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## Ajax in America, or Catharsis in the Time of Terrorism

Originally funded by the US Department of Defense in 2009, Theater of War Productions' first project, *Theater of War*, performs dramatic readings of *Ajax* at military bases, hospitals, and academic institutions throughout the United States. Developed by Bryan Doerries, *Theater of War* brings awareness to the epidemic of suicide and other forms of violence committed by American military service members in the wake of the United States' so-called 'war on terror'. But like *Ajax*, American military personnel typically turn to violence only after being betrayed by the institutions that they served. This article follows how *Ajax*'s more modern manifestation disrupts the tragic protagonist's status as a sacrificial victim whose death precipitates tragedy's cathartic effect, and challenges what René Girard calls the 'scapegoat mechanism' and its socio-political function. It argues that *Ajax*'s appearance as a cathartic figure in American society provokes spectators and artists to reckon with the conditions that can cause military personnel to act violently, and inspires protests against broader hegemonic socio-political structures and the military culture that sustains them. Matthew Roberts is Assistant Professor and Librarian for Comparative and World Literature, English, and Drama at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

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'The society that requires survivors to sacrifice their knowledge as the price of belonging is thereby itself morally and spiritually depleted.' . . . How can these terrible knowledges turn into an acknowledgement?<sup>1</sup>

ACCORDING to Aristotle, tragedy provides spectators with the opportunity to face what would otherwise be unbearable;<sup>2</sup> and by bearing witness to the representation of travesty, members of an audience may begin to learn how to bear it.<sup>3</sup> On this matter, Jonathan Shay's *Achilles in Vietnam: Combat Trauma and the Undoing of Character* accounts for how the classical literary and performing arts serve a therapeutic role in modern American society. Shay created a setting where veterans of the Vietnam War drew from their combat experience in order to study Homer's *Iliad*. This setting provided veterans with an environment in which to reckon with the effects of combat trauma on their own lives. In the process of this work, Shay discovered that 'healing from trauma depends upon the communalization of the trauma – being able safely to tell the story to someone who is

listening and who can be trusted to retell it truthfully to others in the community'.<sup>4</sup> To substantiate his insight, Shay developed a supportive environment for veterans to work with members of their community, who in turn cultivated the presence of mind required to listen to soldiers who suffered from post-traumatic stress.<sup>5</sup>

Since the publication of *Achilles in Vietnam*, Sophocles' *Ajax* emerged as the most visible form of ancient Greek art to reflect the United States' more recent military interventions. According to Sophocles' tragedy, *Ajax* commits suicide after failing to murder the military leaders who betrayed him. Given the play's content, theatre artists turned to the tragedy to explore how it bears on the epidemic of suicide and violent crimes committed by American military service members since the United States invaded Iraq and Afghanistan in 2003. For example, Ellen McLaughlin's *Ajax in Iraq* (2008) concerns the mental collapse of American veterans who fought in Iraq after the attacks on the Pentagon and the World Trade Center in 2001.<sup>6</sup>



**Figure 1.** *Our Ajax*, Southwark Playhouse, 2013. Joe Dixon as Ajax. Photo: Camilla Greenwell.

Meanwhile, Timberlake Wertenbaker's *Our Ajax* (2013) and Aquila Theatre's more recent readings and adaptations of *Ajax* (2009 to the present) invite audience members to examine how post-traumatic stress affects Ajax's constitution.<sup>7</sup> But *Theater of War* (2008 to the present) remains the most publicized work to engage *Ajax* and its contemporary relevance. Following Jonathan Shay's insights, the project *Theater of War* utilizes Sophocles' military tragedies, creating an environment for American military personnel to represent their struggles to members of their community, military leaders, and mental health professionals (Figure 1).

### *Theater of War*

While Terry Eagleton argues that tragedy's 'ontological depth and high seriousness' mitigate its contemporary relevance, *Theater of War* proves otherwise.<sup>8</sup> Developed by Bryan Doerries in 2008, and originally funded by the US Department of Defense, *Theater of War* brings together Hollywood actors to offer dramatic

readings of Sophocles' *Ajax* and *Philoctetes* at a variety of institutions throughout the United States. *Theater of War* lacks the elements of a formal or stylized theatrical production as plainly dressed actors read carefully chosen selections from either one of the plays. At the end of each reading, *Theater of War* concludes with a town hall-style discussion. These conversations connect expert panellists with American military leaders. They examine how Sophocles' military tragedies reflect the many struggles that American service members face in their daily lives. By focusing on the text of each tragedy, *Theater of War* materializes language's power to cultivate communities that destigmatize the effects of post-traumatic stress on American military personnel.<sup>9</sup>

In the wake of the success of *Theater of War*, Bryan Doerries and Phyllis Kaufman founded Theater of War Productions in 2009. Currently, Theater of War Productions partners with a range of organizations, including the Stavros Niarchos Foundation, the United Services Organization, and the Department of

Veterans Services. Doerries himself earned the distinguished title of New York City's 2017–2018 Public Artist in Residence.

