TANTALUS is the culmination of an almost 50-year association between two great men of the theatre, the noted scholar, playwright and all-around theatrical genius, John Barton, and the pre-eminent director and theatre administrator, Sir Peter Hall. They met at Cambridge University when Peter was a freshman and John an upperclassman and the leading light in the Amateur Dramatic Club of Cambridge.

After graduating from Cambridge, Peter very quickly achieved fame as a director. His production of Waiting for Godot moved from the small Arts Theatre to London’s West End in 1956 and was a smash hit. Today it is recognized as one of the landmark productions in theatrical history. Three years later he founded the Royal Shakespeare Company and persuaded his Cambridge guru, John Barton, to join him at Stratford Upon Avon. Together they molded the Royal Shakespeare Company into the greatest theatre company in the English-speaking world.

After 13 years at Stratford, Peter left to succeed Lord Olivier as head of the Royal National Theatre. John stayed on at the Royal Shakespeare Company. At the RSC, he created six productions in theatrical history. Three years later he founded the Royal Shakespeare Company and persuaded his Cambridge guru, John Barton, to join him at Stratford Upon Avon. Together they molded the Royal Shakespeare Company into the greatest theatre company in the English-speaking world.

I first met Peter in 1956. After he founded the Royal Shakespeare Company, I became the American producer for the RSC and a member of its Board of Governors. The first RSC production I brought to America was John Barton’s The Hollow Crown. John was also a leading actor in the play. It was one of three Broadway shows to have received unanimous raves up to that time.

When I saw The Greeks at Stratford, I wanted to bring it to America. John had more ambitious plans inspired by The Greeks. His idea was to write an epic cycle based upon the plays, myths, poetry and history of ancient Greece. Trevor Nunn, who had succeeded Peter as artistic director of the RSC, liked the idea and the RSC commissioned John to follow through. John labored for 17 years and brought forth the monumental work that he entitled TANTALUS. He brought the manuscript to Peter and said, “Read it.” Peter read it and immediately felt that it would be the crowning achievement of his illustrious career as a director.

The Royal Shakespeare Company was equally enthusiastic but could not fit the mammoth production into its already burgeoning season. After much soul-searching, it was agreed by all concerned that TANTALUS should be produced in Denver by the Denver Center Theatre Company in association with the Royal Shakespeare Company. We accepted the challenge gladly and with the full knowledge that it would mean the equivalent of producing two theatre seasons in one and would require extraordinary efforts by everyone at the DCPA.

We are producing TANTALUS, not because it may be the longest play in history, but because we believe it to be a great work of literature and drama. We are not alone in that belief. After its Denver run, our production of TANTALUS will tour England and then open at the Royal Shakespeare Company’s London home, the Barbican Theatre in April of 2001. To help, the English Arts Council is making the largest grant it has ever made for a single production. Other venues throughout the world have already expressed great interest in presenting our production of TANTALUS. By the way, the millennia may have become a humdrum thing but we have always considered TANTALUS to be our millennium gift to Denver and the world.
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Peter Hall was hunched over styrofoam cartons of sushi, a small salad and a cup of miso soup. This was his daily lunch menu, taken in his spacious office punctually from one to two during rehearsals for TANTALUS. A massive man, surprisingly light on his feet and deft in his manner, he rarely deviated from this lunchtime routine during the six-month rehearsal period for TANTALUS that began in late March.

“Can’t stand it,” he muttered with a sweeping gesture at the walls. “No windows,” he explained, at once making a face and breaking into a grin—a contradiction that sums up this complex, charismatic man.

As we sat down to talk in late June, when the John Barton plays were still in the process of being cut, shaped, reasoned, argued and staged, things were just beginning to take form. It had been a hard pull. Three actors had had to be replaced for a variety of reasons. Visa delays and immigration snafus had made for the loss of precious rehearsal time. The opening dates had to be changed.

Hall had had the prescience to insist on working with two other directors: his son, Edward, an up-and-coming young director at the Royal Shakespeare Company (and elsewhere) and, for a while, Mick Gordon, artistic director of London’s Gate Theatre, who left the project midstream. Hall was drawing on the young men’s freshness and energy, but remained the final arbiter.

“One of our aims was to be part of the endeavor,” he had told the Denver Rocky Mountain News earlier that month, “and that someone is me.”

It would be hard enough to stage a cycle of ten established plays, but here was a cycle of ten new ones that had never even been workshopped.

Why would a man with Hall’s laurels and fascination by formal theatre, by Denver for better than half a year, and attempt something as artistically perilous and physically arduous as TANTALUS?

“Well,” he said weighing his words as if his life depended on them, “John Barton is a friend of 50 years. We’ve shared so much, from our education to our enthusiasms. We were both at Cambridge together. I’ve directed him and he’s directed me as an actor. When I founded the Royal Shakespeare Company (RSC), I asked him to leave Cambridge where he was lay dean of King’s [College] and come into the theatre as a director and a teacher. A unity of obsessions, I suppose,” he said, summing up the things that brought them together, “and of backgrounds.”

Hall and Barton had not been classmates at Cambridge (Barton was two years ahead), but they did share the same passions and activities. Hall, the son of a railroad worker, had been introduced to theatre and music early in life and pursued them at university. Music has always been important. As a schoolarship student, he made money teaching children to play piano as he now teaches his eight-year-old daughter Emma.

A
fter Cambridge, Hall knocked about London, quickly learning the good and bad about life as an artist. For a while he ran the Arts Theatre in London where, at 24, he made a name for himself staging the first English-language production of Samuel Beckett’s Waiting for Godot. The uncertainties of life in the theatre bedeviled him, but the work was always exhilarating. A solution was to establish a theatre of his own. In 1959, three years after he had begun directing Shakespeare at Stratford, Hall founded the RSC, calling on, among others, Barton and another Cambridge friend, The Denver Center’s own Tony Church, to be part of the endeavor.

“I think I’ve always been drawn to and fascinated by formal theatre, by which I don’t mean stylized,” Hall said. “I mean theatre that by its writing or by its staging has a form and a shape which provokes the audience to imagine, rather than to literally present realism. “I mean, why don’t you absolutely need any scenery for Shakespeare? Because the audience imagines what it’s told. In the same way, two playwrights with whom I have been very closely associated—Samuel Beckett and Harold Pinter—are very metaphorical writers. You don’t need a huge realistic set to do a Pinter play; you need a sense of the space, a sense of the room, whatever it may be.”

So what started as a radical notion—a theatre devoted to Shakespeare—blossomed into the distinguished institution the RSC is today. Hall’s association with Barton, another strong-willed artist with definite ideas, was stormier, but also endured. They did several productions together, including, notably, the 1963 The Wars of the Roses, which consisted of all three parts of Henry VI as well as Richard III.

By 1973, Hall was tapped to succeed Laurence Olivier as director of National Theatre and ran it for the next 15 years. During that time, he moved the National from the Old Vic to the South Bank, expanded the organization from 150 people and four productions a year to 20 productions and 750 people. Meanwhile, in 1980, Barton came up with another one of his marathons at the RSC: an amalgamation of the ancient Greek plays called The Greeks.

“I was very, very intrigued by John’s production,” Hall recalled. “In that year Hall’s association with Barton, another strong-willed artist with definite ideas, was stormier, but also endured.
I did the Aeschylus Oresteia at the National. The thing that worried me about The Greeks was that it was a bit of a patchwork of Aeschylus and Euripides and Sophocles and Herodotus and Homer. I said to John at the time, ‘Why don’t you write your own, in your own voice…?’ I never thought he’d do it, but he did and it’s TANTALUS. And TANTALUS is about why the Greek myths are still important. They’re very good stories. I think they make modern what many people regard as ancient. A myth, by definition, is still alive or you can’t call it a myth.

“When I read it all, I didn’t think it was quite right. I thought it was like some great primitive piece of art, 80% of which was wonderful, 20% of which was…indistinct. It was like an unfinished sculpture by Michelangelo bursting out of the marble, where you’re not certain if he’s deliberately not finished it or just got bored with it or wasn’t quite certain how to finish it. So I was very intrigued by TANTALUS, because the first time I read TANTALUS there were about 15 plays, even more, but there was still no ending,” he said with a resounding laugh. “It could go on forever!”

As the laughter subsided, he murmured, “I suppose I got involved in it because I couldn’t not, which may sound a silly reason.”

It was the best reason, but probably not the only one. Hall, who turns 70 in November, acknowledges feeling his mortality. He has a young wife, Nicki, and their daughter Emma, who is the youngest of six children by four wives (including actress/dancer Leslie Caron and American opera star Maria Ewing). Work for him has always been the lightning rod and safety net. He has worked all over the world and made his mark not only in the theatre, but also in film, television and, notably, opera. He was artistic director at Glyndebourne from 1984-90, and has worked at the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden, in Geneva, Los Angeles, Houston, Chicago, The Met in New York and Bayreuth, where, in 1983, he directed a Ring cycle. A taste for these marathons was developing.

Work is the balm that stalls the void. It’s life. And Hall’s life, for all its triumphs, brought its share of disappointments. Aside from three divorces, The Peter Hall Company he founded in 1988, and which had mounted more than 30 distinguished productions (including Orpheus Descending with Vanessa Redgrave, The Merchant of Venice with Dustin Hoffman, An Ideal Husband, which transferred to Broadway, the Stephen Dillane Hamlet and A Streetcar Named Desire with Jessica Lange) has folded, a victim of rising costs and dwindling public funding—a subject on which Hall rails at every opportunity. In 1996 he returned to the RNT to direct The Oedipus Plays (Oedipus the King and Oedipus at Colonus) by Sophocles which later opened in Epidaurus as part of the Athens Festival.

“I do like large challenges,” he said, “I’ve done a lot. Maybe it’s hubris, but I don’t really like a safe and comfortable life.”

When TANTALUS is over, he’ll be off to do Othello at Glyndebourne and in Chicago. He’ll be tackling a new Simon Gray play called Jaques in London, teaching in Houston and staging a Romeo and Juliet next year in Los Angeles, which is where last year he directed Measure for Measure and A Midsummer Night’s Dream. But other than lunch, the main thing on his mind when we spoke was TANTALUS.

