

## Unveiling Gun Violence in Ancient Drama — The Guns and Roses

### Perspective: Little Trackers at the Children's Creative

### Workshop in Epidaurus

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**Abstract:** In addressing the issue of gun violence in American schools, this article aims to focus on prevention rather than treatment. Starting from this critical issue in the school environment, where the new generation of Americans is blossoming, the paper introduces the Little Trackers team, which has been active in the field of research for the last eight years through the Children's Creative Workshop in Epidaurus, using Educational Drama as its main tool. Little Trackers discusses the issue through the dynamics of an ancient theatrical text, such as Sophocles' Ajax, and offers its own perspective based on the question: does the use of guns require good judgement or strong muscles?

**Key words:** little trackers, drama in education, theatre, ajax by Sophocles, creative workshop in Epidaurus, guns and roses, Athens Epidaurus Festival

#### 1. Introduction

In the heart of Greece's cultural landscape lies a transformative experience for young minds, known as the theatrical-educational program Little Trackers-Children's Creative Workshop in Epidaurus. This initiative, now in its eighth year, is a captivating immersion into the world of Ancient Drama, hosted by the Athens Epidaurus Festival. Collaborating with the International Network of Ancient Drama in Greece, under the Ministry of Culture's auspices, the program aims to offer young participants a profound immersion into the realm of Ancient Drama, integrating it into the fabric of our cultural heritage, within the iconic ancient theatre of Epidaurus.

##### 1.1 Unveiling the Program's Magic

Amidst the ancient grandeur of Epidaurus, children aged 5–10 embark on a journey of creative engagement while at the same time their parents indulge in the theatrical spectacle that is taking place in the Ancient Theatre of Epidaurus. Inspired by each specific performance and the vision of the respective director, the program welcomes up to 40 children per session, each having reserved their spot in advance.

Participants hail from various corners of Greece and beyond, forming a diverse tapestry of young minds. Language barriers melt away as the Little Trackers team converses fluently in multiple languages, including English, French, Italian, and German. Children with special needs are warmly welcomed, fostering an inclusive

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environment where everyone’s curiosity thrives. Though the gender ratio isn’t meticulously measured, it’s evident that both boys and girls share an equal enthusiasm for the program.



**Figure 1** The Model With Which We “Guide” the Children to the Ancient Theatre of Epidaurus

In general, it can be observed that program slots are consistently filled days before the scheduled performance, underscoring the program’s popularity and demand. Parents escort their children to the Exhibition Space, the designated workshop venue, where both indoor and outdoor areas, including the museum’s interior, garden spaces, and forest trails within the expansive vicinity of the ancient theatre, serve as immersive learning environments. Children are expected to arrive by 20:00, with the program concluding in tandem with the duration of each performance, typically lasting an average of three hours. At the helm of this creative odyssey is a dedicated team of seasoned theatre educators known as the Little Trackers. Since its inception in 2016, this team has remained steadfast, comprising six educators with backgrounds in theatre studies.



**Figure 2** The Little Trackers Team, 2023



## 2. In Response to Ajax: Some Observations on the Issue of Gun Culture in the USA

According to Amnesty International, more than 600 people are estimated to die every day from armed violence, while two-thirds of gun-related deaths, including suicides, occur in just six countries (in descending order: Brazil, USA, Venezuela, Mexico, India, Colombia, Mexico). In the US in particular, Amnesty International data inform us that in 2022 there were 45,222 gun-related deaths and 46 school shootings. Endemic gun violence damages the learning environment by disrupting school attendance. The psychological toll is often heavy, especially for victims, their family members and those who have witnessed shootings.



**Figure 4** Monument in Newtown, Connecticut, USA. On December 16, 2012, the Sandy Hook Elementary School Shooting Claimed 26 Lives.

### 2.1 Research

In US, many public and private institutions have been mobilized to address the problem. Everytown for Gun Safety Support Fund (“Everytown for Gun Safety Support Fund”, n.d.) is an independent organization dedicated to understanding and reducing gun violence. In partnership with the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) and the National Education Association (NEA), it seeks to improve understanding of the causes of gun violence and the means to reduce it by conducting groundbreaking original research and developing evidence-based strategies to disseminate knowledge.

CWLA (“CWLA”, n.d.) is a powerful coalition of hundreds of private and public agencies that have been serving at-risk children and families since 1920. At CWLA's 2013 National Conference, participants expressed concern about the pervasive culture of fear and violence that exists in many of the communities they serve. At the community level, participants observed that guns are often used as a response to fear. They emphasized that children and young people living in violent neighbourhoods feel at risk. Without non-violent conflict resolution skills, they easily turn to guns to solve problems. Often it is only by carrying and using guns that these young people feel safe and protected. Yet despite gun ownership, many children and young people remain vulnerable to violence in their communities.

In the study “Lethal School Violence” conducted by the Alfred University in New York (Lethal Violence in Schools 2001), one of the open questions they asked students was “What do you think teachers and other school personnel could do to prevent a school shooting?”. They published their findings in August 2001. The most



popular response (23%) was that students want their teachers to care about them and be emotionally involved in their lives. They want teachers and staff to be supportive and positive role models for how they treat other people. They want teachers to be their friends, mentors and confidants. Respondents also feel that not all pupils are treated equally at school (4%). They give many different reasons for this, including race, sporting ability, popularity, social cliques, academic performance and socio-economic status.

