

Playing with Greek Fire

by

Brian Woolland

Brian Woolland's play, *This Flesh is Mine*, loosely based on *The Iliad*, was rehearsed in Ramallah, Palestine, in April and early May 2014. This article discusses the early development of a new play, *When Nobody Returns*, based on *The Odyssey* and commissioned by Border Crossings as a companion piece to *This Flesh is Mine*.

Border Crossings and Ashtar Theatre mounted a co-production of *When Nobody Returns* in Autumn 2016 at Theatre Bay, Acklam Village, Notting Hill, as part of the Nour Festival.

The pleasures of ignorance

There are great joys to be experienced in coming late to pleasures we have missed earlier in life. There is something wonderful in encountering plays which have the status of 'classics', but which one encounters, for the first time, as a stranger with freshness and curiosity. For many years I had been warned off the work of Ben Jonson, for example; but when I saw *The Alchemist*, *Volpone* and *The Devil is an Ass* in the theatre I witnessed first-hand what Peter Barnes described as 'his seemingly heavy, clotted verse and prose unfold(ing) like beautiful Japanese paper flowers in water...' (1). The assumptions and preconceptions I had brought with me were confounded.

More recently, I had a similar experience with classical Greek tragedy. I had never studied it, but had picked up vague notions about the tragedies being pretty heavy

going. I assumed the plays to be highly formalised, with the most significant events all happening off-stage. I imagined (for that's what it was, an act of imagination – I had never actually read a Greek tragedy!) that the often brutal endings were 'cathartic' in a way which disempowered the spectator, encouraging the sense that psychological 'flaws' and social and political injustice are not only inevitable, but decreed by Fate and the gods. In essence, I thought that Greek tragedy encouraged audiences to succumb to an ideological fatalism by presenting human beings as incapable of change.

How wrong could I have been?

What is so extraordinary about the plays themselves is how many of them are openly critical of contemporary society and particularly of the consuming destructiveness of war. Many of Euripides' late plays openly question the conduct of war and often the

need for it at all. They frequently contain thinly veiled allusions to incidents in the disastrous Peloponnesian War, which ultimately led to widespread civil war and the collapse of the 'golden age' of classical Greece. *Women of Troy*, *Hecuba* and *Iphigeneia at Aulis* are war plays which actively encourage audiences to question the motives and methods of 'great' leaders. He allows these characters (Menelaus, Agamemnon, Odysseus, Polymestor) to justify what they have done, but makes sure that their real motives are always visible to the audience beneath the superficial sheen of duplicity.

I was also intrigued by how often these playwrights took liberties with Greek mythology. Characters who are central in Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* (Agamemnon, Menelaus, Ajax, Achilles, Hecuba, Helen, Odysseus) appear regularly, but in the tragedies they are made afresh for new audiences (ⁱⁱ); their heroic status often represented as highly questionable – setting a model for the way that subsequent mythologies play with audiences' expectations of characters, and deliberately confounding them (as, for example, in those revisionist Westerns which turn the stereotyped outlaw heroes of 1950s B movies – such as Jesse James, Billy the Kid – into complex and deeply flawed three-dimensional characters).

The plays of Euripides also contain some of the finest dramatic roles for women ever written. The eponymous *Antigone*, *Medea* and *Hecuba* are as rich and complex as *Lady Macbeth*. It was this which inspired me to make *Briseis* and *Hecuba* such important characters in *This Flesh is Mine*.

Plays or theories about plays?

I confess that my ignorance and prejudice about Greek theatre came from my own laziness. I had accepted opinions from others at second hand, without bothering to read the source material for myself. One of the key secondary sources I had drawn on was Boal's *Theater of the Oppressed*. The first part of the book is devoted to an analysis and interpretation of 'Aristotle's Coercive System of Tragedy' (Boal's title for the chapter). It comprises a quarter of the whole book. He argues that 'Aristotle constructs the first, extremely powerful poetic-political system for intimidation of the spectator, for elimination of the 'bad' or illegal tendencies of the audience'. Whilst I have great respect for Boal, and have been profoundly influenced and inspired by his work, it is a great shame that in *Theater of the Oppressed* he refers only to Aristotle's theories. Not one of the plays themselves is ever discussed. By ignoring the plays, Boal denies himself an opportunity to examine the difference between the makers of theatre and those, such as Aristotle, who stand in intimidating judgement. I am in wholehearted agreement with Boal in his argument that Aristotle's analyses and prescriptions for theatre have been deadening, but there is a danger of conflating Aristotle's theoretical prescriptions with the plays themselves, for doing so denies the extraordinary, subversive power of Greek theatre.

