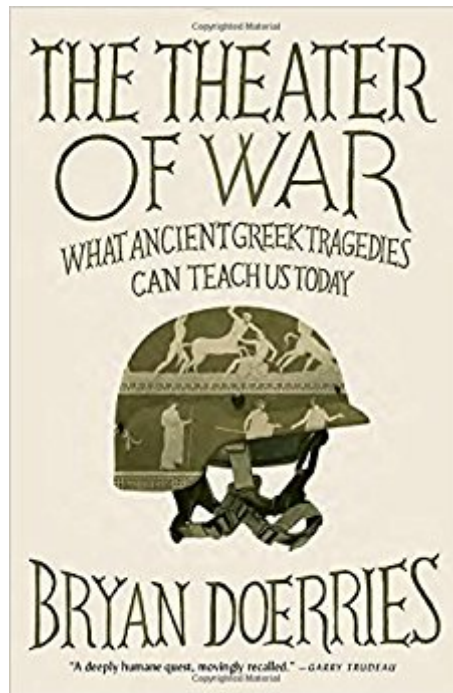




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# **The Theater Of War: What Ancient Tragedies Can Teach Us Today**



## Synopsis

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. For years, theater director Bryan Doerries has led an innovative public health project that produces ancient tragedies for current and returned soldiers, addicts, tornado and hurricane survivors, and a wide range of other at-risk people in society. The originality and generosity of Doerries's work is startling, and *The Theater of War* is a humane, knowledgeable, and accessible book that will both inspire and enlighten. Tracing a path that links the personal to the artistic to the social and back again, Doerries shows us how suffering and healing are part of a timeless process in which dialogue and empathy are inextricably linked.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

"Extraordinary. . . . Riveting. . . . [Doerries] discussed Ajax with many troubled vets returning from Iraq and Afghanistan, and may have saved some of their lives. His book interweaves tales from this journey with episodes from Doerries's own life and moving discussions of the plays he cherishes—his blueprints for felt experience, his conduits for connection and compassion—it is through that intensity of focus, Doerries convinces us, that we can find permission to feel our own pain. To see his productions today, or to see Greek tragedy through his eyes, is to become measurably healthier and more human."—James Romm, *The Daily Beast* "The route Bryan Doerries describes in his memoir is as unique as the place it landed him. . . . Moving. . . . Mr. Doerries's book loops

around from autobiography to literary analysis to medical ethics and back again. . . .

It should win him a host of new admirers.

• Abigail Zuger, The New York Times

“The theater of ancient Greece was many things. . . . [It is] the therapeutic potential of catharsis, that most interests Bryan Doerries. . . .

An impressive and accomplished journey.

• James Shapiro, The New York Times Book Review

“His compelling, raw book is both memoir and manifesto; he chronicles his own gradual discovery of the power and relevance of Greek tragedies while also championing their social utility. . . . Such insights capture something essential about Greek tragedy: Unlike contemporary theater, these works aspired to serve religious, political, and even therapeutic functions in ancient Greek society. . . .

Across a gulf of two and a half millennia, the Greek tragedians can still help us know and cure ourselves.

• Nick Romeo, The Boston Globe

“This heart-gripping book is not merely one of the best theater books I’ve read this year; it’s one of the best books I’ve read this year. . . . An early tragedy inspired [Bryan Doerries] to found a company dedicated to bringing the ancients—specifically lesser-known Greek plays—to groups experiencing trauma of some kind. . . .

The results, as he recounts in fluent, agile prose, upheld his belief that communal exposure to the power of the Greek tragedies can be a profoundly useful healing tool.

• Charles Isherwood, The New York Times

“Doerries is well educated in the classics and in human suffering, which has opened his eyes to the therapeutic potential of art. He describes his father’s slow descent into madness from diabetes and how, at the end of his life, he thought he was being watched over by black persecuting Furies who had come to carry out his fate, largely the result of his own life choices. Doerries likewise describes the slow death of his girlfriend from cystic fibrosis, which was preceded by a double lung transplant, bacterial infections, and the ultimate rejection of the donor organs by her body. He saw from these trials that there is a universal, timeless element to suffering, the psychological dimension of which can be alleviated through drama.