“It is a large commitment. I was very aware that it wouldn’t be easy and had problems,” he said, “but the ambition of the thing is so audacious. And it represents so many things that I’ve been doing in the theatre all my life. The use of verse, the use of music, the use of masks and classical texts. It seemed a challenge that called on most of my obsessions.

“It was the support of my wife that enabled me to do that. I have a wife who’s 30 years younger than me; I’ve an eight-year-old daughter, I wouldn’t have wanted to miss her growing up for six months. I’ve five other children in London and I have five grandchildren, so… a lot of the family are coming out here. Some have already been out. Strangely, we’re a fairly close-knit tribe. That was a consideration also. And Denver’s been very solicitous about making that side of things very good. We have a nice house. Emma’s in school. It’s wonderful.”

The exiled Spanish playwright Fernando Arrabal once stated that one could write a play based on a mathematical equation. After all, music is mathematical…

“Ah, but it’s also ambiguous,” said Hall. “A phrase of music can be anything, depending on the way you treat it or orchestrate it. At one point the two Helens [in TANTALUS] were being played by two different actresses, which means, inevitably, that we’re saying to the audience that there were two Helens, one in Egypt, one in Troy. That isn’t right. Were they the same one? Were there two? We don’t know. It’s ambiguous and should remain so.”

And the biggest challenge so far?

“To find what the last play is. John found it really difficult to do. For years. I suspect it’s because he’d said it all by...
The boundary lines between myth, history and truth are hazy. This blurring is something we understand well today.

AGAMEMNON. It was written some hundred years before the flowering of the great Classical dramatists, and was clearly intended to encompass the whole story, apart from that which was already handled by Homer. It is this lost cycle which TANTALUS attempts to re-invent in modern form.

The story or epic is the key element. Some ten short plays are needed to embody it, since it is cumulatively different in kind from the single plays or even trilogies which handle part of it. It is not so far removed from the modern form we call soap opera.

The gaps in this story are filled from many ancient sources, not merely the surviving early summaries of the Epic Cycle, but also Hesiod, Apollodorus and even some of the surviving or reconstructed fragments from the lost plays of the great classical dramatists themselves.

I wanted to tell as much of the whole story as I could for a number of reasons. Even in Greece today it is largely unknown by most people excited by Greek tragedy. Its scale and importance is on a par with that other great saga of family revenge, The Mahabharata. Above all I believe the whole straggling and fragmentary epic does comprise an organic coherent whole, and that to experience the whole story would qualify and enrich an audience’s feelings and some of its assumptions about its more famous parts. The result is a text which does not use any of the lines in the classical plays we have, except at times when they are quoted in the background in the original Greek in the form of prophecies.

The disparate source material itself is of course full of variants and contradictions. I want to embrace these and let them come up in the course of the cycle, either through questioning and argument by the chorus or through the characters themselves. I am much influenced by the fact that many of the fifth-century plays are themselves highly innovative and freely adapt and add to the source material that existed at the time.

Today these famous classics inevitably provide us with an accepted norm, but to their original audience they were much more the kind of work that we would call “experimental.” To counterbalance my own innovations I have set myself the rule of keeping rigorously to the plot of the cycle and all the main events or “facts” within it, only inventing where there are obvious gaps in the sources. I have treated the material freely in some places and kept very closely to it in others.

My main device has been to show the characters trying to change or prevent the series of deaths and disasters which the epic unfolds. They try, but the fatal outcomes are always the same as in the original myths. Their motivation and character, however, may be very different from those with which we are familiar. This accords with the fifth-century practice of presenting characters in a completely different light in different plays (e.g. Odysseus and Helen). My intention is not perversely to rewrite the old masterpieces but to use the material as a metaphor for today.

TANTALUS has much contemporary relevance, though I would prefer to use the phrase with the stress on the second word rather than the first. Any production of a great myth can bring out its
modern resonances easily enough. Sometimes too easily. It is the eternal relevance of a myth that most interests me: it is contemporary because it is timeless and transcends centuries. TANTALUS is full of immediately recognizable themes embedded in its sources, but to begin to compile a list of them would, I think, labor the obvious. These themes are there in the myths themselves and I hope the text itself need not stress them too heavily.

The cycle unfolds within the conventions of story-telling. It gradually progresses from exchanging stories to enacting them and becoming the characters in the myths themselves—a theatrical myth about the birth of drama, how it began with a storyteller and chorus, and how characters only gradually developed.

They serve as a Prologue, intended to relax and amuse the audience, and to set up vital information which is developed later. Three basic questions are raised: Who is to blame? What is the truth of it? Could it have been otherwise?

But since the whole story pre-exists, the handling of it in this way inevitably involves the question raised by the prophecies of Calchas, Cassandra and the rest. How much of it is pre-ordained by the gods? Are men and women free to change things or is everything fated? The possible solution of this paradox is always contradictory. We are indeed fated but, within the rules set by the gods and the story itself, we are free to change the details of how we act or strive within situations that press so upon us.

I see the whole thing as a metaphor about myth and history, but also about how a great myth helps us to understand history. The boundary lines between myth, history and truth are hazy. This blurring is something we understand well today. And if we don’t, we should.

It is important to stress that throughout the cycle the Roman words “Greece” and “Greek” are never mentioned. My image is of something both pre-Homeric and long past it. The situation is that Agamemnon leads a group of war-kings from “The West” whom he would like to unite into a nation. His army is simply called “The War Kings” or “The Men from the West.”

The title TANTALUS relates to this approach. Death is certain but doom is postponed. The fruits of the earth are ours for the taking, but most people never quite get a real taste of them. Tantalus, the friend of Zeus and the ancestor of Agamemnon and Menelaus, learned the gods’ secrets. When he betrayed them to men, he was given the eternal punishment of living forever under a great rock which was always about to fall, but never fell, close to a tree of delicious fruit which the wind swept away whenever he clutched at it. The Rock, roped up to Heaven, overhangs the whole cycle. When key decisions are made, it stirs and drifts of dust and detritus crumble from it. The ropes are frayed and from time to time, when some major catastrophe strikes, one of them loosens or drops and dangles. But the rock never quite falls.

I think more and more and more of the cycle as a metaphor for a single age in human history, squeezed in between Floods, Ice Ages, man’s general self-destructiveness or some other human catastrophe. Or perhaps yet another cosmic disaster of an unknown nature.

The main bridge between story-telling and enacting is the oracle at Trophonios, where the streams of Lethe and Memory flowed from a cave or hole in the ground. The Greek historian Pausanias tells that “when a man comes out from Trophonios he is still possessed with terror and hardly knows himself or anything around him. Later he comes to his senses no worse than before, and can laugh again.”

SIR PETER continued from page 5

showing it and to say it again was superfluous. So he was driven either to write a kind of comic satire and reversal or some kind of baroque summation, a kind of big metaphorical climax, which is actually unreal. So that’s the biggest problem. We do have an ending but we haven’t done it yet...

Does one rehearse this cycle differently than any other play because it is so much longer?

“Yes, but I’m not quite sure how,” he acknowledged with a broad grin. “We’re finding out each day. I’ve been blessed by having other directors. But if we all get together to look at one problem, one piece of material, it’s tantamount to having one director in terms of productivity. So a week ago I said we’ve now got to rehearse the whole thing in bits, tiny bits, fragments, with the understanding the premise is not doing the whole play but being able to run at least two and possibly three rehearsals [simultaneously], so that you have two actors doing a duologue and even if you don’t get to the end of it in the allotted time, you have to stop, because if you go on, everything will fall into ruins.

“At this moment what’s important is that we get as much rehearsal in terms of practice for the actors, because the eight leading players have an enormous lot to get a hold of and remember, and we are inevitably short of time, but of course one always is.”

Hall, who has worked extensively with both, does not find much difference between American and British actors.

“There’s a mythology out there that British actors think American actors have no technique. American actors think the British have only technique and no heart. Neither is true. A good actor is a good actor.”

APPLAUSE 7
Climbing the TALLEST Mountain

We live in the Rocky Mountains and you’ve probably seen those people who walk around with Fourteener t-shirts. TANTALUS is a Fifteener. I was intrigued by the size of this mountain and I wanted to climb it. I was aware of its dangers—the possibility of falling into a crevice or running out of oxygen—but the challenge of climbing this particular mountain proved irresistible.

First of all, of course, it had to be a worthwhile mountain to climb. A careful reading of a yet unfinished text confirmed it was that. I also had enormous confidence in the Denver Center Theatre Company—those individuals who assemble the gear, establish the base camps, facilitate the communications and provide rescue teams when the climbers get in trouble. You don’t make this journey if you don’t have confidence in your ability to pull it off at the most basic of logistical levels—from scheduling to budgeting to building sets, props, masks and costumes. That’s the initial confidence.

Second is the confidence I had in Peter Hall and John Barton—artists with careers as distinguished as any in the English-speaking world. They are Titans of the English theatre.

But English theatre traditions are different. Peter and John work in very different ways from the way we work. They have challenged many of our long-held assumptions. And we have challenged theirs. There have been frustrations when entrenched processes didn’t align, but we always found a way to keep climbing.

Part of the great strength of this theatre company is an ability to swing to and support the way others work. We celebrate this strength each time we begin a project with a new director. Each director is expected to create unique work and each must utilize unique processes to create that work. The responsibility of the company is to provide maximum creative freedom with maximum logistical support. We do it their way. Which is, of course, our way.

One of the significant challenges of the TANTALUS project was the length of the rehearsal period. None of us had been in rehearsal month after month without the immediate prospect of the adrenaline kicking as we approached technical rehearsals and performance.

In a regular six-week rehearsal period, the members of the company suspend real life, enter the world of the play, create the work and emerge on opening night to reclaim their place in the real world. Their families know this pattern and know how to suspend their needs... for six weeks. But not for six months.

