

American Repertory Theatre

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE - September 12, 2008
CONTACT: Kati Mitchell 617-495-2668

**A.R.T./MXAT Institute for Advanced Theatre Training
presents the world premiere of
Ajax in Iraq
by Ellen McLaughlin • directed by Scott Zigler
October 9-11
Zero Arrow Theatre**

CAMBRIDGE, Mass. - The American Repertory Theatre/Moscow Art Theatre Institute for Advanced Theatre Training presents its second production of the 2008-09 season: ***Ajax in Iraq***, inspired by Sophocles's ***Ajax*** and the current war in Iraq. Written by Ellen McLaughlin, directed by Scott Zigler, and performed by the Institute Class of 2009, it will be presented at the A.R.T.'s Zero Arrow Theatre, Corner of Arrow Street and Mass Ave., Harvard Square.

Performance Dates & Times:

October 9, 10, 11 at 7:30 p.m.

October 11 at 1:30 p.m.

Discussions with Ellen McLaughlin will follow the performances on October 9 and 10 at 7:30 and October 11 at 1:30.

How does the experience of war affect the common soldier? What do veterans bring home from war? How have female soldiers been affected by the war in Iraq? These are just a few of the questions explored in the world premiere production of this new play by award-winning writer Ellen McLaughlin. Using Sophocles' ***Ajax*** as a lens through which to view and interpret the current war, McLaughlin's play combines ancient Greece and modern-day Iraq to grapple with these difficult and perplexing times.

In 2007, playwright Ellen McLaughlin and the A.R.T. received a residency grant from Theatre Communications Group and the National Endowment for the Arts to develop a new play with the A.R.T. Institute for Advanced Theatre Training class of 2009. The grant has allowed for the project to evolve over the course of sixteen months and for McLaughlin to be in residence for a substantial part of that time. It provided a unique opportunity to create new work for a specific ensemble of actors over an extended developmental period.

The impetus for the project was the desire to investigate the notion of war in general and to respond to the on-going war in the Middle East in particular. McLaughlin specifically wished to understand that war from the point of view of the students in the

Institute, members of the generation most directly effected by it. To that end, the first six months of the project were spent doing a series of workshops during which director Scott Zigler and McLaughlin urged the students to generate theatrical responses to war. The students all did interviews and independent research, and presented their findings. The wealth of subject matter included civil war letters, Korean comfort women, homeless veterans, military recruitment and soldiers' blogs, to name a fraction. The presentations ranged from scenes and monologues to dance pieces to various forms of performance art. Over twenty-five hours of theatrical material was created and presented.

As the project developed, the group began focusing on American soldiers' experiences of the current wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, women in war, and the mythology of warfare. Looking for a way to shape the piece and include aspects of the students' presentations, McLaughlin turned to Sophocles' play *Ajax*, a Greek tragedy about a veteran's madness and suicide.

Nearly a year after the workshops began, McLaughlin has written *Ajax in Iraq*. The piece was custom designed for the students who participated in the project; it integrates aspects of the material they generated and engages with the concerns they expressed. The play weaves together McLaughlin's adaptation of Sophocles' play with a modern-day tragedy about a female soldier serving in the current Iraq war. Contemporary interviews with soldiers in combat are interspersed as choral elements, and dance pieces created by the students have been incorporated. The goddess Athena acts as a narrator in both the ancient and the contemporary settings.

Ellen McLaughlin is an American playwright and actor for stage and film. Her plays include ***Days and Nights Within, A Narrow Bed, Infinity's House, Iphigenia and Other Daughters, Tongue of a Bird, The Trojan Women, Helen, The Persians,*** and ***Oedipus***, all produced in major theatres throughout the U.S. She is the recipient of numerous grants and awards, including the Great American Play Contest, Susan Smith Blackburn Prize, NEA Award, Writer's Award from the Lila Wallace-Reader's Digest Fund, the Berilla Kerr Award for Playwriting, and the NEA/TCG Theatre Residency Grant. As an actor, McLaughlin has worked on and off Broadway as well as extensively in regional theater. She is best known for having originated the part of the Angel in Tony Kushner's ***Angels in America***, appearing in every U.S. production from its earliest workshops through its Broadway run. Other roles include The Homebody in ***Homebody/Kabul*** at Intiman Theater, Seattle; Pirate Jenny in ***The Threepenny Opera*** at Trinity Rep (Elliot Norton Award), Mrs. Alving in ***Ghosts*** at Berkeley Rep, and Titania in ***A Midsummer Night's Dream*** at the McCarter and the Paper Mill Playhouse. She has taught playwriting in numerous venues, from Yale School of Drama to Princeton University. She has been teaching at Barnard College since 1995.

Director Scott Zigler is the Director of the A.R.T./MXAT Institute for Advanced Theatre Training. His A.R.T. directing credits include ***Copenhagen, Absolution, Animals and Plants, The Cripple of Inishmaan***, as well as the world premiere of David Mamet's ***The Old Neighborhood*** and the subsequent Broadway production. He has also directed at the Steppenwolf Theatre, Alley Theatre, and the McCarter Theatre, and served as Artistic Director of the Atlantic Theater of New York and as Executive Director of that company's professional training program, The Practical Aesthetics

Workshop. He was Director of the Actors Theatre of Louisville Apprentice/Intern Company from 1992-94, where he helmed Mamet's *Oleanna* and Jose Rivera's *Tape* for the 1993 Humana Festival. Mr. Zigler has taught as resident or guest faculty at New York University, Indiana University-Bloomington, University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill, University of Pennsylvania, and the National Institute of Dramatic Art in Sydney, Australia. He is a co-author of *A Practical Handbook for the Actor*.

Ticket prices are \$10 for the general public; \$5 for students, and seniors, free to A.R.T. subscribers. They can be purchased at the Loeb Drama Center or by calling the A.R.T. Box Office at (617) 547-8300 or online at www.amrep.org.