With its ongoing support and success, Theater of War Productions continues to develop and produce a variety of projects, illustrating Marvin Carlson's contention that theatre requires interpersonal connections and actively builds social relations.<sup>10</sup> Thus *Antigone in Ferguson* (2018) fuses selections from Sophocles' *Antigone* with live choral music to bring to people's awareness the police brutality manifest in urban communities throughout the United States. Theater of War Productions' most recent initiative, *The Oedipus Project* (2020), addresses the issues of 'leadership, accountability, and the challenges faced by citizens and elected officials during pandemics and plagues'.<sup>11</sup> Originally hosted on the digital conferencing platform Zoom and available to registered participants, *The Oedipus Project* included a reading of Sophocles' *Oedipus the King*. The programme concluded with an online discussion led by health professionals, which brought the tragedy into conversation with the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.

### The Question of Catharsis

As Doerries observes, tragedy served as an elaborate therapeutic ritual that assisted ancient Greek soldiers to return to civilian life, but so too can it perform a cathartic function for contemporary American soldiers impacted by the United States' 'war on terror'.<sup>12</sup> While the meaning of the term 'catharsis' in Aristotle's *Poetics* is the subject of great debate, *Theater of War* calls to mind two important interpretations of it. Jakob Bernays emphasizes the medicinal quality of catharsis, arguing that tragedy offers spectators respite from the pain of their psychological and emotional afflictions.<sup>13</sup> Stephen Halliwell, on the other hand, argues that catharsis 'conduces to an ethical alignment between the emotions and reason'.<sup>14</sup> As spectators cognitively process the tragic representation of human suffering, they develop the capacity to respond rationally to actions that might otherwise overwhelm them. Bringing these two interpretations of catharsis

into conversation with one another offers the important insight that tragedy's cathartic effect enables spectators to develop the emotional intelligence required to live with their own painful experiences.

Yet, it is still necessary to consider how tragedy achieves its cathartic effect, and René Girard's influential and controversial analysis of the 'scapegoat mechanism' proves to be significant. According to Girard, the tragic protagonist represents a victim (*katharma*) and scapegoat (*pharmakos*) whose death or sacrifice expels social dangers and personal fears.<sup>15</sup> When discussing the tragic hero's social function in relation to Jacques Derrida's analysis of the *pharmakos* – a deviant outsider who must be sacrificed in order to found and maintain social order and prosperity – Girard claims that the tragic protagonist's death precipitates ameliorative effects and promotes societal wellbeing.<sup>16</sup>

However, a more careful deconstructive examination of the figure of the *pharmakos*, or tragedy as a *pharmakon*, produces a critique of the scapegoat mechanism and exemplifies how tragedy depicts reality as 'rent and divided against itself'.<sup>17</sup> In other words, Ajax's appearance as a cathartic character in contemporary American culture challenges Girard's presentation of the 'scapegoat mechanism' as a model that both explains tragedy's therapeutic efficacy and structures normative social institutions. For the sacrificial logic that underpins the 'scapegoat mechanism', a logic that I call pharmacology, contributes to the epidemic of suicide and other violence committed by American military service members in the wake of the 11 September 2001 attacks. *Ajax* thus necessitates that catharsis be rethought to explore tragedy's more radical ethico-political potential, particularly since the tragedy may challenge, rather than reinforce, American hegemony and the military culture that sustains it.

