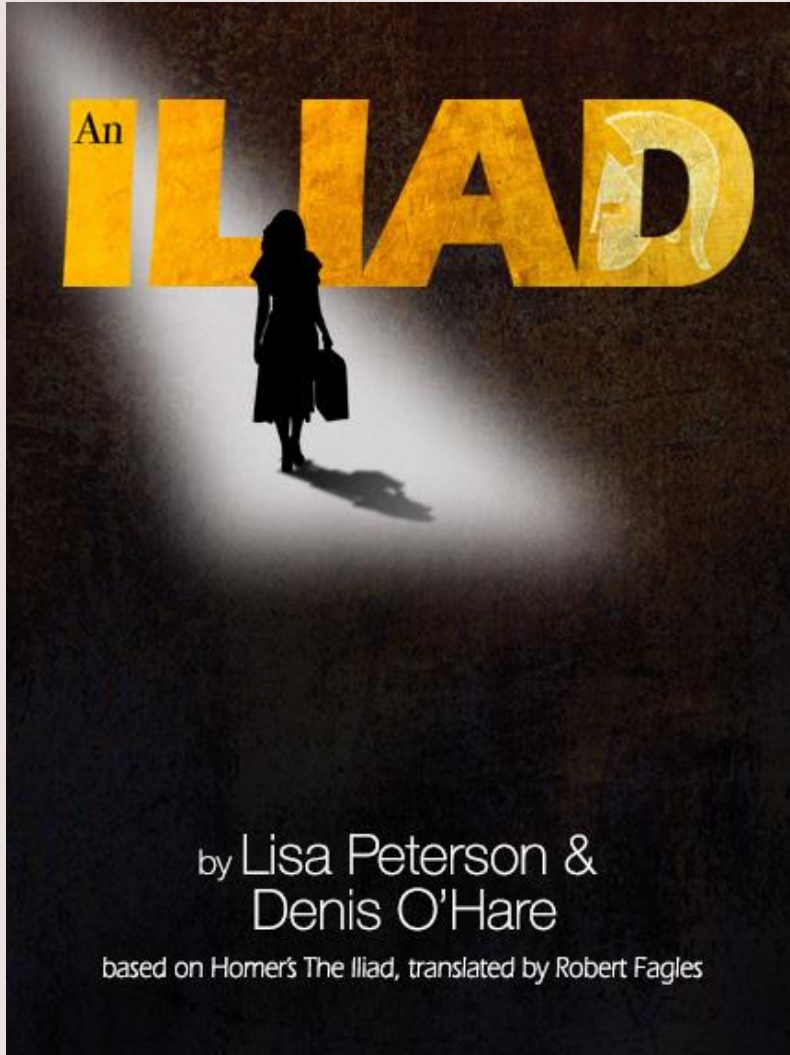


# Jewel Theatre Audience Guide



directed by Kirsten Brandt

by Susan Myer Sifton, Dramaturg  
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*An Iliad started out as an examination of war and man's tendency toward war. In the end, it also became an examination of the theater and the way in which we still tell each other stories in order to try to make sense of ourselves, and our behavior. Someone started telling the story of the Trojan War, in all its glory and devastation and surprise, over 3,000 years ago. We pass it on.*

*~ Lisa Peterson and Denis O'Hare*

## ABOUT THE PLAY

### CHARACTERS

**The Poet** (Patty Gallagher) In the play's "Authors' Note", playwrights Lisa Peterson and Denis O'Hare describe how they conceived The Poet:

We began to imagine a character called The Poet: an ancient teller of tales who might still exist in the universe, doomed to tell the story of the Trojan War until the day when human nature changes, when our addiction to rage comes to an end, when the telling of a war story becomes unnecessary. A day that has yet to come, of course.

We imagine that our Poet traveled across the wine-dark seas with Agamemnon and Achilles and the Greek armies. That he camped there on the coast of Ilium for nine years with the Greek soldiers, that he did lay eyes on Troy and fell in love with that culture. That he has roamed the world telling the story of Achilles and Hector and Hecuba and Hermes and all the hundreds of other characters that inhabit the Iliad. He has told this story for thousands of years, and in that time, he has witnessed (or thinks, or imagines, he has witnessed) every war from the Trojan War onwards. He's found himself at each battle, in every trench, at every wall, in the mess halls, in the infirmaries, over the centuries. He has wandered the scorched battlefields and befriended—then lost—soldiers in all corners of the world's history, witnessing and recording everything. He's a compendium of war.

