

# AN ILIAD

BY LISA PETERSON  
AND DENIS O'HARE

BASED ON HOMER'S *THE ILIAD*,  
TRANSLATED BY ROBERT FAGLES



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AN ILIAD  
by Lisa Peterson and Denis O'Hare  
based on Homer's *The Iliad*, translated by Robert Fagles

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AN ILIAD was originally developed as part of  
the New York Theatre Workshop Usual Suspects Program,  
Off-Broadway premiere produced by New York Theatre Workshop  
(Jim Nicola, Artistic Director; William Russo, Managing Director) in 2012.

AN ILIAD was originally produced by Seattle Repertory Theatre  
(Jerry Manning Producing Artistic Director; Benjamin Moore, Managing Director).

It was subsequently produced by McCarter Theatre Center, Princeton, NJ  
(Emily Mann, Artistic Director; Timothy J. Shields, Managing Director;  
Mara Isaacs, Producing Director).

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## AUTHORS' NOTE

We began talking about performing the *Iliad* not long after the United States invaded Iraq in 2003. We were both thinking about war, and plays about war — thinking that at the time, the best thing a theater artist could do was to find a way to talk about what it means to be a country at war.

The job of cataloging all the plays ever written about war — and there are a lot of them — eventually brought us to the *Iliad*. Most people think of the *Iliad* as an epic poem, not a play. We had both studied it as a work of literature, not a piece of theater — but the more we read about the ancient oral tradition and Homer, the more convinced we became that the staggering tale of the Trojan War really was spoken out loud and passed from storyteller to storyteller for centuries before it was ever written down. We began to imagine a character called The Poet: an ancient teller of tales who might still exist in the universe, doomed to tell the story of the Trojan War until the day when human nature changes, when our addiction to rage comes to an end, when the telling of a war story becomes unnecessary. A day that has yet to come, of course.

We imagine that our Poet is Greek, as Homer was, and traveled across the wine-dark seas with Agamemnon and Achilles and the Greek armies. That he camped there on the coast of Ilium for nine years with the Greek soldiers, that he did lay eyes on Troy and fell in love with that culture. That he has roamed the world telling the story of Achilles and Hector and Hecuba and Hermes and all the hundreds of other characters that inhabit the *Iliad*. He has told this story for thousands of years, and in that time he has witnessed (or thinks, or imagines he has witnessed) every war from the Trojan War onwards. He's found himself at each battle, in every trench, at every wall, in the mess halls, in the infirmaries, over the centuries. He has wandered the scorched battlefields and befriended — then lost — soldiers in all corners of the world's history, witnessing and recording everything. He's a compendium of war.

We imagine that on this particular night, our Poet finds himself transported to an empty stage, in front of a particular audience, and he chooses to tell the story in this way: as an inexorable collision between

two great warriors — Achilles and Hector — and that on this particular night he becomes infected with rage himself, and nearly loses himself in a telescopic listing of all wars ever fought, and that on this night he tries to quit telling the story, but can't. We think that he still believes in the old gods, and that the old gods won't let him quit. They won't let him out of his storytelling purgatory.

The “where” of our play is simple: it's the room that he walks into. It could be an auditorium, an empty theatre, a warehouse ... or even a bar. Wherever people are gathered and ready to hear his song — this is the appropriate setting for our play.

Homer's *Iliad* begins with The Poet asking the Muses to help him, and throughout the epic poem you can find these invocations. We decided to make the Muse actually appear, and to us that means that music literally enters the world near the top of our Part Two. The inclusion of music in this piece is not just incidental. It is a vital part of the evening's progress; we view the muse as the other major character in the play. In the McCarter and New York Theatre Workshop productions we used an extraordinary string bass player to embody this Muse. The back-and-forth dialogue between The Poet and the musician was a real duet, and we encourage other directors to either license Mark Bennett's gorgeous score, or to explore using music in some other way. We have seen other productions where the music is not live and this also works, but when there is a live musician for The Poet to interact with, the evening has much more depth and the struggle The Poet enacts has much more power.