Throughout the process, “real life” continued to knock at the rehearsal room door forcing love affairs, marital spats, family illnesses and personal financial problems into the mythical world of TANTALUS. Manic swings of mood escalated throughout the rehearsal period inflicted by the monumental stress of trying to balance personal responsibilities with the demands of the text of ten new plays. This was often more than frail mortals could bear. There were more tears in this rehearsal process than in any with which I have ever been involved.

The fact is that, in most rehearsal situations, when things get tense, everyone looks at the calendar and says, “Well, week after next we’ll be playing and all of this will blow away.” We couldn’t do that with TANTALUS. Week after next brought only the promise of more rehearsal... and more tension.

We anticipated some of these pressures and before we began rehearsals we discussed them frankly with our artists and with Actors’ Equity Association (AEA), the union of professional actors and stage managers. The union leadership granted several important concessions. They permitted us to work a 48-hour week over five days instead of six, giving the actors a two-day break each rehearsal week rather than the one “dark” day that is the reality for the rest of the profession the rest of the time. This extra free day was crucial to our survival and we are grateful to AEA for its support.

Ultimately the lifeline we clung to—the work itself—proved strong enough. Time after time I saw days of frustration, pain and depression shattered by a flash of insight that suddenly revealed the full meaning of a text that, moments before, had been impenetrable. Or a wry comment from a frustrated actor would cause the entire rehearsal hall to collapse in a gale of purging laughter. And then we’d begin again with the shared knowledge that these myths that are as old as recorded time have a powerful ability to replenish, to nurture and to heal.

How high has our team climbed? Only you can answer. Perhaps it is not possible to conquer any complex work of art—even one that is a fraction of the size of TANTALUS. But six months of rehearsal has taught us that the verb “to climb” has intrinsic value. We will continue climbing through each performance of each cycle.

Donovan Marley
Artistic Director
Denver Center Theatre Company
TANTALUS: Pinning it DOWN

Edward Hall, one of the most notable of his generation of young English directors, is staging TANTALUS with Sir Peter Hall. It is a measure of his merit that he was contracted to come to Denver with the understanding that he would have to absent himself for eight weeks to return to England and stage Henry V for the Royal Shakespeare Company at Stratford. Below is a brief Q&A with Ed Hall for whom the paramount first question is:

Q: Your thoughts on TANTALUS?

EH: The irony of what John has done is to try to make finite the issues of the wars between the Greeks and Trojans. In doing so, he has exposed the simple objective which is to say that it is infinite and that there is no such thing as a finite stop to any issue in life.

The Greek tradition is ambiguity and John has written that. Brilliantly. So you find yourself talking about it in the same paradoxical way that John has written it. Every time you pin something down it jumps up, does the opposite thing and slips through your fingers. When you do a scene one way, you can do it the opposite way. Any time you think Odysseus is cruel to brand the women of Troy or that Neoptolemus was cruel to them, someone pops up and says no, it wasn’t cruel, it was justified. None of it’s news.

Q: What is news about TANTALUS?

EH: John’s articulated it beautifully: the paradox of trying to make sense out of life. No one’s pulled it together in contemporary writing as John has done, so that you can actually have the most fantastic experience in two days or one day, depending on when you see it, rather than spend six months reading. You go to the theatre to be transformed, to look through a spy glass at someone else’s life, someone else’s lot, and not have to pick up the tab when you leave the building, but to take with you the experience.

Q: What about all the humor you directors tell us you’re finding in TANTALUS? It sounds serious to me.

EH: Mmmm. We’re finding it. Any time that something is serious and tragic, you’ve got to say that it’s funny as well. We have to mine the humor, but it’s there.

Q: So much action takes place off stage and yet we live in an age that prizes action. How do you get around that?

EH: The action is not important. It’s the meaning of the action. That’s far more entertaining, and more gratifying, but also harder to get to. You don’t need to see the action to understand that. You just need to know. Then you need to see how the characters are reacting to it. That’s important. That’s the dilemma. You have to work harder, which is why commercial media go-in-60-seconds culture is about action. It’s quick gratification.

Q: So TANTALUS requires an audience that has the will to sit and listen and pay attention…

EH: Our job is to make people want to stay there. Each play is not much longer than an hour and you’re not going to see much more than three hours in an evening. When you consider that you also have the occasional supper break, it’s a much larger evening in the theatre with far richer content. You’ll have time to reflect about what you’ve just seen in those short, intensive bursts.

Q: The rehearsal schedule is from nine in the morning to seven at night. A long day. Is that to help actors build stamina?

EH: No. It’s just trying to get through the material.

—Sylvie Drake
When I joined the Royal Shakespeare Company as an assistant director in January 1980, the Company was embarking on two epic projects both, it was thought at the time, to be high-risk gambles. The first turned out to be a landmark production—Nicholas Nickleby—and the second, an even more unlikely candidate, became the hit of the London season: ten Greek plays, mostly by Euripides, produced as a trilogy, adapted and directed by John Barton and called simply The Greeks.

Ten years passed and I heard little of John’s Greek ambitions, beyond the fact that the hoped-for television production of The Greeks had not materialized, but that a new, even more ambitious idea had seeded in his mind. When I took over the Company as Artistic Director in 1990, I inherited from my predecessor, Terry Hands, the responsibility of nurturing the project that has come to light here in Denver—another epic cycle, but this time all John’s own work, taking as its theme nothing less than the whole Trojan War and its aftermath.

I must confess that for many years I was skeptical as to whether such a feat could ever be completed. I was given regular updates from John and he would discuss the shape and structure of the cycle in his eyrie in the West End of London.

To say that John was obsessed by the project through these many years is an understatement – it’s more accurate to say that he was possessed. He would write and re-write, then re-write the re-writes, then scrap the lot and start again. He continued to direct fine productions for the RSC throughout the 80s and 90s; he continued his role as teacher and mentor of the Company, an elder statesman among directors, but it was TANTALUS that increasingly became the center of his life, and it was TANTALUS that led him back to his first ambition: to be a writer and poet, rather than a director and teacher.

It had not gone unnoticed that many of his finest productions were of his own superb adaptations of the classics, or indeed of Shakespeare himself. The Wars of the Roses, which to a large degree established the reputation of the RSC as a radical, classical company, was littered with speeches, sometimes whole scenes of John Barton, nestling and jostling amongst Shakespeare’s mighty lines of Henry VI and Richard III.

Finally, in 1997 I think it was, I got the call from John. There was something “you might like to look at when you have a moment” and an enormous package arrived! I had to carve out a completely clear weekend to read the volumes it contained. As it turned out, I read the whole thing at breakneck speed because what I had not anticipated was what a fantastic story it was—and witty, nimble, ironic. Great parts for actors, mighty themes, something, to borrow F. Scott Fitzgerald’s phrase, “commensurate to man’s capacity for wonder.”

The next stage was fairly straightforward—to get a director on board. Peter Hall, who had invited John to Stratford 35 years before, loved the script and set about clearing his diary. We targeted the millennium year for production. Then came the problems. And more.

We always knew that the RSC would need partners to produce an epic of this scale (at one point 16 plays long) and from the word go, we sought an international co-producer for a work that is truly internationalist. Many setbacks were suffered, but everyone’s faith in the work was confirmed at a reading in London when the script outperformed our best hopes, and showed itself to be above all, great entertainment.

However, the outlook was bleak and a European production in the year 2000 had to be abandoned.

Just at this moment an extraordinary offer came from the New World. Don Seawell, an RSC Governor and collaborator of John and Peter’s, offered to produce the whole thing in Denver, using American and British actors, and a Greek designer. It was an act of astonishing generosity and good faith. As a result of this brilliant reversal of the old pioneering spirit, the work will be seen in Europe as well as the United States. The circle can now be completed and, with luck, the epic will travel from Denver to London and finally to Greece, the source of its inspiration.

Adrian Noble
Artistic Director
Royal Shakespeare Company
Sumio Yoshii is Japan’s leading and much-decorated lighting designer for opera and dramatic and musical theatre, recipient of the Japanese Ministry of Education’s Award for Artistic Excellence and the Japanese Order of Cultural Merit. He has worked in numerous countries, including France, Italy, Germany, England and the United States. While he has had a major impact on Japanese theatre architecture, has written articles and books on theatre, architectural and lighting design, and can point to many theatres in Japan and elsewhere that bear his imprint (most recently Tokyo’s New National Theatre), he admits that working on TANTALUS has been, to say the least, an unprecedented challenge.

“It is so long, so long,” said Yoshii, who usually works by listening to the lines and getting a sense of what to do. “I can’t do that here,” he continued through his language assistant, Miyu Hinata, who, along with others, has been charged with translating all ten plays of TANTALUS into Japanese.

The challenge is further heightened by TANTALUS itself. Generally, the task of a lighting designer is to create naturalistic light that conveys the mood of a scene or reinforces the emotions of the characters.

However, the lighting in TANTALUS is a special case; it must be used to create the atmosphere for unnatural or abstract ideas — elements that may not be readily grasped by the audience. For instance, how does the audience perceive the curse on Clytemnestra? These mythical scenes are not rooted in the audience’s collective knowledge; therefore, the challenge is to create the correct feeling and mood to illustrate the scene.

But Mr. Yoshii is up for the challenge. As director Peter Hall said, “Sumio Yoshii is one of the best lighting designers in the world. His contribution to the production will be, I know, extraordinary.”

—SD

Donald McKayle’s most recent honor was his recognition this summer by the Library of Congress and the Dance Heritage Coalition as one of the “first 100 Irreplaceable Dance Treasures.” He’s in good company with such greats as Fred Astaire, Mikhail Baryshnikov, Isadora Duncan, Bob Fosse and Twyla Tharp. In a long and distinguished career, he has been a director, writer, educator, performer and choreographer. He’s worked with ballet companies, contemporary dance companies, in the theatre, on television and on Broadway (where he received Tony Award nominations for his direction and choreography of Raisin and an Outer Critics Circle Award for Sophisticated Ladies). On several occasions he has worked with Denver’s own Cleo Parker Robinson Dance. At the Denver Center Theatre Company, he directed The Emperor Jones and House of Flowers, and he choreographed Purlie and South Pacific.

None of this, however, has kept him from being humbled by TANTALUS which, despite its enormous scope, has required him to work in a whole new way: small.