We imagine that on this particular night, our Poet finds himself transported to an empty stage, in front of a particular audience, and he chooses to tell the story in this way: as an inexorable collision between two great warriors—Achilles and Hector ...

We look forward to that community of Poets expanding in every direction; there is no reason that The Poet could not be female, or any race, or differently-abled, or over 70 or under 30. We think of Homer as a kind of coat that anyone with the passion and the talent (and the ability to memorize) the story could wear. Though we definitely invented this play to be performed by a lone figure, we recognize that it could be performed by more than one person and would encourage people to find their own way.

**The Muse** (Jake Sorgen) Also from Peterson and O'Hare's "Authors' Note":

Homer's *Iliad* begins with the Poet asking the muses to help him, and throughout the epic poem you can find these invocations. We decided to make the Muse actually appear, and to us that means that music literally enters the world near the top of our Part Two. The inclusion of music in this piece is not just incidental. It is a vital part of the evening's progress; we view the muse as the other major character in the play.

## SETTING

The playwrights have not specified a setting, writing in their "Authors' Note", "We imagine there are many ways to approach this script". The stage directions make the setting nondescript, placing it in "an empty room" with "dim light" and having The Poet entering from "a door in the back wall".

Approaches from other companies have included a 2016 "site responsive tour" by Homer in the Wild, which took The Poet and The Muse to parking lots, construction sites, city streets, cemeteries, and junkyards, where the tale was told out of a pickup truck, with drones and a can fire among the props.



Patrick Vincent Curran as The Poet in Brad Learmonth's Homer in the Wild production of *An Iliad*, directed by James Blasko

Jonathan Epstein directed the play in 2015 for Shakespeare and Company in Lenox, Massachusetts. Staged in the desert somewhere in the Middle East, the set was a wooden hut built around a small, stone-bordered spring that housed The Poet, played by Michael F. Toomey as a war correspondent covering a current war in the region.



Michael F. Toomey as The Poet in Shakespeare and Company's 2015 production of *An Iliad*, directed by Jonathan Epstein

Jewel's own David Ledingham, recently seen as Jack in *The Weir*, directed the play for the Aspen Fringe Festival in 2013, which David co-founded.



Andy Weems as The Poet in the Aspen Fringe Festival's 2013 production of *An Iliad*, directed by David Ledingham



The Poet, played by Andy Weems, was a janitor who entered the stage rolling a big rubber trashcan adorned with a broom, mop, and other cleaning items. He picked up trash after the audience who had exited the auditorium following a lecture about the history of the Trojan War. The Poet spoke his lines as he pulled props out of the trashcan, including toy army men that represented the Greeks and the Trojans, and veils that helped him transform into the female characters. David described the staging as also having “an element of Commedia to it that really worked well”.



Patty Gallagher as The Poet. Jake Sorgen as The Muse. Set by Pamela Rodriguez-Montero. Jewel Theatre's production of *An Iliad*, directed by Kirsten Brandt

For Jewel's production of *An Iliad*, director Kirsten Brandt and set designer Pamela Rodriguez-Montero conceived of a setting intentionally undefined by place or time, but rich in symbolic imagery that reflects the themes and motifs of the play. Among Pamela's design inspirations were Kate Kollowitz's war etchings, Picasso's *Guernica*, Cornelia Parker's large-scale installations at the Tate, El Anatsui's massive assemblages, installations by Raphael Otton Solis, and Chiharu Shiota, including the latter's "Letter of Thanks" from her touring *Dialogues* exhibition, and Solis' "Bosnia 1993", as well as the memento-covered walls of Frida Kahlo's home. Pamela described the deeply rooted beliefs that guided her: "To me, this play is an antiwar play. I was born and raised in Costa Rica. We don't have an army since 1949, and we are proud of it. In fact, there is a phrase attributed to Riochi Sasakawa (Japanese Ambassador in Costa Rica during the 80s) that says: "Blessed is the Costa Rican mother, who knows at the time of birth that her child will never be a soldier." I am now a Costa Rican mother, and my views of war are shaped by this. To me, there is

no honorable war so my approach to this show is from an antiwar design perspective. I wanted to showcase the universal 'horrors of war' and the poetic fragility of human nature. Even though the play touches on the topics of honor, myth, and rage, I wanted to portray the ever-present price of war: the blood bath looming and waiting to spill over everything."



