

The Odyssey Project
by Rosemarie Pace

If you have ever wondered how a play could be presented via Zoom, as did I, you would have been pleasantly enlightened with the production of *The Odyssey* that Pax Christi Metro New York (PCMNY) presented as its Peacemaking through the Arts event on Saturday, February 13th, 2021. The play was skillfully performed by the Magis Theatre Company and ably directed by George Drance, SJ, who also took on the role of the main character, “The Hero,” Odysseus. Without having seen the play in any other format, it actually seemed that it benefited from the Zoom technology with actors moving as if in a dance, powerfully expressing emotions with their voices and their bodies, transitioning from one role to another, and interacting as if in the same space when in fact they were not.

And the play! Based on the Greek epic, it begins at the end of the Trojan War fought “over a woman who had run off with a guest in her husband’s home.” After 10 years of fighting, the victors are not feeling very victorious. They recognize the cruelty of their actions. They simply want to go home. Like many a warrior, they pray, but soon their attention turns to one trial after another. Getting home is not so easy or straightforward. Their prayers continue, but become more and more desperate.

First they encounter a storm. Even after it subsides, all is not well. The sailors and captain are exhausted, hungry, thirsty and eager for a rest. They acknowledge that a journey can “lead you astray, or attract your attention, or make you forget where you were going, or why you were going there at all.” Luckily, or so they think, they spot an island and stop there. The Hero sends a scout to check out the environs, and the scout succeeds in finding what seem like very friendly “Lotus Eaters” who offer her some of what they are drinking which makes them all very high. When the Hero discovers them all, he cries out, “You fools! Don’t you know that Truth can’t be found by sniffing or sipping, in a bottle or a bowl? The only truth you can know is the truth you live every day!” He further reminds the scout that they are trying to get home “where you can find what you’re looking for without getting it out of a cup.”

But then a frightening memory arises, the battle with the Cyclops who threatens more terrors. The crew want to escape, but the Hero sends them off to find people who may be able to help them find their way home. He, himself, stays back and envisions his wife. She tells him how his country has suffered. He admits, “The war was no more than a slaughter” and promises that he is coming home.

Meanwhile, the sailors do not find people to help them get home but rather Circe, the enchantress, who lures them in and then turns them into beasts that match their natures from lions to wolves to swine. Next, she pages Odysseus who almost falls for her, but who is saved by Hermes who provides him with a charm and who tells the Hero that his faith in the charm is what will save him for “anything will work if you believe in it.” The Hero does indeed defeat Circe and rescue his crew, but before they depart from her, she informs him that they must “consult the Oracle Tiresias who dwells in the Land of the Dead.” Circe’s bitterness and rage have changed her into a thing of evil.

Nevertheless, Odysseus proceeds to the Oracle Tiresias who tells him he will have to pass “those voices that will lead you astray,” including the deadliest of all, the one who “has been created out of your own doubts and fears.” The Hero chooses to meet the challenge, accepting that “no path is easy if it’s worth the trouble to take.”

The captain and crew proceed. Odysseus is assaulted by voices that relentlessly tempt and threaten, insult and demoralize. He is tormented, but ultimately resists and triumphs. After a harrowing trial, the journey home is completed, and we are all reminded again, “No path is easy if it’s worth the trouble to take.”

The Odyssey proved to be an extraordinary morality play that addresses such virtues as truth, faith, and courage, and such vices as doubt, fear, and temptation. For Pax Christi, its anti-war message was perhaps most relevant of all.

You can purchase the script of *The Odyssey* from Creative Educational Systems (<http://creativeeducationsystems.com>), which provides additional resources to help groups produce this and many other plays. You can learn more about the Magis Theatre at (<https://www.magistheatre.org>). You can see them perform <https://www.magistheatre.org/> Thornton Wilder’s play, *The Alcestiad*, at Four Freedom's Park on Roosevelt Island in June.

Rosemarie Pace is “retired” Director of Pax Christi Metro New York.