“I’ve never done anything like this,” he said, visibly baffled. “There are no set dance pieces in TANTALUS.

The dance is part of the dramatic fabric. It gives color and weight and variety to the words. There are so many words… Sometimes the dance extends to one or two minutes, but often it just lasts a moment or two. Sometimes I simply give a movement vocabulary to the actors to utilize within a scene. So, yes, it’s a whole, new, different and fascinating experience of underscoring dialogue with gesture as well as sound.”

—SD
When Donovan Marley asked Sir Peter Hall how he might identify TANTALUS designer Dionysis Fotopoulos in a roomful of people, Hall replied, “That’s easy. Look for Zeus.”

Bingo. With his shock of leonine gray hair and penetrating brown eyes, Fotopoulos is every compressed inch the god who wreaked such havoc over ancient Greece.

He may be stockier than Zeus (we’ll never know), but he has a god’s talent at the drawing board and honors to prove it. Born in Kalamata, in the southwestern Peloponnese, Fotopoulos studied painting, mosaics and sculpture as a young man, staying away from theatrical design until much later. To date, he’s worked on more than 40 films and 300 theatrical productions, ranging from the ancient Greeks and Shakespeare to Ibsen, Buchner, Lorca, Brecht, Mrozek, Ionesco and Pinter.

The range is broad, from working at New York’s LaMama Theatre to working with such illustrious directors as Greece’s Minos Volanakis and Jules Dassin, Germany’s Peter Stein and England’s Sir Peter Hall. With Hall, he did a Lysistrata at the Old Vic and Oedipus Rex-Oedipus at Colonus in a unified staging for the Festival of Epidaurus and the Royal National Theatre of London. Fotopoulos has written books on theatre design and has been included in books by others. His status in theatrical Athens is very nearly godlike.

Fotopoulos greeted this writer with great courtesy in his casually cluttered office in the Denver Center Theatre Company building. He kept its door mostly shut, not to be unfriendly but out of regard for others; this Greek god is a chain-smoker.

He is also a reserved yet engaging conversationalist, which translates as a uniquely European form of gallantry. He speaks softly. His Greek accent and syntax make for slightly broken but perfectly lucid English. (“When I give lectures in English,” he quipped, “the only people who understand me are the Japanese.”)

So what persuaded this polished Athenian to come to Denver?

“It was very difficult the decision,” he acknowledged. “First of all, it is far away. I don’t like to work far from my home. I have decided to do just one piece a year away from Greece because I like my life there. I live in Athens, but I have a country house in Epidaurus where is the big theatre. I am working there. I have done 45, 50 performances in Epidaurus. Last year I was in Bulgaria with Michael Cacoyannis to do a film of Chekhov’s The Cherry Orchard with Alan Bates. The year before I was in Moscow with Peter Stein for Hamlet.

“And when Peter Hall and John Barton brought me this project there were many reasons to do it. Peter is a good friend. We did together Lysistrata and the two Oedipus. So they were artists I knew.

“TANTALUS is a piece which talks about the stupidity of war involving myths and characters I have known all my life,” he explained. “I feel as if I belong to those families. I have done Oedipus nine times. I have done Iphigenia so many times, I have done Orestes. I have made film of Iphigenia with Cacoyannis and Irene Pappas, film of Orestes. I have worked on plays about them. These myths, how John Barton has mixed them with our contemporary times, how these stupid problems one cannot escape continue to exist, how you still feel them, even though it has been more than 2000 years, they are things that interest me, you know?”

Which didn’t prevent a shocked reaction when Hall mentioned Denver.

“I said, ‘Come on. Why Denver? I have been many times in New York, but what I have to do in Denver? Maybe it’s a nice city, OK, I don’t know. I have never been.’ But Peter Hall said come and see the theatre and see what you think. And when I came, I can tell you that I found very organized work and very friendly people. I don’t know about the town. When I arrived, it was a town that was completely out of my…my measurements, you know? Because I am a smoker.” He waved his cigarette for emphasis. “I am a night person. In Athens I work until midnight and go out late at night to see friends, because the theatre in Athens is over after midnight. All these things represent a completely different life.

“But all the people here are very warm, you know? Bill [Curley] who is...
working on the sets and Andrew [Yelusich] who works on the costumes and Kevin [Copenhaver], who is making the masks. I don’t feel so far away, how I felt in the beginning when they told me to come here. These people want to do something in the theatre, you know? Something more.”

What has struck the DCTC designers most about Fotopoulos is the spontaneity with which he works.

“It’s been fascinating,” said Yelusich. “Very different. He works minute by minute.”

“I love Dionysis Fotopoulos,” exclaimed Bill Curley, who has saved every scrap of paper on which Fotopoulos has sketched ideas. “The felt marker is his preferred instrument. I wish we didn’t have a language barrier. He thinks in such bold strokes. The conventions are so different. He brings in concepts and depends on this shop to get things built.”

“Conceptually, it’s not what I’m used to,” said a more subdued Copenhaver about the masks he’s making. “It’s thrilling and it’s an education, but I have yet to… find my place with him.”

“That is why we must find a very simple way... for the audience to penetrate the myths and float between reality and dreams.”
—Dionysis Fotopoulos

“We collaborate with Kevin, because he is a good mask-maker,” said Fotopoulos. “I want something very simple. We must have balance between myths, reality and dreams, and the mask is stylized—if you find the right form and the mask is not too noisy.”

Noisy?
“Visually noisy, yes, so they don’t disturb the serenity of the dream. That is why we must find a very simple way, with the costumes and the movements of the actors, for the audience to penetrate the myths and float between reality and dreams. It should be something that you don’t know if it existed in the past or if it’s just mythology. Also they can find contemporary echoes. That is the game we have to play.

“TANTALUS is big, it’s out of the normal range of production. It is a very ambitious plan which requires something very simple, because otherwise, you are going to feel claustrophobia in all this torrent of words. You must find how you can do it with a huge humanity. Those are the reasons I am here.”

When it came to describing the set, Fotopoulos was less forthcoming. “You will see,” he repeated like a mantra. “We are in an area that has reality, we are on a Mediterranean beach with girls passing the day lying in the sun and drinking. You can hear the sea. You can even smell the air. At the same time, this locale can change. It can become Troy, it can be a castle, it can be an army camp.

“You must give the feeling that dreams can be very simple,” he continued. “The war and life itself are a game, a stupid game that people with power can play. But it must feel intimate and familiar. The characters in Greek mythology have very human traits, problems of the heart, they hate each other, they like each other, they play games. You never know the difference between a man or a god.

“Because the gods have so many weaknesses, we see them as very human. Life is a joke, but life is also a game with beautiful details. And the theatre is also like that, a game with beautiful moments, moments that give you thoughts, that give you hope, that give you problems.”

When asked to outline the differences between working here or in Greece, Fotopoulos looked surprised.

“I have worked in so many different places, in Moscow, in New York, in Frankfurt, in Japan. I don’t know. If you have a nice group of friendly people, the theatre is the same. It’s about exchange of ideas. When it works it’s magic, when it doesn’t it can be awful. But I have been lucky because I have lived wonderful moments of collaboration. You know, I began by studying painting, because I was very suspicious about theatrical work. Of all the hundreds of productions I worked on there are very few that were really great collaborations, but that’s enough in one life. Here is a very professional, very warm company. They appreciate collaboration.”

And the concept for the set?
“Is a beach there with a few broken things,” he said dismissively. “You’re going to use all your senses. You will see.”

Will there be a rock suspended from above? Here Greek ambiguity prevailed: “We are going to feel the rock. We are going to have a lot of visual things. You’re going to use all your senses. You will see.”

And we will.
—Sylvie Drake
The myth of Tantalus is one of the most ancient legends of Greece. It was probably an old story in the early seventh century BC, when Homer described Odysseus’ visit to the Underworld in *The Odyssey* and it was used freely by poets throughout the Archaic Age. Tantalus may have been a real king, a wealthy ruler of either Lydia or Phrygia in Asia Minor; he was the father of Pelops, who gave his name to a major region of Greece, the Peloponnese. But Tantalus was no ordinary human being: he was Zeus’ favorite, perhaps even his son.

Unlike all other mortals, Tantalus was fortunate enough to be included in Zeus’ exclusive for-deities-only banquets on Mount Olympus. At one Olympian feast he listened to the chatty, boisterous gods discussing their affairs, then went back to earth and told their secrets to mankind. In a similar version of his crime, Tantalus attended such a celebration, stole some of the ambrosia and nectar that gave the gods their endless lives, then tried to share the heavenly food and drink with other mortals in order to give mankind immortality.

In the final variation on the banquet theme, the king invited the Olympian goddesses and gods to dine at his home. To test their wisdom, he killed his son Pelops and added pieces of his flesh to a stew, then waited to see who noticed. All but one deity realized what Tantalus had done. Only Demeter, who was mourning the loss of her daughter, absentmindedly ate, nibbling a bit of Pelops’ shoulder. Horrified when she realized what she had done, Demeter replaced the shoulder with an ivory one after Pelops was restored to life.

Tantalus was also accused of larceny and dishonesty. Pandareus once stole Zeus’ beloved golden dog and gave it to Tantalus, asking him to guard it. When Zeus discovered the theft, Tantalus refused to give the mastiff back, claiming he knew nothing about the animal. Hermes, messenger of the gods, was sent to examine the problem, the dog was found and Zeus crushed Tantalus under a mountain, ruining his kingdom forever.

Zeus punished Tantalus further by hurling him into Tartarus, a terrifying place in the deepest region of the world, a prison of darkness, mists, howling winds and thick bronze walls. There Tantalus stands, trapped in the pool of water, under the inaccessible fruit. Over his head a huge rock is delicately balanced, poised to fall at any moment.

Tantalus has been seen as a friend of humanity for wanting to give us eternal life. He has been called the symbol of modern man, unable to attain what he most desires. He has been viewed as a representation of overweening human pride and identified as the originator of an endless familial curse. To those who favor the historical view, Tantalus’ invitation to Olympus marks the transfer of his cult from Asia Minor to Greece.