Chiharu Shiota's "Letter of Thanks" from her touring *Dialogues* exhibition, 2014



*Bosnia* by Raphael Otton Solis. Installation, 1993.

## TIME

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The present.

*Especially in times of darkness, that is the time to love,  
that an act of love may tip the balance.*

~ Aeschylus

## SYNOPSIS

**Warning.** *The following synopsis contains spoilers. Please do not read if you don't want to learn the content of the play.*

*An Iliad* was written by Lisa Peterson and Denis O'Hare, who based it on an adaptation of Homer's *Iliad* by Robert Fagle. It was written for a solo performer, though the playwrights invite interpretations of The Poet that might include any gender, age, or number of actors. The play was first presented at the Seattle Repertory Theatre in 2010.

*An Iliad* brings the Trojan War to the present in a retelling by The Poet (see the "Characters" section on pp. 1-2 of this Guide). For example, The Poet substitutes towns in the US for the hometowns of the soldiers on the Greek warships in order to relate it to present day conflicts. She also recounts how Hector's family watched from the ramparts of the city of Troy as he died in a fierce battle against Achilles – an allusion to the world's witness of the devastation of the Twin Towers on 9/11. The show comes to a powerful and devastating end when, while trying to recall the name of a single battle, The Poet names every war that has occurred since recorded time, up to and including the current war in the Ukraine.

Although the authors based their play on Homer's epic poem, as they went deeper into their research of Homer and ancient oral tradition, they began to envision it as theatrical vehicle rather than a work of literature. The Poet emerged from their realization that the *Iliad* was "spoken out loud and passed from storyteller to storyteller for centuries before it was ever written down" ("Authors' Notes", *An Iliad*). Hence, they devised a narrator, tasked by fate to retell, and doing so, relive, the Trojan War until that time that war becomes obsolete. She is witness, as are those who have come before her, purposed to give the story access to new audiences so they might understand the urgency of her message.

The Trojan War, the historic source of *An Iliad* and *The Iliad*, and its dramatis personae, are discussed throughout the play's [glossary](#), which is available at Jewel's website through the "play background" tab in the [information page](#) for the play.

*An Iliad* may condense the massive *Iliad* (Fagles adaption is 720 pages) into 55 pages of script, but – like the original – it includes or alludes to legendary events in ancient history that precipitated the Trojan War and occurred both during and following the siege, as well as the characters, both mortal and immortal, who populated those events. By doing so, it manages to tell nearly the complete story of the War, although its focus is the final year, particularly the events around the conflict between the Greek



king, Agamemnon, and its greatest warrior, Achilles. Nevertheless, *An Iliad* doesn't purport to tell the story of *The Iliad*, but instead provides a version narrated by a contemporary of our world today whose familiarity with the epic events casts a light on human nature and the continued existence of war.

*We are old friends and so then Lisa asked me, 'Do you want to ever get together and talk about The Iliad as a platform for performance?' I said, 'Absolutely.'*

*~ Denis O'Hare*

## ABOUT THE PLAYWRIGHTS

### LISA PETERSON

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Lisa Peterson in 2019

The [biography](#) that follows was posted on the website of the Stage Directors and Choreographers Foundation (SDCF) when Peterson received their Gordon Davidson Award in 2019.

Lisa Peterson (Writer/Director) is a two-time OBIE Award-winning writer and director. She won her first OBIE for directing Caryl Churchill's *Light Shining in Buckinghamshire* at New York Theatre Workshop in 1990, and her 2nd OBIE, as well as a Lortel Award, for writing and directing *An Iliad* with Denis O'Hare in 2012, also at NYTW. Since then, she and O'Hare have written *The Good Book*, commissioned and produced by the Court Theatre in Chicago, and recently at Berkeley Repertory Theatre. Her directing work includes the world premiere productions of new plays by Tony Kushner

