

Looking for Ithaca

an odyssey

conceived and developed by Gaby Rodriguez
developed and written by Jess Shoemaker

A Note on Diversity in Casting

This script is an adaptation of Homer's classical poem *The Odyssey* and it represents the shared adaptive vision of Gaby Rodriguez and Jess Shoemaker:

"Oye! Hola! Qué tal! So happy that you're here."

Identity is central to any story, but we believe this is especially true when updating classical text for contemporary audiences. *Looking for Ithaca* was developed in 2022 for *Asolo Rep on Tour!* in conjunction with the FSU, MFA class of 2023. Central tenants of the project include developing theatrical experiences that are exciting for and responsive to audiences, bringing fresh perspective to a story, sharing stories that reflect the lives of young people and their communities. These values sit at the core of what we believe theatre should be doing at all times—they are not relegated to educational or community-based programming, but in this context, they are non-negotiable. They also begin and end with representation.

To that end, we've created some firm casting guidelines that we believe are both flexible and effective. Unless permission is otherwise granted by Gaby and/or Jess, these guidelines must be agreed to before securing production rights.

Esperamos ver tu creación!
Gaby and Jess

Cast of Characters

The Central Family (listed below) **must include at least two actors of color.**

Telemachus – A young prince on the verge of manhood. Vulnerable. Represents a new generation of heroes, as he learns about the world outside his home and learns to use his voice. Telemachus should be played as male-identified but all gender identities are welcome in casting the role.

Penelope – A wife and mother, holding the fabric of her kingdom together. Sturdy. Penelope should be played by a female-identified actor.

Odysseus – A man who has lost the heartbeat of his home, with a mind that is never still. Odysseus should be played by a male-identified actor.

Named Ensemble Members (listed below) **must include at least two actors of color.**

Athena – The goddess of war and wisdom. Stubborn, fallible. Athena should be portrayed as female-identified but all gender identities are welcome in casting this role.

King Nestor – An old king, enthusiastic, enamored with the heroism of war. Nestor should be portrayed as male-identified, but all gender identities are welcome in casting this role.

King Menelaus – A younger king, and a generous giver of bear hugs. A natural in the world of heroes. Menelaus should be portrayed as male-identified, but all gender identities are welcome in casting the role.

Old Shepherd – A teacher, married to the soil, makes ignorance feel like an opportunity to grow. Largely invisible in the world of heroes. NOTE: This character is an amalgamation of different characters from *The Odyssey*. Please consider the Old Shepherd a fully flexible role when casting. Productions have full permission to change pronouns for the Old Shepherd, according to the identity of the actor.

Additional Ensemble members should be cast with a diversity of racial and gender identities.

Our script includes two ensemble members (E1, E2) who are double-cast as Old Shepherd, King Nestor, and King Menelaus. If you have enough actors to cast your production without doubling these roles, that should work beautifully. You may even redistribute ensemble lines to accommodate a larger number of unnamed ensemble members, see below for some caveats.

NOTE: If the line is assigned to E1-6, then the line may be given to any unnamed member of the ensemble. But if a named character is noted in parentheses beside E1-6, it is important that the line remains with the named character.

START OF PLAY.
START OF POEM.
START OF SONG.

Onstage, upstage:
a large stone wall climbs toward the sun. The wall
is a kaleidoscope of different bricks, varying in size and shape.
On the wall: a faded mural, distorted, scarred.
Displayed at its center: a weapon of war.
The sword of Odysseus.

A boy, **E4/E?**, steps forward,
maybe from the audience. The boy sees nothing but the sword,
he wants it badly.

His steps are tender. You can tell by the way he moves:
this boy still hugs his mother and cries when he gets angry.

Fingers itching, full of awe,
He arrives.

Very silently
He reaches up to swipe the blade with his fingertips.
He doesn't die,
and no alarum is sounded.
He goes back for another feel,
nothing.
Elated, the boy grabs an imaginary weapon from midair
and expels his energy in a make-believe duel.

Spent, and confident from his win (he won),
the boy strides toward the sacred sword, takes the handle in his hand,
and pulls it from its resting place inside the center of the wall.

Immediately the wall collapses,
stones breaking apart and slamming into one another.
Their final effect should be that of a building in ruins.

E4/E? stands at the center of this devastation,
holding the sword of Odysseus in his mortified hands.
The ensemble pours from every corner, to attack the perpetrator,
here at the city-centre of Ithaca.

E3

Ithaca! Wake up—

E5

People of Ithaca--!

E1

WAR HAS COME TO ITHACA!

E2

But where is—

E6

It was just a kid /

E6

The boy! Grab him.

E1

I don't recognize him / do you?

E5 (Penelope)

What does it matter? He's a child—

E3

He's not a kid, look how tall / he is!

E6 (Odysseus)

He doesn't have any fight in / him! Look--

E3

Looks pretty shifty / to me...

E1

I don't feel safe!

E6

The kid couldn't wield a dagger / much less a sword!

E3

He tried to steal the sword / of Odysseus!

E1

Destruction of property, at least—

E3

Our most valuable—

The ensemble breaks into a shouting match over the fate of the boy.