But the Tantalus story may be read on many levels and can support countless interpretations. The fact that Tantalus’ name has been borrowed in recent centuries by basketball players and physicists, that it has been used to identify everything from monkeys, moths and mountains to a particle accelerator, vocal music and a P.H.A. (potentially hazardous asteroid), proves not only the broad appeal of this particular legend but also the enduring power of myth. Tantalus is, as Ben Jonson said of Shakespeare, “not of an age, but for all time.”

—Barbara Mackay
Theatre today can trace its ancestry to ancient Athens and the religious cult of Dionysos, god of wine and fertility. A Stage for Dionysos looks at the origins of the Greek theatre and its enduring legacy. Dramatic lighting effects, videos and interactive CDs highlight the story of Greek classical theatre, the plays, their audiences and the spaces in which they were performed. The exhibition also features many wonderful costumes including that of Melina Mercouri as Medea, wooden hobby horses worn by the chorus in Aristophanes’ The Knights as well as stunning masks for the first modern revival of Prometheus Bound at Delphi earlier this century and for Peter Hall’s outstanding National Theatre production of the Oresteia.

This exhibition is produced in association with the Melina Mercouri Foundation and the Hellenic Literary and Historical Archive.

TANTALUS ticket buyers are invited to attend the exhibition as part of their package.

- General Concept, Production & Coordination by Spyros Mercouris
- Organized by the Melina Mercouri Foundation and the Hellenic Literary and Historical Archive (E.L.I.A.)
- Design & Artistic Supervision by Mary Koumantaropoulou
- Research & Scientific Supervision by Michalis Pitenis and Konstantinos Boletis

This exhibit was installed and presented at The Denver Center for the Performing Arts by individuals from the Denver Center Theatre Company’s artistic, business and technical divisions.

This exhibit is made possible in part by the generosity of Mr. and Mrs. M Allan Frank and Bob and Judi Newman.

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In tune with **MUSIC**

Mick Sands has had a distinguished career not only as a composer and musician for theatre and radio productions in England, Ireland and New Zealand, but also as a music therapist working with autistic children.

As the composer and as one of two on-stage musicians for TANTALUS (the other is Yukio Tsuji), Sands assembled a wide variety of instruments from all over the world, working on stage with more than 20 instruments that come chiefly from the Mediterranean basin, some Greek instruments, some modern, some ancient—and even some Japanese.

“The main challenge,” he said, “was to create a sound that emphasized place and character and told a story both ancient and modern.”

—Mick Sands

“The main challenge was to create a sound that emphasized place and character and told a story both ancient and modern.”

—Mick Sands

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**ON DISPLAY IN THE BONFILS COMPLEX DURING THE ENTIRE RUN OF TANTALUS**

**A STAGE FOR DIONYSOS**

**A MAJOR EXHIBITION ON CLASSICAL GREEK THEATRE**

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**A costume designed by Dionysis Fotopoulos for a production of The Bacchae by Euripides, National Theatre of Northern Greece, 1991. Photo by Graham Brandon**
Although the spirits that inspire and perpetuate myths are very different from culture to culture, one element is common to all: a sense of what Einstein called “the mysterious.”

The images and accoutrements of mythology are everywhere, from the Paleolithic caves of France to the ziggurats of South America, in the papyri of ancient Egypt and the art of Titian and Matisse. They exist on a gigantic scale, in India’s stone images of the Buddha as well as in miniature, in Mycenaean gemstones. Although the spirits that inspire and perpetuate myths are very different from culture to culture, one element is common to all: a sense of what Einstein called “the mysterious.”

There is no single definition of myth. Myths deal with the prosaic and demonic as well as the divine and poetic. Myths are stories whose plots are liquid and alter with each telling. Their time sequences are slippery, their characters are agents of a fantastic world we don’t inhabit, yet recognized.

While they can be playful, making complex patterns of emotion seem as simple as a child’s game of make-believe, the myths of most cultures fulfill a serious function. They translate the unknowable into the knowable and reconcile opposites—death and life, body and soul, hate and love. They make invisible worlds visible, not by straightforward reasoning, but by innuendo and double meaning. Theirs is the frivolous logic of dreams.

Pablo Picasso said of his “Guernica”: “The bull is a bull and the horse is a horse. These are animals, massacred animals. That’s all, so far as I am concerned.” He may have been serious or he may have been playing the role of iconoclastic artiste/provocateur, but whatever he personally believed, for many viewers the impact of that painting depends on its mythical subtext—a message about war and destruction that refuses to be contained. It is this collision between the surface story and the emotions beneath that gives myths their staying power.

Such power is particularly evident in the myths of the Aegean, where mythology developed thousands of years ago, long before the Greeks gave us their brilliant works of sculpture, architecture, drama and philosophy, long before they developed their arts of oratory, geometry and politics.

The Greeks’ extravagant deities were latecomers in global terms. Civilizations of the Far and Near East had older goddesses and gods, but the mythology of Greece was different from that of its predecessors. It was never associated with the state or with a centralized, orthodox religion; it was never run by a society of priests; it had no holy books and no universally sanctioned rites. Greece separated her myths from her civic, philosophical and scientific interests and kept her mythological tradition in the realm where it had evolved, close to the people. What took the place of organized religion was tradition: a reverence for one’s ancestors and for the gods. Tradition gave the earliest worshippers a direct link to the sacred.

Because it retained its independence, Greek mythology never died out, as other mythologies did when their religious structures crumbled. It kept its flexibility, losing some gods and goddesses, bringing more into the fold, becoming a “both/and” rather than an “either/or” system of thought. In Greek myth, contradictory things can be simultaneously true.

This is the mythology that appealed to the great dramatists of the fifth century BC, a vast interconnected web of stories dealing with the most primitive and sophisticated emotions, with acts of atavistic fury and uncontrollable tenderness, a collection of tales that begged to be more than narrated, a mythology destined to be performed.

Magic caves, transformations, violent and pacific gods, chants, charms, monsters, labyrinths. The images and accoutrements of mythology are everywhere, from the Paleolithic caves of France to the ziggurats of South America, in the papyri of ancient Egypt and the art of Titian and Matisse.

They exist on a gigantic scale, in India’s stone images of the Buddha as well as in miniature, in Mycenaean gemstones.

Although the spirits that inspire and perpetuate myths are very different from culture to culture, one element is common to all: a sense of what Einstein called “the mysterious.”

The most beautiful thing we can experience is the mysterious.

It is the source of all true art and science.

—Albert Einstein, What I Believe

Symmetry is boredom and boredom is the foundation of grief.

Despair yawns.

—Victor Hugo, Les Miserables

When the innovative actor/director/producer Thespis of Icaria stepped away from his choral group during a performance in 534 BC, wearing a mask and costume, speaking his lines instead of chanting them, pretending to be a character rather than simply leading the chorus, he did more than increase the asymmetry of the dithyramb. He made a radical move from narrative to dialogue, creating a completely new vehicle for myth and initiating the art of response and interaction that is the core of Western drama.

The ancient stories complemented the new dramatic form. Both myth and theatre had a social basis. Both looked for answers to the riddles of life. Familiar myths created an immediate link between the actors and the audiences of the fifth centuries as the stories dealt with political and religious issues that were important to all: What was the proper role of man?
How should he think of fate and luck? Did the gods care?

The advantage of treating these questions through myth was that the playwright could touch upon big topics without getting mired in current events. In the same way, TANTALUS speaks to issues that are important to us—homelessness, hypocrisy, war, pollution—through the filter of myth, putting them at one remove from reality. The result is an area where rigid categories of past, present and future are transcended.

The plays work as prisms, continually refracting issues and characters in new and surprising ways. Achilles, with his problems of temperament, becomes our contemporary. The Trojan War becomes every war. Even Tantalus, in his desire for immortal life, seems not far removed from the head of an American stem-cell research organization who recently said, “All I think about, all day long, every day, is human mortality…” or from Woody Allen: “It’s not that I’m afraid to die. I just don’t want to be there when it happens.”

As the characters in TANTALUS become agents of another reality— recognizable, not abstract, human but with an added dimension—they reveal intriguing parallels between myth and theatre. Both make immediate connections through feeling, not analysis and contemplation; both explore man’s relationship to himself, his family and his society through vivid, unforgettable personalities; both depend on that direct link to the extraordinary that kept the earliest Greek myths alive.

“Gentlemen, you can’t fight in here. This is the war room.”

—Stanley Kubrick, Dr. Strangelove

TANTALUS is a war play in which laughter is as central as slaughter. It takes place in a world of paradox, contradiction, wit and madness. It emphasizes extremes—the grisly and bizarre as well as the lyrical and divine. Yet, like the mythology that inspired it, TANTALUS contains no clear-cut dichotomies. Intellectual issues are charged with sexuality; sex is as much about perception as about body heat. Truth is grasped not by the intellect alone but by an appreciation of the irrational.

The plays create a vibrant, tuned-up environment, the universe reflected in the muscular lions that guard the Gate of Mycenae and the bright frescoes of acrobatic bull-jumpers of Crete. This landscape is restless, a space of energy and speed, like the earliest Greek visions of the world—crafted in metal, stone, ivory and gems—where stags leap, goats dance, griffins soar and men hunt everything that moves. Nothing is static, predictable or frozen: Apollo appears in a blinding light, his Pythoness writhes and babbles her oracles, dark ships slip through black seas to war and the ever present rock of Tantalus creaks and shudders, spitting pieces of rubble and stone.

TANTALUS examines men, not gods, who are valorous and fragile, active and passive creatures squeezed by the machinery of chance. In its female characters particularly, TANTALUS exposes a culture that is not anesthetized, not afraid to face fear or think dangerous thoughts, not content to plaster over disturbing truths with platitudes. These things are also true of the great Attic tragedies, but TANTALUS is radically different from those works, becoming both a tribute to dramatic tradition and a challenge to its conventions.