### Living with Ajax

On 18 February 2007, the *Washington Post* initiated a longstanding investigation into Walter Reed Army Medical Center's complex and inefficient structure.<sup>18</sup> According to Dana

Priest and Anne Hull, '5 ½ years of sustained combat have transformed the venerable 113-acre institution into something else entirely – a holding ground for physically and psychologically damaged outpatients'.<sup>19</sup> For Bryan Doerries, Priest and Hull's article highlighted a particularly troubling crisis:

Incensed by the mistreatment of soldiers and their families by the very administration that had sent them to Iraq and Afghanistan, I began thinking about what I could do to raise awareness about the needs of veterans and their families and perhaps rally more people to pay attention. . . . Rather than a fully formed idea, my impulse to present readings of ancient Greek tragedies for combat veterans was what the great stage director Peter Brook has called 'a formless hunch'.<sup>20</sup>

And so, as they say, the rest is history. From 2007 to 2008, Doerries translated Sophocles' *Ajax* and *Philoctetes*, offering his first readings of his translations at Off-Broadway venues and in front of medical students and doctors throughout the greater New York City metropolitan area.<sup>21</sup> Doerries's readings earned him an invitation to the 2008 United States Marine Corps Combat Stress Conference in San Diego, enabling him to present his project to an audience comprised of combat veterans, military leaders, and mental health professionals.<sup>22</sup>

In the months that followed this conference, Doerries developed *Theater of War*. The project enlisted Hollywood actors, including David Strathairn, Gloria Reuben, Adam Driver, Jeffrey Wright, and Paul Giamatti. Working with Doerries's translations, the actors staged readings of *Ajax* and *Philoctetes* at military bases and hospitals throughout the United States. Building on the project's success, Doerries' presented *Theater of War* at the inaugural Warrior Resilience Conference in November of 2009, where he met former Brigadier General Loree Sutton.<sup>23</sup> At the time, Sutton served as Director of the Defense Centers of Excellence for Psychological Health and Traumatic Brain Injury (DCoE).<sup>24</sup> A US Department of Defense organization, the DCoE serves American soldiers struggling with the effects of combat-induced trauma. Compelled by *Theater of War*, Sutton helped

Doerries secure a nearly \$4-million contract with the US Department of Defense.<sup>25</sup> This funding allowed Doerries to expand *Theater of War's* outreach, and to bring the programme to a variety of communities throughout the country (Figure 2).

Due to its proximity to Veterans Day in the United States, *Theater of War's* 9 November 2009 reading of *Ajax* at St Vincent's Hospital in New York earned Doerries and his collaborators national attention.<sup>26</sup> According to the *New York Times*, the programme at St Vincent's, like all *Theater of War* performances, concluded with a town hall discussion led by military personnel and mental health professionals. The panel examined how Sophocles' military tragedies relate to the traumatic experiences of American soldiers who had fought in Iraq and Afghanistan. Commenting on the programme's potential, Richard J. McNally, Director of Clinical Training in the Department of Psychology at Harvard University, stated that 'If seeing the Theater of War can reduce stigma and help veterans seek these treatments, then that will be wonderful indeed'.<sup>27</sup> And in a moment of cathartic clarity, panellist Sergeant First Class Tony Gonzalez, an Iraq combat veteran, stated, 'I've been Ajax . . . I've spoken to Ajax'.<sup>28</sup>

### A Song of Sorrow

But what, exactly, does it mean to be Ajax or to have spoken to him? According to Sophocles' tragedy, Ajax plots to murder members of the Greek military leadership who denied him Achilles' armour.<sup>29</sup> To spoil his plan, Athena deceives Ajax, causing him to kill a hoard of livestock taken by the Achaeans.<sup>30</sup> Shamed by his actions, Ajax ultimately commits suicide in order to preserve his ancestral prowess and mitigate the shame affixed to his name.<sup>31</sup>

To be sure, Ajax's plight speaks to the epidemic of suicide among American military personnel affected by the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Nevertheless, Ajax's status as a cathartic figure for American service members warrants further examination, particularly given the catastrophic event that occurred just days before the performance of *Theater of War* at St Vincent's Hospital. On 5 November



**Figure 2.** *Theater of War: Ajax.* A Reading of *Ajax* with Reg E. Cathey as Ajax, and Kathryn Erbe. Photo: Gregg Richards.