*Pretty quickly, E2 breaks through the chaos,
leading the mob down a different path.*

E2 (Old Shepherd)

DO ANY OF YOU KNOW...

How long that wall has stood in Ithaca?

Do any of you remember

What was written on that wall?

E3

It's a million years / old!

E1

It was faded before I could read / but...

E2 (Old Shepherd)

The mural! Do you remember—

E6

But it was the sword / that—

E4/E6 (Telly/Odysseus)

"Stranger!

*E4/E6 steps forward. He remembers the mural, fresh,
from a time when he was just a little boy, like the little boy
now trapped inside the crowd.*

You are welcome here.

What I have to give is yours and I give it with a glad heart."

E2 (Old Shepherd)

Exactly.

Someone still remembers...

E1

But he tried to take the Sword of Odysseus!

E2 (Old Shepherd)

Then we must give it with a glad heart.

But we should start from the beginning...

*The Ensemble begins to sing the song of Ithaca,
Penelope's song. They begin by telling their story directly to **E4/E?**,
before turning to the final member of their ensemble, the audience.*

It started in the Ancient World—!

E3 (*Athena*)

It started with a Man—!

E6 (*Odysseus*)

It started with the Gods—!

E5 (*Penelope*)

It started when Greece went to War—!

*E2 grounds the story
and the ensemble.*

E2 (*Old Shepherd*)

It started before Greece

Was called Greece.

This rocky soil knew many kingdoms before ours.

First, we were alone:

Scattered in small villages along the coast.

We grew food, and kept cattle

To feed our families and eventually,

When we could, our neighbors.

Life was sweet.

E1

Then suddenly, the earth collapsed before...

Ensemble

Erupting!

E1

Fire fell like rain upon our heads and the sea rolled forward—

E2

Relentless!

E1

—to swallow cities whole.

E2

The bitter sky turned black in mourning!

E1

Our food and water choked with ash...

E5

Most of us died.

E2

And those of us who lived, began to fight:

E1

For our lives and against our neighbors.

E2

Strangers became enemies. We set aside stone tools
And hammered weapons out of bronze.

E1

We hoarded food and gold,

E2

Built walls around our families.

E1

Separating into kingdoms, we waged war against each other

E2

And fell... into a dark age.

E3

And from the depths, a group of Kings emerged:

Odysseus enters.

Ensemble (*whispered*)

Odysseus...

Referencing Odysseus...

Athena

King of Ithaca!

Athena sweeps onstage.

Her entrance should contain an element of spectacle.

Her energy should impress itself upon the space.

Odysseus

I was the poorest of these Kings, but...

Athena

Odysseus had an extraordinary mind,
And I took notice.

*All scatter, besides Athena and Odysseus,
who is working in his fields.*

Trickster!

Odysseus

Goddess! Athena...

*With a sly, or satirical, or rascally...
or clever, or nimble gesture of deference.*

I've got another riddle, listen:

What we caught, we threw away, what we /didn't ca—

Athena

This is not a social call.

Going back to his work...

Odysseus

It never really is.

Athena

The Grecian Kings are squabbling.

Odysseus

Ithaca has no fight with anyone.

Athena

Her king has no ambition!
And Ithaca has nothing worth defending.

Odysseus

Clear this up for me:
Do your wars on Mount Olympus mimic mortal ones?
Or did we learn to fight from you?

Ensemble (*whispered from the edges*)

Careful Odysseus...

*Odysseus stops working.
Athena's energy is tense but contained.*

Athena

War is coming.

What if I promised you something to defend when it does?

Penelope appears.

Odysseus

Penelope!

*Athena restrains Odysseus
and whispers in his ear...*

Athena

Show me what that mind of yours can do:

Forge an alliance amongst the Grecian kings,

And I promise you, the least of them,

A chance to bring her home with you.

Odysseus

Tell me where to start.

Athena

Next month,

Penelope's uncle meets with delegates

From nearly every kingdom that touches the Aegean Sea,

About the marriage of his daughter, Helen.

Odysseus will be among them—

Odysseus

What about Pen/el--!

Athena

You will not *marry* Helen,

But you will see the matter settled peacefully:

With the fate of every single man,

Bound up with his neighbors.

Odysseus

How?

Athena

If you figure that out,

Penelope might just marry you:

A poor farmer,

With a fertile, fruitful mind

That he wastes in Ithaca.

Beat.

Make the alliance.

*Athena vanishes, in an appropriately spectacular manner.
Odysseus turns to the audience...*

Odysseus.

I had no business picking fights with gods.
Besides, I have always loved Penelope.

Penelope

I would have married him anyway.

Odysseus

She has a way of gliding over surfaces but
She's always kicking, madly, underneath.

Penelope

I swear that when he touches soil, he can hear it speaking.

Odysseus

She came home with me, to Ithaca,
And there we had our son, Telemachus.

Penelope

Telly.
And his father has a scar, like a whirlpool, on his leg.
Odysseus flinches when Telly touches it.

Odysseus

Our lives were... perfect.

Penelope

The scar pricks at him sometimes,
Likes the shadow of a wound.

*The ensemble creeps
back onstage.*

E1

The alliance Odysseus had forged—

Odysseus

At Athena's urging!

