

Actors stage Aristophanes' *Lysistrata* to protest war against Iraq

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Billed as “The Largest World-Wide Theatrical Protest for Peace,” readings of the ancient Greek antiwar comedy *Lysistrata* were held in 59 countries and in all 50 states in the US on March 3.

The global readings, which totaled more than 1,000, were organized by New York City actresses Kathryn Blume and Sharron Bower. The origins of the event were explained by the actresses on the web site of *The Lysistrata Project: A Theatrical Act of Dissent*: “Before we started Lysistrata Project, we could do nothing but sit and watch in horror as the Bush Administration drove us toward a unilateral attack on Iraq. So we emailed our friends and put up a web site. The response has been enormous.

“If America rushes into a unilateral attack on Iraq, the White House not only drives our country deeper into deficit spending, but also alienates out allies, and fans the flames of anti-American sentiment all over the world. Our purpose is to make it clear that President Bush does not speak for all Americans.”

In New York alone there were a total of 67 readings, involving such actors such as Mercedes Ruhl, F. Murray Abraham, Kevin Bacon and Kyra Sedgwick. Alfre Woodard, Christine Lahti, Eric Stolz and Julie Christie, among others, were part of the project in Los Angeles. Christie asserted: “At least for the record of history we have to let it be known that millions and millions oppose this war.”

Greek dramatist Aristophanes (c.447 - c.385 BC) wrote *Lysistrata* during the Peloponnesian War (431 - 404 BC), involving the rival Greek city-states of Athens and Sparta. The play tells the story of a group of women from the opposing states who unite to end the war by withholding sex from their husbands. Desperate for intimacy, the men agree to lay down their weapons and form a peace.

Many of the readings involved variations on the play's script. For example, in New Hampshire *Lysistrata 2000* depicted a group of harmless protesters detained by government agents. The latter irrationally insist that the protesters are foreign terrorists and thereby upgrade a warning alert to “code fuchsia.” In the end, all die from a poison gas with the exception of one of the agents, mysteriously immune to the biological weapon of mass destruction.

The breadth of the popularity of the *The Lysistrata Project* was described on its site: “There [were] events in Russia, China and in the jungle in Hawaii, in Athens and in Iceland, homemakers' reading groups in the Midwest and Burmese dissidents in Thailand, on sidewalks and subway platforms, in parks and theaters, at high schools and churches and bars. All this came about in the last six weeks, propelled by growing fears about the Bush Administrations alarming foreign policy.”

In the Middle East, there were readings in Beirut, Damascus, Karachi, Istanbul and Jerusalem. A version of the play performed at the American University in Beirut incorporated poetry from celebrated Iraqi director Jawad al-Assadi.

Together with major cities in Europe and Australia, activities also took place in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, in Havana, in Trinidad and Tobago and Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic.

A refugee camp for Kurds located in a ruined factory in the port city of Patra, Greece was the site of a reading in the classical Greek language. In Mindanao, Philippines, where US military presence has recently caused a national controversy, a theater group contacted the project organizers, writing: “[T]he southern Philippine island [that] has become a battleground involving communist insurgents, Muslim separatist

groups, kidnap-for-ransom bandits (the Abu Sayyaf), government forces, and even U.S. troops. We would like to join hands with you in the international Lysistrata project for peace.”

There were several productions in Tokyo. *The Daily Yomiuri* reported that the organizer of one of the events emailed the online publication with the following statement: “I believe that we Japanese are responsible for our government’s support of the war. We need a chance to remember what we’ve lost in wartime, and to make sure that we are a peace-loving people.”

Near-freezing weather was the backdrop for an outside performance of the play at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor, staged by student actors and members of Britain’s Royal Shakespeare Company. A group of homeless women and men read the play in a church on the Upper West Side of Manhattan.

Many college and high school students spoke out regarding the reasons for participating in the project. The stage manager for the performance at Towson University in Baltimore commented in the college’s student newspaper: “It really shows the power that theater has had in the past. People have outlawed theater because of its ability to move a group of people. We haven’t seen that yet in our generation. It happened with guerilla theater in the ’60s during Vietnam, and we haven’t had a chance to see that, and this is a huge chance to see the highest level of what you can use theater for.”

In Washington, D.C. 17-year-old Amelia Workman, who was playing the character Lysistrata in one of the city’s productions, told the *Washington Post*: “As war became imminent ... It was no longer a choice. It was a duty. I’m proud of us for taking on such a piece of literature, as high schoolers.”

At Stanford University in California, according to the *Stanford Daily*, “organizers related classical literature to the current U.S. political situation in an attempt to bridge the two. ‘Reading the play in the context of conflict with Iraq is a way to raise consciousness,’ said Richard Martin, Classics Department chair and event organizer. ‘Has the West been built on conflict? Can we restructure society to avoid it?’”

Megan Elk, a University of Akron directing student and organizer of the reading, told Cleveland’s *The Plain Dealer*: “Society needs to be reminded what the role of the artist is. ‘We are not just self-serving

bohemians. We are capable of making a political statement’ and of working for peace.”

Speaking on the global character of *The Lysistrata Project*, Linda Chapman, associate artistic director of New York Theater Workshop told the *Village Voice*: “We’re tapping into a long and honorable tradition that goes back to the Greeks, when the Senate was mirrored by the theater. Theater is so important for democracy because it inspires complexity of thought.”

The international response to *The Lysistrata Project* is one of the indicators that numbers of artists and intellectuals are being radicalized by the war threat, as well as social and political conditions on a world scale.

Last month the cancellation of a poetry symposium at the White House by the office of Laura Bush, the US president’s wife, after some of the invitees made known their plans to protest the Iraq war, evoked a strong reaction. A web site that arose as a response to the controversy, <http://www.poetsagainsthewar.org>, now has received and posted poems from more than 12,000 people. An International Day of Poetry Against the War took place on March 5 during which there were 120 poetry readings. Poets presented copies of 13,000 poems to governments around the world, including the US, Great Britain, Canada, Australia, Germany, Italy and Mexico.



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