2009 – the last day of the inaugural Warrior Resilience Conference – former Major Nidal Malik Hasan fatally shot thirteen people and injured nearly thirty others at the Fort Hood military post in Killeen in Texas.<sup>32</sup>

As a US Army psychiatrist, Nidal Malik Hasan treated veterans who suffered from combat trauma.<sup>33</sup> This work profoundly affected Hasan, who became increasingly disturbed by the horrors that veterans of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq described to him.<sup>34</sup> In 2007, Hasan delivered a presentation titled ‘The Quranic World View as it Relates to Muslims in the U.S. Military’ to his supervisors and nearly twenty-five mental health staff members. The lecture occurred at the Walter Reed Medical Center and documented Hasan’s assessment of the problems that American military personnel could encounter from Muslim American soldiers who were conflicted about fighting in Iraq and Afghanistan.<sup>35</sup> Arguing that ‘Muslim Soldiers should not serve in any capacity that renders them at

risk to hurting or killing believers unjustly’, Hasan recommended that the US Department of Defense release Muslim soldiers as ‘conscientious objectors’ in order to promote troop morale and avoid adverse consequences.<sup>36</sup>

In the days that followed the 2009 Fort Hood shooting, investigators looked to Hasan’s presentation at Walter Reed as evidence of his extremism.<sup>37</sup> The US Army did not charge Hasan with terrorism, arguing that terrorism cannot define violent crimes done by Americans within the United States. The controversial decision prompted public debate and disagreement, leading Senator Joseph Lieberman to describe the first Fort Hood shooting as ‘the worst terrorist attack on U.S. soil since September 11, 2001’.<sup>38</sup> On 23 August 2013, a military jury convicted Hasan of all charges connected to the first Fort Hood shooting.<sup>39</sup> Just five days later, that same jury sentenced Hasan to death.<sup>40</sup>

Still the deadliest attack on a military base in the United States, the Fort Hood shooting

bears an uncanny resemblance to *Ajax*: both Ajax and Hasan resorted to violence in order to exact retribution for an injustice they believed to suffer. It is mere speculation to assume any connection between the first Fort Hood shooting and the US Department of Defense's decision to fund *Theater of War*. But the consonance between Ajax and Hasan's respective actions raises a significant question: How can Ajax perform the function of a cathartic figure for American military personnel when he is a criminal who, like Hasan, sought to murder his military colleagues in order to avenge a perceived injustice?

### Of Pharmacology

Girard's analysis of tragedy in *Violence and the Sacred* may begin to provide some insight into the complexity posed by Ajax's status as a cathartic figure in contemporary American culture. According to Girard's reading of the *Poetics*, Aristotle's interpretation of tragedy demonstrates how 'the qualities that make a "good" tragic hero are precisely those required of the sacrificial victim'.<sup>41</sup> Maintaining this analogy between the scapegoat and the tragic protagonist, Girard muses on the origins of Attic tragedy:

Once upon a time a temple and an altar on which the victim was sacrificed were substituted for the original act of collective violence; now there is an amphitheatre and a stage on which the fate of the *katharma*, played out by an actor, will purge spectators of their passions and provoke a new catharsis, both individual and collective. This catharsis will restore the health and wellbeing of the community.<sup>42</sup>

Girard's account of the origins of tragic theatre emphasizes the etymological connection between *katharma* and *katharsis*, advancing a logic that I refer to here as pharmacology.<sup>43</sup> According to this logic, tragedy is a *pharmakon*, or remedy, that assumes the therapeutic function originally reserved for ritualized human sacrifice. As Girard claims, tragedy replaces a sacrificial victim or *katharma* with a tragic protagonist who represents menacing qualities in a similar way.<sup>44</sup> Just as the *katharma*'s death restores order to the community that it

threatened, so too does the tragic protagonist function as a *pharmakos*, or scapegoat. The tragic protagonist's demise thus resolves the emotional crisis that their actions cause spectators to suffer.<sup>45</sup>

Girard's description of catharsis illustrates how tragedy imitates a broader logic that historically structured communal relations. On this issue, Girard acknowledges Jacques Derrida's extended analysis of the *pharmakos* and its socio-political significance.<sup>46</sup> As Derrida describes the matter, the *pharmakos*

has been compared to a scapegoat . . . The city's body *proper* thus reconstitutes its unity, closes around the security of its inner courts, gives back to itself the word that links it with itself within the confines of the agora, by violently excluding from its territory the representative of an external threat or aggression . . . The expulsion of the evil or madness restores *sōphrosunē*.<sup>47</sup>