## **2.2 Arts and Armed Violence**

In the quest for solutions, many believe that engagement with art, both generally and specifically with the art of theater, is a key factor in mitigating violent behavior and fostering an atmosphere of healthy coexistence and cooperation within a group. William Electric Black, a playwright, collaborated with Chauncey Parker, Deputy Commissioner of the NYPD for community partnerships, and Kristy De La Cruz, supervisor of Community School District 4, in an attempt to create a small pilot program addressing armed violence in an elementary school in East Harlem during the academic year 2022-2023 (District 4 n.d). Additionally, teenagers from Brooklyn utilize the "Theatre of the Oppressed" to explore solutions to armed violence. They are all graduates of a youth organizing program called YO SOS — "Youth Organizing to Save Our Streets" (YO SOS: 99 problems n.d) — managed by the Crown Heights Mediation Center in Brooklyn. These teenagers spent a year being trained in violence prevention techniques. Starting in January 2017, they learned theatrical games under the guidance of Katy Rubin, the executive director of Theatre of the Oppressed NYC. Heather Day, who oversees YO SOS as the director of youth programs at the Mediation Center, highlights that the group's work helps demonstrate that armed violence can be prevented.

## **2.3 Educational Drama in Schools and Violence Prevention**

Educational drama is a specialized theatrical method primarily experiential and based on a student-centered approach through cooperative methods. Through role-playing, which is a fundamental activity in educational drama, children attempt to place either themselves or others in a hypothetical situation. To play this role, they must adopt the perspective of the character they are portraying, try to self-identify through the role, and see the "other" within themselves (Bolton, 1984).

The techniques used aim to cultivate the student's personality, develop critical thinking, encourage free expression (physical/verbal, non-verbal), take initiatives to solve problems, and make decisions based on the zone of proximal development. Additionally, the inclusion and comprehensive participation of the child in group activities are promoted through creative collaboration and the development of collective consciousness and empathy. Through the empowerment of the student's cognitive and metacognitive skills, transformative learning is pursued, aiming to change attitudes, perceptions, behaviours, and to shape new life strategies (Brunner, 1972).

## **3. Guns and Roses: Presentation of a Theatre Pedagogical Program**

The performance of Ajax by the Greek director Argyris Xafis was presented at the Ancient Theatre of Epidauros on 29 and 30 July 2022. The orchestra of the ancient theatre is a snow-covered landscape, dominated by a huge transparent toll house in the shape of a military squat. Light and shadow, the obvious and the hidden define the aesthetics of the performance.

### **3.1 Creation of a Framework Based on the Stimulus Story: Activation**

The children are immersed in the myth through the visual arts component of the program, which precedes all

other activities. As they enter the space, theatre facilitators instruct the children that in order to begin the narrative, they must first “hone” their skills as actors, starting with the role of shepherds. In this role, inspired by the set design of the performance, they create a snow globe with a little lamb inside. This artistic endeavour serves as a representation of the merciless winters the Greek soldiers in Troy faced as they tended their flocks in the vast meadows of the camp, which were essential for their sustenance. The children then design and assemble a relief collage (Figure 5) depicting the layout of the Trojan camp and its surrounding natural features — meadows, mountains and cliffs (Collective drawing). Finally, a crimson flower is placed on the map. Its meaning is yet to be revealed.



**Figure 5 Relief Collage of the Trojan Camp**

### **3.2 Developing Drama: Creating Episodes**

The primary drama program begins. The drama facilitators present a fictional time machine that everyone in the circle builds with their bodies. Using the map they have made before, we set Troy as the destination. The time machine hypothetically lands in Troy and the children, with our guidance, search the room for new clues. Music leads them to an unknown figure holding a crimson flower (Teacher in role). It is the same flower that the children had previously placed on the snow-covered map. Each petal contains the story of the brave Greek warrior Ajax — his origins, his skills and the principles he upheld. As the facilitator places each petal on the floor, he or she tells the story within, paving a path for the children to follow. At the culmination of the journey, the final petal reveals its hidden truth inside a staged military tent. Here an inscription reads: “Amid the chaos of the Trojan battlefield, Ajax bravely guarded the fallen body of Achilles, the first of the Greek warriors”.

Suddenly, a multitude of identical crimson flowers appear in front of the stage. The children conclude that this is Ajax’s tent. However, directly opposite is another tent whose owner is unknown. Out of the blue, a servant (Teacher in role) emerges from the latter scene, frantically cleaning and desperately arranging various objects

(clothes, weapons, books, glasses, etc.). Through her narration, she addresses the children and assigns them the role of Ajax's sailors (Collective role). The servant boasts about her master, saying that he is the cleverest of the Greeks, the fastest and the most eloquent. The children understand that she is referring to Odysseus. She goes on to explain her dilemma: because of the carelessness of the leaders, the belongings of Odysseus and Ajax have become entangled, and she is not sure what to put in each character's tent (Defining space). The children help her to identify these objects (Figure 6) according to the qualities of the two men (bravery for Ajax and cunning for Odysseus). In the end, only a golden shield and Achilles' weapons remain on the stage. An inscription on the shield declares that it will be given to "the best", the most illustrious warrior. At this moment, Ajax's Chief Sailor (Teacher in role) appears and claims that these possessions belong to Ajax, as he has shown the greatest bravery in battle. He retrieves the weapons, but as he moves to position them on the stage, Agamemnon (Teacher in role) appears and claims that the weapons rightfully belong to Odysseus, as his cunning led to the conquest of Troy. Agamemnon takes the weapons and vanishes.



