The ongoing war in our time and in Aristophanes’ world.

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 in a 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 Vonnegut 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 war was being fought was presented to audiences made up of 6,000 to 7,000 adult citizens who were the very soldiers who had fought and were fighting the war and the very leaders who were responsible for whether it was being fought.

Aristophanes’ “Acharnians” was produced in 425 B.C., six years into the war. Aristophanes hopes for a quick end to the war had been dashed. The city center, packed with refugees fleeing into the countryside by strategic plan, had become an unsanitary breeding ground for sickness, plague and human misery.

The play is named after the city that was most devastated by regular invasions of the army of Sparta and its allies. The main character, Dikaloepis (“Mr. City Justice”), decides to enact a separate truce with the Spartans.

This kind of fantasy and its accompanying political bite are no more disgraceful 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 whether we 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 Theater’s Ancient Greeks/Modern Lives Project went to historic Santa Monica pier, which for over a century has been offering visitors amusements - thrill rides, a carousel, dance halls, portrait artists, musicians, restaurants, fish spotting, bait shops, arcades, an aquarium - and particularly elevated views along a beautiful sandy shoreline.

When we were there, one lone man, most likely a veteran, very tall and thin, with crisp gray hair, 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, 2010) about his experiences in our current wars: “It’s not the sights, sounds, adrenaline and car clave 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.

Regular contributor Tom Palaima is a regular contributor to the National Endowment for the Humanities-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.
Key questions are whether the

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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 year when the demand for electricity threatens to exceed supply.

In 2011, for example, the real-time price peaked at $49 per megawatt-hour. By the end of summer - on July 9th - the price had fallen to $4.23 per megawatt-hour. The wholesale price spiked to $3,000 per hour for a few hours in Texas and cracked up their air cond-

situation 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 $76 that generating companies averaged during 2008 before the price of natural gas, a fuel used to generate electricity, collapsed. It is also lower 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 left by the threat of rolling blackouts last summer.

Luminant Generation Co. and NRG Energy Inc., for example, argued in their filings 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 speculate on new projects or improvements to existing plants based on the promise of a future (wholesale cap) increase, an investment is considered less risky if based on proven

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