

War has broken out in the town hall of bucolic Chester as the Chester Theatre Company presents “An Iliad,” an epic one-person adaptation of a landmark story. “An Iliad” is an effective contemporary adaptation of a classical story of war and inhumanity. In the effective Chester production, one actor skillfully recreates an entire conflict, highlighting the horror by making it personal while making a universal argument against all senseless violence.

“An Iliad” was adapted by Lisa Peterson and Deni O’Hare, who retained the essential of Homer’s original but added contemporary references to enhance the story’s modern relevance. They did a superb job, adding the bold notion of positioning the play as a one-person tale, much in the mode of Homer telling the original. While the story and underlying depravity are crucial to “An Iliad,” this ultimately is more about the storytelling than the story.

The play opens with the arrival of the Poet, who in the tradition of Homer, travels to tell his urgent story. The Poet carries a suitcase loaded with mini-bottles of liquor and reams of crumpled paper because remembering the minutia of his stories is not just difficult but painful.

After a few lyrics, the action shifts to English, which makes it easy to follow as the Poet “sings” his tales.



The device of the Poet harkens back to the roots of Homer and storytelling, while allowing one audacious actor to serve as narrator, the characters of the epics and also as commentator. Indeed this narrator isn’t afraid of narrative liberties, to make concepts

more contemporary or

to speak up when he doesn’t like a character. This causal approach adds an informality that keeps the tale accessible.

In Chester it all works because actor [Steve Hendrickson](#) is a versatile, engaging Poet, making smooth transitions among his roles. He ably switches from characters to narrator to contemporary interpreter. Most impressive is when he jumps from character and takes action in other directions.

He dramatizes a disagreement between Achilles and Agamemnon in almost breathtaking fashion, a feat he later duplicates for the deadly encounters, easing from character to narrator to other character in flawless fashion.

When things turn bloody in this play – which is often — Hendrickson conveys the clang of armor and hand-to-hand combat, followed by the stink of death and the reactions of

onlookers. It’s impressive work that creates the illusion of an ensemble far bigger than one.

There’s actually a second individual on stage throughout - Tom Shread, who performs an original score.

To the credit of Shread and director Sheila Siragusa, the original music and sound effects are notable for being judicious. Often original sound designs overwhelm the main script. No such problem here. Shread stays in the background, enhancing moments rather than trying to take them over. Siragusa’s approach emphasizes less is more. She provides

Hendrickson with lots of movement to fill the small Chester stage, but the director doesn’t overreach. She realizes that the core story is in the hands of a gifted actor and lets him stay comfortable. The stage bursts with energy, but it’s not forced.

Hendrickson and Siragusa convey epic scope, introducing characters at a simple level while representing a larger context. They make a massive battle made understandable by presenting it in segments without losing the bigger picture.

As noted Hendrickson is just one actor but does the work of an entire troupe. In a grand sense he represents the scope of major battle without losing sense of intimacy, especially as the play focuses away from the battlefield on those impacted on the periphery.

It all builds to a breathtaking battle between Achilles and Hector, one that most will already know the outcome of but still be enthralled.

There are pensive moments in “An Iliad” and also frightening ones. Hendrickson shows the power of violent rage, but also the thoughts in the midst of life-and-death battle.

The set by Vicki Davis depicts a rehearsal theater stage, where this modern vagrant Poet shares his stories. Lara Dubin offers crisp lighting that, again, enhances critical transitions within the story.

By the end, adaptors Peterson and O’Hare shift to more general links in mankind’s history of brutal conflict, directly referencing modern wars that hark back to the Trojan conflict. Man’s brutality never ceases, the play says, and likewise this poet’s work never ends in warning of past lessons.

“An Iliad” is a thrilling, thoughtful work, well presented indeed in Chester.