**Figure 6 Children Help to Identify the Weapons (Defining Space Technique)**

A light appears through Ajax's tent, and with shadow theatre we see Ajax's enormous shadow. The narrative shows how Ajax's increasing anger, fuelled by the perceived injustice of not receiving the weapons he felt he deserved, led to a gradual erosion of his rationality. He eventually reached a state of disorientation where he no longer recognized himself and was unsure of his actions. As a result, the children watch the giant shadow shrink in size (Figure 7), accompanied by the gradual inflation of a black balloon, symbolizing his growing rage, while his vengeful screams echo. Blinded by the rage emanating from the balloon, he loses clarity of vision and mistakes small lambs depicted on the canvas for Agamemnon, Odysseus and the other soldiers, seizing and slaughtering them. This symbolic imagery cultivates the children's empathy with the hero's feelings, while the shadow theatre technique provides a safe veil that distances the children from the violent event of the slaughter.



**Figure 7 The Anger of Ajax**

Encouraged by the theatre facilitators, the children call Ajax back and gently implore him to leave the tent, get some fresh air and regain his composure. Ajax hesitantly complies. However, his anger has so weakened him that he appears like a puppet (Metamorphosis), directly manipulated by a puppeteer. Using the “hot seating” technique (Figure 8), the children ask Ajax questions (Puppet Theatre), trying to understand his feelings and thoughts. By interacting with the puppet, the children empathize with Ajax, as the size and shape of the puppet makes it easier for them to identify with him and take on the role of his caregiver or advisor. Thus, by engaging in dialogue and problem-solving alongside the hero (Puppeteer-puppet), the children guide him in effectively managing his anger, while also reinforcing his identity by reading the information inscribed on the petals of the crimson flower from the outset. The petals trace a path that the children follow with the puppet, leading him to the point from which everything began. Ajax’s tomb. There they carefully lay the puppet in the ground, sing a lullaby and leave it to rest forever (Figure 9).

The program ends with a short story that tells the legend of the crimson flower. Ovid wrote a myth about a crimson flower that bloomed on Ajax’s tomb and how, years later, when Odysseus returned to Ithaca, his ship capsized and the sea washed Achilles’ weapons to the spot where Ajax had fallen asleep forever.



**Figure 8 The puppet Ajax is being “hot-seated”**



### 3.3 Reflection

The group then gathers in a reflection circle to explore two key themes: firstly, the management of anger and its effects, and secondly, the concept of shame. More specifically, the theme of “coping with defeat” faced by the hero is raised, an issue of relevance to the children in the group. Questions such as: “How do you deal with feelings of anger and resentment when faced with loss? Do you seek revenge against those who have wronged you? Does resorting to violence ultimately lead to self-degradation and a dead end? Can weapons serve as symbols of courage for individuals?” are explored in depth.

The program ends in a circle where, after reflection, participants share their favorite moments from the program and, with music, say goodbye until next time (Figure 10).



Figure 9 Ajax Tomb

## 4. In Lieu of Epilogue

In addition to the educational drama techniques we use, the way we usually link episodes together is through narration (Booth, 1994). Using the technique of narration we can also recall, summarize, comment on the action or provide new information. This way, narration can “transport” participants to another time and place and help create atmosphere (Wooland, 1999, pp. 50–51). While narration provides external coherence of episodes, internal coherence (Johnson & O’Neil, 1984, pp. 117–118) in drama is about the experiences that participants share in different episodes. By linking one episode to another, children have a coherent flow of experiences and can make decisions and draw their own conclusions (Avdi & Hadjigeorgiou, 2007, p. 75).

In the educational program of Ajax, the children are confronted with very serious issues such as: the use of weapons and the bravery involved, the madness and confusion caused by the anger and injustice suffered by the perpetrator, the consequences of this behaviour, shame and the end of life. It is only through the safe context of drama and play that children can come to terms with these issues and emerge more empowered, more confident and less alone in the face of the huge questions of existence that confront them as part of their social reality (Goffman, 1974). That is why we believe that the educational program of this short can be used in groups of children of all ages and should be integrated into the school curriculum, in order to empower children with

non-violent conflict resolution skills.

In addition, our extensive study of ancient drama, which often deals with subjects seemingly far removed from children's interests, has shown us time and again that children possess an extraordinary level of curiosity, openness and determination that consistently surpasses our own preconceptions. Throughout the years, our fervent wish has remained unchanged: if only we could see the world through children's eyes.



Figure 10 Reflection

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