As David Wiles argues,

'Aristotle's dislike of performance and isolation of the written text from its performance context is bound up with his deep dislike of the Athenian democratic system.' (Wiles p.170).

Timberlake Wertenbaker goes further: Aristotle's

'*Poetics* wrecked theatre for the next two thousand years... (His theories) had a deadening impact.' (ii)

One only has to look at the plays of Chekhov, Caryl Churchill, Howard Barker or Edward Bond (all of which defy almost every one of Aristotle's prescriptions) to see how exhilarating theatre can be when it throws off the shackles of doctrinaire theorising. A deferential over-reliance on the Aristotelean model is at least in part the

reason for the endless stream of forgettable, schematic, formulaic films which emerge from Hollywood.

Commissions and constraints

In previous articles for *The Journal* I have explored how *This Flesh is Mine* ⁽ⁱⁱⁱ⁾ developed from a series of educational drama workshops on *The Iliad* with young people and with teachers, through workshops with professional actors, to theatrical production.

When Michael Walling, the director of Border Crossings, asked me to write a companion piece to *This Flesh is Mine*, based on *The Odyssey*, I felt honoured and privileged. The constraints of the commission included: the play was to be for the same cast as *This Flesh is Mine* (so that the two plays could tour together and be performed back-to-back); the cast would be six actors, three English, three Palestinian, two women and four men; the play would be co-produced with Ashtar Theatre (based in Ramallah) and would have to resonate for the Palestinian cast and audiences in the Middle East. Initially I felt daunted by those constraints and by the knowledge that so many others before me have adapted *The Odyssey*.

But writing within constraints is often liberating because it reduces the number of decisions you have to make, forces you to think of the ‘creative processes’ as a series of problem solving exercises. Just as with educational drama, providing young people (or any workshop participants) with a stimulus and asking them to ‘go away and make up a play’ usually leads to poor work and fractious argument. Provide participants with a clear stimulus and a closely defined task, and they are likely to be far more creative.

Approaching *The Odyssey*

My way past the intimidation of the sheer scale of the project and the difficulties posed by the constraints was to think of the whole project as a collaborative process, in which preliminary workshops could open up the material not only for the workshop participants but also for myself. This ethos of collaboratively seeking out and making meaning owes as much to Boal, of course, as it does to Dorothy Heathcote, John Fines and many other teachers of drama. And thus I began work on the play by reading *The Odyssey* through the eyes of a drama teacher/workshop leader. My previous knowledge of *The Odyssey* was through modern retellings (such as the one in Roger Lancelyn Green’s *Tales of the Greek Heroes*) rather than through direct contact with Homer’s poem. This relative ignorance turned out to be a gift because it meant I approached the text as a naïve reader. I was shocked and surprised by what I discovered.

Odysseus does not appear in the first four books of *The Odyssey*. He is referred to, but it is Odysseus's son, Telémakhos who is the central character in that substantial opening section. Telémakhos: a young man, twenty years old, the same age his father was when he left home to go to fight in the Trojan War; a young man living with Penelope, his mother, wife to Odysseus, a single parent. But even though the war lasts nearly ten years, it has ended ten years before the opening of *The Odyssey*. Odysseus has been away twenty years. Although Penelope and Telémakhos hear stories told about him, they don't know the truth of what they hear. And while Penelope waits for Odysseus' return, she is besieged by suitors, who are becoming increasingly impatient. The resonances were striking – for myself, for many of the young people I'd be working with, and for the Palestinians enduring the continuing Israeli occupation of so much of the West Bank.

What fascinated me at this stage of 'innocence' was firstly that the two most important characters in the opening of the poem are Penelope and Telémakhos, and secondly that in Homer's poem all the 'episodes' (those Odyssean adventures and temptations which is what most of us think of as *The Odyssey*) are stories that are either told *about* Odysseus or are told *by* Odysseus himself to justify his long absence. None of the 'episodes' happen in real time. *The Odyssey* that we think we know is (in Homer's original) a series of stories nesting within stories, told by unreliable narrators who always have an agenda in the telling.