E1

—came back to haunt him.

E2

Before Telly was even one year old,
The Grecian Kings were called upon to fight.

E1

It was the beginning of the Trojan war.

*Odysseus speaks to Penelope,
as Athena stands upstage, baby Telly in her arms.*

Odysseus

This war means nothing to me!
I have no interest in the outcome—

*Athena steps forward,
close to exploding.*

Athena

Your mind dreamt up an army who will need you now to win.
Weigh carefully the safety of your son,
And the lives of every able-bodied man in Greece,
Before you finish speaking.

*Odysseus turns, helplessly,
to face his wife.*

Penelope

Ithaca will be here, when you return.
Just promise me that you will.

Odysseus

Come back?
Troy is halfway around the world!
How much of his life am I about to miss?
How many memories? How / many—

*As he speaks, Penelope pulls her son
from Athena's arms, and brings him to her husband.*

Penelope

I will keep your memories,
However long it takes for you to come back home.

*Odysseus nods,
and it weighs a thousand pounds to do it.*

Odysseus

There is no man, no creature on the earth—
Or beneath the surface of the sea—
Who could keep Odysseus, from Ithaca.

*Odysseus and Athena exit,
Penelope rushing after them.*

E1

Across Greece, fathers held their children close,
And said their last goodbyes to wives and mothers.

E2

Remember, this was a dark age.

*The Songs of War begin to thrum,
very quietly in the background and slowly escalate.*

E2

For ten years, Odysseus was gone,
Fighting Greece's war in Troy. And whenever her son asked questions...

Telly (3-5)

How tall did my father grow? Did he live in our house? //

E1

Or... //

Telly (7-10)

How did you meet my father?
What made you love him in the first place?

E2

Penelope would tell him stories
About the farmer full of mischief that consumed her waking thoughts.

Penelope

He smelled like sunshine.

Telly

And?

Penelope

He was strong and, like the juniper tree, he stretched
Further than it seemed like he could reach!

Telly

And?!

Penelope

He tricked your grandpa, and all of Greece,
Just so he could marry me.

E1

For ten, endless years, the war dragged on... //

E2

Those who were left behind
Fed themselves on stories of the far-off war.
Like many cities, Ithaca lost herself to daydreaming
About the unspeakable violence and horrible courage
That turned her men, her farmers, into heroes.

Enter Telly, with a play sword.

Telly (*playing*)

Cower, minions, at my brutal strength!

Thrumming crescendos...

No one can save you from my wrath!

Thrumming crescendos...

I will sneak into the Trojan tent...
AND KILL THEM WHILE THEY SLEEP!

Penelope

TELLY, NO!

The thrumming crescendos, then drops almost silent.

Telly holds his play sword, limply by his side.

Where did you learn that?

Telly

It was just a game.

Penelope

Then what were you playing?

Telly

War.

Penelope turns to the audience.

Penelope

I was afraid.
The spark of mischief had left his eyes,
And I couldn't see his father in them anymore.
I began to feel afraid for Ithaca, and so—
I forbid the Songs of War.

The thrumming ceases.

I sent Telly to the same Old Shepherd
Who had taught Odysseus to farm.

*Telly moves across the stage,
to meet the Old Shepherd.*

And I thought about my promise
To remember.

*Penelope gazes at the rubble around her, then she sees it.
She strides across the stage to a particularly
large and heavy brick.
It is difficult for her to lift.
This is not easy work.
Moving upstage, she identifies a piece of earth
and presses this first stone into the ground.
Her cornerstone.*

*Penelope continues stacking,
upstage of the action.*

*Telly is now 10 years old,
with a definite blush of adolescent attitude.*

Telly

In the palace, we have shade.

Old Shepherd

Out here, we've got the wind!
Now grab a shovel: use your legs and not your back.
Let's go, Telemachus!

*A shrouded figure comes around the corner.
Telemachus shrinks back, as the Old Shepherd steps forward,
shaking the hand of the stranger.*

Stranger, you are welcome here.
Hungry?

Athena *(as stranger)*

Starving.

Old Shepherd

Head towards the orchard, I'll meet you there!

Athena, as stranger, exits.

Telly

That was a stranger!
They might be dangerous—besides, why should we share
What little we have grown with someone who hasn't earned it?

*The Old Shepherd hesitates, something in him changes.
It seems like he is angry... but when he speaks,
his tone is gentle.*

Old Shepherd

Telly, where's your father?

Telly

Troy.

Old Shepherd

But *where*, in Troy?

And does he sleep in his bed,

Or on the ground?

Do you know if he is safe?

Sick? Hungry, or in pain?

Your father often creeps into my thoughts.

Wherever he is—

I just hope that he comes across strangers who

Offer to share their lunch or

Lend a patch of shade.

They're just gifts,

Given to us by the earth, anyways.

*The Old Shepherd exits,
and Telly commits to his digging.*

E1

Telly grew into a young prince with big eyes

And a soft heart. Thanks to his mother, he knew little

Of the war his father had been sent to fight—

E3

—or of the hero Odysseus had become.

E2

But like his father,

The earth spoke volumes to him.

