Insights
A Study Guide to the Utah Shakespeare Festival

An Iliad
The articles in this study guide are not meant to mirror or interpret any productions at the Utah Shakespeare Festival. They are meant, instead, to be an educational jumping-off point to understanding and enjoying the plays (in any production at any theatre) a bit more thoroughly. Therefore the stories of the plays and the interpretative articles (and even characters, at times) may differ dramatically from what is ultimately produced on the Festival’s stages.

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Cover Art for *An Iliad* by Cully Long.
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Synopsis
A single, modern day storyteller takes the stage—possibly Homer, possibly one of the many bards who followed in his footsteps. He retells Homer’s classic tale of the Trojan War, specifically the great fighters Achilles and Hector. As he shares his tale with a modern audience, references with wars throughout the ages collide with the ancient story of Greeks and Trojans. As a traveling storyteller, he uses poetry, music, humor, and poignant accounts of war to share the experience from the perspective of a fighting Greek soldier and a poet, a tale he is fated to tell throughout time.

Characters
The Poet: The sole cast member, The Poet (possibly Homer, possibly one of the many bards who followed in his footsteps) tells the story of the Trojan War through the eyes of a Greek soldier.
An Iliad: Keeping the Old Tale Alive

By Ace G. Pilkington

In 1814 when Europe had been fighting a vast war for decades, Lord Byron wrote in Lara, “Religion—Freedom—Vengeance—what you will,/ A word’s enough to raise Mankind to kill” (The Poetic Works of Lord Byron [London: Oxford University Press, 1939], Canto II, VIII, 67-68). Or, as the Poet in An Iliad concludes, “It’s always something, isn’t it?” (All references to the play are from Lisa Peterson and Denis O’Hare [New York: Overlook Duckworth, 2014], 25). Neither the sentiment nor the problem is new. The first great expression of it went back to somewhere around 750 B.C.E. to the first and one of the most remarkable voices in western literature—Homer and his account of the Trojan War, what Caroline Alexander calls “The greatest war story ever told” (The War that Killed Achilles [New York: Viking, 2009], 1). In a review of An Iliad, Myron Meisel writes, “If war and conflict must be begrudgingly considered the natural condition of Mankind, then The Iliad of Homer, voiced and written some 2,800 years ago, remains the most profound exploration of these primal drives to domination and destruction The act of combat has never been more piercingly described . . . nor its qualities of rage, savagery and comradeship more intensely conveyed” (“An Iliad: Theater Review” Hollywood Reporter, Jan. 21, 2014. https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/review/an-iliad-theater-review-672629).

The Iliad is the story of the anger of Achilles, a central element and crisis point of the longer tale that comes very near the end of the ten-year struggle. Achilles was the greatest hero of the Greeks, a man Ovid in his Metamorphoses calls “More heartless, violent than war” (Horace Gregory transl., Ovid: the Metamorphoses [New York: Mentor, 1958], 343), but The Iliad is partly the story of how, as the Poet in An Iliad puts it, “For once, Achilles who is addicted to rage . . . this fighting man feels the rage well up in his heart . . . and he makes it disappear” (92). This is especially poignant because as Caroline Alexander says, “Homer’s Iliad concludes not with a martial triumph but with Achilles’ heartbroken acceptance that he will in fact lose his life in this wholly pointless campaign” (2).

The long history of Troy begins before The Iliad and continues after it is over in Homer’s Odyssey and Virgil’s Aeneid, among other places. Samuel Butler, nineteenth-century novelist and translator of Homer, says, “The tales of the minstrels were many. . . . With much repetition they took on more and more marvelous features and were organized and developed into great saga cycles” (The Iliad of Homer [Roslyn, NY: Walter J. Black, 1942], xvi). The Poet of An Iliad dismisses them, as he concentrates on the story he is telling, “The song of Aeneas escaping with his father on his back, the song of Odysseus, trying to get home, no, it’s too much, all these songs” (94), but Homer’s audience knew the other stories, the greater context and the richer world.

