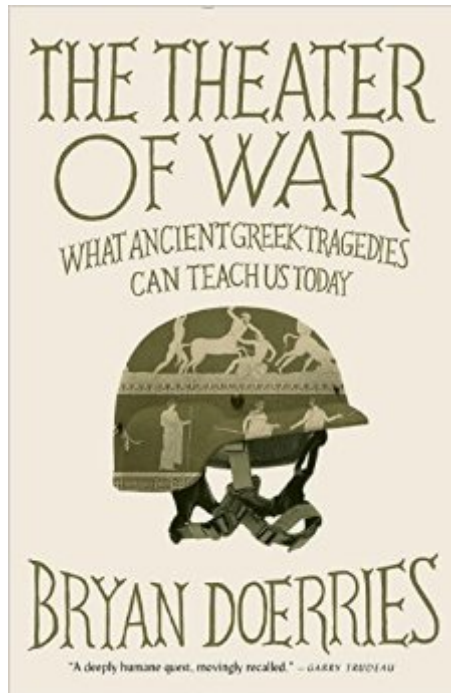


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# The Theater Of War: What Ancient Tragedies Can Teach Us Today



## Synopsis

This is the personal and deeply passionate story of a life devoted to reclaiming the timeless power of an ancient artistic tradition to comfort the afflicted. For years, theater director Bryan Doerries has led an innovative public health project that produces ancient tragedies for current and returned soldiers, addicts, tornado and hurricane survivors, and a wide range of other at-risk people in society. The originality and generosity of Doerries's work is startling, and *The Theater of War* "wholly unsentimental, but intensely felt and emotionally engaging" is a humane, knowledgeable, and accessible book that will both inspire and enlighten. Tracing a path that links the personal to the artistic to the social and back again, Doerries shows us how suffering and healing are part of a timeless process in which dialogue and empathy are inextricably linked.

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## Customer Reviews

Honestly, I didn't quite know what to expect with *The Theater of War*. By the time I was done, I felt almost guilty for peeking into some of the personal moments that were shared by Doerries in this work. First, a look at what we have here: Doerries stages 'readings' of Classical Greek plays for veterans groups and other specific groups like those facing terminal illness. From that point he leads discussions about how the plays inform or address the issues being dealt with by those groups. Second, a look at the impact: this book probably has the most raw emotion I've read in a long, long time. We see people finally finding the vocabulary to express what they feel, to address what they face. It's powerful. It's powerful to see how the ancient world can inform the modern one. One of the best lessons in here is that one can address the difficulties of war separate from the

politics of getting into it in the first place. Doerries' work reminds me that there is wisdom for now found in the old words.

I am certainly one of the audiences for this book - I'm a veteran, and reported several times from Iraq, etc., and as you'd see from my reviews, I've read quite a lot of the fiction and nonfiction that's come from the last 14 years of war, and I feel like I'm invested in all aspects of it. So it surprised me that I was so ambivalent and apathetic about this book, which has a laudable intention. I think part of it was my realizing some things about myself. I think very literally and in fairly 'journalistic' terms. I don't especially use metaphors in my writing, or in my life. Things are what they are, and they don't represent anything else. So when I was confronted with Bryan Doerries project that was essentially trying to do just that, it's something that didn't connect with me. There's enough present-day history to pay attention to, without needing the plays from 3000 years ago. Doerries is very earnest - and that also is opposed to my dark cynicism. He is a crusader, and a preacher for his ideas, but that style of proselytizing often grates on me in large doses and that also happened here. But - I do NOT think this pushes the "victim affliction" another reviewer commented on. And I don't want to judge Doerries responses to his own experiences, or especially the value that others would get from this. By using these plays, he's showing a way to connect the present day to what's gone before and that IS important. I do think he's a bit condescending to veterans, soldiers and family members at times, and maybe not giving them enough credit for being smart enough to figure this out on their own...but I'm internalizing, so that's likely a bit unfair. I don't know. I don't mean for this to be a negative review, but there is an audience that this won't reach - the people who think very literally and in the moment. I can certainly find present-day relevance in more recent wartime works, and I think the Greek plays are just too distant for me to connect with - even though they say the same thing as any book by Tim O'Brien or Michael Herr. So strangely didn't work for me - but I applaud the effort all the same. No book can reach all audiences, or maybe I just wasn't ready for this one.

I was drawn to this book because I've become interested in classical literature and am also interested in the military. I couldn't see how the two would come together. This book totally blew me away. Bryan Doerries got involved with the classics at Kenyon College, a liberal arts college that's been the subject of at least one memoir. He then got an MFA in directing. He was personally affected by tragedy with his girlfriend and later his father. From there he conceived the idea to stage classical plays for the military. It's not clear how Bryan was drawn to the military but he was on to something. He fought hard to get his first performance of what would become Theatre of the War.

As he predicted, the words of the ancient Greek heroes - read movingly by professional actors - resonated with contemporary warriors. After each performance, Bryan creates an environment of sharing. People - sometimes led by a panel - come to realize they are not alone. Often they're not deterred by the presence of senior officers: they need to speak. Bryan goes on to produce these plays in other environments, such as prisons. Guards have no trouble identifying. It is especially meaningful when they say Zeus is the three strikes rule. A lot of books about transformative experiences tend to be upbeat and cheerful. This one pulls no punches. Bryan doesn't spare us a raw, rarely seen look into the horrors of PTSD and prisons. He takes us into Guantanamo, where guards cruelly force feed prisoners on hunger strikes, and medical people aren't always comfortable with what they see. We hear about returning soldiers who did horrific things when caught up in anger and frustration. We're not taken behind the scenes much. Bryan writes sardonically about his unusual introduction to the classics, especially the languages, where he created a total immersion experience for himself. His transition to theatre as healing is a bit murky and he never talks about funding or casting. How does he get famous actors to participate and coordinate with their schedules? Where did he get the motivation and skill to persuade military officials when he was getting started? I can only imagine a tedious, frustrating series of calls and turn-downs, which he spares us. The book's focus is on those who are subjects and audiences. Projects like this have much room for growth. He could tackle health care and nursing homes, where "residents" sometimes have fewer rights and about the same possibility of abuse as prisoners. On the one hand, it's heart-warming to realize that stories from 2500 years ago still resonate. On the other, it's chilling to witness cruelty, in all its forms, unchanged after all this time, built into the infrastructure of institutions in a nation that claims pride for advancement in science and achievement of freedom.

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