(Slavs!, Humana Festival and NYTW), Beth Henley (Ridiculous Fraud, McCarter Theater), Donald Margulies (*Collected Stories*, Manhattan Theater Club; *The Model Apartment* and *Shipwrecked* at Primary Stages), Naomi Wallace (*Trestle* at Pope Lick Creek at NYTW and *Birdy* at WP Theater), Marlane Meyer (*Patron Saint of Sea Monsters*, *The Chemistry of Change* at Playwrights Horizons), Jose Rivera (*Sueno* at Hartford Stage and MCC), Basil Kreimendahl (*We're Gonna Be Ok* at ATL) and many more, as well as classic plays at theaters across the country, including the Guthrie, Arena Stage, Yale Rep, Hartford Stage, Huntington Theater, Seattle Rep, Portland Center Stage, American Conservatory Theater, Oregon Shakespeare Festival, Baltimore Center Stage, California Shakespeare Theater, Actors' Theater of Louisville, Dallas Theater Center, Alley Theater, and South Coast Repertory, among others. Recent New York credits include *Ernest Shackleton Loves Me*, Book by Joe DiPietro, Music & Lyrics by Brendan Milburn & Val Vigoda (2ST Tony Kiser Theater); *Hamlet in Bed* by Michael Laurence (Rattlestick); *King Liz* by Fernanda Coppel (Second Stage Uptown); *To The Bone* by Lisa Ramirez (Cherry Lane).

Lisa has directed regularly at Berkeley Rep (where she was Associate Director for the last 3 seasons), the Mark Taper Forum (where she was Resident Director for 10 years) and La Jolla Playhouse (Associate Director for 3 years). She has developed many new plays at the Sundance Theatre Lab, where she served as the Guest Artistic Director in 2019, as well as the O'Neill Playwrights Conference, Playwrights' Center in Minneapolis, and the Ojai Playwrights Conference. Upcoming projects: *The Waves*, adapted from the novel by Virginia Woolf with music by David Bucknam and Adam Gwon; *The Song of Rome*, a commission for the McCarter Theater, written with Denis O'Hare; *The Idea of Order*, inspired by the poetry of Wallace Stevens and written with Todd Almond; and new musical projects with Byron Au Yong/Aaron Jafferis, and with Jill Sobule.

## DENIS O'HARE

In his own words, from his [website](#):

My earliest memories of performing come from when I was around 8 years old or so. I played the organ at the Michigan State Fair in an exhibition to do with Hammond organs or something. I think I played at least 1 or 2 numbers – Santa Lucia and something else – maybe Trumpet Voluntary. Backstage, an older man showed me how to push the lights up and down using a large piece of wood – this way they would all go up at the same rate. I don't remember the audience. There must have been an audience, however. My mother waited for me backstage and afterwards, I think we just went home. It wasn't very far from where I was raised in Southfield, Michigan.

This auspicious beginning was followed up by my acting debut around the same time in a grade school play about a peddler. I played a pig. High school brought musicals and some straight plays and choir performances. By the time I got ready for college, there was no question about what I was going to do. I was going to be a performer – either a musician (Opera at University of Michigan) or acting (Northwestern University). I ended up going to Northwestern. The rest, as they say, is history.

I still don't really know why I was so drawn to music and storytelling. True, my mother was a musician, and her mother was a musician so it was in the blood. But my father was a lawyer. Could have just as easily gone that way. My sister was a jock, and my brother ran track. Could have done that too. But no. Music and storytelling. The magic of make believe.



Denis O'Hare as The Poet in the original production of *An Iliad*  
Seattle Repertory Theatre, 2010

The biography that follows is reprinted from [Wikipedia](#).



Denis Patrick Seamus O'Hare (born January 17, 1962) is an American actor, singer, and author noted for his award-winning performances in the plays *Take Me Out* and *Sweet Charity*, as well as portraying vampire king Russell Edgington on HBO's fantasy series *True Blood*. He is also known for his supporting roles in such films as *Charlie Wilson's War*, *Milk*, *Changeling*, and *Dallas Buyers Club*. In 2011, he starred as Larry Harvey in the first season of the FX anthology series *American Horror Story*, for which he was nominated for a Primetime Emmy Award for Outstanding Supporting Actor in a Miniseries or a Movie in 2012. He returned to the show in 2013, playing Spalding in *American Horror Story: Coven* and once more as Stanley in *American Horror Story: Freak Show*, the latter for which he earned a second Primetime Emmy Award nomination. For his performance in *American Horror Story: Hotel* as Liz Taylor, O'Hare received critical acclaim.

