

Public Witness Testimony
Submitted to the Interior, Environment and Related Agencies Subcommittee
Committee on Appropriations, U.S. House of Representatives
Regarding FY 2015 Funding for the National Endowment for the Humanities
Dr. Peter Meineck, Associate Professor, New York University and
Director, Aquila Theatre (April 10, 2014)

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee:

My name is Peter Meineck and I am a professor of classics at New York University, the Founding Director of the Aquila Theatre Company and a proud member of the Bedford Fire Department in New York where I serve as a volunteer Firefighter and EMT. I am here to testify on behalf of the National Humanities Alliance and Aquila Theatre in enthusiastic support for the Alliance's FY 2015 request of \$154.5 million in funding for the National Endowment for the Humanities—which is nothing less than a great American treasure.

As I came here this morning, I was reminded of the way in which our relationship to the classics and the cultures of ancient Greece and Rome and the societies they were connected to has had a profound and positive impact on so many facets of American identity and culture. In fact this “classical” influence is not a thing of the past or a remnant of our ancestors, but a vibrant living cultural force that is constantly developing, adapting and influencing. We can appreciate the plays of Sophocles or Shakespeare as “classics” just as we know that the dramas of Pittsburgh playwright August Wilson will also enter this ever-evolving canon.

When I look up at J. George Stewart's magnificent main entrance to the Rayburn Office Building, where we are meeting today, the six soaring Ionic columns supporting the pediment with a sculpture of the American eagle—itsself a symbol inspired by Ancient Greece and Rome—instills a confidence about the solidity of the Republic. C. Paul Jeenewein's powerful statues reflect the dignity and classical works “The Spirit of Justice” and “The Majesty of Law” and connect us aesthetically with the founding principles of our government that were heavily influenced by the lessons of Ancient Greece and Rome.

I mentioned in my introduction that I am a volunteer Firefighter in Bedford, New York. My hamlet of Katonah, part of the town of Bedford, includes the home of John Jay, the author of several of the Federalist Papers, member of the Continental Congress, signatory to the Declaration of Independence and our first Chief Justice. Like almost all the members of the Continental Congress, Jay received a classical education and could read both Greek and Latin. In fact, Thomas Jefferson was so enthusiastic he exclaimed, “I thank on my knees, him who directed my early education, for having put into my possession this rich source of delight; and I would not exchange it for anything which I could then have acquired, and have not since acquired.” John Jay's works and those of his colleagues reflect the profound influence the classical world had on the conception and creation of the United States of America.

This is strikingly apparent in the Federalist Papers. Hamilton and Madison, Jay's fellow New York delegates to the Continental Congress, devoted the entirety of Federalist no. 18 to a sophisticated objective appraisal of why the Ancient Greek city states failed to coalesce into one nation. This became a powerful historical argument in support of the confederation of the 13 colonies into a federal United States. They wrote, “Had Greece been united by a stricter confederation, and persevered in her union, she would never have worn the chains of Macedon;

and might have proved a barrier to the vast projects of Rome.” Right from the start, Americans drew inspiration from their knowledge of the classical past.

John Jay well understood that knowledge was essential if the American experiment was to succeed. In a letter to Pennsylvania delegate Benjamin Rush in 1785 he wrote, “Knowledge is the soul of the Republic and the only way to diminish the weak and wicked.” Later in 1789, he echoed this theme by writing to Timothy Matlack that “Knowledge is essential for the duration of liberty,” and in the same year, he felt confident that the American Revolution would succeed because “In my opinion more light and knowledge are diffused through the mass of the people of this country than any other.”

Jay received his classical education at Kings College in New York, renamed as Columbia University, and I was able to read Jay’s letters in his own hand because of a superb digital archive held there. These historic papers are available online for all and funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities, the agency which embodies the sentiments of John Jay that “Knowledge is the soul of the Republic” and essential for the survival of liberty.

Long before there was the NEH to help scholars undergo important research and disseminate their knowledge, support documentary film makers and archives, and fund important public programs in libraries, museums, galleries, VA hospitals and community centers, the classics provided many early Americans with the historical exemplars and literary metaphors by which they examined their own lives. Abigail Adams wrote countless letters from Boston to her husband John, far away in Philadelphia, during the war. She signed them “Diana,” after the Roman goddess of the hunt and later “Portia,” the wife of the Roman republican, Brutus. Adams wrote back as “Lysander,” the famous Spartan General who ended the Peloponnesian War. Abigail’s passion for the classics was evidently so great that John felt compelled to write, “Amidst your Ardor for Greek and Latin I hope you will not forget your mother Tongue. Read Somewhat in the English Poets every day. . . . You will never be alone, with a Poet in your Pocket. You will never have an idle Hour.” Now, there are a fair few more Americans than in 1780, and it is the National Endowment for the Humanities that brings us “Poetry in Motion” on the subway and places living poets in communities throughout America, offering access, education, inspiration and knowledge.

With that in mind, I would like to briefly describe the NEH funded program that I directed called Ancient Greeks/Modern Lives that used the works of Homer, Aeschylus Sophocles and Euripides to foster informed public discussions on the veteran in American society. Between 2010-13, the program toured to 106 communities in 31 states, staging 244 live events, comprising staged readings and discussions, public lectures, reading groups, film screenings and theatre workshops. We hired 62 classics professors and sent them out into the field where they worked with professional actors, librarians, museum curators, performing arts center staff and members of veteran organizations. 110,865 people attended the live events. This works out to a cost to the federal government of only \$7.22 per person, and if we add the program web site’s recorded hits of 678,000, it only comes to around one dollar per person.