E1

When Telly was ten, word reached Ithaca

That the Trojan War had ended: Greece had won.

E2

But Ithaca had only just *begun* to struggle.

*The Songs of War begin to thrum
quietly in the background.*

E1

As soldiers made their journeys home, they brought a
Barren violence with them and an angry wind.

E2

Greece grew hot and dry.

E1

The land grew hard, our shovels sparking against rock.

E2

Hunger crept from home to home along with families fleeing conflict.

E1

They carried their belongings on their backs, along with stories
Of death and violence that swept through cities like a pestilence.
The world did not feel safe.

E2

Anxiously, we waited for our king //

E1

Through a fruitless harvest, and a lonely winter. //

Old Shepherd

Dig! Plant, water the soil. // Cultivate life
Where once there was nothing.

Telly

"Cultivate life
Where once there was nothing."
Nothing is the only thing we've grown in years.

Old Shepherd

And hunger courts the land.
You would rather starve than try?

E2

We grew no food, but waited anxiously //

E1

As hungry seasons became famished years.

Telly

The land has died!

Old Shepherd

The land is *changing*. The earth moves in seasons:

Some are short and some are long, but each brings change.

E2

It had been two years since we won the war with Troy...

E1

Seven years had passed, since I last saw my father's face...

E2

Fifteen since I hugged my son...

Old Shepherd.

Telly, we must get to know the land again.

Listen to her: learn her secrets.

*Telly places his hand on the ground,
at first as a joke and then—he feels something.*

Telly

Ithaca is angry.

*The Old Shepherd quickly kneels
to feel the earth, which has begun to shake.
A mixture of The Songs of War and an angry crowd
begin to crescendo.*

Old Shepherd

Go! You must go to the palace,

Your mother / is in danger—

Telly

My mother!

*The ensemble swarms to confront Penelope,
who has been dutifully stacking bricks, upstage.*

E3 (*Athena in disguise*)

War has come to Ithaca:

And it wears the face of famine.

E1

Our queen has wed herself to foolish work
And refuses to address the greedy hunger
Which now pursues her people.

Telly

Leave her alone! It's not her fault / that the crops---

E2

It may not be her fault, but she has an obligation!

E1

The people are dying, Telemachus!

E3 (*Athena in disguise*)

Odysseus would know what to do...

E2

Odysseus has been gone for almost twenty years!

E1

Your mother wastes her days, stacking brick on brick,
While we starve for leadership.

E1

It won't be long before death comes to woo
You and your mother too.

Penelope

What choice do we have but waiting?
I cannot bring my husband home.

E1

Kingdoms much richer, stronger than our own
Have been attacked!

E2

Every able-bodied man in Ithaca followed your husband
Into war. We have no protection.

E1

You must marry or appoint a king to lead us.

Penelope

I still have a husband and Ithaca still has a king.

E3 (*Athena in disguise*)

How can you be sure that he is coming home?

Penelope (*Athena in disguise*)

He swore it.

E1

My husband made promises too—our children now have children,
And they are hungry!

E2

Penelope is foreign-born, she does not speak for Ithaca!

E3 (*Athena in disguise*)

What about Telemachus?

E1

Don't hang your hopes on him.
The world is hard but our prince is soft.

E2

All he does is toil fruitlessly in the naked, dying fields,
Alongside an ancient, dying man.

E1

What do you expect?
She forbid any songs from Troy,
When he was just a child!

E2

He has no fight in him! His mother sheltered the boy:
Left him weak-willed and too sensitive!

Penelope

I have done everything I know
To teach my son about the Ithaca his father loved:
You would rather have him schooled in war?

E3 (*Athena in disguise*)

It's the world we're living in.

Penelope

We are a peaceful people, known for farming!

Telly (*gently*)

But what does peace matter,
If the city starves?

E1

Go back to your father and your home!

E2

You stall our progress, and you waste our resources.

*The ensemble bursts into bitter argument,
shouting to be heard over one another.*

E3 (*simultaneous*)

Speak, Penelope! The sons of Ithaca cry out! //

E1 (*simultaneous*)

You think you know everything

E2 (*simultaneous*)

No! No, no, no.

E1 (*simultaneous*)

What good are you, anyways?

E2 (*simultaneous*)

We keep going around in circles //

E1 (*simultaneous*)

Yes! Yes.

E3 (*simultaneous*)

His mother is a fool!

*Penelope gathers an armful of bricks in her arms and slams them to the earth.
The ensemble quiets as Penelope gathers the breath to speak...*

Penelope

When Odysseus left,
Something at the center crumbled.
And so with every brick, I've labored to restore the things we lost.
I wanted to tell the story of what was left behind.
To give shape to our changing landscape,
And to honor each long and anxious night.
In stone, I've weighed our hunger,
Twenty years of anguish,
Mixed with little joys.

*Penelope considers her son, carefully,
then moves to the wall and runs her fingers
across the bricks we've watched her labor over.*

I love Ithaca as I love her king.
My roots have grown into the soil: you are my home.
What you're asking is important and I want to get it right.
Let me complete this—and I promise you:
Ithaca will have her king.