• Blake Seitz, The Weekly Standard

“Doerries’s account of his performances with Theater of War is at once an impassioned history lesson, a manual of therapy for the afflicted and a deep analysis of the power of ancient Greek tragedy.

• Arlice Davenport, The Wichita Eagle

“Important and illuminating. . . . This is an admirable book about an admirable project.

• Andrew J. Bacevich, The American Scholar

“The Theater of War is an enthralling, gracefully written, and urgently important examination of the vital, ongoing relationship between past and present, between story and human experience, and between what the ancients had to report about warfare and human values

and the desperate moral and psychological struggles that soldiers still undergo today. Bryan Doerries has given us a gift to be treasured.

•Tim O'Brien "Bryan Doerries's *The Theater of War* is a testament both to the enduring power of the classics and to the vital role art can play in our communal understanding of war and suffering.

•Phil Klay, author of *Redeployment*, recipient of 2014 National Book Award "One has the feeling we are being watched by our ancestors, that they continually call out to us, bestow us with gifts of their wisdom, warn us about habitual traps and foibles common to all humans. We rarely have the presence to listen to, to receive that wisdom. Bryan Doerries asks: what lessons will we finally take to heart from these ancients? In this riveting narrative, simply but elegantly told, Doerries movingly resurrects the inner life of a people who lived 2,500 years ago, but whose struggles evoke our own familiar and damaged present, now endowed by this wonderful book with more drama, more tragedy, more compassion, more possibility. Here is the proof at last: our future depends on the gifts of the past.

•Ken Burns "Bryan Doerries's ongoing staging of Greek tragedies before U.S. military personnel and others processing trauma is an act of courageous humanism: a tribute to vanished lives and a succor to current soldiers and citizens. In connecting the valiance and pathos of modern military life to a 2500-year tradition, Doerries has returned dignity to countless troops nearly destroyed by war. His capacious yet intimate book offers a privileged look into not only the psychological costs of the Iraq and Afghanistan conflicts and other proximate disasters, but also the larger meaning of inhabiting an unpredictable and militarized world.

•Andrew Solomon, author of *Far From The Tree* "I have always thought of Greek tragedies as the earliest public service announcements. Those ancient stories of family politics, their warnings about civic duty, and their parables of grief and its management are as vital today as when first written. Through his translations and public readings, and now this powerful book, Doerries offers modern audiences access to these ancient PSAs. We hunger and thirst for the guidance these plays contain.

•Frances McDormand "A deeply humane quest, movingly recalled. Doerries's passionate search for meaning in ancient text has led him out of the dusty stacks of scholarship into an arena of ecstatic public engagement. He has taken his elegantly reasoned thesis that the main business of tragedy has always been catharsis and created a theatrical experience that has lifted countless audiences out of isolation and into profound community.

•Garry Trudeau "This book illuminates how Greek tragedy penetrates to the deepest of levels in us all. It also shows how certain audiences, when given permission, can help illuminate the urgency and relevance of these

ancient stories today. In his approach to tragedy, Doerries has found the way to remove out-of-date barriers and clean the outer crust of language with fresh words so that the essential can appear once more. —Peter Brook

BRYAN DOERRIES is a writer, director, and translator. He is the founder of Theater of War, a project that presents readings of ancient Greek plays to service members, veterans, and their 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 addiction. A self-described “evangelist” for classical literature and its relevance to our lives today, Doerries uses age-old approaches to help individuals and communities heal after suffering and loss.

I could not put this down. I love theatre and believe strongly in its potential therapeutic effects. IT enables us to “hold the mirror up to nature,” as Hamlet says. This book demonstrates that statement, and the relevance of great plays which are 2,500 years old to our modern problems. Thank you, Bryan Dowries. This is a story which really needed to be told. “Live long and prosper,” as my favorite Vulcan says, and please continue your superb work. For those who wonder -- the author has a strong background in ancient Greek (so he can do good adaptations) and in Latin and Hebrew. I would say, to those with both language and theatrical skills, read and learn and confer with him, work with him, to learn how it is done.

