

Penelope Program Note

Written by Caroline Holmes for the 2024 production at Carnegie Mellon School of Drama

Enda Walsh wrote *Penelope* when he was asked by Theater Oberhausen in the Ruhr Valley to write a play inspired by *The Odyssey*, the Greek epic poem written by Homer. *The Odyssey* tells the story of the infamous hero, Odysseus, and his twenty-year journey home to his wife Penelope, during which he encounters various obstacles and adventures which he must overcome.

Walsh chose to focus his interpretation on the story of Penelope, who, while awaiting the return of her husband over the course of twenty years, is courted by hundreds upon thousands of men, all vying for her hand and ownership of Odysseus and Penelope's home and land. These men are far from respectful, living in her home indefinitely, drinking her wine and eating her food, destroying the space that they are inhabiting. Rather than highlighting the perspective of Penelope, Walsh chooses to instead expand upon the perspective of the suitors. He moves the setting into a contemporary age, using modern language and clothing, and places the suitors in a drained swimming pool: a place once used for community gathering and relaxation, now drained of its purpose and overtaken with competition, violence, and waste.

Today is a day unlike any other, because after twenty years of returning to the same pool, with scores of suitors abandoning the competition over the years, the final four suitors have had the same dream prophesying the return of Odysseus. Walsh said in an interview with The Arts Desk:

These four men have been having conversations about nothing - for like, ever - but when faced with their death, they begin to reset themselves in some way. It's like everything is

blank and then they begin to create actual worlds to place themselves in. They have a need to find something to leave behind them, to try and leave something good behind. Through an absurd rendition of this circumstance, these men are forced to confront what these twenty years of their life has amounted to, and how they can possibly save themselves from certain death through their attempts at seducing Penelope into marriage.

Though there is plenty of room to laugh at the ignorance of these men, it is key to remember that men alike to these characters do exist in the real world. The names of three of the characters intentionally parallel three Irish businessmen who played key roles in the downfall of the Irish economy during the 2008 Global Economic Crisis: Seán Quinn, Ben Dunne, and Sean Fitzpatrick. Each of these men exemplify a ruthless drive to succeed and acquire wealth with no regard for the larger global impact. Existing within a company of like-minded men unwilling to push back against the dominant power structures, men such as these in positions of power (both in Ireland and the United States) pushed our global economy to the brink of collapse. Simultaneously, there are men in our world not in positions of power that mirror the mentality of these characters: pushed to the edges of society, self-isolating within online forums, creating virtual echo chambers of toxic masculinity.

While we watch these characters attempt to grow past their self-destructive habits and ignorance over the course of their final day pursuing the love of a woman they've never met, we can witness the impact of toxic masculinity upheld by hierarchical power structures, competition, and comparison.