We imagine there are many ways to approach this script. One thing we do know about solo storytelling, though, is that when our Poet embodies each character, he becomes that person, fully. We hope it's unnecessary to use costume pieces or props to do this, but that this Poet uses his voice and body to inhabit all of the souls in his story. The story is full of these instant transformations, and it's important that the Poet dives deeply into the experience of each character, taking the audience with him, and then just as easily and fully step out to narrate, like a reporter embedded in the human wartime experience. There is no reason that The Poet could not be female, or any race, or differently-abled, or over 70 or under 30. We think of Homer as a kind of coat that anyone with the passion and the talent (and the

ability to memorize) the story could wear. Though we definitely invented this play to be performed by one lone figure, we recognize that it could be performed by more than one person, and would encourage people to find their own way.

There are a few places in the script where we recognize that, over time, there might need to be a bit of adjustment. We've noted those places in the script, with guidelines for staying up to date.

And finally, we fell in love with Robert Fagles' glorious translation. To us, it remains the most compelling and playable English version of the poetry of the *Iliad*. It is written in fairly free dactylic hexameter — very different from the iambic pentameter that we're all used to in the English language theater. In the text, we've indicated Fagles' passages by indenting the verse and setting it off from the main body. We highly recommend the introductions that Fagles and his editor, Bernard Knox, have included in their full editions of the *Iliad*, and would certainly recommend that anyone taking on this project read the entire Fagles translation of the epic. Also, tackling the ancient Greek takes some help, and every time that we've put a production together, we have brought in a Greek scholar to teach us about the pronunciation and rhythmic rules of the ancient Greek that is sprinkled throughout the script.

AN ILIAD started out as an examination of war and man's tendency toward war. In the end, it also became an examination of the theater and the way in which we still tell each other stories in order to try to make sense of ourselves, and our behavior. Someone started telling the story of the Trojan War, in all its glory and devastation and surprise, over 3,000 years ago. We pass it on.

AN ILIAD was originally produced by Seattle Repertory Theatre (Jerry Manning, Producing Artistic Director; Benjamin Moore, Managing Director) in Seattle, Washington, opening on April 9, 2010. It was directed by Lisa Peterson; the set design was by Rachel Hauck; the costume design was by Marcia Dickey Jory; the lighting design was by Scott Zielinski; the original music and sound design were by Paul James Prendergast; the stage manager was Michael B. Paul; and the dramaturg was Janice Paran. The production featured Hans Altwies as The Poet.

AN ILIAD was produced at the McCarter Theatre Center (Emily Mann, Artistic Director; Timothy J. Shields, Managing Director; Mara Isaacs, Producing Director) in Princeton, New Jersey, opening on October 29, 2010. It was directed by Lisa Peterson; the set design was by Rachel Hauck; the costume design was by Marina Draghici; the lighting design was by Scott Zielinski; and the original music and sound design were by Mark Bennett. The production featured Stephen Spinella as The Poet.

AN ILIAD was produced at New York Theater Workshop (James C. Nicola, Artistic Director; William Russo, Managing Director) in New York City, opening on March 7, 2012. It was directed by Lisa Peterson; the set design was by Rachel Hauck; the costume design was by Marina Draghici; the lighting design was by Scott Zielinski; the original music and sound design were by Mark Bennett; and the production stage manager was Donald Fried. The production featured Denis O'Hare and Stephen Spinella as The Poet on alternate nights.

# CHARACTERS

THE POET

# AN ILIAD

## Part One

### THE ARMIES GATHER

*An empty space. Dim light. Suddenly, a door in the back wall opens and a man enters. He's wearing an old coat, a hat pulled down over his eyes, and carrying a suitcase. There is something ancient about him, but it may just be that he looks weary, as if he's been traveling for a very long time. He walks toward us, puts down the suitcase. He squints out at us, taking us in. Hesitates, not entirely sure if he's in the right place.*

*The man shakes his head, closes his eyes, gathers his energy, and begins:*

POET.

μη̄νιν ἄειδε θεὰ Πηληϊάδεω Ἀχιλῆος?  
MEH nin ah | EI de the | A PEH | LEH ia | DYO akhi | LEH os  
οὐλομένην, ἣ μυρὶ Ἄχαιοῖς ἄλγε' ἔθηκε  
OU lo me | NEHN HEH | MU ri a | KHAI OIS | AL ge' eh | THEH ke  
πολλὰς δ' ἰφθίμους ψυχὰς Ἄϊδι προΐαψεν  
POLLAS | D' IPH THI | MOUS PSU | KHAS ah i | DI pro i | AH psen  
ἠρώων,  
HEH RO | ON —

[*Translation:*

*Rage — Goddess, sing the rage of Peleus' son Achilles,  
murderous, doomed, that cost the Achaeans countless losses,  
hurling down to the House of Death so many sturdy souls,  
great fighters' souls — ]*