I hope every literature teacher in the country reads this. It shows the power of literature in capturing the emotions of situations better than any lecture. Through the military chapter you can see the unfortunate timelessness of war. Some of the issues at Alexander’s time is the issue armies face today. The book is about what a guy did with his Phd education in the classics. He took that knowledge to market plays to selective audiences. Through the discussion about each play the audience can learn about their own situation. He adapts the Greek play of Ajax for the military, Prometheus for corrections and Heracles for Hospice workers. The best chapter is what he did for the military through the play Ajax. He took a crew and went to over 100 bases. His stories of how the play woke people up to the realities of their own situation is very spell bounding. It really opens up your mind to the whole situation about PTSD. The other chapters aren’t quite as good as the

military one. That is why I gave it 4 stars.

Some may think that I cannot be an impartial reviewer because I know Bryan Doerries; I am one of his former teachers. If I wrote a glowing, undeserved review, I would be a very poor teacher indeed. I never handed out unearned A's and it doesn't seem wise to start doing that now. Saying that, I have nothing but the highest praise for THE THEATER OF WAR. In the beginning of the book Bryan establishes his ethos by revealing tragedies in his own life. By doing so, Bryan gains the trust of the reader. We learn that he is more than a theater director, writer, and translator specializing in Greek and classical literature. We see that he has confronted his own uncertainties, guilt, and possible fate, so we listen when he presents his premise: Greek tragedy can change our lives because it has the potential of "cultivating a heightened awareness of the forces that shape our lives and [exposing] ... the pivotal role our choices and actions play in realizing our destiny." In other words, Greek tragedy can help us learn we are not prisoners of fate. Theater of War, a project that presents readings of ancient Greek plays to encourage a dialogue to help the military and their families heal from the wounds of war, grew out of this premise. Over 300 performances of Sophocles' Ajax and Philoctetes have benefited both military and civilian audiences here and abroad. Theater of War's success inspired other innovative projects serving others' needs: prisoners and corrections officers; the dying, their families, and palliative care professionals; and natural disaster victims. This book explains these projects by presenting excerpts from tragedies and then sharing people's responses to them. Like Ajax and Philoctetes, modern man and woman, no longer shackled in the prison of their own private thoughts, cry out in a public forum that promotes healing. Bryan presents persuasive evidence of the power of his projects, thus proving his premise that Greek tragedy can change lives. Reading this book will both instruct you and challenge you. Even though Bryan asserts that he is no professor, I learned more about ancient Greek culture and tragedy from this book than from any college English course I took. Bryan says that "one hope of this book is to administer an antidote to the obligatory high school unit on ancient Greek tragedy." His "antidote" deserves a well-earned A+. He also earned a high mark for making me question my suppositions about war, the prison system, end of life issues, and fate. My wish for you is that you not only read this book, but if you have the opportunity, you also attend a Theater of War program, or one of Outside the Wire's other programs. I was fortunate to attend a Theater of War program at a military base in Tidewater, Virginia. It was the most amazing piece of theater I have ever witnessed.

It affected people – not in an Oral Roberts – way of  
“Praise! You are now healed!” Instead, it freed people from their  
shackles of silence and initiated a conversation – a conversation that opened up a  
path towards healing. This book tells the stories of those who joined the conversation and started  
their journeys. These people’s brave, honest revelations show us that Greek  
tragedy lives on to teach us today.

A magnificent work! I thank the author for helping me understand the human condition and why after  
2400 years we still haven’t learned that war benefits few at the expense of all. I bought three more  
copies of Mr. Dorries magnificent book , Theater of War, to give to those serving. And to that end, I  
recommend another outstanding book to follow up titled: War is a Racket. By Major General S.  
Butler. Sw

After having just seen our local theatre company present an original work on homelessness, and  
having seen the overwhelming and unanticipated response to the showing, Doerries experiences  
lent credence to the lasting value to our community of our production. Even before the run finished  
(5 shows – filled to the rafters), we began talking about other community issues that  
need to be shown thru the lens of theatre. Everyone involved in theatre should read this book!

Provides us a whole new way to view Greek tragedy and the function that it fulfilled in Athenian  
society - a society that was at war for 80 out of 100 years. Amazingly enough it still works today on  
warriors returning from our continuous wars.

Great idea and I admire his work -- but not his writing. It should have been a magazine article, not a  
book. Also, too much self-congratulation. It did give me much more appreciation of Greek plays.

Most inspiring book I've read in a long while. . . Hooray for Bryan Doerries.. It's an engrossing read  
and marvelous work that he's doing

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