Three-Way
Did you bring the Trojans?

BY FRACKO LODEN

Achilles and Patroclus are one intriguing item. In the Iliad, these Greek heroes of the war against the Trojans are fierce comrades in armor. But centuries earlier, according to Plato's Symposium, they are proof that “love is the eldest and noblest and mightiest of the gods, and the chiepest author and giver of virtue in life and of happiness after death.” In other words, they’re the greatest lovers of all time.

In Gary Graves’ new play Achilles & Patroclus, opening Friday (8 p.m.) at Central Works at the Berkeley City Club (2315 Durant Ave.), Achilles is torn by conflicting passions: one for Briseis, the maiden he captures as a prize and who is snatched away by Agamemnon, resulting in his epic tent-sulk and the threatened victory of Troy; and another passion for Patroclus, who goes out and fights, and whose death at Hector’s hands rouses Achilles from the tent to wreak vengeance against the Trojans. At the same time the play explores the relationship among Achilles, Briseis, and Patroclus, it recasts the story against the backdrop of a modern war that looks a lot like the American adventure in Iraq. Although the characters refer to Troy and the Greeks, the contemporary implications of their motivations and decisions are pretty clear.

Graves says Achilles is “a representative of soldiers in Iraq facing a decision: Do they honor their commitment to fight in a war which they no longer believe in? It’s a dilemma facing new soldiers and us as a country, a war that’s gone on for a long time now and bound to make losers out of everyone.” Those of you nodding may empathize with another character in the play, Cassandra, whose gift of prophecy is cursed so that, no one will ever believe her, notably her prediction that the gift of the big wooden horse is a dirty bomb right in the Trojans’ midst. Meanwhile, despite the carnage, there’s the utopia of a ménage à trois among Achilles, Briseis, and Patroclus. The play, Graves says, “postulates a relationship among three people that we don’t really have a model for. In that, it represents the breaking of taboos and the creation of a new world. For a moment in the play they actually do create one.”

There’s a pay-what-you-can preview Thursday, and a pay-what-you-can performance on October 27. Tickets ($9-$25 sliding scale) and info: CentralWorks.org or 510-558-1381.