

'Ajax' in Guantanamo



An ancient story wins hearts and minds at the world's most controversial military base

BY BRYCE PINKHAM

The Theater of War ensemble gives a reading of *Ajax* in an amphitheatre at U.S. Naval Base Guantanamo Bay in March 2011.

COURTESY OF THEATER OF WAR PRODUCTIONS

SOMEONE IS SCREAMING AT ME IN HIGH-PITCHED Arabic. The thick glass partition to my left could probably stop a bullet, but it fails to block me and my fellow visitors from what my gut registers as either caustic threats or urgent pleas. I am undeniably rattled. The hair on my neck and arms is in the full upright and locked position. My heart feels like a beanbag that has been tossed up the back of my throat. I am under the same roof as some of the most allegedly dangerous men in the world, and one of them is screaming at me.

He is young—maybe 25? His skin is light brown and his face has the beginnings of a substantial beard. He sits in a chair in white scrubs, his hands shackled between his knees. A conspicuous blue tube trails out of his nostril and disappears behind the chair. Three troopers surround him, each sporting a plastic faceguard, rubber gloves and nerves of steel.

I can feel the entire audience—service members, vets and their wives—begin to sit forward in their seats in solemn recognition of a shared experience.

Amid the hurling of epithets, the young man and I make eye contact. For just a moment, I see in front of me a frightened boy, a pawn wondering how he got so far from the protection of his rook. The moment is fleeting, and he resumes his bluster with redoubled strength. We are swiftly shuttled past the scene, funneled down another corridor of Detention Camp V and, in a flash, blinded by the Caribbean sun.

Detention Camp VI is decidedly calmer, but equally strict. We are offered a few seconds' glimpse of detainees in communal living situations. Through one-way mirrored glass we peer in on men taking English class, surfing 120 stations of satellite on flat screens, playing Xbox, reading, and listening to music. Plastered on the inside of the thick glass for all visitors to see is a pastiche of handwritten signs and banners. Some are in Arabic, but most send clear messages in English: "Obama is a Liar!" "Give us a Trial or Release Us!" "Indefinite Detention is Illegal!" I ask why the blatant antagonism is allowed to remain in view, and our guide answers that he believes in allowing the detainees (note: always "detainees," never "prisoners") a form of peaceful protest. He adds that taking the signs down could lead to more virulent forms of insurrection.

In an effort to keep the detainees healthy in mind and body, the military staffs a full-time psychologist and psychiatrist (both women, by the way) as well as a full hospital staff. The medical team treats detainees for anything and everything, including self-inflicted starvation. Apparently, one of the hardest tasks for military doctors here is determining when it is necessary to use nasally intubated feeding tubes and restraint chairs to keep hunger strikers alive. This practice, responsible for many scenes like the one we passed earlier in Camp V, is one of several contradictions I find most perplexing about this place. In a different setting we would hunt and kill these men; here, we are forcing them to stay alive.

Our tour of Camp VI is cut short as we near prayer time.

COURTESY OF LT. JASON DUFF, U.S. NAVY



Back row, from left, Joint Stress Mitigation and Restoration Team (JSMART) members HM2 Salvatore Peralta, HM3 Barry Soraghan; Theater of War's Bryan Doerries, Elizabeth Marvel, Brian O'Byrne; the officer responsible for bringing *Ajax* to GTMO, Lt. Jason Duff; Bryce Pinkham. Front, from left, HM2 Kari Harty; Outside the Wire producing director Phyllis Kaufman; actor Peter Francis James.

The camps are kept quiet five times a day out of respect for Muslim practice—one of many benevolent gestures made toward men being held indefinitely against their will. On our way out, several guards, 20 years old if they're a day, carry padded leather shackles and rubber gloves past us in haste. This place is nothing like I expected.

IT'S NOT OFTEN THAT CIVILIANS ARE given the chance to tour the innermost reaches of Guantanamo Bay, especially when those civilians are actors. I am traveling with Bryan Doerries, artistic director of Outside the Wire and creator of Theater of War, a project that brings scenes from Sophocles' *Ajax* to military audiences. Along with actors Elizabeth Marvel, Peter Francis James and Brian O'Byrne, I have come to further Doerries's mission: to use live theatre as a catalyst for discussion among specific communities about the issues most pressing to them. Several years ago Doerries acted on a hunch that men and women of our military—those who live lives of mythical proportions, facing life and death every day—would benefit greatly from the provocative power of an ancient yet universal story of war.