According to Derrida, then, the death of a *pharmakos* exorcizes evil and enables members of a community to develop the soundness of mind needed to organize their society and establish the institutions to maintain it. Sophocles' *Ajax* demonstrates how this pharmacological process organizes such social relations. The patriarchal society that Ajax inhabits creates a structure wherein only his death enables him to recuperate what his life would otherwise preclude, namely, the dignity of his paternal lineage.<sup>48</sup> This structure informs the play's dénouement and foregrounds its restorative potential: Odysseus buries Ajax's body and reinstates the fraternal comradery (*philia*) required to maintain military order within a patriarchal society (Figure 3).<sup>49</sup>

Girard's interpretation of tragedy represents and reinforces the pharmacological constitution of communal structures that Derrida elucidates. In other words, what I call pharmacology offers Girard a compelling logic to explain how tragedy accomplishes its cathartic effect, as well as a means to theorize how societies form and regulate themselves.<sup>50</sup> According to Girard, tragedy depicts how socio-political institutions re-establish themselves in the wake of the tragic protagonist's death.<sup>51</sup> And the tragic hero's demise



**Figure 3.** *Theater of War: Ajax*. Frances McDormand as Tecmessa; Reg E. Cathey as Ajax. Photo: Gregg Richards.

eliminates the threat that this hero posed to spectators' beliefs and sense of security, compelling them to return to the values that fortify their society.

While Girard addresses the violence intrinsic to pharmacology, his analysis of it derives from an arguably universalist conceptual framework that serves a broader, and more normative, anthropological project. It is possible, then, to distinguish Girard's view of social relations and the institutions that sustain them from Derrida's more critical assessment of the *pharmakos*. Rather than situate the *pharmakos* as a threat that is external to a particular community, Derrida observes how the *pharmakos* is 'constituted, regularly granted its place by the community, chosen, kept, fed, etc., in the very heart of the inside'.<sup>52</sup> In other words, while a *pharmakos* threatens the community that calls for its death, that community finds itself on the existence of such a contagion, which it internalizes and repeatedly and ritualistically destroys. By acting as both a poison and a cure and by being both inside a community and

external to it, the *pharmakos* is irreducible to either function or place. Instead, it collapses the distinction between these roles to figure a complexity that haunts and disrupts the social relations that depend on it to survive.

### Pharmacology and the 'War on Terror'

Derrida's reading of the *pharmakos* describes a dynamic that is consistent with how pharmacology may account for the conditions that made the first Fort Hood shooting possible and facilitated the Department of Defense's interest in *Theater of War*. While Hasan's presentation at the Walter Reed Army Medical Center disturbed some of his colleagues, there is little evidence to suggest that they understood his lecture as an attempt to reconcile the cognitive dissonance that plagued him.<sup>53</sup> Nor did they seem to acknowledge the presentation as symptomatic of the trauma that Hasan had experienced as a United States Army psychiatrist. In fact, Hasan's presentation at Walter Reed appeared structurally incongruous

with the American institutions that initiated military operations in Afghanistan and Iraq. For the investigation that followed the first Fort Hood shooting interpreted Hasan's presentation as well as the recalcitrance that it represented as allegiance to individuals who threatened democratic political institutions and rationalized US hegemony in the wake of '9/11'.

By contrast, Sergeant First Class Gonzalez's identification with Ajax represents the inverse of this logic. His statement did not call audience members to reflect on Ajax's more criminal nature since Gonzalez fought against enemies whose deaths would restore American society in the aftermath of the attacks orchestrated by Osama bin Laden. It is only because the US Department of Defense presented *Ajax* to represent the human cost of preserving democracy and freedom that it could situate the tragedy to serve what it perceived to be a broader social justice function. While the first Fort Hood shooting took place just days before Theater of War's presentation of *Ajax* at St Vincent's Hospital, the tragic event seemed strangely absent from how members of the panel explicitly or consciously addressed the play's content.<sup>54</sup>

A juxtaposition of the first Fort Hood shooting and the US Department of Defense's decision to fund *Theater of War* represents the problematic nature of pharmacology. Pharmacology does not just depict one model for understanding how tragic theatre accomplishes its cathartic effect; it also describes a violent logic that founds social relations and the institutions that maintain them. Derrida's analysis of the *pharmakos* makes it possible to examine *Ajax* more closely and to reconsider how Ajax's demise bears on the connection between the first Fort Hood shooting and *Theater of War's* readings of *Ajax*. In order to pursue this more critical approach, it is imperative to follow how pharmacology produces the violence represented in *Ajax* and also contributes to the more recent crisis of American soldiers committing suicide and other deadly actions. Only by reading tragedy as a critique of pharmacology does it become possible to consider *Ajax's* cathartic effect in a more modern context.