*Penelope retreats to her bricks,
as the ensemble shuffles off.*

*From the crowd, Athena reveals herself.
She looks heavier than the last time we saw her.
Her spectacle, faded. Twenty years
have taken their effect.*

Athena

Trickster junior!

Telemachus jumps.

I am the goddess Athena

*Telly throws himself to the ground,
his first supplication.*

Telly

Stranger! You are wel/come here—

Athena

Get up.

Telemachus rises.

There have been stories, rumors that Ithaca had lost
The heartbeat of Odysseus, but I did not believe them.

*Telly is suddenly muscular, alert.
The Songs of War begin to thrum.*

Telly

You're here to tell me he has died.

Athena

No. I'm here to make him come alive for you.
Your father was much more than a human man:
Tales of his heroic life will resonate long after your own
Grandchildren have died.
But you, his son,
Know nothing of his glory.

Telly

Is he dead or does he live?

Athena

He lives—what's wrong?

Something inside Telly breaks.

Telly

If he lives, then why hasn't he come back?
Other kings now lay beside their wives at night
And make up for lost time with their sons!

Athena

Telly, listen!
Your father would have traded every bit of gold in Troy
To see your mother for just one minute
And hold you in his arms.
His love for you was devastating.
A tidal wave of longing: he threw himself at everything
That stood between him and Ithaca.

Telly

Then I must find him.

Athena

First, you must go to the kings, Nestor and Menelaus,
They fought beside him, and consider Odysseus a brother.
I have prepared a ship, including help to guide your way.
Go now / and tell—

*Penelope slams an armful of bricks
into the earth as the Songs of War come to a halt.*

Penelope

THAT'S ENOUGH!

*Throwing herself between the goddess
and her son.*

Telemachus

Mom--!

Penelope

You tore his father from my arms!

You will not take my son—

Athena

My power cannot stop a war, Penelope.

Penelope

But it can bless or curse the outcome.

Our lives are just a game to you!

*Athena is suddenly furious, every bit of her expression amplified.
In the heat of her fury, Telemachus slips away.*

Athena

Your lives? Are proof that sparks of god
Live upon the earth! You are my absolute joy,
My only respite in immortality.

Penelope

Then where are the men of Ithaca?
Where is—where is Telemachus?
TELEMACHUS! TELLY!

*Penelope stops,
turns on Athena.*

Where is he?

Where did you send him!

Athena

To find out who he is.

You couldn't keep Troy from him forever.

Penelope

But I could shelter him until he knew himself.
You think the only stories worth
The telling are songs of glory, violence and power.
But what you really offer are rotten spoils,
And half-truths.
There are other stories that desperately need telling,
Including one that you are hiding...
Do you deny it?

Athena does not respond.

Where is my husband, Athena?
When did you forsake Odysseus, and why?

*Athena vanishes, her magic gone.
In her own time, Penelope returns to her bricks.*

Enter, Telly.

Telly
Excuse me!
Um—is his majesty available?

*King Nestor and King Menelaus enter and turn to stare at Telemachus,
who looks every bit as awkward as he feels.*

*The following section is a theatrical convention. The kings are in separate worlds,
though they share a single scene. The text should also be performed rapidly, with little
to no pausing between lines.*

Nestor (E1)
Stranger!

Menelaus (E2)
Friend.

Nestor
You are exceedingly welcome.

Menelaus
Get in here! The day of my son's wedding
And here you come: a welcome friend
To amplify our joy.

Telemachus
Oh, I can / wait—

Nestor
Nonsense.

Menelaus
The more, the merrier!

Nestor
A special feast—

Menelaus

—for a special guest!

Nestor

You have the honor, of sitting next to me!

Menelaus

I'll put you right here: between my wife,
And mistress.

Nestor

Aha! We'll use the *golden* plates...

Telly

That's very / kind of—

Menelaus

No need to explain anything about yourself...

Nestor

Until after you are well-rested.

Menelaus

Hey! Grab me the good blankets!

Nestor

Can I offer you a bowl of wine?

Menelaus

Magic potion? Takes the edge off.

Telly

Thank you.

Here, there is a small silence.

Congratulations!

On the wedding of your son.

Menelaus

I'm glad to have a friend,
To share the day with.

Telemachus

Every citizen of Greece knows your name.
Your house is packed with Myrmidons!
Look how many people came, just to celebrate
The wedding of your child.

Menelaus

Those aren't friends, kiddo.
Do you see Ajax or Antilochus?

The rhythm picks back up.

Nestor

Dead!

Menelaus

Achilles and Patroclus?

Nestor

Dead!

Menelaus

Agamemnon—

Nestor

Dead!

Menelaus

—or his wife?

Nestor

Dead! It was quite nasty too.

Menelaus

But you—//

Telemachus

I am the son of— //

Menelaus

You remind me of—//

Telemachus (in unison)

Odysseus.

Menelaus (*in unison*)
Odysseus!

Nestor (*in unison*)
Odysseus?

Menelaus
I knew it!

Nestor
You frightened me—

Menelaus
You look just like him!

Nestor
—I thought I'd seen a ghost!
Those clever eyes,

Menelaus
That sturdy build,

Nestor
His farmer hands,

Menelaus
Your gait.

