

AMERICAN CONSERVATORY THEATER

Carey Perloff, Artistic Director Heather Kitchen, Executive Director

PRESENTS

# WORDS <sup>on</sup> PLAYS

INSIGHT INTO THE PLAY, THE PLAYWRIGHT, AND THE PRODUCTION

## *War Music*

ADAPTED AND DIRECTED BY LILLIAN GROAG  
BASED ON THE BOOK BY CHRISTOPHER LOGUE  
CHOREOGRAPHY BY DANIEL PELZIG  
MUSIC COMPOSED BY JOHN GLOVER  
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## RESISTANCE TO NORMALCY

### A Brief Biography of Christopher Logue

BY LESLEY GIBSON

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Christopher Logue is something of a paradox. An antiwar protester who never studied Greek, he spent almost 50 years immersed in ancient classical literature, rewriting Homer's timeless war epic, the *Iliad*, to create for a 20th-century sensibility an entirely new poem that depicts Homer's battle scenes in all their bloody glory.

Born in Portsmouth, England, in 1926 into a middle-class family, Logue enlisted in Britain's elite Black Watch infantry regiment when he was 17. A bashful and unfocused young man, he floundered in the army (without seeing combat) until 1945, when, while stationed in Palestine, he was caught dealing stolen army identification cards and sentenced to 16 months in prison. It was during this period of incarceration that he began to write poetry, and after his release he moved to London anxious to find a literary scene. Postwar London was a sober environment for a restless young poet, however, so Logue did what any bohemian artist looking for adventure did in the 1950s—he moved to Paris.

Mid-20th-century Paris was a hotbed of the fervent and the progressive, and before long Logue found himself at the center of the action. He forged relationships with writers Henry Miller, Samuel Beckett, and Richard Wright; briefly dabbled in literary pornography for Maurice Girodias's newly founded Olympia Press (publisher of the work of Beckett and William S. Burroughs and Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita*); and began to publish slim collections of poetry, the first of which, *Wand and Quadrant*, appeared in 1953. By the time he returned to London in 1956, Logue was contemplating undertaking an epic-length work (on no particular theme) when a friend, Homeric scholar Donald Carne-Ross, approached him about contributing to a new translation of the *Iliad* for BBC Radio.

In his continuing rewriting of Homer's epic, Logue has over the past five decades tackled short sections of the *Iliad* sporadically and in no particular order. The first two volumes, *Patrocleia* (based on Book 16 of the *Iliad*, the result of the BBC commission) and *Pax* (Book 19), appeared in 1962 and 1967 respectively, to much critical acclaim. The 1960s brought a surge of excitement into Logue's life, and he seemed to be everywhere, swept up



in the current of political change. During those years he marched against nuclear armament and spent a second (shorter) stint in prison for his political activism. Professionally, he kept himself afloat with an eclectic combination of creative gigs. He wrote short poems and songs here and there, curated for the satirical magazine *Private Eye*, wrote plays (for the Royal Court Theatre) and screenplays, and appeared as an actor in a handful of films. Logue was, he says, “constantly refusing the ordinary human side of life,” and by the 1970s, his resistance to normalcy collided with a postsixties letdown that left him in a depression for the greater part of a decade.

Attention returned to Logue’s Homer project in 1981, when Jonathan Cape published *War Music*, which included a reprint of *Patrocleia* and *Pax*, together with *GBH* (for “grievous bodily harm”), a new section entirely devoted to the battle scenes in Books 17 and 18 of the *Iliad* and intended to link the previous two sections. In the years that followed, Logue extended *War Music* with four additional installments: *Kings* (Books 1–2, 1991), *The Husbands* (Books 3–4, 1994), *All Day Permanent Red* (battle scenes from Books 1–4, 2003), and *Cold Calls* (Books 5–9, 2005, winner of the prestigious Whitbread Poetry Award).

Today considered by many to be Britain’s greatest living poet, Logue is credited with helping to throw off the field’s pompous reputation. As a self-proclaimed “lowlitist” autodidact who never studied Greek (and indeed never went to university, a fact of which he is still proud), Logue calls his version an “account” of the *Iliad*, based on five English translations of Homer’s epic (George Chapman [1611], Alexander Pope [1720], Lord Derby [1865], A. T. Murray [1924], and E. V. Rieu [1950]), from which he pieced together the basic structure, plot, and characters. He then retold the story as he imagined it, viewed through the lens of his iconoclastic 20th-century experience and illuminated with brashly anachronistic pop culture references and allusions to contemporary military conflicts.

Narrated in a relaxed form of blank verse, the Homeric series reflects Logue’s affinity for the dramatic arts and his overlying intention that his work be spoken aloud. People often use the word “cinematic” when describing his *Iliad*, as the poetry is rich with sweeping aerials, quick cuts, mental close-ups, and striking sound effects that portray Logue’s violent Ilium with heart-stabbing immediacy. As one reviewer wrote, “Logue makes [Homer’s poetry] leap, twist, and revel in its sprays of blood.”

Logue, who has said that he finds the Iraq war “disgusting,” has succeeded in capturing for our times the essential human element at the heart of Homer’s visceral tale of divinely driven mortal conflict. The story of the *Iliad* continues to fascinate after almost three thousand years, says Logue, because it embodies Homer’s complex attitude toward war, “at once knowing how horrible it is, but also knowing that inside wars tremendous virtues exist—courage, bravery, self-sacrifice. And also feats of incredible daring. The whole business of warfare is very ambiguous for humans.”