TANTALUS mixes modes, its comic and tragic moments continually collide and overlap, creating friction between seriousness, irony, black humor and laughter. The scope of TANTALUS is greater than that of any extant trilogy. Most important, classical drama grew out of a particular historical context, a complex time when democracy was just beginning to flourish, but when there was still clear political, religious, historical and social cohesion. TANTALUS reflects a more vast, convoluted, divided age. The ancient material proves its elasticity as it explodes with new language, motion and visual surprise.

Like the handful of plays remaining from the fifth century BC, TANTALUS reminds us of the valuable and universal heritage of myth and how the ancients preferred their stories, bathed in music, poetry, song and dance. But TANTALUS doesn’t do the work of archaeologists and historians, scraping away layers of dust, metal, pottery and stone to reveal a world hidden under the thin crust of earth. Like a magic archaeological dig in reverse, it brings the essential elements—earth, air, fire and water—onstage to create the spirit of Greek drama in a time-neutral zone, propelling us into a panoramic world of myth where the tenses blend and the senses are teased and where we are surrounded by “the mysterious.”

Barbara Mackay holds a Doctor of Fine Arts degree from the Yale University School of Drama. She has worked as a drama critic for The Saturday Review and The Denver Post and was the Executive Vice President and a Trustee of the DCPA until 1992.
FAMILY TREES

THE ROYAL HOUSE OF TROY

Zeus -- + Electra

Dardanus -- + Batiela

Erichthonius -- + Astyoche

Tros -- + Callirhoe

Ilus -- + Eurydice

Laomedon -- + Strymo

Telamon -- + Hesione

Andromache + Hector

Polyrestor + Ilione

Paris Cassandra Helenus Laodice Polyxena Troilus Polydorus many others

Astyanax Deipylus

THE HOUSE OF TANTALUS

Zeus -- + Pluto

Tantalus -- + Dione

Niobe

Broteas

Pelops -- + Hippodamia

Ateus -- + Aerop

Tyndareus -- + Leda

Helen -- + Menelaus

Agamemnon -- + Clytemnestra

Hermione -- + Neoptolemus

Orestes -- + Hermione

Chrysothemis Electra Iphigenia Orestes -- + Erigone Aletes

Tisamenus

THE HOUSE OF PELEUS

Peleus -- + Thetis

Achilles -- + Deidamia

Andromache -- + Neoptolemus

Molossus
ATHENS Great city-state of Greece where the arts and sciences flourished and where democracy was born.

AULIS Seaport in Boeotia, where the Greek forces met before their expedition to Troy.

CRETE One of the largest islands in the Mediterranean Sea, said to be the birthplace of Zeus.

LYDIA Mount Sipylus in Lydia is usually called the home of King Tantalus. Another tradition located his kingdom in Phrygia.

MOUNT OLYMPUS Home of the dynasty of Olympian gods, ruled by Zeus.

MOUNT PARNASSUS A mountain near Delphi where Apollo was said to preside over his Muses.

MYCENAE A great palace city of the Bronze Age in Greece, believed to have been the royal home of Agamemnon and his queen, Clytemnestra.

MYSIA An area on the northwest coast of Asia Minor where the Greek forces landed by mistake on their first expedition against Troy.

PHTHIA Home of King Peleus, father of Achilles.

SPARTA Home of Menelaus and his wife Helen, until she was abducted by Paris and taken to Troy.

THRACE A wild area north of Greece, liberated by Dionysus on his wanderings throughout the world, Thrace was ruled by King Polymestor.

TROY A great coastal city in Asia Minor, sacked by the Greeks during the Trojan War in an effort to retrieve the Spartan queen, Helen.
SACRIFICE
Greek society was full of rituals, patterns of behavior that affirmed social cohesion and lasted long after their original reasons for being had been forgotten. There were rituals associated with birth, death, marriage, hunting and war. Even athletic competitions were preceded by prescribed rites of diet and abstinence.

One of the most important rituals was sacrifice, in which a willing animal was offered to the gods to insure the growth of crops or success in war or the hunt. By the eighth century BC in Greece, sacrifice was an unquestioned part of Greek spiritual life, proving man’s belief in the gods and his desire to show them respect.

Man hoped that sacrifice would lead to divine favor, but there was no guarantee. Sacrifice was an honor, a duty or a source of personal despair—as it was to Agamemnon—but it was never optional. ■ — B. M.

APHRODITE
One of three deities involved in the Judgment of Paris, a beauty contest that ultimately led to the Trojan War. Aphrodite won that contest by offering the judge (Paris) the love of Helen of Sparta, the most beautiful woman in the world. The goddess of love and sexuality, Aphrodite is married to the god Hephaestus, although she delights in extramarital liaisons. She can be recognized by the scepter or mirror she holds and by the doves that draw her chariot.

APOLLO
Son of Zeus and Leto, Apollo is the god of music, poetry, nature, medicine and prophecy. When he was young, Apollo slew the dragon at Delphi and took possession of the oracle there. Although Apollo is capable of tremendous wrath and revenge—he sent a plague to devastate the Greek army during the Trojan War—he is most often associated with the rational view of life and brings enlightenment to those who come to Delphi to seek his help.

ARES
The god of war, son of Zeus and Hera, Ares delights in combat and slaughter. The daemons Fear and Terror are his companions. He is usually pictured as virile and handsome, carrying a spear, sword or shield, wearing a helmet and armor. Ares adores Aphrodite, but also loves mortal women. The other gods consider Ares malevolent and destructive.

ARTEMIS
The beautiful, chaste goddess of animals, often accompanied by a fawn and seen with a bow and quiver of arrows, Artemis loves the hunt. She is the daughter of Zeus and Leto and, like her brother Apollo, Artemis can be vengeful and cruel. After he killed a stag in her sacred grove, Agamemnon had to sacrifice his daughter Iphigenia before Artemis would let the winds spurt his ships to Troy.

ATHENA
Goddess of wisdom and mercy, the arts, political and military skill, Athena is particularly honored for having introduced the olive to Greece. The daughter of Zeus and Metis, whom Zeus swallowed when it was predicted that the child she was about to bear would be greater than its father, Athena sprang from Zeus’ forehead fully grown and in complete battle dress. Athena can be recognized by the spear she carries, by her helmet and aegis (a breastplate or shield made of goat skin) or by the owl that accompanies her.

DEMETER
One of the oldest Greek deities, Demeter is the goddess of agriculture, pictured with stalks of grain or ears of corn, narcissus or poppies. Demeter and Zeus had a daughter, Persephone, who was abducted and carried off to the Underworld by Hades, causing the anguished Demeter to stop crops from growing. When Zeus intervened and restored Persephone to life for the spring and summer months, Demeter allowed the earth to become fertile again.

DIONYSUS
God of spiritual and physical release and ecstasy. A son of Zeus and Semele, Dionysus is the youngest of the Olympians. He was raised far from Greece and as a boy taught himself how to make wine. When he reached manhood, Dionysus traveled through Egypt, Syria, India, Thrace and Greece, spreading his message of intoxication, exultation and mystical redemption.

HADES
After Zeus gained control of the universe, he and his brothers drew lots for their kingdoms. Hades got the Underworld, also called Hades. Greek poets pictured Hades as under the earth or on the edge of the world. One part of Hades is where departed souls flutter about as tiny, winged replicas of the dead; another part is the prison of Tartarus, which houses great sinners like Tantalus. As a god, Hades appears in few myths and is best known as the abductor of his queen, Persephone.

HEPHAESTUS
The god of fire and metallurgy, Hephaestus is usually seen with an axe or tongs. He is often linked to Athena, because they are both associated with wisdom, civilization and the perfection of the world’s arts and crafts. Hephaestus made Achilles’ armor, helped in the creation of Pandora and created the first robots, intelligent creatures made of gold and silver, whose
mechanical brains allowed them to walk and talk.

HERA
Patroness of women, marriage and the family, Hera is the wife and sister of Zeus. Hera’s and Zeus’ marriage was tempestuous, marked by intense quarrels over his infidelities. Hera’s fits of jealous rage were directed not only at Zeus’ mistresses, but at his illegitimate children as well. During the Trojan War, Hera sided with the Greeks, in retaliation for Paris’ awarding the golden apple to Aphrodite, instead of to her. The symbols associated with Hera are the peacock, the pomegranate and the lily.

HERMES
When the nymph Maia gave birth, it was dawn. The baby leapt out of his cradle and by midday had fashioned a lyre out of some reeds stretched tightly across the shell of a tortoise; by evening he had stolen Apollo’s cattle. Thus began the life of the cunning god Hermes, messenger of the gods. Hermes protects travelers and is the guide of departed souls to the Underworld. He is usually seen wearing a broad-brimmed, winged cap and staff and boots with wings. Hermes escorted Aphrodite, Athena and Hera to Mount Ida for the fateful Judgment of Paris, the preface to the Trojan War.

HESTIA
An important early deity to the Greeks, goddess of the family fireside, but no visual images or specific myths associated with Hestia remain. The eldest daughter of Cronus and Rhea and the sister of Hera and Zeus, Hestia never married, although she was wooed by Poseidon and Apollo. She was eventually replaced by Dionysus in the formal roster of gods residing on Olympus but remains a revered member of the Olympian family.

POSEIDON
Ruler of the oceans, seas, springs and lakes, recognizable by his trident, by the fish and dolphins that always surround him and by his chariot, drawn by half-horse, half-serpent sea creatures. Son of Cronus and Rhea, Poseidon is a moody god who delights in whipping up terrifying storms, landslides and earthquakes. He wanted to be the god of Athens when the cities of Greece were each given a patron deity but lost out to Athena and caused a terrible flood in revenge. Poseidon was something of a double agent during the Trojan War, supporting both sides at different times.

ZEUS
Supreme commander on Olympus, an amalgamation of sky gods inherited from other cultures. By the late eighth century BC, he was already a singular, all-powerful deity, representing moral and judicial order. Zeus makes sure that promises are honored and that social and royal hierarchies are respected. He can purify murderers of their sin, distribute good and evil to men and control the actions of the other gods. Zeus is an imperfect god who can be tricked and distracted from affairs of state by affairs of the heart. Descent from Zeus was claimed by many families—including the house of Tantalus and the House of Troy—as proof of the importance of their lines. In addition to the Olympian gods and goddesses who are siblings or children of Zeus, he is the father of the Horae (Peace, Discipline and Justice), the Moirai, the Fates, the Graces and the Muses. He is recognizable by the lightning bolt and scepter he holds and the eagle perched near him.