It began, insofar as any Greek tale can be said to have a beginning, with Helen, daughter of Zeus and Leda, the most beautiful woman on Earth. When she reached marriageable age, her suitors included most of the powerful men in Greece. Tyndareus, her foster father, “sent no suitor away, but would, on the other hand, accept none of the proffered gifts; fearing that his partiality for any one prince might set the others quarreling” (Robert Graves, The Greek Myths [London: Moyer Bell, 1994], 268). Odysseus, clever as usual, had a solution. If all Helen’s suitors swore to defend whichever one managed to win her, the successful suitor and indeed the marriage should be safe. Odysseus himself was not interested in Helen. All he wanted for solving Tyndareus’ problem was his help in winning Penelope, was his help in winning Penelope, who turned out to be an intelligent, resourceful, and faithful wife, the very opposite of Helen. Menelaus, king of Sparta and brother of the even more powerful Agamemnon, won the woman so many men had wanted. When Paris, one of the princes of Troy, later stole her away with help from Aphrodite (and his own good looks, his previous lover had been the nymph Oenone [Graves 270]), the oath Odysseus had dreamed up (and had also had to swear himself) meant that all of Greece would go to war to
bring Helen home. Her beauty was, in Christopher Marlowe’s words from Doctor Faustus, “the face that launched a thousand ships,/ And burnt the topless towers of Ilium” ([New York: Modern Library, 1969], 70). Or in the more prosaic description of Samuel Butler, the invaders “dragged their ships up on the beach and settled down to the lengthy business of a siege, supporting themselves meanwhile by marauding campaigns against the surrounding islands and countryside” (xvii). Caroline Alexander writes, “The 15,693 lines of Homer’s Iliad describe the occurrences of a roughly two-week period in the tenth and final year of what had become a stalemated siege of Troy” (2). This, in other words, is where we come in, both in The Iliad and An Iliad.

An Iliad is a one-man show, but it is much more than that. As a version of The Iliad that uses the extraordinary translation of Robert Fagles for much of its text, it is already closer to the spirit of the original than most adaptations. But it is also close to the original in an entirely different way. The Poet says, “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?” (24). While a year may be an exaggeration, the rest of it is exactly right. The Poet presents himself to us as a bard singing or chanting to us the kind of story about war that he has been telling for as long as humans have fought each other. He lists individual conflicts, and he lists cities that have been destroyed, and both lists grow day by day. In fact, the text of the play is meant to change performance by performance.

The Iliad was a folk epic made somehow by someone called Homer into a literary masterpiece. But it grew from the tales of what Samuel Butler calls minstrels, people who made their livings by chanting stories. There was a common stock of such tales, but each bard had his own versions; in fact, each bard created the story anew as he spoke it. He had about a third of it already in his head, phrases such as “wine-dark sea” or “wily, Zeus-sprung Odysseus,” but for the rest, though the plot stayed much the same, the words floated and shifted on the winds of inspiration. The prayer to the Muse was not entirely for show. In his Translator’s Preface to The Iliad, Robert Fagles writes, “Homer’s work is a performance, even in part a musical event” ([New York: Viking, 1990], ix). There were still bards doing very similar things in Russia and other Slavic countries with little folk epics called bylini as late as the twentieth century (Pilkington and Pilkington, Fairy Tales of the Russians and Other Slavs [Forest Tsar Press, 2010], 411). As Bailey and Ivanova put it, “Epics recorded in northern Russia in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries were performed essentially by single singers without an instrumental accompaniment” (An Anthology of Russian Folk Epics [London: M.E. Sharpe, 1999], xxviii xxix). That may have been true for Homer himself, and even if it was not, it was true for the predecessors who made his works possible. In the words of Brian Vaughn, who will bring the Poet to life at the Festival this summer, “It blends both the classical with the contemporary and transports the epic poem into the hearts and minds of the viewer” (“Announcing a Ninth Play for Our 2018 Season” Utah Shakespeare Festival, Jan. 24, 2018 https://www.bard.org/news anunci ng-a-ninth-play-for-our-2018-season). Though the Poet is not making up a new version of the play every night or chanting his words, what he is doing is reminding us of how The Iliad was created, allowing us to be part of an audience in that long line of audiences that have listened to such tales, wondered at them, remembered them, and kept them alive.