



Odysseus

Created and Performed by Bill George

Directorial Assistance, *Gerard Stropnick*

Musical Accompanist, *Rob Aptaker*

Stage Management, *Ryann Cooper*

Odysseus

*The performance will run approximately two hours and thirty minutes,
including one fifteen minute intermission.*

The Songs

aftos o anthropos monos
epitomontas to pro spiti
Taxidevontos to pros spiti
Epomeni ton themo theon

This man alone
Seeking to go home
Endures the anger of the gods

I kataigída teleíose
O Odysseás éinai chtypiménos allá zontanós
Geia sou, i moíra paraménei avévaii
Ómos i Athiná exakoloutheí na vasilévei stin
kardiá you

The storm is over
Odysseus is battered but alive
his fate remains uncertain
But Athena still reigns in his heart.

O eroas ehe epistrepsti
Toe pototoma ghenay yemata menacruz
apoleminay tin ethusa may thee affee
apoleminay tin ethusa may fo-tia
O eroas ehe epistrepsti

The hero has returned
The floor is littered with the dead
cleanse the hall with sulfur
cleanse the hall with fire
The hero has returned

aftos o anthropos monos
epitomontas to pro spiti
Taxidevontos to pros spiti
O eroas ehe epistrepsti

This man alone
Seeking to go home
The hero has returned

Why Odysseus?"

It's important to allow the play to speak for itself, so this will be brief and answer only a small part of the question; let's do that with another story. When I was working on putting the text for this performance together, learning the lines, many long-ago memories, often little more than a simple image with strong feelings attached, unloosed and floated to the surface. Two I wish to share: I remembered when I first encountered Odysseus as a youth; I was perhaps fourteen, fifteen? In that first encounter, he was on the beach, crying. That was such a revelation to me. How could such a hero and brave man be one who openly cries? Was it possible that Odysseus was weak, afraid and suffered like I do? I then made it my mantra: If Odysseus could be vulnerable enough to cry and still be a good man, then so could I. And second, the moment when Telemachus drives his javelin through Amphinomous's back and out his chest. I needed to know or see no more of war; I wanted nothing to do with it. - **Bill**

With special thanks to...

First of all, to Touchstone Theatre in my home port, Bethlehem, Pa, for helping this production come to life as part of their 2022-23 season — Lisa Jordan, first and foremost among this creative tribe; Jp of course, as our artistic leader and beloved boss. I cannot express the depth of love and gratitude I have for these two dear partners — who for over twenty years, through so many battles together, have fought to bring not just theatre, but the deeper, healing power of creativity and play to all who might be willing to join us evolve this transformative art. To Mary, Emma, Christopher, Chris, Sam, Matt, Kiera, Adam — to all the Touchstone family; the names go on throughout the decades. To my creative comrades, Rob Aptaker and Jerry Stropnick, my infinite thanks, and all those who sat through readings, shared ideas that have helped perfect and strengthen this evening's work: Doug Eadline, Ben Wright, Seth Moglen, Geoff Gehman, Kyle Lewis (who stood with me at the very beginnings of this project), Jennie Gilrain, Cristina Rufu, and most gratefully John Hare who helped me understand Odysseus more profoundly. Dan Rothenberg and my beloved daughter, Anisa, and son, Sam, for their love and support in so many different ways. And last but not least, Bridget George, who sat through more runs, readings, and ruminations than anyone should ever be forced to bear, always smilingly and a never ending source of wisdom and guidance.

The Odyssey is a truly great story; over 2,500 years old, it is fresh, powerful, profoundly vital and human—an epic adventure. There are so many truths to be mined in it, lessons to be learned about fundamental mor-

al and existential realities, fundamental concerns of the human condition; and there are a lot of old fashioned ones as well that still contain a grain or more of truth. The story is multi-dimensional, complex, profound, sacred even, yet intimate. It has been told in so many different ways many, many times. Why have I told it in the way I have chosen? Well for one, because this is a way that I can tell it given who I am and my means at this moment in time. It's possible to imagine many marvelous approaches to the story but, coming out of several years of debilitating disease, feeling the alienation that is also endemic in present society, numbed by hours and hours of radiating electric screens as we are, I wanted to take us back to basics: a single story teller, small live audiences where all can see and touch and hear together. I wanted to take us back to that sacred space where, with the simple tools of the body and imagination, we might enjoy a tale handed down from our ancestors that belongs to us all, unites us all, even if we may have differing views about what particular parts of it might mean for us now.

For me, as a man in the early 21st century--a heterosexual, white man--it's clear that how a man is to behave, even what it means to be a man, is shifting. There is the unanswered question, at least in my mind--after women have proved themselves more broadly intelligent, more adaptable, more capable at collaborating, endowed with all the most important virtues required to face these complex times—as to my unique purpose as a man. Am I simply here to open that stuck lid on the jar of peanut butter, or is there something more existential that calls?

For that reason, in *Odysseus*, this play, I am more interested in the *character* of Odysseus himself than in what happens to him: how he chooses domestic life and inevitable death instead of power, eternal life and pleasure with Calypso; and how, again and again, he chooses restraint over force, embraces chastity, familial devotion, courage in the face of endless pain, and humiliation and trials in pursuit of justice and wisdom in the personification of Athena. I see Athena as part of Odysseus and the Life of Creation itself—his anima perhaps, or his inspiration and guiding spirit that lives within and without him. For me, this is a way of reconciling how to see men, as science tells us, containing within themselves both the male and female principles. I humbly offer this picture of Odysseus as a prototypical man in order to provide a useful though inevitably imperfect measure, in the midst of the present social confusion, by which we men might be free to judge and choose how we wish to fashion ourselves as we move forward.