—Barbara Mackay

ORACLES
Oracle had several meanings. It was the answer sent by a god to a mortal questioner; the sanctuary where that message was delivered; the seer or soothsayer who delivered the message.

Seers could read oracles in dreams, the flight of birds, the rustling of leaves. From at least the eighth century BC on, Greeks consulted oracles about everything from marriage to war, believing them to be a way of reading the gods’ will.

One of the most important oracles was at Delphi. When Apollo decided to create a sanctuary there, he killed a dragon—named Python—that was ruining the water and terrorizing the countryside, then established his shrine and named his own priestess Pythia. She sat on a covered three-legged cauldron or tripod, holding bay leaves. When asked a question, she murmured incoherent answers, which were translated by a priest into intelligible, though often cryptic, messages.
The families in TANTALUS and their key players

The primary action of TANTALUS involves three families: the House of Tantalus, the Royal House of Troy and the House of Peleus. The following is an introduction to some of the members of those families.

I. THE HOUSE OF TANTALUS

AGAMEMNON
A great-grandson of Tantalus, Agamemnon was the king of Mycenae and the supreme commander of the Greek forces in their war against Troy.

AEGISTHUS
After Aegisthus murdered his uncle Atreus, he carried on a family tradition of hatred and vengeance. While Agamemnon was in Troy, Aegisthus helped Clytemnestra plan her husband’s death.

CLYTEMNESTRA
Wife of Agamemnon and mother of Iphigenia, Electra, Chrysothemis and Orestes. She and Aegisthus became lovers while Agamemnon was fighting in Troy; when he returned to Mycenae, they murdered him.

ELECTRA
Daughter of Agamemnon and Clytemnestra, Electra was consumed with hatred for her mother after her father’s assassination. She urged her brother Orestes to seek vengeance by killing Clytemnestra.

HELEN
Helen’s father was the mightiest immortal, Zeus. When Helen reached marriageable age she had countless suitors; from them Menelaus was chosen. They had a daughter, Hermione, who was nine years old when Helen was abducted by the Trojan prince Paris.

HERMIONE
Clytemnestra raised her niece while Hermione’s mother, Helen, was in captivity and her father, Menelaus, was fighting in the Trojan War.

IPHIGENIA
A daughter of Clytemnestra and Agamemnon, Iphigenia was sacrificed at Aulis in order to make the winds blow the war ships to Troy.

MENELAUS
When Menelaus was exiled from Mycenae by Aegisthus, he sought refuge in Sparta, was welcomed by King Tyndareus and betrothed to Helen. Menelaus was eventually given control of Sparta where he and his wife lived until Paris abducted Helen.

ORESTES
Son of Clytemnestra and Agamemnon, Orestes was a child when his father left to fight the Trojan War. After Agamemnon’s murder, Orestes was sent away for his own protection. Years later, he returned to Mycenae to avenge his father’s death.

II. THE ROYAL HOUSE OF TROY

ANDROMACHE
Wife of the Trojan prince Hector. By the end of the Trojan War, her father, seven brothers, husband and son, Astyanax, had been killed by the Greeks. At the end of that war, Achilles’ son, Neoptolemus, took Andromache as a war prize.

CASSANDRA
Daughter of Priam and Hecuba, Cassandra had been given the gift of prophecy by Apollo, who adored her. Cassandra spurned him though, so the offended god modified her gift: she would still prophesy accurately, but no one would believe her.

HECUBA
Queen of Troy and wife of Priam, Hecuba had 50 children, according to one legend. By the end of the Trojan War, all of Hecuba’s children had been killed by the Greeks and she was awarded to Odysseus as a war trophy.

POLYXENA
While in Troy, Achilles fell in love with Polyxena, daughter of Priam and Hecuba. Learning that Polyxena and Achilles were lovers, Paris surprised them in an assignation at the shrine of Apollo Thymbria and killed Achilles. Achilles’ son, Neoptolemus, sacrificed Polyxena on Achilles’ grave at Sigaeum, blaming her for his father’s death.

PRIAM
The great king of Troy during the Trojan War, Priam was too elderly by the time of the siege to take part in the fighting.

III. THE HOUSE OF PELEUS

ACHILLES
Child of the sea nymph
Thetis and the mortal Peleus. Achilles’ passion was war. Known for his strength and valor, he was the greatest soldier to fight on the side of the Greeks in the Trojan War.

NEOPTOLEMUS
Achilles’ son, also known as Pyrrhus. He played a major role in the Trojan War, fighting valiantly as his father had done.

THETIS
A Nereid, a divinity of the sea, once desired by Zeus. But because it had been prophesied that any child born to Thetis would be greater than its father, the god changed his mind and she was given in marriage to the mortal Peleus.

PELEUS
King of Phthia, an adventurer and a rogue, continually breaking laws, being banished or pursued by angry women. When he married Thetis, Eris (the goddess of Discord) threw down a golden apple, setting in motion the events leading up to the Trojan War.

IV. PROMINENT OTHERS

CALCHAS
A soothsayer of Mycenae who insisted that Achilles be part of the Greek army and that Iphigenia be sacrificed for the winds to blow the ships to Troy.

ODYSSEUS
Born on the island of Ithaca, Odysseus fought with the Greeks at Troy. His long and dangerous return from that war is the subject of Homer’s Odyssey.

PALAMEDES
An ambassador sent to Troy to settle peacefully the dispute over Helen’s abduction. Unable to do so, he convinced Odysseus to accompany the Greeks to Troy and helped find Achilles on Scyros.

POLYMESTOR
Polymestor, King of Thrace, was asked by Hecuba and Priam to shelter their youngest son, Polydorus. He eventually killed Polydorus, for fear of retaliation from the warring Greeks or, in other versions, because he wanted the treasure that had been left with the child.

TELEPHUS
When the Greeks landed at Mysia on their first effort to reach Troy, Telephus was wounded by Achilles. Learning that only the warrior who had hurt him could heal him, Telephus found Achilles and begged to be healed. In exchange, he led the Greek ships to Troy.

—Barbara Mackay

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Preceding each performance of TANTALUS there will be no state-ly procession winding from Speer Boulevard up the stairway to the Helen Bonfils Theatre Complex, no long lines of maidens and young men carrying baskets full of honeycombs and cakes, no prayers to Dionysus and most certainly no sacrifices of bulls or sheep.

Yet there are many similarities between the ancient Greek festivals that incorporated such elements into their celebrations and TANTALUS.

The most important function of Greek festivals was to halt time, to make certain days absolutely different from others, allowing people to change their normal patterns of action.

In the same way, TANTALUS alters our perspectives, both in terms of what the plays say and because the cycle’s architecture offers a refreshing change from most Western theatre today, where productions usually run for two hours.

The sections of TANTALUS are intended to be seen together and their full impact is felt only when the cycle is experienced as a whole. Like the works performed in Greece in the fifth century BC, where the viewing of tragedies, satyr plays and comedies occupied several days, the plays of TANTALUS require a commitment of time. They make us change our theatre-going habits and expectations.

TANTALUS is also planned as part of a larger experience, where audience members share more than the ideas and emotions dramatized on stage. From pre-classical times on, Greek festivals had important social and political functions, creating and reinforcing a sense of community among those who participated in the processions, music, dancing, competitions, eating and drinking.

As patrons of TANTALUS view the “Stage for Dionysos” exhibit, or attend the October 30 symposium or dine together, they will be doing what audiences at Greek festivals did more than 2,500 years ago, when they gathered with friends before, during and after the plays, perhaps discussing the actors, the dancing, the music, the myths.

There were countless festivals throughout Greece, some of them available to the general populace, some open only to men, to women or special religious and social groups. Each month of the lunar calendar held different celebrations, marking everything from the ancient equivalent of a wine tasting, to the spring cleaning of Athena’s statue, to a holiday when slaves could dine with their masters.

Certain festivals went on for days. All, even those celebrated with phallic buffoony and licentiousness, were taken seriously as they allowed people to pay honor to the gods. Festivals were an opportunity for men and women to offer whatever they could—fruits, vegetables, cereals, milk—to make the gods happy, and they invariably included a sacrifice. The slaughtering of animals not only gave something to the deities, but also provided a feast for the participants, a meal that was sometimes a family’s only source of meat for a week. Along with the roasted beef or goat went the consumption of wine and a big party atmosphere.

A critical element in every Greek festival was the pompe or procession. Although it was formally a way of getting the celebrants and sacrificial victims from a gathering place to the sanctuary where the sacrifice would take place, the procession was an end in itself—the event that marked the beginning of festival revelry.

In the case of the popular Country Dionysia festival, the pompe was originally a simple affair, described by Plutarch as a parade including people carrying a jar of wine, a basket of raisins, a phallus pole and “someone dragging a he-goat.”

By the late fifth century BC, the procession of the Great Panathenaea had become a spectacle in which the colossal statue of Athena—40 feet high—received a new robe the size of a ship’s sail that took months to weave. But simple or elegant, the pompe was filled with music. Sometimes the celebrants stopped in front of shrines to the gods to sing hymns and dance, and some festivals included gymnastic or artistic competitions. Theatre was incorporated relatively late, its arrival encouraged by politics.

In the middle of the sixth century BC, the community of Eleutherai—squeezed between Athens and Boeotia—asked Athens for protection from its Boeotian enemies. Pisistratus, ruler of Athens, was happy to oblige since annexing Eleutherai extended his power base. The cult and festival of Dionysus Eleutherus came along as part of the arrangement, although there were already three celebrations of Dionysus in Athens.

Renamed the City Dionysia, the festival was held each spring and grew bigger and more sophisticated than its predecessors. Anxious to move away from an aristocratic political agenda and encourage popular support for his régime, Pisistratus enlarged the festival to include drama and, in 534 BC, the first theatre competition was held.