## A Betrayal of Justice

The US Department of Defense continues to emphasize that combat trauma led to the 'more than 6,000 reported veteran suicides every year from 2008–16'.<sup>55</sup> But such conclusions obfuscate a significant issue. Combat trauma did not motivate Ajax's drive for vengeance and eventual suicide. According to Bryan Doerries, it was the feeling that, 'those above him in the chain of command have devalued and betrayed him . . . that ultimately sends him to his death'.<sup>56</sup> While combat trauma can injure veterans in both seen and unseen ways, even Doerries underscores that Ajax acts violently because Odysseus and his supporters betrayed him. For without Achilles' armour, Ajax lost the object that would symbolically hold his life together and acknowledge his military accomplishments.<sup>57</sup> Unable to live with the weight of this injustice, Ajax takes matters into his own hands.

As troubling as it may be to think it, *Ajax* draws attention to the perceived injustice that contributed to the first Fort Hood shooting and that frequently leads American soldiers to commit suicide and commit other acts of violence. The US Department of Defense and the FBI both linked the first Fort Hood shooting to religious extremism.<sup>58</sup> As numerous reports concluded, Hasan's growing frustration with the US Army led him to correspond with Anwar al-Awlaki.<sup>59</sup> While investigators would later read this exchange as an indication of Hasan's radicalization, Hasan resorted to violence only after his military colleagues failed to acknowledge the unbearable condition that plagued him.

It may be easy to consider the first Fort Hood shooting as an isolated incident of the betrayal and injustice that Sophocles addresses in *Ajax*. It is certainly easy to discredit the validity of Hasan's grievance, given his turn toward religious fundamentalism and ideology. But the first Fort Hood shooting is one of many incidents in recent memory when Ajax's ghost appeared to haunt the military institutions that congeal American society. For instance, beginning in February of 2019, numerous combat veterans committed suicide in a number of Veterans Affairs



hospital parking lots.<sup>60</sup> Crudely known as the 'parking lot suicides', these veterans brought attention to the failure of the Department of Defense and the Department of Veterans Affairs to care for American soldiers.<sup>61</sup>

Like the first Fort Hood shooting, the 'parking lot suicides' demonstrate that 'The traumatized victim . . . feels driven to a howling, self-centred outrage that exactly corresponds in ferocity to the pain and terror of the trauma itself'.<sup>62</sup> The deaths also resembled the performative significance of Ajax's suicide. As Doerries notes: 'Sophocles staged the violence of Ajax's death mere feet from where the generals sat in the audience in the ancient Theatre of Dionysus'.<sup>63</sup> Just as Sophocles situated Ajax's death in front of military leaders, the 'parking lot suicides' occurred in front of the institutions responsible for providing American military personnel with medical and psychiatric treatment.

Ellen McLaughlin's play *Ajax in Iraq* extends Doerries's analysis of *Ajax* and its bearing on the crisis that many American military personnel face. McLaughlin studied the conditions that cause soldiers to act violently and collaborated with members of the ART/MXMT (American Repertory Theatre and Moscow Art Theatre School) Institute for Advanced Theatre Training to transform her research into the play.<sup>64</sup> Referring to Shay's work, she discovered that military personnel who commit violence

feel 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.<sup>65</sup>

It is noteworthy that McLaughlin emphasizes that the 'berserk state' – a state that Shay first described in his work with American veterans of the Vietnam War – occurs when military institutions render soldiers superfluous.<sup>66</sup> This betrayal forces a soldier to experience a

sort of moral reckoning, leading them to encounter how their own actions, or the institutions that they served, endorse nihilistic positions. As in the case of the first Fort Hood shooting and the 'parking lot suicides', such a confrontation can incite soldiers to act violently (Figure 4).

