in my own words

The Changing Face of a Classicist

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In addition to being a professor, English-born Peter Meineck is a writer, director, and producer. In 1991, he founded Artistic Aquila Theatre, which is dedicated to reinterpretations of classical drama. He is the visionary behind Ancient Greeks/Modern Lives, a program that brings theatrical events, reading groups, and lectures to 100 libraries and art centers across the U.S. Meineck is also an EMT in his town’s volunteer ambulance corps and a former Royal Marine. What makes him think he can be so many things? The Greeks, of course.

A soldier like me

I wanted to be an archaeologist initially. As a child, I liked the romance of that, and I loved the idea of the Mediterranean world, Rome, and travel. Then, at 15, I left school and joined the Royal Marines, and that was going to be my career. When the Marines ended up sending me to University, I studied archaeology and Ancient Rome. But one of my professors saw that I had been in the military and she suggested I study Greek drama and Aeschylus because he was a soldier like me. It never occurred to me that a soldier could be a playwright, too.

While discovering the Greeks, I also discovered the theater. I began to work in theater as a technician, doing lighting and building sets. Those two loves—the theater and scholarship—went hand in hand.

The classics made so many connections in my life. They taught me that you didn’t have to be just one thing. You didn’t have to be the theater kid or the jock. You could actually be all of those things. Sophocles was a politician, a general, and a playwright. Aeschylus wrote 120 plays, and all that it says on his gravestone in Sicily is, “Here lies Aeschylus who fought in the battle of Marathon.” They were definitely well-rounded, and that appealed to me.

Something old becomes something new

The classics have been held up as a paradigm of the elite, but I actually think that negates the wisdom and the power that are within those texts. I’ve always wanted to explain them to people and give people access to what these texts were about.

Ancient Greeks/Modern Lives goes into rural and inner-city communities and gives live, top-quality performances of ancient plays. In addition to the talented actors, scholars from the best universities create discussions based on people witnessing these classic plays.

In our reading groups, people may read The Iliad, and alongside it, they may read African American poetry or the work of Wole Soyinka, or watch an HBO show like The Wire. Then you have an ancient text and modern text having a conversation. Or our scholars might do a film series and, at the end of a film, talk about The Iliad. Or they might teach The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao and then compare it to a play like Sophocles’s Ajax. It not only makes the audience think, but it gets scholars out of their comfort zone. They have to start thinking about these works as contemporary texts, and that’s the challenge.

Catharsis and healing

This program has a particular thrust of interest because right now we have an enormous number of young Americans who joined the military and are coming back physically and mentally hurt by their experiences. In a way, we’re in a similar place to Athens in the fifth century, which was also a place of constant war. These
plays are filled very honestly with war, and veterans respond to them. It's amazing to see a veteran from Vietnam, Iraq, or Afghanistan say, "This play is about me. I never thought anybody else felt this way." Then, they start speaking to members of the public. So not only do we know about these plays by understanding them in performance, but we also create a kind of dialogue between two kinds of Americans who often don’t get to talk to each other.

I’m a great believer that we can use the classics to learn about ourselves. When it’s too painful to talk about ourselves, we draw a mythical analogy. This even happens in Shakespeare. Hamlet doesn’t know what to do about his father, and, when a group of traveling players comes and performs a version of *Hecuba*, a Greek play, Hamlet thinks, “What’s Hecuba to me? Why am I feeling these emotions toward this ancient work?” Drama and the classics allow us to put our emotions into something else when it’s too painful to articulate them. That’s what Aristotle called “catharsis.”

These plays work that way, and I think they can actually heal us a little bit. Or at least get people talking. If we let our culture descend into the sound bite and cable news, and we don’t think deeply, and we’re not educated, then we’re lost.

**More than language**

Many people view classicists as mere linguists. They view us as people who just teach Greek and Latin. That’s an identity problem that classicists have. Classicists are, by nature, interdisciplinary. We study architecture, art history, culture, language, politics, everything, really. Language is just a means to an end.

The subject is becoming much more global, with more networks and interactions. So this is a really exciting time for classics. The Internet has allowed classicists to speak internationally; it has allowed much deeper research. It used to be that you had to be at a great research university just to get access to the library. Now, anybody can go online and download articles and books and get access to this material. I’ve begun to branch out into other areas, too, and to apply scientific pursuits to the study of classics.

**Drama meets neuroscience**

Recently, I was doing some work with the ancient mask. I wanted to understand how the mask worked cognitively because it seemed odd to me that actors would wear a mask to do very intricate performances of narrative emotional drama. Everything I’ve read about the tragic mask—we don’t have any that have survived—was that it was one unchanging face. But when I was in Japan and watching Noh theater, that mask was totally changing its emotions to me. I was fascinated. I actually think that the mask is more expressive than the human face because the audience’s imagination sees the face they want to see in the mask. I wanted to prove that. I wanted to do work in face recognition, gaze direction, and mirror neuron theory and cognition. I realized that neuroscientists and cognitive scientists are asking the same questions. We are asking the same questions about body, about proprioception, about how the face works, about what happens when people with autism can’t read the face.

Now I’m with a group at NYU where we’re studying a new field called neuroaesthetics. We’re bringing people who work on texts together with neuroscientists, and we’re starting to actually do the hard science to answer interesting questions: Do my neurons respond differently when I watch a live performance than when I watch a TV screen? Do my neurons respond differently when I watch a masked actor than when I watch an actor with a bare face? What happens when I watch a performance on my own and when I watch a performance with other audience members?

**No escaping the past**

When people ask why they should study the classics, I tell them that this is 2,000 years of human history. If we can’t read those texts and study them, then we are completely blind to 2,000 years of our past. Just on that basis, there is a reason to study it.

In a way, the Greeks are our cultural ancestors, even though all of us come from diverse backgrounds. For Americans, there’s so much that can be traced back to them. If you ever become a scientist, your thinking will move back toward philosophy. The farther you go into the study of medicine, you’ll go back to the Greeks. Actually, you’ll be learning Greek whether you like it or not. In anatomy, everything will be in Latin and Greek.

If you look ultimately at what we call science, it is an ancient construct that started with people like Pythagoras, Thales, Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle. You will eventually come back to these practitioners. So if you’re going to be a physicist one day, you might as well be a philosopher now.