Exploratory workshops

In preparation for the first workshops with young people (^{iv}) I formulated a set of key focusing questions; questions that would not only inform and drive the workshops, but would also go on to drive the explorations I undertook in writing the play itself. These can be summarised as follows:

- What do we mean by 'home'?
- How can people return from war without bringing the war with them?
- When is it right to forget? When is it right to resist the temptation to forget?
- As someone on the edge of adulthood, how does somebody negotiate a sense of their identity around an absent parent?

These first two workshops each lasted a whole day, and took place at Salisbury Playhouse with groups of young people, many of whom came from military families with direct personal experience of the questions noted above and who responded very positively to the material. Given that most of them had moved many times in their

lives, they were keen to explore meanings of ‘home’. Many of them also had personal, and difficult, experiences of absent fathers –in a couple of cases mothers – returning home from war. The material was initially framed in a modern context. As the days progressed, we started to work on the dramatic situations using extracts from *The Odyssey* itself (v), giving the work a formal richness.

What became apparent from the work was that Odysseus can’t return home until he has forgiven himself, until he has come to terms with a sense of guilt for the atrocities that he’s been part of. One of the young people put it like this: ‘He doesn’t want to bring the war back to his family’.

Feedback during the workshops and afterwards (via email) was overwhelmingly positive, and included this from one of the young people taking part:

“The workshop was a fantastic learning curve for me. The way you were genuinely interested in our interpretations, the way you modernised and made relative the tales from *The Odyssey*, and letting us all be part of a project made it one of my favourite ever workshops.

“I went to school in Tidworth, home to the super garrison that is Tidworth Camp. Friends ... would brag about the adventures of a Dad who went to Afghanistan, all competing over whose graphic story was cooler than the rest... The relevance to what you’re doing is uncanny!”
Reece Evans

Over the next few months I undertook several more workshops, all of them focused on *The Odyssey* – with young people, with students and with teachers (including two workshops for NATD). These continued to explore the situations of Telémakhos and Penelope, but also began to look at Odysseus’ lengthy stay with the demi-goddess Calypso and his encounter with Polyphemus, the one-eyed giant, Cyclops.

Al Qattan Summer School and Palestinian insights

In July 2015, I ran a fortnight of workshops in Jordan as part of my contribution to the Qattan Foundation Summer School for teachers (predominantly from Palestine), which Luke Abbott has described in detail in previous issues of *The Journal*. The focus of my work was using the craft and skills involved in playwriting to teach and develop verbal, written and emotional literacy in young people. The sessions where we explored *The Odyssey* in ways that one might with young people revealed further possible approaches to dramatising some of the story-telling episodes. The teachers involved in

those workshops brought insights and attitudes to the material I had not encountered anywhere in the UK, and proved invaluable in developing the play. As I had anticipated, they were very engaged with exploring the issue of occupation. What I had not expected was what a powerful stimulus they would find in the Telémakhos/Penelope situation. Naïvely, I had not considered how many young men in Palestine of Telémakhos' age are without fathers and grow up hearing countless stories of their absent fathers. By that stage in the process I also knew that I wanted the Polyphemus (Cyclops) episode to be a story that Telémakhos would hear about his father and that he would find himself unexpectedly sympathising with the giant, seeing parallels between the occupation on Ithaka and the one-eyed giant whose island is invaded by Odysseus and his crew. I was, nonetheless, impressed by the wit and truthfulness of their work on this episode; and delighted that working on the Homeric material provided a safe way in to exploring material which had great personal significance for many of them, and was potentially very raw.

In planning and leading these workshops (whether with young people, students or teachers), it is important to allow the work to be driven by the needs of the participants. In any truly productive teaching situation I feel the teacher should hope to learn as much from the work as the participants do. One of many problems of education being driven by externally set targets is that it denies this sense that creative learning is necessarily collaborative. I have developed the argument in other articles for *The Journal* ^(vi), and shall not pursue it further here, except to conclude this section by affirming that all these workshops with different groups were crucial in enabling me to develop the play which by now had a title: *When Nobody Returns*. And I was growing increasingly confident of the dramatic potential of the material, and how the play might work within the given constraints.

