

The ongoing war in our time and in Aristophanes'

On the weekend after Memorial Day, I asked myself some questions and got an answer I did not expect in a place where I did not expect to find it.

I was in Los Angeles as part of the National Endowment for the Humanities and Aquila Theater's Ancient Greeks/Modern Lives Project that has been sponsoring readings and discussions for nearly a year in locations across the country about ancient Greek drama and literature pertaining to war.

On that Saturday at the Los Angeles Public Library, professor Larry Tritle, a Vietnam veteran and professor of ancient history at Loyola Marymount University, and I talked about the comedies of Aristophanes, the Athenian playwright whose works were performed at public religious festivals throughout one of the longest and most devastating wars in world history, the Peloponnesian War that lasted from 431 to 404 B.C.

We have nothing equivalent to Aristophanes' plays in our culture.

They blend X-rated sexual and bodily humor with scathing satire of political figures and policies and plots that make Kurt Vonnegut's works seem plodding and pedestrian.

Aristophanes' straightforward criticism of the ongoing war, why it started in the first place, what costs it had for the common citizens and soldiers, how political and military leaders and members of the upper class did not share in their suffering, and the wisdom and morality of the way the war was being conducted was presented to audiences made up of 6,000 to 7,000 adult male citizens who were the very soldiers who had fought or were fighting the war and the very leaders who were responsible for how it was being fought.

Aristophanes' "Acharnians" was produced in 425 B.C., six years into the war.

Athenian hopes for a quick end to the war had been dashed. The city center, packed with refugees called in from the countryside by strategic plan, had become an unsanitary breeding ground for sickness, plague and human misery.

The play is named after the citizens of the town in Athenian territory that was most devastated by regular invasions of the army of the Spartans and their allies. The main character, Dikaiopolis ("Mr. City Justice"), decides to enact a separate truce with the Spartans.

This kind of fantasy and its accompanying political bite are no more outlandish than what we read in fantastic treatments of the human costs of World War II or Vietnam and now Iraq and Afghanistan, like Vonnegut's "Slaughterhouse-Five," Joseph Heller's "Catch-22," Tim O'Brien's "Going After Cacciato"

and Ben Fountain's recent "Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk." These works ask readers who have gotten used to war, consider it the norm or perhaps do not think about it much at all to take a look at its consequences and imagine what their lives might look like if their nation were at peace.

Who fights our wars? At what costs to them and to us? For what reasons? Who cares?

On late Sunday morning, the day after the National Endowment for the Humanities-Aquila event, my fiancée and I went to the historic Santa Monica pier, which for over a century has been offering visitors amusements – thrill rides, a carousel, dance halls, portrait artists, musicians, restaurants, fishing spots, bait shops, arcades, an aquarium – and spectacular elevated views along a beautiful sandy shoreline.

Below the pier, spreading out along the beach, as on every Sunday, Veterans for Peace had set up what they call Arlington West, a cemetery of crosses representing soldiers who have died in Afghanistan and Iraq (white for one soldier, red for ten soldiers), laid out as in American military cemeteries.

There are also flag-draped coffins. Mementos, photographs and fresh-cut flowers were placed at some crosses.

When we were there, one lone man, most likely a veteran, very tall and moving with crisp formality, marched up, stood at attention and called out his respects to the fallen soldiers. He then turned and strode away and out of sight.

He went virtually unnoticed by the crowds of people on the pier, distracted as we were by the sounds and sights of the diversions that had brought us to the pier.

I still had Aristophanes' questions in my mind. Who fights our wars? At what costs to them and to us? For what reasons? Who cares?

As veteran Timothy Kudo put it in a New York Times article (Nov. 8, 2011) about his experiences in our current wars: "It's not the sights, sounds, adrenaline and carnage of war that linger (for veterans).

"It's the morality. ... I thought my war was over, but it followed me back."

That lone veteran on the Santa Monica Beach gave me the same answer.

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Witness: No train signals before crash

TULSA – Two freight trains that collided weren't blowing their horns or flashing their lights as they hurtled toward each other, according to a long-haul truck-

reach the site, authorities said. At least 3 feet of snow has fallen since the accident Thursday that killed ranger Nick Hall, creating more dangerous conditions.

Compiled from wire reports

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Electricity

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weather to the future price of natural gas to a customer's electricity provider, would determine the eventual impact on an individual consumer's bill, but a lawyer for the state's industrial customers warns that billions of dollars are at stake.

"These are staggering numbers, and the impact of the Commission's decision in this rule making should not be trivialized or viewed as a purely academic exercise," Phillip Oldham, representing Texas Industrial Energy Consumers, wrote in his comments submitted to the commission.

In the state's deregulated wholesale market, electricity is bought and sold with long-term contracts or in a real-time market.

The issue of the wholesale price cap comes into play each summer when the demand for electricity threatens to exceed supply.

In 2011, for example, the real-time price paid by all types of customers averaged \$53.23 per megawatt-hour. But during that summer – one of the hottest and driest on record – the wholesale price spiked to the \$3,000 cap for a few hours as Texans cranked up their air con-

ditioning on summer afternoons. By the end of the day, the prices returned to normal levels.

Last year's \$53 wholesale price is lower than the \$77 that generating companies averaged during 2008 before the price of natural gas, a fuel used to generate electricity, collapsed. But it is higher than the mid-\$30s that generators averaged in 2009 and 2010.

Public Utility Commission Chairwoman Donna Nelson has echoed the concerns of generating companies that say higher wholesale prices are necessary to attract investments in new power plants.

Those investments, in turn, would help alleviate the capacity issues that raised the threat of rolling blackouts last summer.

Luminant Generation Co. and NRG Energy Inc., for example, argued that the wholesale cap should be raised as soon as possible because it can take up to three years to build a power plant.

"While investors may speculatively finance new projects or improvements to existing projects based on the promise of a future (wholesale cap) increase, an investment is considered less risky if based on proven



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