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THEATER REVIEW

Burbage Theatre's one-man, one-muse 'An Iliad' explores the glory and grief of battle

Humanity's unshakable attraction to warfare and its ramifications are unmistakable themes that run throughout this powerful play

By **Bob Abelman** Updated November 12, 2024, [1 hour ago](#)



Cathy Clasper-Torch as The Muse and Bill Harley as The Poet in Burbage Theatre Co.'s "An Iliad" through Nov. 24 in Pawtucket,

PAWTUCKET, R.I. — In “An Iliad,” which received both an Obie and Lucille Lortel Award for its 2012 off-Broadway production, playwrights Lisa Peterson and Denis O’Hare offer a compressed, contemporized, and intensely compelling take on Homer’s nearly 3,000-year-old, 15,693-line epic poem titled “The Iliad.”

The poem depicts significant events that took place during the Trojan War, a decade-long siege of the city of Troy (located in present-day Turkey) by a coalition of Mycenaean Greek states. Chief among them is the killing of Achilles’ best friend Patroclus by the Trojan prince Hector and, subsequently, the killing of Hector by a vengeful Achilles, who is the greatest of all the Greek warriors.

For centuries, scholars have debated whether the work was a pro- or anti-war epic since both the glory and grief of battle are explored so fully and in such astounding detail.

No such ambiguity exists in Peterson and O’Hare’s wonderfully theatrical 100-minute, intermission-free adaptation, which begins with a weary, exasperated everyman entering the performance space. We quickly learn that he is a time-fluid teller of tales doomed to repeat the story of the Trojan War until the day when humankind’s addiction to rage comes to an end and the recalling of the atrocities of war becomes unnecessary.

It is clear from this telling on the Burbage Theatre Co. stage that this day has not yet come.

The script serves up an exhaustive, exhausting centuries-spanning chronological list of warfare, up to and including the conflicts in Gaza and Ukraine. The play also touches on the perspective of the women who reside in the periphery of Homer’s classic story — the devout wives grieving the loss of husbands, heartbroken mothers lamenting the death of sons, powerless sex slaves, and woefully misguided goddesses. Humanity’s unshakable attraction to warfare and its ramifications are unmistakable themes that run throughout this play.

Despite the self-effacing downsizing of the title and the play's short run time, "An Iliad" is no "The Iliad"-lite. The intense source material, its exalted and abundant verbiage, and its poetic rhythms — albeit filtered through Robert Fagles' accessible translation — are still very much in evidence.

But all this is told through a modern prism that offers contemporary examples to help explain antiquated references in much the same way that Homer used simile in his storytelling.

And all this is told by Grammy Award-winning storyteller Bill Harley as The Poet, and master instrumentalist Cathy Clasper-Torch, on cello and violin, as The Muse.

Harley wins you over from the get-go, as his wind-blown character abruptly comes through the large wooden door in the back brick wall, wearing an old overcoat, a hat pulled down over his expressive eyes, and carrying a well-worn satchel overflowing with old documents. Harley walks toward us, squints as if assessing our worthiness, closes his eyes as if gathering energy, and starts to tell his tale. In ancient Greek, which he soon stops, embarrassed by the oversight but which suggests that he shares the same heritage — and, perhaps, the same time frame — as Homer.

Harley's passionate devotion to this powerful piece of performance art is riveting. And his skills at storytelling, facilitated by Jeff Church's subtle direction, are mesmerizing.

Production designer Trevor Elliott is called upon to perform only light lifting here, for this production's sparse staging — merely the semblance of a back storage room at an old tavern — is built to place all eyes at all times on Harley. Isolating lighting, used selectively and purposefully, adds drama to key moments.

So too does Clasper-Torch's cello, which gravitates toward improvisation rather than the Mark Bennett score the play's publisher makes available for licensing. Her intriguing playing, which contributes higher frequencies and a more intense vibrato on violin, adds layers to this production's theatricality.

Though Clasper-Torch's underscoring and accompaniment are wonderful, missing is her primary function as muse. There is not nearly enough back-and-forth exchange with The Poet and there are moments in the play when her playing could have better served to encourage or bolster The Poet's painful and reluctant efforts to tell his tale. The presentation of that exhaustive list of human conflicts would have been an ideal place for The Poet to falter and The Muse to lend musical support and guidance.

This production of "An Iliad" is, in so many ways, a master class in making canonical literary work engaging and relevant to theatergoers. If only our middle school selves had this show as an option to having to plug our way through the required reading.

AN ILIAD

Play by Lisa Peterson and Denis O'Hare. Directed by Jeff Church. At the Burbage Theatre Co., 59 Blackstone Ave., Pawtucket, R.I. Through Nov. 24. Tickets are \$30, including fees. 401-484-0355, burbagetheatre.org.

Bob Abelman is an award-winning theater critic who formerly wrote for the Austin Chronicle. Connect with him [on Facebook](#).

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