Telemachus
You fought beside my father!
Where did you last see him
And how long has it been?

Please, you must tell me if he's dead.
I'm young but I swear I am no child.

The rhythm comes to a halt.

Beat.

Nestor (*gently*)
When I left Troy, your father was alive.

Menelaus (*firmly*)
The last I heard, he lived.

Telemachus

Please—tell me my story.
Tell me the story of my family,
Of my father.
I am the only son of a great hero
But I know nothing of his legacy:
Tell me where he went and how he lived!
When he sailed away from my mother,
And from me.
Tell me about a king who left
Ithaca almost twenty years ago,
And explain how a man renowned
For the love he bore his family,
Has yet to find the way back home.

*Both Kings are taken aback, Athena appears
and the Songs of War begin to thrum.
just as the kings cannot see each other,
They cannot see Athena.*

Athena

You are the son of Odysseus.

Menelaus

A *master* trickster!

Nestor

Sheer *genius* at disguises.

Athena

Twenty years ago,
Your father, called Odysseus, left to fight the Trojan War,
Along with every able-bodied man in Greece.

Nestor

A capable farmer //

Menelaus

A just leader:
He was resolute, tough. //

Nestor

A formidable force in battle. //

Athena

Apocalyptic.

But still, the war dragged on //

Nestor

For ten long years! //

Menelaus

The walls surrounding Troy were too strong,

Too tall //

Nestor

They reached almost to the clouds! //

Menelaus

We were living in tents. //

Nestor

Everything stank, of death. //

Menelaus

It felt like it would never end. //

Athena

The Greeks despaired, but then... //

Nestor

It was your father who figured out how to breach the city. //

Menelaus

He tricked the Trojans, giving them a horse //

Nestor

A wooden horse, offered as a gift //

Menelaus

But full of deadly soldiers.

Nestor

We slaughtered the Trojans.

Menelaus

The city was annihilated.

Nestor

After ten, long years—

Athena

It was your father
Who won the war for Greece.

The songs of war begin to warp...

Telly

Then where is he?
I see something flickering, right there,
Behind your eyes.

Nestor

There was something with Athena.
A curse.

The songs of war cease, suddenly.

Telly

I thought—he was her favorite?

Menelaus

She was our patron, now she's not.
That's all I know.

Telly

My father thought of you as a dear brother,
Thank you for everything.
But I must go back to Ithaca:
His kingdom is in trouble.

Menelaus

You're welcome to anything you see.
I'll prepare a ship immediately.

Nestor

Ithaca will have everything she needs.

Menelaus

Good luck, Telemachus,
Son of Odysseus.

Nestor

And may the gods
Be ever in your favor.

*King Nestor and King Menelaus exit,
leaving Telly alone with Athena.*

Athena

Why won't you look me in the eye?

Telly

I don't trust you.

Athena

What do you want to know?

Telly

The truth!
You used your power to propel our ships to Troy.
Where are the men you led to war?
Where is my father and why didn't you tell me
That you cursed his journey home?

Athena is startled.

Does it seem fair to you that the immortal goddess of war
Will never know death?

Athena

I have seen the death of more men
Then you will ever meet, I assure you.

Telly

What are you doing about it?

Athena

Teaching human beings to fight,
Offering them strategies of war.

Telly

That they might wage your wars and die?

Athena

That they might weigh their costs and live.
Your father has slipped past the world of mortal men.

Telly

You said he was alive!

Athena

I haven't lied.

Telly

I'm sick of riddles.

Telly turns to leave.

Athena

Don't go!

You humans are always going on to somewhere else
And leaving me alone.

Telly

That man the kings describe...
That's not the man I want to be.

Athena

A hero?

Telly

A murderer.

Athena

Telemachus, the memory / of your father—

Telly

Nobody who loves Ithaca
Would want to be remembered like that.
Please, Athena.
I need to see him with my eyes,
I need to see if she's alive in him.

Athena

... past the world of men, there lives the ocean's daughter.
Seek Odysseus there.

*Telemachus thinks carefully.
He is frustrated, then...*

Telemachus

Calypso's Island.

She nods, he exits.

*Odysseus enters, unkempt and weary
from his long journey.*

Odysseus

Stop there! No one is welcome—?

Telly

Odysseus? I'm Telemachus.

Odysseus

Telly?

*Telly runs to his father and embraces him with all the energy
of a small boy or a puppy who adores his human.*

My son, my son, my son! /
How—What are you doing here?

Telly

I have a ship – a whole fleet of them is being sent to Ithaca.
The land has changed – I met King Menelaus
And he spoke about you like a brother!
I told him you felt the same way...

Odysseus

... your mother?

Telly

She misses you.
Oh gods— I feel like I already know you!
She talks about you constantly.
She sent me to the Old Shepherd, you remember?
She wanted me / to learn

Odysseus

He's still alive!

Telly (*mimicking*)

"Cultivate life where once there was nothing..."

Odysseus (*mimicking*)

"Stranger! What I have to give..."

Telly

I'm sure he's furious that I left...

Odysseus

You didn't tell him?

