

BOSTON LATIN SCHOOL

(Excerpts from article in school paper – Feb 2006)

Plato's "The Apology of Socrates"

It is perhaps one of the most clichéd wishes of teachers of history and classical languages to want their students to feel “connected” to the past. But, when it is difficult enough for us to feel continuity from day to day, trying to appreciate what happened thousands of years ago can seem almost impossible. Along with teachers, however, actor and scholar Yannis Simonides does a lot to bridge the gap between present and past with his version of Plato’s “Apology of Socrates.”

Simonides performed here at Boston Latin during R6 and R7 in the Black Box on Wednesday, February 15th. All 189 students taking Greek Language, Greek Tradition, or Myth were invited to the performance, which was generously funded by Leadership 100. “The Apology” (*Apologia* means “defense” in Greek) is Socrates’ defense to the charge of corrupting youth delivered at the trial in 399 BC. The presentation left the students enthralled and with much to think about, in relation to life, truth, and the ability to question. “Socrates is just... a man-child,” Simonides said, when asked why he enjoys playing Socrates so much. “He is full of wonder at the world around him.” Simonides reflected that such curiosity is invaluable, whether one is young or old. Classical texts, often considered difficult to master, can become easily accessible through performance. Thousand-year old words seem to spring to life on the lips of the actor.

I personally found the end of Simonides’ performance to be the most thought provoking. While Socrates’ “Apology” ends with his death sentence, the final note is hardly mournful. Socrates looks to death with hope, saying that “... death is only one of two things: either it is nothing, and whoever dies has no awareness of anything, or, as they say, there is a change in course and the soul migrates from this place to another.” Either way, what does he have to dread? In essence, what do any of us have to fear? Throughout his whole performance, Simonides’ genuine belief in the truth of Socrates’ words made his presentation all the more believable and effective.

Born in Istanbul, Simonides grew up in Athens, where he learned to love classical Greek literature. He moved to the United States and attended the Yale School of Drama. After being involved with Yale productions, he became director of the Greek Theater of New York and professor and chair of New York University's Tisch Drama Department. However, Simonides did not feel as if he was doing enough; he wanted to show that Greek literature is important not only in understanding the past, but in expressing values that are still highly relevant and current today. He wanted to reach not only adults, but younger generations as well. So, he left his position at NYU to return full time to his passion, performing. Among other projects, he developed this new "stage-worthy" translation of Plato's "The Apology of Socrates," along with his colleague, Loukas Skipitaris. Simonides has since been presenting it as a solo performance in high schools, colleges, theatres and institutions across North America and Europe.

Simonides' most important message is that our generation is next in line to inherit the classics, and next in line to question life in the way it has been questioned for thousands of years. The ethics Socrates expounds upon are still omnipresent. We still ponder the same moral and ethical dilemmas that he confronted. For instance, we ask: is it honest to have a government wire-tapping the phone lines of its citizens? Is it just that both evolution and "intelligent design" should be taught in schools because they are both "truth"? What is the best way to lead one's life? And finally, as Socrates, too, asks: how does one approach death? As the next generation, we receive these questions and the classics that contain them. Simonides hopes that through his performances, he can make our understanding of the classics clearer. And finally, he hopes that, like Socrates, we will "never lose [our] sense of wonder," for it is that wonder that keeps us all young at heart.

We are grateful for having had this opportunity to connect with Socrates' wisdom and insight through the medium of Simonides' extraordinary performance.