### Early life

O'Hare was born in Kansas City, Missouri, the son of Margaret Karene (née Kennedy; January 25, 1931 – October 8, 2008) and John M. O'Hare. He has three sisters, Pam, Patricia, and Kathleen, and one brother, Michael. O'Hare grew up in the suburbs of Detroit, living in Southfield until he was 15, when his family moved to Wing Lake in Bloomfield Hills. His mother was a musician, and he grew up playing the church organ. O'Hare is of Irish descent and holds an Irish passport.

As a teenager, O'Hare was in his school's choir and in 1974 he went to his first audition, gaining a chorus part in a community theatre production of *Show Boat*. In 1980, O'Hare left Detroit for Chicago to study theatre at Northwestern University.

### Career

O'Hare won a Tony Award for Best Performance by a Featured Actor in a Play for his performance in Richard Greenberg's *Take Me Out*, where his character's lengthy monologues in which he slowly falls in love with the game of baseball were considered the main reason for his award. He won the 2005 Drama Desk Award for Outstanding Featured Actor in a Musical for his role as Oscar Lindquist in the Broadway revival of *Sweet Charity*.

In 2003 O'Hare played a doctor in *21 Grams*. In 2004, he played Charles J. Guiteau in the Broadway production of Stephen Sondheim's *Assassins*, for which he was nominated for the Best Performance by a Featured Actor in a Musical Tony Award. He lost to co-star Michael Cerveris who played John Wilkes Booth. Before appearing in those shows, he appeared on Broadway in the 1998 revival of *Cabaret*, in which he played Ernst Ludwig onstage and the clarinet in the show's orchestra, the Kit Kat Band. O'Hare was featured in the Hallmark Hall of Fame presentation of *Saint Maybe*. He has appeared as a guest star on several episodes of *Law & Order* and its spin-offs, *Law & Order: Special Victims Unit* and *Law & Order: Criminal Intent*.

In 2008, he appeared as a guest star on several episodes of *Brothers & Sisters*. His feature film credits include *The Anniversary Party*, *21 Grams*, *Garden State*, *Derailed*, *Michael Clayton*, *A Mighty Heart*, *Half Nelson*, *Milk*, *Edge of Darkness*, *Charlie Wilson's War* and *Changeling*. In 2009, O'Hare portrayed Phillip Steele (an amalgam character

based on Quentin Crisp's friends Phillip Ward and Tom Steele) in a television biopic on Crisp entitled *An Englishman in New York*. The same year he played therapist Dr. David Worth in the series *Bored to Death* (episode 1.3).

In 2010, O'Hare joined the cast of HBO's *True Blood* in its third season as Russell Edgington, the vampire king of Mississippi who is 2,800 years old. In 2011, he appeared in the film *The Eagle* as a Roman officer named Lutorius. Recently he has appeared in a recurring role as Judge Charles Abernathy on the television drama series *The Good Wife*. O'Hare also co-starred as Larry Harvey in FX's first season of *American Horror Story, Murder House*.

In 2012, O'Hare starred alongside Amy Adams and Donna Murphy as the Baker in Stephen Sondheim's *Into the Woods* at The Public Theater. The production played at the Delacorte Theatre in Central Park, NYC, from July 23 to September 1, 2012. In 2013, O'Hare returned to *American Horror Story* for its third season, *American Horror Story: Coven*, where he portrayed Spalding, the house butler. O'Hare portrayed con artist Stanley on the fourth season of the series, *American Horror Story: Freak Show*. In 2015, O'Hare played a hotel worker, Liz Taylor, on the fifth season of the series, *American Horror Story: Hotel*, and in 2016 he was Dr. Elias Cunningham on the sixth season, *American Horror Story: Roanoke*.

#### **Personal life**

O'Hare is openly gay and has been married to designer Hugo Redwood since July 28, 2011. The couple have an adopted son, Declan. He identifies as an atheist.

#### **LISA PETERSON and DENIS O'HARE: FROM CONCEPT TO PRODUCTION**

Reprinted from *Arts ATL*, "[Co-creators O'Hare, Peterson confront the hell of war in 'An Iliad' at Theatrical Outfit](#)" by Jim Farmer, September 14, 2021:

It was in 2003 after the U.S. invaded Iraq that she [Peterson] came up with the concept. "We were suddenly at war again," she says in a Zoom interview shared with O'Hare. "I had this feeling that as a country we were not necessarily clear about that. It was not affecting us personally. I was thinking about war plays and suddenly had this thought."