Finding a way through writer's block

Despite the stimulus and encouragement of the workshops, I still came up against a serious 'block' after returning from Jordan. Whatever I am writing, there are usually moments when I feel stuck, or 'blocked'. I have learnt to recognise this feeling as an indicator that I don't know what I'm doing! This is not false modesty. I have also learnt not to feel too downcast about it. One of the remarkable things about the creative process is the way that the central concern of any work is rarely visible at the outset. I liken it to a sculptor working with wood, following the grain, making use of knots, allowing what is hidden in the wood to reveal itself. One has to learn to 'trust the process', and for me that entails recognising the feeling of 'stuckness' and dealing with it appropriately. I now understand that my preference for approaching writing a play without a map before I start work will probably lead to periods when NOT knowing becomes difficult. But one way out of the 'stuckness' is to reflect as

objectively as possible on the workshops – not so as to steal or borrow the participants’ ideas, but to hear their insights again, to see the characters and their situations through their eyes; effectively interrogating what I/we have produced thus far, asking: ‘What does this mean?’ ‘What are the implications of these scenes, these interactions?’ –This is similar to the way one reflects on meanings in educational drama. And, as in educational drama, the action of reflection not only looks back but also forward, often opening up further explorations.

Greek Fire

In this case, the essence of my ‘stuckness’ lay in the fact that I had no idea how this play would end. It was never going to be a straightforward adaptation of *The Odyssey*, so Homer’s ending was inappropriate. My way through the block was to look again at the plays of Euripides and Sophocles – in the hope that they might provide a model of just how far it is possible to move away from the source material. The Odysseus of *When Nobody Returns* was already a darker character than the Odysseus of popular retellings, Telémakhos was more impulsive, and Penelope more active (a trickster in her own right, and a match for Odysseus). Looking back on it now, I think the problem lay in not having the courage of my convictions. I had been playing too safe. But, as Mary Beard has written ^(vii),

‘In much of Greek literature after Homer, Odysseus is not just clever, but a downright liar. You’d want him on your side, but you wouldn’t trust him an inch...’

In short, he is dangerous; a danger to others, and ultimately a danger to himself. What I am striving to create in *When Nobody Returns* is a character the audience identifies with at one moment, then questions his motives and their own judgement in sympathising with him. And because he is such a dangerous, unreliable narrator, he is a character who (I hope) will take us, the audience, on our own emotional Odyssey.

And the journey he takes us on is not towards catharsis, nor the elimination of ‘bad tendencies’ (as Boal suggests Aristotle was proposing), but towards an active and critical engagement with the contemporary issues and concerns which underpin THIS play in our world.

After re-reading *Hecuba*, *Ajax* and *Cyclops*, I felt liberated from Aristotle's prescriptions; and inspired by Euripides to allow the Odysseus, Penelope and Telémakhos of *When Nobody Returns* to continue on their respective journeys, making Homer's characters of our time – just as Euripides had made his Odysseus for his own.

'Greek Fire' was a weapon of war. It was hurled by giant catapults into enemy ranks or onto enemy ships. The effect was not unlike napalm. Using water to try to douse it had the effect of making it burn even more fiercely. It is a potent metaphor. Homer and theatre make a powerful combination. This stuff is dangerous. Just keep Aristotle out of the mix.

Whether the play works as I think it does, rehearsals and performances will tell. But, in its present form, it is certainly not safe. And for that I owe a debt to the raw, savage beauty of Euripides' and Sophocles' Trojan plays.

NOTES

- i 'Bartholomew Fair: All the Fun of the Fair', Peter Barnes, in *Jonsonians*, 2003, p.46
- ii The Trojan War is thought to have taken place around 1200 BC. *The Odyssey* was probably composed around 700 BC. Euripides *Women of Troy* is thought to have been first performed in 415 BC.
- iii Timberlake Wertenbaker in a speech at the University of Birmingham, April 1997; printed in *Studies in Theatre Production* 15 (1997), 88-92
- iv The three articles which first appeared in *The Journal* (Volume 30, issues 1 & 2, and Volume 31, Issue 1) have been republished online by Border Crossings. They can be read online at: <http://thisfleshismine.blogspot.co.uk/>
- v The first groups of young people I worked with on the project were students taking a BTEC jointly run by Wiltshire College, Salisbury and Salisbury Playhouse; and then with young people from the Salisbury Youth Theatre.
- vi The tasks used were similar to those described in the essay about the early workshops for *This Flesh is Mine*. See <http://thisfleshismine.blogspot.co.uk/>

- vii Specifically, in an article entitled *Collaborative Creativity* (co-written with John Airs, Maggie Hulson and Guy Williams). *The Journal*, Volume 27, Issue 2. Summer 2011.
- viii Mary Beard in her Foreword to *The Guardian* series of short booklets *Greek Myths*, available online at:
<http://www.theguardian.com/books/series/greekmyths>
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