

[The Human Toll of War Examined in 3rd Law Dance/Theater's "Wanderer"](#)

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Some aspects of war are difficult to dispute. People die; people are hurt in body and in mind, on and off the field of battle; and the injured may not always be combatants. Less clear are the specifics of these experiences, and their implications for individuals. Complexities are rampant and difficult to untangle from generalities. Life in the military is more than combat, and life outside of the military is more than the mundane. Reasons for instigating and enacting war exist, but are not always relevant to the individual or even available to those seeking answers.

Wanderer uses Homer's *Odyssey* as a fundamental base for exploring these specifics. (This performance is part of Veterans Speak, an inspired two-week-long collection of events and efforts to share the perspectives of both veterans and the larger community.) The themes of the three movements of *Wanderer*-- "Ilium" (the Departure), "Thalassa" (the



Perilous Sea), and "Ithaka" (the Return)-- broadly address the arc (or arcs, as each movement could be understood separately) of a soldier's journey and, in a historic sense, the progression of conflicts in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Drawing from literature pertaining to the first and second World Wars, the Vietnam War, and the ongoing, decades-long warfare in the Middle East, actor/readers give voice to individual and national experiences.

Projection, voiceover, and music were also instrumental in this multi-media work. While the eight lit, angular pillars of the set were a constant on stage, their positioning was not. In a very clever, simple use of props and space, the wheeled pillars were frequently moved by dancers to suggest very different scenes. Shelter, walls, obstacles of rock and flesh, openings, a labyrinth, and many more temporary realities were created and then re-purposed. The pillars became part of the choreography and its story-telling.

Sometimes the movements of the dancers felt inevitable, they were so effective. When the group of dancers



worked together to indicate the swell and drag of a wave-- or a wave of advancing bodies--, or the gathering of a storm, or the billow of a sail was able to see the intended shape at the same time I was aware that individual bodies were involved. At

points, one dancer-- not always the same dancer-- moved independently of the others, acting as a thematic touchpoint that was seconded and chorused by his or her fellows.

In a work that deals with death and mass death, intense physical and mental opposition, extreme empathy, and determined sympathetic renewal, what I found most vivid and affecting was to see these struggles addressed in dance. The bodies of the dancers are so visible! We can see particular muscles move and people reach out to touch. We see real humans transmitting real human experiences.

In the last movement, "Ithaka," the Homeric reference is made clear as the readers share text about Odysseus's systematic slaughter, upon his homecoming, of the eager suitors of his long-missed and beloved wife. Taken back to the parallel drawn between Odysseus's trial and that of a soldier, I felt dismay. The soldier is home, yes, but there is more blood. More death. Is there respite, the warrior wonders? Or have I simply become able to see what always is, and what others refuse to see?

One could say this homecoming is bittersweet. Or, entirely empty. Despite the compelling reconciliation of Penelope and Odysseus, one has to wonder.

Regular feeling has been suspended, repressed, channeled, and denied. How does the returned feel, now, and how to feel with any sense of conventional normalcy? The dancer who portrays Penelope does do a damned good job of showing her continued care and commitment to Odysseus. I had the sense, when watching their interaction, that they were both aware of how much had been broken and destroyed. What they were negotiating was not a rebuilding, per se, but, perhaps, a new path.

[3rd Law Dance/Theater's](https://tickets.thedairy.org/online/veteran) *Wanderer* was performed on November 7 & 8, 2014 at the Dairy Center for the Arts. For more information about Veterans Speak events, conversations and performances, visit <https://tickets.thedairy.org/online/veteran>.

Photos: All photos are by Annabelle Denmark. Images courtesy of 3rd Law Dance/Theater. 3rd Law Dance/Theater Company Members are: Molly Pearson, Gwen Phillips, Mason Lawrence Taylor, Michelle Pugh, Jamie Melaragno and Danielle Hendricks.