Inspired by friend Morgan Jenness, who teaches dramatic literature and presents *The Iliad* as a spoken word piece, Peterson asked O'Hare if he would be interested in helping with an adaptation.

O'Hare was a definite yes at the initial idea. "Lisa and I are at a point then and now where creating our own work is a vital part of how we stay alive in the business," he says. "I don't mean career-wise but spiritually and inspirationally to be working on your own ideas.

"This idea appealed to me on so many levels," he continues. "It was the culture of the time. It did not feel like Americans were grappling with what it meant to be at war,

and this was a great vehicle to do that because it's at a remove, it's not exactly what we're doing, not exactly America. It's ancient so you can have that safety of distance."

*An Iliad* co-creator Denis O'Hare has appeared in television series including *True Blood* and *American Horror Story* and films such as *Dallas Buyers Club*. Yet adapting the classic (from a translation by Robert Fagles) down to a manageable stage time, the pair knew, was not going to be easy. It took a few years of exploration and the help of a dramaturg to get its narrative drive, focusing on two primary characters, Hector and Achilles.

"That seems obvious now," Peterson says. "They are the tentpoles of *The Iliad*. It's an epic and there are incredible characters in it. Once we realized that we could view it as the story of two people entering war for different reasons with different emotions about it and different family stories, we started to pare away."

Neither Achilles nor Hector have a dog in the fight, O'Hare says, and neither man should be there, in a way. "It's not their war. They are not the heads; they are foot soldiers. That is what appeals to us. We are not the ones making the decisions but we are the ones fighting."

The play premiered at Seattle Repertory Theatre in 2010 and the next production was at the McCarter Theatre Center in Princeton, N.J., the following year. Each stop along the way Peterson and O'Hare developed it a little further. The show was conceived with O'Hare in mind to star.

"In the beginning I thought it would be exciting to go to an actor who could create it with me," Peterson says. "I didn't know he had a history as a writer, but I knew Denis had a strong political sensibility and he would have opinions." In the end, though, O'Hare did not perform in *An Iliad* until its Big Apple debut at New York Theatre Workshop in 2012 because of other obligations. There, he and actor Stephen Spinella — who starred in the Princeton staging — alternated the role.

Going into the project, the playwrights knew the production would be either really long or compressed. They chose the latter, clocking the show in at a crisp 90 minutes with no intermission. Despite its relative short length, though, it's a demanding show and a lot of work for its main actor.

Although the two also worked on the play *The Good Book* together as well as the upcoming *The Song of Rome* — a companion piece of sorts to *An Iliad* — both have had tremendous success on their own. Besides writing and directing, Peterson served as resident director at the Mark Taper Forum for 10 years and associate director at La Jolla Playhouse for three years. A Tony winner for Broadway's 2003 *Take Me Out*, O'Hare has since appeared in television series including *True Blood* and *American Horror Story* and films such as *Dallas Buyers Club*. He's currently in London filming *The Nevers* for HBO.

Despite the focus on wars in *An Iliad*, neither playwright feels it's an anti-war statement.

"It's hard for me to find a war that I think is justified in ever producing anything decent," O'Hare says. "That being said, I don't think the piece has a political point of view. Homer doesn't. What he is reflecting is cultural norms, which included glory, at the time, and honor, ideas that are harder for us to grasp. However, as a human being he was sketching out the horrifying reality of what it is to fight and die. It is graphic. There are so many passages where he lingers over the death. He doesn't say [a character] dies. He says his guts were torn from him and splayed on the ground. There is a cost to death and war, and you can't get off scot-free. I think more than anti-war, what we were exploring is that there is something in the human character and nature and that is rage. What is that and why does it exist?"

Although the text for *An Iliad* is basically finished, Peterson and O'Hare have left room for whoever is producing it to breathe and respond to current events.

"People can choose to set it anywhere they want, do it any way, and any kind of person can perform the role of the Poet," Peterson says. "Almost 10 years after [opening in New York], it's fun for us to know who else is doing it and how they're doing it."



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