Our performances over the next few days are very simple. We sit at a table with scripts in hand, on the stage of one of GTMO's two—count 'em, *two*—amphitheatres. To our right is boundless sea, to our left guard towers and razor wire. The majority of our audience members have been “volun-told” by their superiors to attend, and their skepticism toward anything involving the words

“theatre” or “play” is palpable. Inevitably, though, somewhere around minute five, a change happens. Tecmessa, Ajax's wife, played with fiery élan by Elizabeth Marvel, cries out: “Our fierce hero sits shell-shocked in his tent gazing into oblivion. He has the thousand-

yard stare! A divine madness poisoned his mind...our home is a slaughterhouse!” I can feel the entire audience—service members, vets and their wives—begin to sit forward in their seats in solemn recognition of a shared experience.

In the town-hall discussions that follow all Theater of War performances, Doerries encourages soldiers and their spouses to share how Ajax's post-traumatic stress disorder and eventual suicide relates to their own experiences. One marine at Guantanamo, a self-proclaimed “trained killer” with a Disney jawline and grapefruit biceps, speaks with visible difficulty. In 2010 he returned from “the sandbox” with all the men from his vehicle accounted for. He reveals that today he is one of two that remain alive. Upon returning home, the squad experienced several waves of suicides, he divulges, deaths that more often than not cropped up in pairs. Now at GTMO, his third deployment, this “trained killer” goes to work every day and stands five to ten feet from men he recognizes as *the enemy*, men responsible for insurmountable damage to his friends' minds, men who day in and day out fling everything at him from

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holy curses to fresh feces. “And what is my job?” this Goliath intones in a gentle baritone that belies an unfolding vulnerability. “To do nothing.” Guantanamo might be the only front of the War on Terror—and the military *does* consider it a front—where the mission is flipped entirely on its head: preserve the enemy.

AN OLDER VETERAN IN CIVILIAN clothes approaches me after one performance. He shakes my hand with a force that would have made Ajax himself wince. He looks me straight in the eye and asks, “Have you ever served in the military, son?”

“No, sir,” I quickly reply.

Still shaking my hand, refusing to break eye contact, he says, “What you are doing here is just as honorable, just as much a service to your country as anything anyone in this audience has done. You are giving these people the chance to talk about something they may have never had the chance to talk about before. You’re offering them the chance to heal.”

It’s easy to forget our power as actors. It’s even easier to assimilate into “the entertainment industry” and invest in the delusion

Doerries encourages soldiers and their spouses to share how Ajax’s post-traumatic stress disorder and eventual suicide relates to their own experiences.

of “making it.” It’s tempting to marginalize our relevance in a world of 3-D TVs and “Jersey Shore.” After this trip, however, I find it impossible to deny the power and enduring strength of live storytelling. It’s no small feat to bring a living, breathing G.I. Joe to tears in front of his men. It requires actual vibration and resonance in real time, something only the theatre can produce.

Sophocles (a former general himself) knew of theatre’s potential; it’s why he wrote a play about soldier suicide for 12,000 Greek soldiers to watch together. Doerries relays the comments of a service member at a previous

performance who suggested that Sophocles wrote the play to “boost morale.” Doerries asked him to clarify: “What’s morale-boosting about a tragedy?” The trooper responded, “It’s the truth.”

On our way back to the hotel on the last night we shuffle through some comment cards collected anonymously. One reads: “I feel like I can breathe again.” Another: “I’ve come back to every show. I think it’s helping me find my smile.”

Let us never forget our worth, storytellers. We are the original 3-D. Let us never doubt our service to mankind; we are not only honorable but necessary. Most of all, let us never underestimate the simple power of a good story. ☑

Bryce Pinkham is an actor and writer in New York City. He most recently appeared in W. Somerset Maugham’s *The Circle* at Westport Country Playhouse and *February House* at New York Stage and Film. To learn more about Theater of War and *Outside the Wire*, visit www.outsidethewirellc.com.

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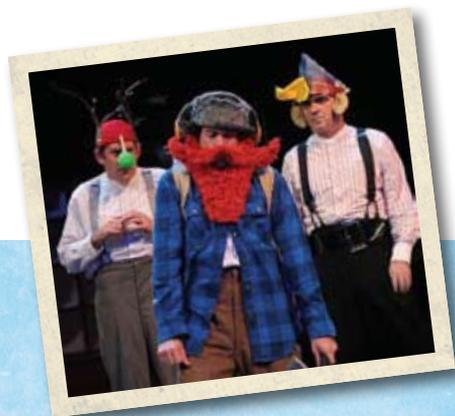
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