*(He stops, lost. He looks out at us, embarrassed. He shuffles down to the edge of the stage, and peers out into the dark. He squints and examines the audience.)*

Back then, oh I could sing it. For days and nights. On and on, every battle, every old digression, I would sing and sing ... in Mycenae once I sang for a year — you don't believe me? In Babylon, I sang it differently, but the crowds came ... in Alexandria I started to notice a few empty seats, but still I sang it. Shorter though — three or four days. Know where it went down really well? Gaul, something about those people, they had a real taste for it — of course they were hard to control, they used to get up on tables and sing along, they threatened to take the whole thing over, went outside, screaming, building fires, terrible.

Every time I sing this song, I hope it's the last time.

*(With Homeric intensity.)* Ohhh, sing to me now. Uhhh, you muses. In the halls of Olympus ... you are goddesses! You are everywhere! You know everything! All we hear is the distant ring of glory ... *(Hopefully.)* Sing!

*(Suddenly changing subject — a diversion.)* You know, in the old days, we'd be in a tavern, or a bar, I guess you would say. It was so much easier to talk about these horrors in a bar ... *(He takes off his hat and looks toward the suitcase.)* This is the story of the Trojan War. And two great fighters — Achilles and Hector —

*(Imploring.)* Ohhhhhh ... Muses ...

*(He concentrates very hard, searching his memory and asking the Muses to help. He closes his eyes.)*

μη̄νιν ἄειδε θεὰ Πηληϊάδεω Ἀχιλῆος?  
MEH nin ah | EI de the | A PEH | LEH ia | DY0 akhi | LEH os  
οὐλομένην,  
OU lo me | NEHN ...

*(Waits. Then, in a burst of inspiration, he squeezes out six lines of dactylic hexameter.)*

RAGE!

Goddess, Sing the rage of Peleus' son Achilles,  
Murderous, doomed, that cost the Achaeans countless losses,  
Hurling down to the House of Death so many sturdy souls,  
Great fighters' souls, but made their bodies carrion,  
Feasts for the dogs and birds ...

What drove them to fight with such a fury?

Ohhh ... the gods, of course ... um ... pride, honor, jealousy  
... Aphrodite ... some game or other, an apple, Helen being  
more beautiful than somebody — it doesn't matter. The point  
is, Helen's been stolen, and the Greeks have to get her back.

*(Tired by the idea of it.)* Huhhhh. It's always something, isn't it ...?

But — it's a good story. I — I remember a lot of it, I remember a  
lot of it ... Imagine a beach — rocky, jagged — and oh about a mile  
and a half inland imagine a city, with stone ramparts protecting  
it. This city was called Troy, and from the walls of this city Hector  
can see the water, down by the beach, and in that water, there are  
hundreds of ships. It is crowded with all kinds of Greek ships. This  
is where my story takes place. Ages ago.

*(With Homeric intensity.)* Who were the captains of those Greek  
ships? Who were the captains of Achaea? Ahhhhhh! The mass of  
troops I could never tally, I could, I could, if ... if I had ten tongues  
in ten mouths ... if, if, if, if I, if I had a heart made of me bronze. *(He  
likes that.)* Yes! A heart made of me bronze. And if I could remember  
the names, that is — if I could actually remember everybody.

Sing! Sing in memory  
All who gathered under Troy ...

The List of Ships ... the numbers of men on those ships ... Muses?

*(No answer from the Muses. He concentrates very hard — willing his  
memory to wake up — and slowly at first, he calls up the list of ships.)*  
Here goes:

First came the Boeotian units led by Lay-i-tus and Pen-e-lay-os:  
Ar-se-si-lay-us and Proth-o-ee-nor and Clonius shared command  
Of the armed men who lived in Hyria, rocky Aulis ...  
(*Grasping, he skips ahead.*) Thespia and Gray-uh, the dancing  
rings of My-ka-less-us,  
Men who lived round Harma, Il-e-si-on and Er-y-three ...  
(*Skips ahead again.*) Co-pae, Eu-tree-sis and Thisbe thronged  
with doves —

Ah, it's coming back to me, yes (*He picks up the pace ...*)

Fighters from Coronea, Haleartus deep in meadows,  
And the men who held Plataea and lived in Glisas,  
Men who held the rough-hewn gates of Lower Thebes,  
On-kee-stus the holy, Poseidon's sun-filled grove,  
Men from the town of Arne green with vineyards ...