Thespis of Icaria, who won the prize at that contest, is credited with turning the chorus leader into the first speaking
actor. Although there are fragments of works and records of prizes won by playwrights who existed after Thespis, only 33 complete tragedies exist, written by Aeschylus (who added the second actor), Sophocles (who added the third) and Euripides. Of the hundreds of tragedies written, as many as 31 may have been about the House of Tantalus.

The procession and sacrifice continued to be important in the City Dionysia throughout the fifth century BC, but it was drama that established the reputation of this spectacle. The god himself was there to witness the plays. Once the days devoted to production began, the ancient wooden statue of Dionysus was paraded into the theatre and given a prominent seat in the front row, next to the priest of Dionysus, city officials and the sons of men who had died heroically protecting Athens in war. For everyone else, seats were not reserved.

Each morning for three successive days, a poet presented four plays: three tragedies, sometimes related in theme, and a satyr play. The satyr plays depended on obscenity and lewd jokes and portrayed the satyrs, companions of Dionysus, as lecherous characters, men with goats’ legs and horses’ tails. After 486 BC, comedy was added to the festival, with five comic poets presenting their works, except during the Peloponnesian War when only three comedies were produced.

Although they used generous amounts of clowning and phallic references, Aristophanes’ comedies are far more sophisticated than the satyr plays, incorporating irony, parody and political or social criticism into their plots.

All productions took place in an outdoor amphitheatre, which included a circular dancing floor at the base of the grassy south slope of the Acropolis. Wooden planks were set into the hillside for seats. But even after Lycurgus built the stone Theatre of Dionysus in 326 BC the seats were uncomfortable, so people brought cushions and rugs. Performances began early in the morning and audiences either brought food or bought it in the theatre. Wine was poured before the chorus came in and after it exited and sweets were apparently eaten during the performances. According to Aristotle, the worse the performance, the more food was consumed.

The City Dionysia quickly became an opportunity to spread the word about the glory of Athens, as it was open to all and was held when seas were calm and visitors were in town. It was a perfect forum for the government to proclaim its power, prestige and wealth.

The city’s generals appeared together to pour libations and—since the City Dionysia began on the day when tribute from outlying areas was due to be received—the empire’s income was placed in sacks on the theatre’s dancing floor for all to admire. To make sure that as many people as possible attended, the state provided the admission charge for citizens who could not afford it.

Long after its introduction, the City Dionysia continued to be a major focus for the Athenian community. In 330 BC as many as 240 bulls may have been slaughtered to feed the participants. Theatrical productions became popular at Athens’ Lenaia and Country Dionysia festivals, and many cities, large and small, were inspired to build their own theatres. Originally, only new plays could be performed in the City Dionysia, but could be revived in smaller festivals after the first Athenian presentation. By the fourth century BC, the works of Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides were considered classics and were allowed to be performed in the City Dionysia as “Old Tragedies.”

It has been said that never before or since has such an ideal state existed for the creation and performance of theatre. Society was a complex mix of the privileged and unprivileged in the fifth century BC. There were strong political factions, legal disputes and disagreements about every aspect of life. Still, there was a sense of moral, social, religious and historical unity shared by performers and audience that could be endlessly explored through the flexible medium of myth.

Even when myths began to be challenged by science and philosophy, that social cohesion was perpetuated by the festivals.

—and Barbara Mackay
I t could have happened. It might have included kings named Agamemnon and Menelaus, warriors named Achilles and Odysseus. It may have been one war or a blend of many battles, a conflict over women or gold. The question of whether the Trojan War is fact or marvelous fiction may never be resolved, but the arts, archaeology and the reflections of the Greeks themselves offer a variety of fascinating clues as to what may have occurred.

In Greek legend, the war was a result of many disputes that led to two abductions. First, princess Hesione of Troy was taken by Heracles and spirited away to Greece. Then Helen, queen of Sparta, was seized in retaliation by the Trojan prince Paris, to be held hostage until Hesione’s return.

Mythology embroiders this second kidnapping with the Judgment of Paris, in which the goddess of discord (Eris) threw down a golden apple to be given to the most beautiful of the three goddesses: Aphrodite, Hera and Athena. When Aphrodite offered the judge, Paris, the love of Helen, the bribe worked and Paris whisked Helen off to Troy. To get her back, the Greeks united under the leadership of Agamemnon, king of Mycenae, and sent a fleet of war ships to Troy.

Homer’s two great works, The Iliad and The Odyssey, created at the end of the eighth or beginning of the seventh century BC, provide the most complete early sources of information about the war. According to Homer, the siege took place on Trojan soil for ten years, waged by a collection of armies drawn from the Greek islands and mainland. These forces—called Achaeans—camped on a beach near the great barri
cades of the royal city of Troy (Ilium), their ships protected by a wall of earth, stone and timber.

By the time Homer named the cities that participated in the war and described the houses of Menelaus and Odysseus, the Troy of Priam had been buried under rubble for several hundred years, its final destruction coming about 1250 BC. But Homer got many place names right, accurately describing real centers of civil, artistic, military and economic life in the Mycenaean Era—an extraordinary period that took its name from the powerful city of Mycenae and lasted from about 1600 to 1200 BC.

In addition to Homer’s poetic tribute, there are Greek vases with scenes from the Trojan War, sculptures, votive plaques and frescoes illustrating Mycenaean many-oared sailing ships and Greeks fighting in hand-to-hand combat. A silver Mycenaean drinking cup depicts a city being sacked, bas-relief panels on a storage jar from Mykonos show Greek soldiers with captured Trojan women and children.

In fact, the visual and poetic representations of Homer’s warlike age reflect a great deal of historic truth. The large number of swords, daggers, spears and armor buried with the dead, the administrative tablets found at the town of Pylos recording armaments and intelligence-gathering techniques—all of it speaks to an age well-acquainted with

According to Homer, the siege took place on Trojan soil for ten years, waged by a collection of armies drawn from the Greek islands and mainland.

blood and battle. Even the Trojan Horse may have been real, modeled on huge battering rams known to the Near East.
in the late Bronze Age. As pictured in an Assyrian relief, these horses were large enough to accommodate soldiers inside to operate the device and open the enemy’s walls.

Toward the end of the 13th century, dynasties on the Greek mainland were strong. The great ones—at Mycenae, Athens, Thebes, Pylos and Tiryns—built imposing palaces on high hills and encircled them with massive fortifications, suggesting political instability and a need for protection.

The acropolis walls sheltered communities of craftspeople, villagers and soldiers clustered near or living in the palaces, huge structures with painted floors, fresco-covered walls and store-rooms full of olive oil and wine. A warrior class appeared, and a middle class of merchants and traders who were increasingly canny about economics and foreign affairs.

These Mycenaean citadels may have been ruled over by a single prince or may have united in a loose, shifting affiliation to the strongest king. Rulers employed large staffs of servants, cooks, masons, smiths, chariot-keepers, artists and administrators. To outfit and train their soldiers, retain their help and keep their households in meat, wine and song, the kings needed plenty of money.

When Heinrich Schliemann discovered the shaft graves at Mycenae in 1876, uncovering the rich stores of gold, silver, ivory, amber, lapis lazuli and jewels, he thought he had found Agamemnon’s and Clytemnestra’s tombs. The world marveled not only at the wealth, but also at the high degree of sophistication and internationalism known to Mycenaean royalty. There were objects from as far away as Mesopotamia, Nubia, Prussia and Anatolia, as well as a gold cup that resembles the Cup of Nubia. Schliemann’s excavations of Troy in 1873 revealed stores of gold, silver, copper and bronze, which he mistakenly labeled “Priam’s Treasure.” Those riches must have tantalized brigands who roamed the Hellespont throughout the Bronze Age.

Mycenaean armies might have been sent to replenish supplies of metal, livestock or slave labor—women were routinely stolen or brought back from wars to do menial work. Troops may have been mobilized to redress an insult, win back land or property, exact retribution for a debt or the infringement of hunting and fishing rights. Whatever the motivation, armies from the Greek mainland could have easily sailed to Asia Minor to loot a city or two. Their navigators knew every island, harbor and cave in the coastline, as well as where to send the soldiers when they arrived.

Finally, the luxury items found in Mycenaean palaces may have been political gifts or bribes. One theory supporting the historicity of the war relies on Hittite diplomatic records from the 13th century BC. The archives reveal that the Hittites had continual trouble with the uppity Ahhiyawa people—

The world marveled not only at the wealth, but also at the high degree of sophistication and internationalism known to Mycenaean royalty.

Homer’s Achaiwou (Achaeans). To the Hittite Foreign Office, these eastern Mycenaens were not just buccaneers occasionally raiding the coast of Asia Minor, but serious political rivals, establishing communities, signing treaties, making allies, taking land. When Hittite diplomacy failed, the Ahhiyawa launched a military invasion in an area that could have included Troy.

No assessment of the Trojan War would be complete without the thoughts of the Greeks themselves. Greece’s first historian, Herodotus, tells us that Greeks of the fifth century BC referred to their bravery during that war as proof that they should be given an honorable fighting position at the Battle of Plataea in 479 BC, freely associating legend with truth. Thucydides also mentions the siege as fact in his History of the Peloponnesian War: “Even after the Trojan War Hellas was in a state of ferment; there were constant resettlements, and so no opportunity for peaceful development. It was long before the army returned from Troy, and this fact in itself led to many changes.”

Troy has never lost its appeal. Xerxes visited the site and sacrificed 1000 oxen to the Trojan Athena. Alexander the Great, who slept with a copy of The Iliad under his pillow, claimed Trojan soil as his own and laid a wreath at Achilles’ tomb. Julius Caesar promised to rebuild Troy. The kings of Italy and Gaul who claimed descent from the Trojans, Crusaders, Ottoman conquerors, French and English troubadours, Shakespeare, even Lawrence of Arabia intensified the mystique surrounding Troy.

Archaeologists and historians may someday offer conclusive proof regarding the Trojan War. But if we never learn exactly where history and myth converge, everyone from scholars analyzing manuscripts in dead languages to children who adore the story of the Trojan Horse will continue to fuel the world’s fascination with Troy and its monumental war.

—Barbara Mackay