But in the end, it's just a story—hopefully a deeply pleasurable and resonant one told in this manner. If so, it will have justified its existence.

Bill George, (Creator/Performer): Bill received his B.A. in English Literature from Lehigh University and his M.F.A. in Acting/Directing from the Dallas Theatre Centre of Trinity University. He studied mime with Paul

Curtis of The American Mime Theatre, co-founded the People's Theatre Company in 1977 and later co-founded Touchstone Theatre in 1981 where he was Producing Director until 1990. During a hiatus from Touchstone in 1996, Bill founded Kingfisher Theatre to promote and house his artistic work and created Little Pond Arts Retreat in Nazareth, Pennsylvania with his wife Bridget—a retreat center dedicated to exploring the art of transcendence. During this interregnum he toured to Switzerland, Australia, New Zealand, Britain, and throughout Canada and the United States with his original dramas: *The Kingfisher's Wing* and *The Marriage of Munirih Khanum*. These works, dedicated to the challenges of representing "sacred" story on the stage, were inspired by the Baha'i Faith. In 2003, Bill returned as a full-time Ensemble Member to Touchstone, his creative home.

Bill's recent work for Touchstone Theatre has included a major role in the conception, development, and production of its Festival Unbound. Launched in 2019, this extraordinary festival built on Touchstone's acclaimed *Steel Festival: The Art of an Industry* (1998), which included the nationally recognized, community-based drama *Steelbound*. Staged among the preserved remains of Bethlehem Steel, in which Bill played the steel worker Prometheus, *Steelbound* gave birth to a sequel, *Prometheus Redux*, in 2019 and a return to the character twenty years later. Bill is proud to share this original one-man show about Odysseus, will play the Old Guy for the umpteenth time in Touchstone's upcoming *Christmas City Follies*, and is in partnership with his daughter, Anisa, to build a devised work for later in Touchstone's season called "The Last Play." Touchstone's first "Ensemble Member Emeritus" as of September 1st, Bill—who has served as a panelist and adjudicator for the National Endowment for the Arts, the Pennsylvania Council on the Arts, the Maryland State Arts Council, the Barrymore Awards of Philadelphia, and currently serves on the board of Godfrey Daniels Coffee House—turns his attention back to Kingfisher Theatre and his work with his beloved wife, daughter, and son—Bridget, Anisa, and Sam—at Little Pond Arts Retreat.

Gerard Stropnick (Directorial Assistance) is in his 50th year as a multi-faceted theatre professional. After Northwestern, he studied with Alvina Krause, and in 1978 co-founded Bloomsburg Theatre Ensemble (BTE), where he worked for the next 35 years, transitioning to Emeritus in 2013. He's acted in over 100 productions, and directed 71 to date, including classic, contemporary, new, original or devised plays at BTE, Maryland Ensemble Theatre, Touchstone Theatre, Sandglass Theatre, Florida Shakespeare Festival and elsewhere. He's written, co-written or devised a score more. *LETTERS TO THE EDITOR*, culled from 200 years of letters to local newspapers, was published as a play by Baker's Plays/Samuel French and as a trade paperback by Touchstone/Simon & Schuster. In communities in Pennsylvania and throughout Appalachia, the deep south, New Orleans, Maine and elsewhere, he writes and directs often large-scale site-specific productions featuring diverse community casts employing local story to celebrate, challenge, and address intractable issues. Sever-

al were co-written with poet and playwright Jo Carson; he learned Story Circle methodology from John O'Neal. Recently he's worked with communities in Uganda and Rwanda. He is an occasional writer for AMERICAN THEATRE magazine. He's served as a panelist or reporter for Americans for the Arts, the National Endowment for the Arts, the Pennsylvania Council on the Arts, the Massachusetts Cultural Council, and the Pew Charitable Trust's Philadelphia Theatre Initiative. He's been a Visiting Artist at Vassar College, Bucknell, the University of Redlands, and facilitated workshops at many more. He's a co-founder of the Network of Ensemble Theaters, the national service organization for ensembles, and currently serves on NET's Board of Trustees. He was named USA Lowe Fellow in Theater in 2010. For his service to the autism community, he was the 2010 Temple Grandin Award winner for service to the autism community.

Rob Aptaker (Musical Accompanist) is a Pennsylvania born educator and storyteller who lived in the West and New England before returning to our state. For 46 years he has been involved with Native American People -- their ceremonies and their causes. In that time Rob learned stories, songs and traditional Native drumming. Despite his lack of musical training or theater experience, Bill George enlisted Rob to be part of the *Odysseus* production. Once conscripted, he brought his broad range of life experience and love of language to bear, composing the production's songs in Greek (with the help of local Greek folks) and making use of a Celtic harp, a Kalimba, two drums and a variety of sound making implements to add texture and accent to the one man production. Rob is a member of the Lehigh Valley Storytelling Guild, and holds a Masters Degree in teaching secondary English. He is recently widowed, a stepfather and a preposterously proud grandfather of five children who are infinitely more talented and creative than he will ever be.



Odysseus will be touring in the Spring and Fall of 2024.

Please contact us at kingfish@fast.net or call 610-570-1335 if you're interested in having a performance.

www.kingfishertheatre.com; www.littlepond.org
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