The stated aim of the program was to use ancient dramatic literature to bring members of the veteran community and the public together around the common themes found between the ancient literature and the experiences of war and homecoming. We staged these free events in public spaces dedicated to reading, art and culture—places that were right in the heart of the inner city, rural and underserved communities we visited. Here, Americans had the opportunity to freely exchange ideas framed by the deeper context of the classical texts.

One program participant, a US Army Ranger sergeant who has served in several tours of Afghanistan and Iraq, summed up the way in which classical texts can be a context for modern military experience: “With the Ancient Greeks/Modern Lives project I liked that the experiences were filtered through classical myth. This distance allows both performers and audience members to use their imaginations in an empathetic way, rather than merely evoking sympathy. The use of myth (or perhaps any fictionalized narrative) also helps free us from anachronistic terms such as PTSD or psychological wound, or whatever else they want to use to describe someone who has undergone a significant change due to military service. Classical myth places the emphasis back on character and story, and helps reject the laziness of labels. Arguably, the abstract nature of myth also allows individuals to reflect on their own experiences with the subject at hand, and to flesh out the experience with some combination of memory and imagination.”

Of course, there are as many responses and experiences as there are veterans but one veteran of the Vietnam war felt that the program was helping to make American’s literate about war, something he believed was essential in any democracy. It was always remarkable to see how the classical stories elicited deeply personal and heartfelt responses. At one event in a military museum in Iowa, a long serving non commissioned officer of the Iowa National Guard latched on to the tension inherent in the moment in Book 23 of Homer’s *Odyssey*, when the hero is finally reunited with his wife, Penelope. This Iowan and his wife recognized the intimacy of something simple between them that could suddenly transcend the long separations of multiple deployments. Like Odysseus himself, who is moved to tears when he hears tales of the Trojan War sung by a bard, there were many sniffles in the audience at this beautifully simple and completely human moment that was captured and written down in a foreign land some 2750 years ago: for the humanities constantly remind us what it means to be human.

In Mississippi, a leather-clad member of Rolling Thunder—the veteran motorcycle group—responded quite differently to the same passage. After hearing the Homeric simile of how Odysseus felt like a drowning man, he stood up and said “I have told nobody this, not even my wife here, but when I came home from Vietnam I threw my uniform in the trash at the airport and went home in disguise, just like Odysseus and I too felt like a drowning man—all that death—I didn’t think I could love any one or be loved by anyone again—I felt like I was drowning, until my girlfriend, my wife here, gave me her hand and rescued this drowning man. How did Homer know this?”

As the program progressed, we met more veterans from Iraq and Afghanistan, mostly keeping silent at first, perhaps even suspicious, but we noticed the veterans of the Vietnam War making contact and talking to them after the event. New mutually supportive relationships were formed—veterans helping veterans. We also started to encounter female combat veterans, nurses from Vietnam who had been deployed in the field, Army personnel working with front line troops in Iraq and Afghanistan, sometimes telling us about two enemies—the one they were there to fight and the enemy within—harassment, sexual assault and rape. The ancient plays resounded even amongst the most difficult and uncomfortable of topics and allowed us to talk about them. These classical works became “our mirror held up to nature,” advice Hamlet gives the players after he has been moved himself by watching one of them perform a classical piece about Queen Hecuba at the fall of Troy.

We met veterans from World War II, the Korean War, the Cold War and those who served in between, and we learned so much about the meaning of these classic plays from them. Their insights were often so keen and insightful that many of our classics scholars came to see

aspects of these works in a completely new light. VA Psychologist Dr. Jonathan Shay in his book, *Odysseus in America*, wrote that Greek drama was theatre by combat veterans, performed by combat veterans for an audience made up of combat veterans—perhaps this was one reason why these ancient works resounded.

The NEH has provided us with funds for a new humanities/veterans project called YouStories: Classics, Conversation, Connection. Here, we take the devices that worked so well on Ancient Greeks/Modern Lives and are creating a combination of live events and a new story collecting app, where veterans and the public can upload their own video stories. These are spoken into a smart phone, tablet or computer after being inspired by the ancient materials included with the app. These stories will then be collected, curated and displayed online and also archived at the Library of Congress. This program has a special focus on female veterans and we hope that these ancient plays might inspire, provoke and provide a context for their stories—their experiences as Americans serving their country at a time of war.

The aim of my testimony today has been to try to convince you of the continuing power of the classics in American life and how the National Endowment for the Humanities has allowed a truly *national* and *human* program to flourish. Their prestigious award helped create media and institutional interest in the program and attract additional funding from private foundations and individuals. Their selection process is highly rigorous and the expert advice and tireless help of their program staff is nothing short of priceless.

I conclude with the words of a great man far more eloquent than I. In his last speech delivered in Memphis on April 3rd, 1968—the day before my first birthday—Martin Luther King took us on a monumental and historic flight of fancy telling us:

I would move on by Greece, and take my mind to Mount Olympus. And I would see Plato, Aristotle, Socrates, Euripides and Aristophanes assembled around the Parthenon as they discussed the great and eternal issues of reality.

The National Endowment for the Humanities does just this—it enables those discussions of great and eternal issues of reality and via its excellent public programming sends them out across the nation helping to empower our democracy with that most valuable of human resources – knowledge.

Thank you very much.

Founded in 1981, the National Humanities Alliance advances national humanities policy in the areas of research, preservation, public programming, and teaching. More than one hundred organizations are members of NHA, including scholarly associations, humanities research centers, colleges, universities, and organizations of museums, libraries, historical societies, humanities councils, and higher education institutions.

Founded in 1991, Aquila Theatre's mission is to bring the greatest theatrical works to the greatest number. To this end Aquila presents a regular season of plays in New York, at international festivals, and tours to approximately seventy American towns and cities each year.