As Lindsey Mantoan stresses, McLaughlin's adaptation of *Ajax* challenges audience members to imagine the horrors of the second American war in Iraq and to envision alternatives to such politically sanctioned violence.<sup>67</sup> In this respect, McLaughlin's treatment of *Ajax* differs from Theater of War Productions' presentation of the play. According to Helen Morales:

Doerries's agenda is to privilege the emotional over the intellectual. . . . One problem with this approach is that political responses to Greek tragedy, especially those that criticize the US government and its institutions, remain underdeveloped by Doerries and his audiences. This is untrue to the spirit of Greek tragedy, but perhaps to do otherwise would be to jeopardize the project's funding.<sup>68</sup>

*Theater of War* does not appear to have a particular political agenda. None of its promotional material or public announcements address, much less challenge, the United States government and its military institutions. While *Theater of War* does not advocate for any particular political position, it does provide military service members with a space to overcome feeling as if they are tragic protagonists who must live without the means to represent their own struggles. For to be Ajax and to speak to him is to recognize that political institutions can always betray those who risked their lives to defend them. The very fact that *Theater of War* offers high-profile readings of *Ajax* makes the tragedy a topic of public interest, which sheds light on the conditions that lead American soldiers to commit suicide or violent crimes.

### Beyond Pity and Terror

Such recent engagements with *Ajax* as *Theater of War* and *Ajax in Iraq* illustrate how tragedy bears on ethical-political matters. Yet, the issue of tragedy's relation to such issues is



**Figure 4.** *Ajax in Iraq*, Not Man Apart Physical Theatre Ensemble, 2016. Aaron Hendry as Ajax. Photo: Sean Deckert.

quite complex. As Darren Gobert observes, Aristotle defines tragedy's cathartic effect as antithetical to ethics, since catharsis does not prescriptively teach spectators how to act.<sup>69</sup> Malcolm Heath offers a different perspective, arguing that the *Poetics* demonstrates how 'ethical concepts are internal to poetry'.<sup>70</sup> According to the *Nicomachean Ethics*, pity and terror name two of several emotions that, if left unchecked, can compromise a citizen's ability to develop the balanced emotional state necessary to exhibit virtue.<sup>71</sup> Since just societies cannot develop without virtuous individuals, tragedy can lead citizens to build and maintain political institutions that protect the wellbeing of others.<sup>72</sup>

Regardless of how Aristotle may or may not have attributed an ethical or political significance to catharsis, Theater of War's readings of *Ajax* call audiences to reckon with the juridico-political institutions that facilitate American military culture's disastrous consequences. Liz Tomlin's *Political Dramaturgies and Theatre Spectatorship: Provocations for Change* indirectly addresses this more critical,

albeit often unacknowledged or not articulated aspect of *Theater of War*. In particular, Tomlin turns to Nicholas Ridout's scholarship to underscore how the physical, mental, and emotional work required to make and participate in theatre creates communities that trouble the homogenizing and restorative effect that can be associated with pharmacology.

Tomlin connects Ridout's work with Jacques Rancière's thought, which clarifies the former's position on theatre's political dimension. Tomlin observes that

the community, for Ridout, as for Rancière, is not the placeholder for the power from which the individual can be nourished and sustained nor is its formation the goal of egalitarian politics. . . . Rancière's philosophy posits the relational nature of subjectivity, so that each individual's 'apartness' can only be formed and constituted in relation to the shifting networks of multiple subjectivities of any given, temporary and contingent community.<sup>73</sup>

In Tomlin's view of Ridout's analysis, theatre is political insofar as it engenders a heterogeneous community that emphasizes alterity as

the condition of possibility for any sense of self or individuality.<sup>74</sup> The individual's encounter with others generates 'affective resonances' that lead a spectator or artist to feel or intuit the contingent quality of their sense of self.<sup>75</sup> Such resonances are irreducible to any particular and identifiable emotions. Instead, they manifest a corporeal intensity that signals the self as it faces its own conditionality and vulnerability.

While Ridout and Rancière's theorization of political community may appear to provide the intellectual resources to resist pharmacology and its homogenizing effects, Tomlin's more critical appraisal of their work suggests otherwise. According to Tomlin, the post-structuralist position in theatre studies emphasizes theatre's autonomy from matters such as ideology or authorial intent, and invests interpretive powers solely in artists and spectators. It is not so much that post-structuralism is incorrect to emphasize the asymmetrical relation between self and other, which Ridout advances as the basis of theatre's inherent political quality. Nor is it simply wrong to privilege the artist or spectator as the arbiter of a play or performance's signifying potential. Rather, Tomlin cautions against dogmatically maintaining these theoretical interventions, since they risk transforming the theatre into a place where participants suspend antagonisms or inequalities without effecting resistance to violence and oppression.<sup>76</sup> Further, they may fail to account for more normative and violent ideologies, and may even make room for such ideologies within the concept of political community that they advance.<sup>77</sup>