Telly

I didn't tell anyone. Athena came / to me—

Odysseus

You've seen Athena?

Telly

What happened between you?

She wouldn't tell / me—

Odysseus

You need to go home to Ithaca.

Telly

That's why I came here. To bring you home.

Odysseus steps back from his son.

Odysseus

Telly, I can't go back.

You will leave without me.

Telly

Leave without you—the land is barren!

And our people starve inside their homes.

Everything in Ithaca is near collapse.

You're our king, the people need you.

I need you.

You have to go back!

Odysseus

I'm not leaving, Telly.

*Odysseus stays silent. Telly throws himself to the ground
in frustration. He digs angry fingers into the dirt, staring at his father,
who cannot look at him. Then, Telly sees a large scar, like a whirlpool on father's leg.*

With exquisite tenderness, he brushes the scar with his finger.

Odysseus flinches.

Telly

What happened to you?

Odysseus

A boar. Got me in the leg when I was hunting with my father.

Telly

How old were you?

Odysseus

Really young. Nine or ten.

I can't believe—you're twenty.

A tender pause.

Telly (gently)

That must've been scary.

Odysseus

It's how I learned to grow things,

Instead of chasing them down.

I don't enjoy the hunt.

Telly

Do you still think about the boar?

Odysseus

I used to all the time.

Now, almost never.

Telly

Do you still think about Troy?

Odysseus nods, and struggles to speak through his emotion.

Athena appears and places her hand on his shoulder.

We will do this, together.

The Songs of War begin to Thrum.

Athena

When the war ended, Odysseus and his crew were desperate

For their homes but violence had not left them.

The first place they landed was an island, and they attacked

The city of Ismara. There / they—

Odysseus

We murdered as many men as we could find

And split their wives and crops amongst ourselves.

We decimated their lives.

Athena

Odysseus was haunted by his own actions.
He knew that just as the people of Ismara had fallen victim
To the King of Ithaca, he had left his own family and the riches
Of his kingdom, vulnerable to the whims of men
Just like himself.

*In the background,
Penelope lays a brick.*

E1

Perhaps this is why Odysseus and his crew met such powerful storms.

Brick.

E2

Storms that wrecked their ships and blew them far off course.

Brick.

E1

They wandered for years.

Brick.

E2

Escaping the Lotus eaters //

Odysseus

Whose sweet flower us to languish,
We lost our longing for home.

Brick.

E1

Escaping the sirens //

Odysseus

They tortured me with promises of happiness.
Enough, even to erase a decade of war.

Brick.

E2

They escaped the treacherous waters of Scylla and Charybdis //

Odysseus

Horrifying sea monsters from the dark depths of the ocean...

Brick.

E1

They escaped terrifying giants and clever sorcerers //

Odysseus

And with my tricks, I earned the wrath
Of Zeus and Poseidon, both.

Athena

Desperate to survive, and to reach home regardless of the cost.
Odysseus tried desperately to save the men of Ithaca,
From themselves.

Telly

From / themselves? —

Athena

The crew landed on the Island of Helios – the sun god.
There, he kept and cared for his beloved pack of cattle.

Odysseus:

I told them! Never touch these creatures
As they are sacred: precious to their powerful owner.

Athena

They were starving, just like those left behind in Ithaca.
They disobeyed, they held a feast.
All but Odysseus partook and, because of this,
All but Odysseus were drowned.

Telly

All?

Odysseus

All.

*A final brick. The ensemble begins to keen.
Behind them, we can see Penelope who continues her work
through heavy sadness. As the cries of the ensemble subside,
Telly opens his mouth to speak.*

Telly

Come home. We will work together, to make things right.

Odysseus shakes his head.

This is not the man my mother spoke about,
Not the father that I grew up knowing,
The man before me, is a stranger.

*Telly exits.
Odysseus and Athena are alone.*

Odysseus

If this is all of life, I want no more of it:
KILL ME AND BE DONE WITH IT!!

Athena

Calypso's Island?

Odysseus

She's offered me my place among the gods.

Athena

You haven't taken it?

Odysseus

Twenty years without Penelope
Didn't feel like living. I can't fathom immortality.

Athena

Then go—follow your son!
You aren't trapped on this island:
Why do you condemn yourself to suffering?

Odysseus

Penelope fell in love with a gentle king,
A farmer who knew how to make her laugh.

Athena

Yes. She fell in love *Odysseus*.

Odysseus

She will hate Odysseus when she knows what I have done!
How many Trojan women, how many children like Telemachus
Now live lives of misery because of me?
I SENT ITHACA TO WAR!
I unleashed that godsforsaken
Wooden horse on Troy,
Carving the path to slaughter.

Athena

You ended the war.

Odysseus

I'm a murderer.

Athena is silent for a moment, then...

Athena

I sent Ithaca to war, not you.
I treasured the justice of your heart
And wielded it as a weapon.
You've never asked...

Odysseus

Why you abandoned me?

Athena

Each human being is just a speck, a tiny moment
In the scope of my expansive life and still...
I have loved you, deeply.
And you really hurt me.

Odysseus is surprised.

