

# EDGE

## MEDIA NETWORK



Bill Harley in "An Iliad" Source: Courtesy of Burbage Theatre Company

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## **Review: 'An Iliad' a Spellbinding Meditation on War**

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Burbage Theatre Company's "An Iliad" is a spellbinding meditation on love, vengeance, pride, and the absurdity of war.

Bill Harley, a two-time Grammy winner, plays The Poet, the storyteller in Lisa Peterson and Denis O'Hare's adaptation of the ancient Homeric epic. In what basically amounts to a solo show – though with accompaniment by Cathy Clasper-Torch – Harley narrates the story of the Greek war against the Trojans, a war precipitated by the abduction of Helen of Troy by Paris, the son of King Priam and Queen Hecuba. Helen was reputed to be the most beautiful woman in the world – hence the war, as well as the modern catchphrase "the face that launched a thousand ships."

Greek hero Achilles is described as "superhuman." His enemy is Hector, a Trojan prince and the older brother of Paris. Hector is also the greatest warrior among the Trojans, and events inevitably draw the two warriors into a fateful showdown.

But not before Patroclus – Achilles' beloved friend, companion, and advisor – dons Achilles' armor in a moment of passion to fight against the Trojans. His impulsive act will have major ramifications for all involved.

Greek gods and goddesses feature in the action as well, including the Sun God Apollo, Zeus (the King of the Gods), Goddess of Wisdom Athena, and Aphrodite, the Goddess of Love and daughter of Zeus.



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The Poet brings the story to life in his portrayals of many of the characters. Under the guidance of director Jeff Church, Harley gives what I believe to be the best stage performance of the year: He is able to recite impassioned monologues, then shift back into narrator mode in an instant. His movement and vocal inflections capture the anguish of the characters. It is a true masterclass in acting.

Harley carries the 100-minute show almost entirely on his own, with the musical accompaniment of Cathy Clasper-Torch as The Muse.

At one point, Harley lists every single military conflict in world history, starting with ancient wars in the Middle East and proceeding onward through the 20th and 21st centuries. It serves as a stark reminder of mankind's propensity for using violence to resolve disputes.

The set is very basic, consisting of a table and a chair. The power of the story emanates from the language and imagery of two armies fighting each other. The cost of war is described in very clear terms: Parents lose their sons. Friends are cruelly taken away in the heat of battle. Heroes bear their wounds, and live to fight another day.

"An Iliad" is an intense experience that is likely to leave you drained. It's not enjoyable, but it is worth seeing for Harley, a true showman who knows how to bring the classic tale to life.