For Tomlin, it is insufficient to maintain that the community which theatre establishes is in and of itself political or capable of producing a political effect. Nor does she glorify the contingent nature of subjectivity. She engages with how theatre exposes and investigates ideological and material structures of oppression that plague the lives of actual people and deprive them of agency.<sup>78</sup> Theatre thus motivates political resistance when the specifics of a work's narrative content function in tandem with the individual's affective or sensory response to the production.<sup>79</sup> And

in order for theatre to compel individual artists or spectators to resist violent or otherwise exclusionary social structures, it must ascribe something like agency to those who participate in it (Figure 5).<sup>80</sup>

As noted earlier, Aristotle argues that tragedy tempers or refines how a spectator experiences pity and terror. Yet, as I have intimated, this position interprets theatre as a means to cultivate a predefined form of political subjectivity, in this case a model citizen who maintains the patriarchal rule of law. Although *Political Dramaturgies and Theatre Spectatorship* does not address tragedy or catharsis in any explicit or extended fashion, Tomlin's turn to affect makes it possible to consider *Ajax's* cathartic effect in a more nuanced manner.

*Ajax* disrupts the political intention that motivated the Department of Defense to support Theater of War. Rather than simply destigmatize the effects of combat trauma, Theater of War's readings of *Ajax* can expose individuals to the plight of American service members who turned to violence only after being betrayed by military institutions. As is evident from Sergeant First Class Tony Gonzalez's words, such a confrontation generates affective states that are irreducible to specific emotions and disrupt tragedy's role in producing a predetermined political subject.

In its modern manifestation, *Ajax* troubles the common characterization of catharsis in terms of emotional purgation or temperance, and it challenges the dichotomy between emotion and intellect that frequently pervades interpretations of catharsis. *Ajax's* criminal nature and eventual suicide provoke spectators and artists alike to reckon intellectually with pharmacology as a malignant system of violence that necessitates warfare and the infrastructure to perpetuate it. The affective states that *Ajax* may galvanize in a more contemporary context open the possibility for unforeseen forms of political action that can identify and resist hegemonic social structures and the political violence that sustains them.

### Catharsis without Pharmacology

*Ajax* bears witness to how socio-political institutions – those very institutions that are



**Figure 5.** *Theater of War: Ajax*. Amy Ryan as Tecmessa. Photo: Gregg Richards.

responsible for protecting and maintaining a just society – can precipitate violent injustices. But beyond encouraging spectators to resist the political institutions that govern their society, *Ajax*'s cathartic effect inspires, as Mary Karen Dahl states, 'alternatives to sacrificial action that redefine social dynamics around a new ethic of non-betrayal'.<sup>81</sup> Sophocles' tragedy materializes this ethical intervention by situating *Ajax*'s desire for revenge in relation to what he perceives is an act that signifies a traumatic betrayal. This structure leads spectators to empathize with a protagonist whose actions they might normally condemn. Thus, whatever healing properties tragedy might have, it has them to the extent that the spectator recognizes that the tragic protagonist is, at least within the Sophoclean universe, an outsider whose action contravenes the law.<sup>82</sup>

Aligned with such an ethical intervention, Theater of War's readings of *Ajax* may enable audience members to examine the institutions that regulate their own society, and to protest against them if and when they lead to

oppression or exploitation. This form of critical consciousness becomes especially important when others outside of the theatre claim to suffer injustices that complicate, if not outright contradict, an individual's convictions or any of the more normative structures that inform them. Given such stakes, tragedy's ability to compel individuals to listen to those who suffer from a 'betrayal of justice' becomes all the more necessary when they cannot represent such injustice in the spectator's or artist's language or idiom.

*Ajax* facilitates such a confrontation with alterity, which disrupts pharmacology and gives language to others so that they may testify to the reality of their traumatic experiences and develop the comportment to survive them. Yet, such healing produces an important insight: the individuals or communities whose absence brings tragedy to bear on the present will always haunt the gift of cathartic words such as 'I've been *Ajax*' or 'I've spoken with *Ajax*'. To think of catharsis in the time of terrorism is thus to consider how

tragedy produces its cathartic effect when individuals imagine dismantling the conditions that precipitate in present reality the violence represented by a particular tragedy. And this more radical idea of catharsis can only be realized when spectators – and in this instance it is primarily white American spectators – learn to acknowledge and welcome those whose lives they might otherwise sacrifice to secure their own.

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