I fought your war in heaven
As you did on the earth.
I was your comrade, your protector, your general, your friend.
And then you desecrated my temple in the siege of Troy--

Odysseus

How could we have known? The wreckage / spread—

Athena

You couldn't!
But I wanted you to suffer for it! Because I was hurt.
And the goddess of wisdom, I knew: you did not deserve it.

Odysseus

We hurt you.
They hurt us.

Athena

I thought that I could go to war without it reaching me.
But I was wrong. And I did wrong.
But Ithaca has not.
Your son has not.

Odysseus exits, followed by Athena

E2

And so, Odysseus embarked
Upon the very last leg of his long journey.

E1

And just ahead of him,
Was Telly.

Telly

I sailed with speed //

Odysseus

I hiked the steep and wooded trails //

Telly

Towards my mother and my home, //

Odysseus

Towards my wife and son. //

Telly

When I saw the water brighten
From deep navy to the turquoise of our harbor...

Odysseus

When I smelled the sharp, woodsy perfume of our olive groves...

Telly/Odysseus

I knew I had come home, to Ithaca.

*Odysseus exits,
as Penelope runs to meet her son.*

Penelope

How could you leave without my knowing?
I'm so angry with you! You stupid, you brave—young man.

*The two embrace,
Then Telly pulls back.*

What did you find out there, Telemachus?

Telly

My father—the stories of his bravery and cunning
Are sung by kings from every corner of Greece.
It was his mind that won the war.
Did you know that?

Penelope

I did.

Telly

You didn't trust me.

Penelope

He never planned to fight.

When the Grecian army came here to recruit your father

You were barely three months old: he would not leave you.

The kings that sing those songs? Plotted against your father.

They stole you from my arms and they ransomed you to weaponize his mind.

Telly

Why not tell me that?

Penelope

Perhaps I've shielded you from manhood,

Because I was afraid of what the world demands from men.

*An echo of the Songs of War
drift through Penelope's thoughts.*

Your father is not the man in those songs.

Telly

I know.

He isn't coming back.

*Penelope kisses her son,
and then returns to her wall,
and once again begins her stacking.
Telly takes a deep breath, and calls out...*

Telemachus

ITHACA! I have come home.

The son of Odysseus has returned and I bring news!

Gather in the city center, I have much to share!

*The ensemble comes flocking from all corners.
Penelope continues stacking.*

E1

Telemachus? //

E2

Telemachus is here! //

E3

He's returned—the boy is back!! //

E1

Where is your father? //

E2

Did you find Odysseus? //

*For a moment, Telly is a scared boy, and then he takes
a deep breath and speaks with measured confidence.*

Telly

Please hear me!

Your king is sung about

In the richest palaces, and farthest reaches of Greece.

It was his idea which ended the Trojan War.

*Excitement and anticipation
run through the crowd.*

I have painful news as well.

Our ships were wrecked on their journey home.

All were drowned.

There were rumors of Odysseus surviving

But I do not believe—

*Odysseus steps forward from the ensemble,
and walks up to his son. Upstage, Penelope stops working.
The crowd whispers.*

Odysseus

Stranger? What little

That I have to give—

Is yours. I give it with all my heart.

*Telly and Odysseus embrace
And the crowd begins to kneel.
Odysseus turns to his people.*

Do not kneel! Stand level, meet my eyes.

I--

*The Songs of War begin to thrum as
Odysseus searches desperately for words.*

Athena

The man who won the war for Greece is losing.

Penelope lays a brick.

Telly

His sense of self and his belief in goodness. //

*Athena gestures.
Penelope lays a brick.*

Athena

Odysseus had clung to memory as a drowning man,
Reaching for a rope.

Gesture, Brick.

Odysseus

I would imagine my old life until it became real to me,
Until I recognized myself again.

Gesture, Brick.

Athena

He survived this way for many years, but //

Gesture, Brick.

Telly

The images of life before the war, had begun to fade.

Gesture, Brick.

Athena

To blur.

Gesture, Brick.

Telly

He remembered the steady strength of his wife's fingers //

Gesture, Brick.

Odysseus

But could no longer remember how her hands felt,
Tucked inside my own.

Gesture, Brick.

Telly

He remembered the color of her eyes but not their shape.

Gesture, Brick.

Odysseus

I remembered her words but had lost her voice.

Gesture, Brick.

Athena

He remembered hope but could not feel it.

Gesture, Brick.

Odysseus

And maybe...

Athena

He often thought...

Odysseus

I deserve that.

I'm not the man who left here twenty years ago.

Odysseus turns to face Ithaca.

E1

Do you think Ithaca is still the home you left behind?

*Athena gestures.
Penelope lays a brick.*

E2

We are different too.

Odysseus

I don't know where to start.

Penelope lays a brick.

Penelope

I do. I rebuilt our home in such a way
That we could weave you back inside it.
And I will find a place for all you have become,
If you will help me finish.

*Penelope holds out her hand to Odysseus,
who hesitates.*

Telly

Long ago before Greece was called Greece
A violent rupture tore apart the land.
We separated from each other
And in doing so we separated from ourselves.
Now is not a time to be alone.

Odysseus takes Penelope's hand.

*END OF PLAY.
END OF POEM.
END OF SONG.*