size and ambition of the play—there are as many as forty roles—speaks not only to Guare’s mastery of this dramatic form, but also to the collaborative “fit” between playwright Guare and director Wolfe, who clearly shaped the production. Much more ambitious than most commercial theatre today, *A Free Man of Color* imagined a moment in US national history when decisions were made that inevitably to a devastating civil war, decades of brutal racial strife, and continuing economic inequality. *A Free Man of Color* is a play that should be read and viewed for the highly theatrical and thought-provoking masterwork that it is.

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**AN ILIAD.** Adapted from Homer by Lisa Peterson and Denis O’Hare. Directed by Lisa Peterson. McCarter Theatre Center, Princeton, NJ. 24 October 2010.

The deeply performative nature of Homer’s poetry is all too often lost on his modern audiences. Although the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* are the products of a rich oral tradition, that vital context frequently remains distant and abstract to modern readers encountering the poem on the page and in translation. Lisa Peterson and Denis O’Hare’s adaptation bridged that gap by staging unaltered passages of the *Iliad* annotated with witty exegesis and copious parallels to contemporary society. This structure, combined with historical contextualization and skillful choice of translation, established *An Iliad* as an effective popularization of Homer that, through a focus on solo performance, demonstrated the theatrical potential of Greek epic.

*An Iliad* was structured as a commentary on the text, rather than as a reworking of the original. Interpretative philological commentaries on classical texts have been written since antiquity and are central to their modern study. As such, *An Iliad* was an innovative dramatization of how (at least in terms of form) Homer has been studied for centuries. Approximately ten distinct passages from the *Iliad* were included unabridged. Most of the canonically famous scenes received treatment, including the initial conflict between Agamemnon and Achilles, Patroclus’ death, the *ekphrasis* describing the shield of Achilles, the death of Hector, and Achilles’ final reconciliation with Priam. The recitation of these unaltered passages was the backbone of the show, adumbrating the contours of the plot in a succinct and fast-paced format. The remainder of the performance consisted of material written by Peterson and O’Hare discussing, inter alia, the historical and literary context of Greek epic, the explication of various passages, and parallels between the burdens of war in the *Iliad* and in contemporary conflicts.

Within this framework, Peterson and O’Hare sought to argue for the relevance of the epic to the modern spectator. On many occasions, *An Iliad* drew a direct parallel between a passage in Homer and a familiar event or motif of US society. One strong example involved the catalog of ships in the second book of the *Iliad*, a notoriously dry passage for most modern readers. In the performance, Stephen Spinella, the lone actor in the piece, transitioned seamlessly from reciting the details of the Greek warships moored at Troy to listing numerous US towns and cities—some familiar, others obscure—in which residents had been recently conscripted for an unnamed war, thereby enlivening a moribund passage with a compelling analogy. A few such comparisons, however, were inadequate, as when Achilles’ grief over the death of Patroclus was likened to the anger one feels after being cut in a supermarket checkout line—a hopelessly trite and diminishing juxtaposition.

Peterson and O’Hare’s use of Robert Fagles’s 1990 translation of the *Iliad*, which he composed with careful attention to the tradition of Homeric performance, contributed to the effectiveness of their adaptation. Fagles’s loose and recitable translation was a natural choice for a popular staging of selected passages in the *Iliad*. Additionally, due to his distinguished reputation as a translator and the widespread adoption of the text in high school and undergraduate literature courses, his *Iliad* is one of few translations of a classical work with substantial cache among the general public. The familiarity of Fagles’s works—especially strong in Princeton, where Fagles lived and taught for decades before his death in 2008—both enhanced the commercial
Stephen Spinella in *An Iliad.* (Photo: T. Charles Erickson.)
potential of An Iliad and provided many audience members with an immediate connection to the production.

The popularizing features of the production were balanced by inclusion of material that made connections to the original language and performance contexts of the Iliad. An Iliad was configured as a solo performance piece, in which Spinella, as an itinerant reciter of epic poetry, portrayed all characters—from Achilles to Hector, Patroclus to Thetis. In this regard, Spinella’s character was based on the scores of traveling bards who performed Homer’s poetry for Greek audiences in the centuries after his death and functioned as an implicit reminder of the poem’s historical context. Additionally, Spinella performed several brief segments of the Iliad, including the famous opening lines, in the original, in a rough approximation of the Greek dactylic hexameter. These passages provided a glimpse of the integral role of meter to the performance of Homer’s poetry and a connection to the background behind Fagles’s translation.

Structuring the production as a solo performance also highlighted the theatricality implicit in the Homeric epics. The bard character, in addition to reflecting historical background, required Spinella to alternate rapidly between the range of characters in the Iliad. For instance, he was required to play both Agamemnon and Achilles in their opening quarrel over Briseis. Throughout the argument, Spinella jumped abruptly between two different positions on the stage when switching characters. His physical presence was thus a direct performance of the acts of representation required to stage a piece of Homeric poetry. Additionally, the fluid nature of Spinella’s character allowed for an innovative staging of the invocation of a muse, a hallmark of the epics of Homer and other classical authors. For conversations with his bard’s muse, Spinella gazed upward and spoke in the direction of several musicians located in a balcony at stage right. At his request, the musicians tailored their playing to the current action in the epic. These interactions effectively translated an abstract literary device into a dynamic part of the performance.

Throughout An Iliad, the stage was bare except for a single wooden table and chair and some metal scaffolding far upstage, a design that naturally complemented Peterson and O’Hare’s arguments for the universality of Homer and evoked the wartime destruction narrated in much of the performance. Spinella’s appearance—barefoot, sporting a scruffy beard, and carrying a worn briefcase—reinforced the transient disposition of his character. The modest personnel and technical requirements for An Iliad should make it an appealing and economical option for theatres looking to mount a classical piece other than a Greek tragedy, something I hope will become more frequent in the coming years.

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ROSMERSHOLM. By Henrik Ibsen. Directed by Elinor Renfield. The Pearl Theatre Company. New York City Center Stage II, New York City. 20 November 2010.

Henrik Ibsen’s Rosmersholm (1886), which had not received a major Equity run since 1977, depicts a society where political efficacy requires abandoning ideals in favor of partisan, selectively truthful versions of reality constructed by the media. Notable for its parallels to present-day America, Elinor Renfield’s production yoked the construction of partisan realities to a struggle for semantic control over domestic space, and questioned the universal value accorded to the ancestral home of the title. Through direction, lighting, and depictions of media rhetoric, Renfield’s production defamiliarized and distorted how personal and political perspectives appeared within the play. The production’s distortions of domestic space suggested that Ibsen’s central concern in Rosmersholm was not only divergent constructions of reality, but also the outdated ideological and social foundation that shaped those realities.

The Pearl Theatre Company chose an apt cultural moment to revive Rosmersholm, which stages a battle for political and semantic control over domestic space through divergent, media-driven constructions of reality. The play’s liberal and conservative factions are equally keen to enlist the