(*He stops himself.*) Ah, that's right, you don't know any of these  
places ... but these names — these names mean something to me.  
And I knew these boys ...

The point is, on all these ships, are boys from every small town  
in Ohio, from farmlands, from fishing villages ... the boys of  
Nebraska and South Dakota ... the twangy boys of Memphis ...  
the boys of San Diego, Palo Alto, Berkeley, Antelope Valley ... You  
can imagine, you can imagine, you know, um ... there are soldiers  
from Kansas. There are soldiers from Lawrence, Kansas.\* There  
are soldiers from Springfield, Illinois. Evanston, Illinois. Chicago,  
Illinois. Buffalo, New York. Cooperstown, New York. Brooklyn,  
Queens, Staten Island, uh, the Bronx, South Bronx. You have soldiers  
from Florida, from the Panhandle, with its snake charmers and  
evangelists, from the Okeechobee. You have soldiers from Miami  
who speak Spanish, Miami who speak French, Miami who speak  
English. You have Puerto Rican soldiers. You have soldiers from  
Texas, from the flatland, from Dallas, from Plano, from Houston.  
There are soldiers from Tennessee, from western Tennessee, from  
the mountains, from the mountains in Virginia, the mountains in

\* We like to include one or two towns from the locale where the play is being performed. Feel free to pick a couple of nearby places that produce enlisted men and women, and insert them after Lawrence, Kansas.

Seattle. From Flint, Michigan, from Benton Harbor, from — from — from — in the thumb, from Escanaba, you know what I mean? ... That's it. That's it.

You get the point.

Known and unknown.

We're talking tens of thousands of men, emptied out of the Greek islands.

Picture these men, these ships, so many ships.

*(He begins to count the ships as he sees them in his mind's-eye, drawing attention to his favorite commanders.)* 50, 40, 40, 40, 50, 80, 100 — Agamemnon — 60, 40, 40, 12 — Odysseus — 80, 30, 50 — Achilles — 11, 40, 30 — these are ships I'm counting, not men — 40, 40, 90 — Nestor ... that's, how many, uhhhhh, hundreds and hundreds of ships ...

That's 120 men on each ship ... tens of thousands, hundreds of thousands of Greek men. Do you see?

*(Silence.)*

So here we are —

Nine years.

*(Beat.)* Oh please ... O Muses ... don't make me do this alone. *(No answer.)* Nine years.

Fighting on and off, fighting to the wall and back. Greeks win one day, Trojans win the next, like a game of tug-of-war, and nothing to show for it but exhaustion, poverty, and loneliness.

What was it like? Ah, it was a pain. It was awful. It was, it was, it was hot. How about that? It was hot. How can I — ?

Nine years. So for — so you left home when your baby was one, you

# AN ILIAD

by Lisa Peterson and Denis O'Hare

based on Homer's *The Iliad*, translated by Robert Fagles

1M (flexible casting)

AN ILIAD is a modern-day retelling of Homer's classic. Poetry and humor, the ancient tale of the Trojan War and the modern world collide in this captivating theatrical experience. The setting is simple: the empty theater. The time is now: the present moment. The lone figure onstage is a storyteller — possibly Homer, possibly one of the many bards who followed in his footsteps. He is fated to tell this story throughout history.

*"Spellbinding ... Smartly conceived and impressively executed, AN ILIAD relates an age-old story that resonates with tragic meaning today ... As he talks about ruined civilizations and how blind rage can overwhelm people whether they are on a battlefield or merely cut off by a car on the highway, the poet asks viewers, 'Do you see?' Indeed we do."*

—The New York Times

*"AN ILIAD is pure theater: shocking, glorious, primal and deeply satisfying."*

—Time Out New York

*"Explosive, altogether breathtaking ... Brilliantly meshes past and present calamity, with touches of the most caustic dark humor suddenly shifting into unimaginable pathos."*

—The Chicago Sun-Times

*"Intimate, unstuffy, timely, accessible — while preserving a sense of timelessness, and grandeur, [AN ILIAD] enthralls and pierces your heart with images of fallen warriors, bereft wives and parents, and the bitter landscape of a long, fruitless, uselessly barbaric war."*

—The Seattle Times

*"100 intelligent, emotional minutes."*

—The Huffington Post

*"A brilliant and thrilling adaptation."*

—The Philadelphia Inquirer

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